

## ECUMENICAL ORDINATION (1996)

- 1 The Conference of 1995 received the following Memorial (M20):

The Llanelli and Carmarthen (8/19) Circuit Meeting (Present 17. Vote: Unan) which is currently forming an LEP in Carmarthen is deeply concerned about the status of possible future candidates for ordained ministry who enjoy joint membership of several denominations, and who may wish to retain their allegiance to all.

We have been alerted to the real possibility of future difficulties through the requirement placed on our present (probationer) minister to choose ordination in one denomination only. We therefore seek an urgent review of the underlying issues, and ask the Conference to submit the documents "Ecumenical Ordination" (Canon James S Newcome 1993) and "Ecumenical Ordination" (Rev June Mallabon 1995) to Faith and Order (or their successors) for a considered theological judgment on their contents, together with recommendations for practical solutions.

- 2 The Conference referred the Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration, consultation with appropriate ecumenical and church bodies, and report to the Conference of 1996.
- 3 In responding to this Memorial, the Faith and Order Committee has been aware that it arises from a particular set of circumstances but has wider ramifications. The particular case is that of a probationer who was received into membership in a Local Ecumenical Partnership where she enjoyed the membership of several denominations. Though her offer for ordained ministry was accepted by the Methodist Church, she has consistently pressed for 'ecumenical ordination' and has been reluctant to submit to what she regards as exclusively Methodist ordination. She is currently serving as a probationer in the Circuit which sent Memorial M20.
- 4 The Faith and Order Committee had been aware of these circumstances before the Memorial was sent to the Conference and had indeed been asked for theological advice in 1994.
- 5 The Committee has read the documents mentioned in the Memorial and has sent a considered judgment on them to the Llanelli and Carmarthen Circuit Meeting. It is important that there should be no doubt about what those documents advocate. It is already possible for an ordained person of another denomination to be the assisting minister, chosen by the candidate, at an ordination. The Newcome and Mallabon papers argue that a further step be taken. They argue for joint ordination, enabling the person ordained to be fully a minister in two or more churches.
- 6 The Committee believes that it can best report to the Conference on this matter by starting with a few theological premisses about ordination and denominationalism, moving on to consider whether in exceptional cases the

theology might allow for some variation, and then reporting on the action it has taken.

- 7 Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, as understood in Methodism, is not to be regarded as simply 'denominational'. In other words, a person is ordained to presbyteral ministry in the Church of God, not simply in the Methodist Church. It is not clear what two presiding ministers could add to the act of one, especially in a context where each church involved already recognised the validity of the orders of the others, except to denominationalise an essentially undenominational act.
- 8 Nevertheless, though presbyteral ordination is an essentially undenominational act, it does confer authority to act as a presbyter within a particular denomination. Ordaining ministers act in the name of their Churches. It would be extremely unusual for a Church to give authority for the ordination of a person who was not going to serve as a minister under the discipline of the Church concerned.
- 9 There is a long-established tradition whereby a minister of another Church may take part in a service of ordination according to the Methodist rite as an assisting minister who joins the presiding minister in the laying on of hands. This is an act of ecumenical solidarity, but it is never understood as imparting the orders of another denomination. Indeed, assisting ministers of other churches are always informed of the Methodist understanding that presbyteral ordination is ordination within the universal Church.
- 10 The Methodist Church is deeply committed to the search for Christian Unity according to Christ's will and has often shown itself willing to move in new directions if it believes that such action will bring such unity nearer. Shortly after the Memorial was referred to the Committee, the Committee received a letter from the General Secretary of ENFYSS, the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales. The letter reported that the Commission was aware of the Memorial and had adopted a resolution endorsing its "support for ways and means to be found for the ordination of ministerial candidates to ministry within two or more of its covenanted churches". "In adopting its resolution, the Commission did so in the light of that Clause in the 1975 Covenant that states that 'We intend to seek an agreed pattern of ordained ministry which will serve the gospel in unity . . . '". The letter further reported that the Presbyterian Church of Wales (Methodism's partner in the Local Ecumenical Partnership to which the Memorial refers) "would offer every co-operation with the pursuit of this resolution".
- 11 The Covenant that exists in Wales provides a context in which it is possible to look again at the question of joint ordination. Twenty years ago, the Methodist Church was one of four churches in Wales which entered into a solemn Covenant to seek for visible unity. As a means of enabling that process to advance, joint ordination could be seen as a small step or contribution towards the unity to which the Covenanted Churches are committed. There is no sense in which such a joint ordination could be regarded as necessary, but as an ecumenical gesture or sign it could be significant.

- 12 As well as preparing and reporting its comments on the papers written by James Newcome and June Mallabon, the Committee has acted as follows to fulfil the responsibilities laid upon it by the reply of the Conference to Memorial M20.
- 13 The Committee, sensible of both the particular circumstances which prompted the Memorial and the wider implications of either accepting or rejecting the possibility of joint ordination, has throughout consulted and acted in concert with the Division of Ministries and the Conference Office.
- 14 Representatives of all three have met with senior officers of the Presbyterian Church of Wales and reached agreement that there is no sense in which joint ordination is **necessary** in order for a person to exercise a full ministry, including a sacramental ministry, in either church, but that a joint ordination service could be envisaged in the Welsh context **as a symbolic gesture within the context of the Covenant**, which could make a contribution towards the goal of visible unity. The Faith and Order Committee concurs with this judgement.
- 15 The Faith and Order Committee was clear that joint ordination on this basis could only be sanctioned if the following conditions could be fulfilled:
  - a) It would need to be apparent that there was no doctrinal divergence between the Churches involved so significant that it would be impossible for one person to be faithful to the doctrinal standards of both or all;
  - b) There would need to be agreement about the Ordinal to be used and sufficient convergence of view about what was happening in the ordination;
  - c) It must be possible to come to an agreement about questions of discipline and authority.
- 16 The Committee notes that it would be necessary to decide, whenever a request for joint ordination occurred, whether or not these criteria could be fulfilled. In the particular case which must be decided by the 1996 Conference, the Committee believes that there would be no difficulty about any of them. No significant doctrinal barrier stands in the way. If the Conference agrees to a joint ordination, the Faith and Order Committee, acting on the Conference's behalf, could be involved in the preparation and authorisation of the ordinal to be used.
- 17 As to c), for one person to be in relationship with two churches simultaneously raises real difficulties, but they are not insuperable. On a day to day basis, oversight and pastoral care should be provided by the appropriate persons in both (or all) churches involved. The substantial question of discipline and jurisdiction, however, would require the clear procedure which follows to be established.
- 18 While a person jointly ordained remained in an appointment in which he or she served two Churches, the one Church would delegate its responsibilities for discipline and jurisdiction to the other; in other words, one Church would act on behalf of both, by mutual agreement. If the minister were subsequently to

serve in a purely Methodist appointment, jurisdiction would continue to be Methodist. If she or he were to serve in an appointment in the other Church involved in the ordination, the Methodist Church would delegate its responsibilities for discipline and jurisdiction to that other Church.

- 19 Detailed recommendations regarding the case which prompted the Memorial will be presented to the Conference by the Division of Ministries. **The Faith and Order Committee advises the Conference that, in its judgment, there is no theological objection to joint ordination, provided that it occurs in the context of an existing Covenant, such as that in Wales, to seek for visible unity, and as a step towards that unity; provided that it is seen as a prophetic sign rather than as a requirement for the exercise of ministry in ecumenical circumstances; and provided that the conditions set out in paragraph 15 above can be fulfilled.**
- 20 The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to consult “with appropriate ecumenical and church bodies”. As reported in paragraphs 13 and 14, the Committee, through its representatives, has consulted with other Methodist bodies and with the Presbyterian Church of Wales. It has carefully considered the resolution passed by the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales.
- 21 Finally, because there are wider ecumenical implications, the Committee has reported its actions, its recommendations and the reasons for them to the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, requesting that the matter of joint ordination in appropriate circumstances should be placed on the ecumenical agenda at that level.

## **RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts the report.

*(Agenda 1996, pp.189-192)*