

EPISCOPACY IN THE METHODIST CHURCH (1981)

The following three texts need to be taken together. The first is an account from the President's Council of its actions; the second is the final draft of the working party's report; the third contains the comments of the Faith and Order Committee upon that report. In the event the Conference was not asked to adopt either the report or the comments. Rather it commended the report for study in the Church without expressing and judgement on its conclusions, and 'took note of' the comments from the Faith and Order Committee.

(i) FROM THE PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL

The Conference of 1980 directed the working party on Episcopacy in the Methodist Church to present its final report to the Conference of 1981, and in the meantime to present the draft as a study document with the approval of the President's Council as early as possible in the next Connexional year.

However, the President's Council was informed that the Faith and Order Committee had examined the Episcopacy Report and made some extremely critical comments upon it. The Council felt that it could not express its own judgement on the Episcopacy Report until the final verdict of the Faith and Order Committee upon it was known, and also that it would only cause confusion to publish the Report together with the not very well organised critical comments upon it.

As its February meeting, the Council had before it the various judgements on the Episcopacy Report adopted by the Faith and Order Committee at its residential meeting at the turn of the year. The Council passed the following resolution:

'Having noted the second resolution of the Faith and Order Committee, the President's Council records its own view that no scheme is likely to gain acceptance in Methodism which does not make use of the already developed and significant role of the Chairmen'. (The resolution referred to reads: 'The Committee expressed its judgement that a further development of the present superintendency represented the most acceptable method of receiving the historic episcopate into the life of Methodism'.)

The Council believes that the Episcopacy Report would be a valuable resource document in the further discussion that would follow the provisional acceptance by the Conference of the Proposals relating to Covenanting.

(Agenda 1981, p. 10)

(ii) FROM THE WORKING PARTY

The Conference believes that the coming great church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order. One step towards this would be for the Methodist Church to include an episcopal form of ministry in its life. This would be a sign of faith in the future and a way of helping churches with and without bishops in the search for unity. If the responses of other churches to the Ten Propositions would

cause delay in the progress towards unity, the Conference directs the President's Council to consider, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, whether the Methodist Church should not take this step. (Bradford Conference, 1978).

The working party produced its report at the special request of the President's Council within nine months of its first meeting, despite a change in its convener. That draft of the report is substantially the same as the final report. It was presented to the Council in November 1979 and made available to the Faith and Order Committee at the same time. Since then the Covenanting Proposals have been published (June 1980) and the General Synod of the Church of England has made a positive response. This report will be of value to the Methodist Church as it responds to the Covenanting Proposals.

AN AGREED SUMMARY

At the Bradford Conference in 1978 it seemed that the response of the Church of England to the Ten Propositions might cause delay in the progress towards unity. In that context the resolution on the coming great church was an endeavour to find another way forward. It raised the possibility that the Methodist Church should receive an episcopal form of ministry. Taking such a step was seen in the light of the belief that the church in the future will be congregational, presbyteral and episcopal in its life and order. It was held that taking such a step would be a sign of faith in the future and a way of helping churches with and without bishops in the search for unity.

The majority of the Working Party thinks that the Methodist Church should take such a step, a minority (in two dissentient statements) disagrees. The minority draws attention to the advantages of the covenanting scheme of the Churches' Council for Covenanting (which is specifically endorsed as the right step to take in one of the dissentient statements). The majority regards its proposals as offering a way forward should a negative response to the covenanting scheme mean a delay in the progress towards unity. It believes that such an initiative would break the logjam in the movement towards unity, enrich the life and ministry of the Methodist Church, and enable it to make a contribution to the church of the future by developing its own form of bishop.

In its first main section the report examines what is meant by the historic episcopate (in other words, an episcopate that is in a succession of ordination from the earliest times) and gives reason for the church to receive it. It also presents some ways in which the historic episcopate is understood, while indicating that the Methodist Church would not have to have an identical understanding of it.

A second main section considers the relationship between the historic episcopate and Methodist teaching and practice. It argues that there is nothing contrary to scripture or Methodist practice in receiving the historic episcopate. It points out that the episcopate (oversight) already exercised in the Methodist Church is corporate as well as individual, lay as well as ministerial, and proposes that such marks should characterise the episcopate of a Methodist Church with bishops. The ministry of a Methodist bishop is seen as including familiar elements in the Christian tradition (a pastor and preacher, a focus of unity and continuity, a guardian of doctrine, an ordainer) and as having a characteristically Methodist expression (for example, partnership in ministry and leadership in mission). It is argued that the receiving of bishops would help the growth towards mission and unity, not least in those areas where the churches are already working closely together.

The third section present the proposals. Three main suggestions are made for those to become bishop: the President, the Chairmen, the Superintendents. The report sees the office of the President as pre-eminently episcopal, but gives reasons for not making the President alone a bishop. It holds that the usual expression of episcopacy should be elsewhere. For this the Working Party prefers the development of the office of Superintendent (with larger circuits), judging that the superintendency is the most distinctively Methodist expression of oversight. It therefore recommends that Superintendents of enlarged circuits should be those made bishops. (Those signing the dissentient statements also believe that, if the Methodist Church were to have bishops, it should be by developing the office of the Superintendent.) However, the report affirms that a satisfactory alternative could be found in the office of the Chairman (either as they are at present with their present districts or in smaller districts with the Chairman in pastoral charge of a congregation). Some of the important implications of these proposals are noted and suggestions are made about the churches which might share their episcopal ministry with the Methodist Church.

After a final section which considers three possible difficulties and before the appendix and the two dissentient statements, the report concludes by saying that there are many gifts which God is encouraging Methodists to receive from others at this time and that among them is the historic episcopate.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bradford Conference in June 1978 was held at a moment when it seemed the Church of England's response to the Ten Propositions might cause delay in the progress towards unity. In that context the resolution on the coming great church was an endeavour to find another way forward.

It speaks of the church of the future as being more diverse in its life and order than the divided churches are at present, describing that church as congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal. That affirms three emphases that have often been separate in churches in the past. They have tended to stress or overstress the role and authority of the bishops, or of the ministry, or of the congregation. In recent years, however, people have become more and more convinced that each of these can be a valuable element in the life of the church and the ordering of its ministry. This has been expressed in many of the schemes of church union in different parts of the world.

Congregationalists offer an example of how the emphasis and practice of a church can develop. Historically Congregationalists have stressed the role (and independence) of the congregation, but in their union in England with the Presbyterian Church they have given a fuller place in their life to the ministry. In other words their emphasis has become presbyteral as well as congregational. In South India, moreover, the Congregationalists (already part of a united church) entered into a union which also included bishops. Thus in South India we see a church that has sought to give a place to congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal elements in its life and order. This is an instance of how churches – as they come together – receive from and contribute to each other. Moreover they express their unity in many ways, including the form of their ministry.

The resolution at the Bradford Conference asks the Methodist Church to consider taking a step towards this, by including an episcopal form of ministry in its life. It suggests this not as a condition imposed on the church by other churches or other Christians, but as a sign that we are confident – despite all the setbacks to unity – that the church will be one. What is new about the Bradford resolution is its proposal that

one church should consider taking a step, even if no other church is willing to take a comparable step at the same time. If we acted on this resolution, we should be asking certain churches to share with us what they treasure in the historic episcopate. (We believe that we in our turn could offer a new model of what a bishop can be.) At the same time, however, we should want to say to all churches that receiving the historic episcopate would not diminish our esteem for them, our relations with them, or our desire to be one with them. Rather, indeed, does it express the way we believe God is leading us at this moment in the coming together of all Christian people. This report examines what would be involved in taking such a step and presents certain recommendations.

B. DEFINITION

1. What is meant by bishops or the phrase ‘an episcopal form of ministry’?

A bishop (episcopos) is one who exercises oversight (episcopate). There are at least two kinds of bishops: those in and those not in succession of office and ordination from the early church.

The bishops of the United Methodist Church (the largest part of the worldwide Methodist Church), the Reformed bishops in Hungary, and the Lutheran bishops in Germany, all have the name bishop and exercise many or all of the functions traditionally exercised by bishops. They do not however stand in a succession of episcopal office and ordination from early times. By contrast the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, as well as the Anglican Churches and some other Lutheran Churches (Sweden and Finland) have bishops in such a succession. This second kind of episcopal ministry – differently understood in the different churches – is often described as the historic episcopate. It is that to which we refer in this report and which it is proposed the Methodist Church should receive.

2. Why the historic episcopate?

There are many reasons given for having bishops who are in the historic episcopate. First, there is the simple fact that the majority of our fellow Christians already have them. Moreover they regard the historic episcopate as a gift which they should bring to the united church of Christ. They also believe that it would enrich the life of other churches were they to receive it.

While we ask, ‘Why bishops?’, the majority of our fellow Christians ask, ‘Why not bishops?’ In a discussion about bishops they would want to know what compelling reason there is for not having bishops. To them we would be bound to say that we do not regard it as a matter of principle that Christ’s church should not have bishops. What would raise for us a matter of principle would be the insistence that we accept a statement or act which affirmed that our church or ministry is not of Christ because they lack the historic episcopate. This we could not accept. It is however not a matter of principle with us that other Christians or churches should give up what they have had and valued from the earliest times, unless it is in fundamental conflict with Christian faith and practice.

Second, wherever unions have taken place between churches with the historic episcopate and those without it, the union has kept the historic episcopate as part of its total ministry.

Third, the British Methodist Church has approved schemes of union for its daughter churches to enter into a union with other churches, where this has been one of the elements.

Fourth, the Conference accepted the inclusion of the historic episcopate as one of the elements in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme.

Fifth, we think that the historic episcopate can make a valuable contribution to the life and mission of the church of the future.

3. How do other Christians understand the historic episcopate?

There are various ways in which they understand it. It may be simplest to take the way it is understood in the Church of England as that church expressed it in its conversations with the Methodist Church. (It is dealt with on pages 16 to 27 of *Conversations between The Church of England and The Methodist Church: An Interim Statement*, SPCK and Epworth, 1958.)

‘As an institution it was, and is, characterised by succession in two forms: the succession in office and the succession of consecration. And it had generally recognised functions; the general superintendence of the church and more especially of the clergy; the maintenance of unity in the one eucharist; the ordination of men to the ministry; the safeguarding of the faith; and the administration of the church.’

‘What we uphold is the episcopate, maintained in successive generations by continuity of succession and consecration, as it has been throughout the history of the Church from the earliest times and discharging those functions which from the earliest times it has discharged.’ (page 23)

In the same statement, however, the limitations of the historic episcopate are recognised:

‘. . . the unity of legitimate succession is after all of little value if taken apart from the continuity of Scripture, the rule of faith, and the Sacraments. It is in these things, and in the continuing stream of Christian prayer and action inspired and empowered by them, that the substance of the Church’s life resides. Legitimate succession cannot of itself guarantee the integrity of these things, but if taken in conjunction with them it enriches their witness and strengthens their power.’ (page 19)

Various elements belong together, although not all have been equally emphasised. The bishop is pastor, preacher, teacher, evangelist, reconciler, ordainer and initiator. By many he is seen as exercising the prime ministry which he shares with the other ministers in the diocese somewhat in the same way that a Methodist superintendent exercises the chief or prime ministry in a circuit, a ministry which he both shares with other and delegates to them. By others the bishop is seen as exercising a wider and fuller ministry than other ministers (for example, wider as covering a wider area and fuller as including ordination), but his ministry is not seen by them as the prime ministry. The prime ministry they see as exercised by the whole body of ministers.

As part of the modern discussion of bishops, it is illuminating to read the summary statement about the historic episcopate in a document produced in 1978 in the United

Reformed Church entitled *Personal Episcopacy – a URC View*. It argues the case for having pastoral oversight focussed in a person, not only in a local congregation focussed in a minister, but also in a region of many congregations focussed in a bishop.

‘What is held to be essential to it is a combination of elements already noted in the description of personal oversight at the local level, now extended to the regional and also to the historical dimension. Thus a bishop is a pastor of the flock, a witness to the faith, a reconciler, a builder and maintainer of unity. And a bishop is all these things in manifest continuity with the life of the church down the ages and in manifest fellowship with the life of the church throughout the world.’
(page 6)

4. Must we have the same understanding of the historic episcopate?

No. There is nothing unusual in Christians having different understandings of something they accept. A united Church will have in its life the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, but they will be understood in different ways. Moreover one could hold the two sacraments to be an indispensable element in the life of the united church, without its being considered necessary for everyone to have the same understanding of them. If different understandings of the sacraments are possible in the Methodist Church today and the united church of the future, then they would clearly also be possible with the historic episcopate.

We can agree with Anglicans and others that by the end of the second century an episcopal form of ministry was almost universal in the church and that it was seen as possessing a commission ultimately derived from the one given by Christ to the apostles. We can recognise its crucial part in the early church in resisting false teaching, in holding Christians together, and in furthering the mission of the church. We do not however see this as strictly comparable with the formation of the canon of scripture or the creeds as many Christians do. Because claims have been made for it which we do not accept (such as that it is essential to the church), we find it natural first of all to make negative statements. Thus we are clear that it is not essential to the church, so that without it the church would not be truly Christ’s church, and we are clear that it is not essential to the ministry, so that without it the ministry would not be truly Christ’s ministry. We can however also see that it can be valuable in the life of the church. It focusses the pastoral office in a person. It expresses the church’s and the ministry’s continuity through the centuries and is a focus of unity within a diocese and between dioceses. As it deepens the sense of unity in the church it can strengthen the church’s capacity for mission.

C. Relationship with Methodist Practice

1. Is receiving the historic episcopate in keeping with scripture and our Methodist tradition?

This question could mean different things. If it means does scripture or our Methodist tradition require the church to have bishops in the historic episcopate, the answer is emphatically no. If it means is having the historic episcopate contrary to scripture and our Methodist tradition, the answer is equally no; but then the answer needs clarification.

We do not think that an episcopal ministry can be conclusively proved or disproved from scripture, although there are those called bishops in the New Testament. What is clear is that an episcopal ministry developed very early in the life of the church and became almost universal by the end of the second century. It was seen as early as the second century as in continuity with the ministry of the apostles. The diverse forms of ministry that can be seen in the first century of the church gradually disappeared or were transformed, and a threefold form of bishop, presbyter, and deacon emerged.

It cannot be shown that there is an unbroken succession of ordination from the apostles. It should be noted moreover that the earliest references to succession concern a succession of bishops holding office in a particular bishopric rather than a succession of ordination. In the struggle to resist false teaching, the claim was made that people could have confidence in the truth of the doctrine taught in those churches which could show they had a succession reaching back to an apostle or to one who had been in touch with an apostle. Undoubtedly stress was later laid on the succession of ordination from the apostles, some seeing this succession as a guarantee that the bishops are a channel of God's grace in ordination and that the church was apostolic because it had in such bishops an apostolic ministry. Such a way of thinking is in our judgment not in keeping with the way of grace of God as understood in the New Testament and the way we have experienced God's grace in the Methodist Church without our having an apostolic ministry in that sense of the word. We repudiate the view that a succession of episcopal ordination is a guarantee either of God's grace or of the church's apostolicity as the Methodist members did in the Anglican-Methodist conversations.

The fact that this ministry is not required by the New Testament (neither are class leaders or the Methodist Hymn Book) and the fact that it has been abused (so has the Conference or the ordained ministry or the sacrament of baptism) are not reasons for rejecting it. The fact that the Christian church has practised it from early times, the fact that the majority of Christians have such a ministry today, and the fact that it has been included in union schemes between episcopal and non-episcopal churches, are all reasons in favour of accepting rather than rejecting it. The important issue touches not the fact of the historic episcopate but the way it is exercised and the way it is received. It is our hope that we shall develop a distinctively Methodist way of exercising it and the Bradford proposal would be that we accept it not as a condition imposed on us by others (to qualify us in some way for union or communion with them) but as a sign of our faith in the coming great church which we believe will include it in its life. Such a step will help towards the unity of the church and (notably in areas of ecumenical co-operation) it will help the mission of the church. A step that helps unity and mission, while not denying God's grace in any way, is in keeping with scripture and our Methodist tradition.

2. Does receiving the historic episcopate mean that we are ceasing to be Methodist and becoming Anglican or Roman Catholic in our church's life?

No. In our past our church has resolved to accept the historic episcopate – both in the schemes of union in South India and North India and in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme in Britain. Moreover one of the advantages in the step proposed this time is that it enables us to incorporate the historic episcopate in our life and to develop it within our own tradition. This should lead to an enriching of what the episcopal ministry can be in the whole church. The developing of such a ministry in our tradition could help Methodists moreover to see that a person can be a bishop without being a prelate, a lord (a member that is of the House of Lords), or a prince of the church.

3. Does not the Methodist Church already have episcopacy?

Although the Methodist Church does not have the historic episcopate, it does have various forms of episcopate (oversight). It is an oversight of people and property, discipline and doctrine. This oversight is exercised both corporately and individually. It is exercised corporately, for example, by Conference, Synods, Circuit Meetings, Pastoral Committees and individually by the President, Chairman, Superintendents, Ministers, Class Leaders.

It is important to note that oversight is corporate as well as individual, lay as well as ministerial. This is something characteristic of our tradition and something that most Methodists would want to maintain. It would be natural therefore for Methodist bishops to be related in their oversight, as Methodist ministers are at present, both to other ministers and to lay people. According to whether he corresponded more closely to the President, the Chairman, or the Superintendent, a Methodist bishop would exercise oversight in association with the Conference, the Synod, or the Circuit Meeting. This relationship would preserve both the corporate and the lay elements in oversight.

4. What would a bishop be like in the Methodist Connexion?

If we describe the way the term bishop is used (by us and by others), people will probably say ‘You mean something like a Methodist superintendent of chairman, or a United Reformed moderator, or a . . .’ They will draw a comparison with what is familiar to them in their tradition. There is a danger then of exaggerating the similarity with or the dissimilarity from what we or others already have.

Probably the nearest analogy is with the relation of a minister to a congregation. As he is the one who presides in ministry in that area, so a bishop is one who presides in ministry in a wider area. His ministry is comparable with that of the local minister, as they are both sharing the ministry of Christ, who is the first bishop as he is also the first minister. Both exercise Christ’s ministry, although a bishop may do so more fully (where, for example, he is the one who ordains) or more widely (where his area of responsibility is more extensive).

He is primarily a minister (or servant) of Christ. His ministry is a ministry of the Word, and expresses itself as he leads in preaching and teaching, in celebrating baptism and the Lord’s supper, in witnessing and caring, in reconciling and enabling. (As *episcopos* – the New Testament word for bishop – implies, he has oversight.) He is concerned with ministry both to the world and to the church, as was (and is) the ministry of Christ. In that context, however, it may be proper to stress that he will be in particular a pastor to ministers, and his pastoral relationship to his fellow ministers will fittingly express itself in ordaining and stationing as well as in pastoral care. As a minister is seen in a special sense to be a representative person in the congregation and in its neighbourhood, so a bishop is seen in a special sense to be a representative person in a wider group of churches and in the area where they are.

The characteristics we have noted might suggest a bishop, but not necessarily a bishop in the historic succession. That characteristic expresses the continuity of the bishop (and of the church) with the earliest times. The element of succession is already expressed in our church in the fact that ministers are ordained by those already ministers. This element of succession would fittingly belong to the ministry of bishops if we were to have episcopal ordination in the church, just as at present with presbyteral ordination we have a presbyteral succession.

Our view of a bishop includes some of the characteristics or tasks traditionally associated with bishops (a focus of unity and continuity, a guardian of doctrine, an ordainer). Some of these however would be differently expressed in our tradition.

Our church has always been fundamentally concerned with the mission of the church, and so leadership in mission would be a prime duty of the bishop. His leadership, moreover, in keeping with our tradition would be in fellowship with the ordained and lay members of the church. Our stress on the brotherhood of the ministry would mean that other ministers would be seen as the bishop's colleagues or partners in ministry, not essentially as his subordinates. His leadership would not be a sole or monarchical leadership, imposed by a veto or financial control. The place of the synod and Conference would mean that he would not take decisions in isolation from others, indeed in some cases (as in the guardianship of doctrine or the ordination and stationing of ministers and the length of his ministry in his diocese) the final decision would not be his but that of the Conference of which directly or indirectly he would be a part. His representative leadership means that he would represent the concerns and decisions of his diocese to the Conference and the wider church, just as he would represent their concerns and decisions to the diocese. Similarly he would represent and speak on behalf of his diocese to other churches.

This sketch illustrates in a measure how the office of a bishop would have continuity with the tradition of other churches and continuity with our own tradition, and suggests how its exercise in the church of the future could be influenced by our church's way of exercising that ministry. For an episcopal ministry which is missionary and pastoral, exercised in genuine partnership with the whole church, is a far cry from the pomp and power we associate with Lord Bishops. It finds its pattern and its power in the ministry of the One who came not to be served but to serve.

5. Is not the existence of parallel episcopates a denial of the assertion that a bishop is the focus of unity?

While the church is divided, as it has been for nine centuries at least, there are inevitably parallel episcopates. It cannot be expected that the ministry will be one before the church is one, but we believe that our receiving bishops would be a step towards a united church, a united ministry, and a united mission. Thus the episcopates would be converging rather than parallel.

We live in a period of convergence when increasingly we all learn and receive from each other. We are growing together in such a way that the time may come – almost imperceptibly – when it will appear that we are too close to each other to remain apart. Our receiving of an episcopal ministry would be simply one of those steps that all churches are taking as they seek to follow their vision of what God is doing with the divided church of today.

Methodist bishops would need to have the episcopal ministry in ways recognisable to other churches and recognised in different measure by them. It could be that Methodist bishops and bishops of other churches would share in the ordination of ministers (presbyters and even bishops) and in this way the bishops would be agents of unity in the church. Undoubtedly the decision to have Methodist bishops would help those areas which are looking for an ecumenical bishop. Such an area could have a Methodist as a bishop, if he were the right person, in the same way as at present they could have an Anglican.

6. Is not this another case of unity from the top?

No. The pressure for unity is coming from congregations as well as from synods or Conference. There are over three hundred ecumenical projects in England. They are responses to the missionary situation of the church. Some are grouped in a single town or area (of which one of the best known cases is Swindon – see the additional note on the Swindon proposals), others serve neighbourhoods. Where there is such close working together, people are calling for action to resolve problems created variously by dual or multiple membership, the deployment of ministers, the need to relate to the different denominational structures, working within locally devised constitutions, and the representation of the Church by Christians of the various churches. Many of the tensions created by these problems would be overcome by the appointment of the Methodist bishops.

D. PROPOSALS

1. Factors to be considered

In considering who should exercise the ministry of bishop in the Methodist Church, we have found factors pointing in different directions.

In our church powers resides (at least constitutionally) in the Conference and in the circuit or congregation, the district and the synod being relatively powerless. Should bishops express that structure (with the President and superintendents as bishops), or should they counteract it (with chairman as bishops, perhaps with an added emphasis on the role of the district and the power of the synod)?

Our church has been through a period of re-structuring. It is ready for another act of re-structuring, or should the introduction of bishops involve as little change to the structure as possible?

Should the role of our bishops stand in obvious continuity with the role of bishops in other churches (in the size of the area in which they minister, and in the functions which they exercise), or should the continuity be rather with the way we have done things in the past?

Should we examine what an ideal bishop is and fit that into our system or should we start from what already exists in our system?

Clearly people will give a different weight to different factors. Some will prefer as little change as possible; others will be prepared for considerable change. Some will want the balance of our structure to remain the same; others will want this move to alter that balance. The working party offers its judgment in section 6. It presents the main suggestions that have come before it (the President, the Superintendents, the Chairman) with some comments on each.

2. The President

As the bishop is a focus of oversight and unity in the church, it would be natural for the President to be a bishop. Moreover he engages in the kind of ministry traditionally associated with bishops (for example, in ordaining and in presiding over the Conference to which oversight of doctrine is committed). However to have only the President as bishop would be to remove the bishop from the close contact with the local church and the local minister which is generally seen as one of the most valuable parts of his ministry. Moreover the presence of perhaps ten or a dozen Past Presidents

engaged in a ministry that is not necessarily one which focusses oversight and unity would severely distort the role of a bishop in the church. The majority of the church's bishops would be engaged in a ministry that was not characteristically episcopal and they would almost certainly not be distributed evenly around the country. If the President is to be a bishop, which we judge to be right, then it is important that the more usual expression of episcopacy be elsewhere.

We would not recommend that the Past Presidents be made bishops, but it might be fitting for the Ex-President to be made a bishop at the same Conference as the President, so that he may share in the ordinations if they are held at the Conference, and act in his stead should the need arise during his presidential year.

3. The Superintendents

The word superintendent represents what lies behind the word episcopos (overseer) which is traditionally translated bishop. In Methodism the superintendent has played a vital part in the oversight of the church. Although not by right a member of the Conference, he has been particularly responsible for carrying out the decisions of the Conference. His oversight of doctrine and discipline and worship in the circuit, his care of his fellow ministers, his relation to probationer ministers, his presidency of meetings, all give him an obviously episcopal role.

There are at least three possible ways in which superintendents (or some of them) could become bishops.

(a) All superintendents could be made bishops. This might make the superintendent correspond in some ways to bishops in early times when the bishop was very much a local bishop. However the church was small in numbers then, and as it grew in size the area covered by the bishop grew. With every circuit superintendent a bishop we should probably need to make chairmen, if we still had them, into something like archbishops. We should face the strange situation of having some circuits with bishops but not other ministers (or presbyters) or only one other. Moreover few of the bishops would exercise one of the bishop's traditional roles, that of ordaining, and it would be hard to relate our bishops to the bishops of other churches.

(b) Some superintendents could be made bishops, probably together with the chairman as a presiding bishop, or perhaps with no chairman and the presidency moving round. This would give a kind of team episcopacy. In the one case the bishops could work together with one as president. Both forms deprive the office of bishop of one of its main characteristics, the focussing in one person of the oversight in a given area. The bishop is less obviously the focus of unity if there are two bishops in the same area. This system would complicate our present pattern of oversight, without corresponding advantages.

(c) Circuits could be amalgamated, so that the present districts would in effect be divided into a number of circuits, perhaps somewhere between three and six in the mainland districts. (In its earlier days Methodism had much larger circuits than we have at present.) The new circuits or dioceses would probably have between 10 and 25 or 30 ministers, the smaller number being in the scattered rural areas. Although this move would cause an upheaval in many places, it would have advantages at a time when circuits of two or three ministers have to forego a minister and find themselves severely understaffed or driven to an emergency amalgamation.

Such a move could take many forms and we sketch here one possible form. The dioceses would, as far as possible, follow the natural centres of population, communication, or work. The bishop would probably have pastoral care of one congregation in a rural diocese or would share the pastoral care of a larger church in a town or city diocese. He would therefore have fewer demands from his section of the diocese than our present superintendents and this would free him for his wider responsibilities. He would have the advantage of being close to the ministers and churches where he is a bishop, knowing them and being known by them. He would bear responsibility for stationing and preside at ordinations.

There would be major changes if this scheme were followed, though all of them are in keeping with the way we have been developing as a church. First, dioceses would be much larger than present circuits, although there are an increasing number of circuits with ten or a dozen ministers (usually where all the circuits of a town have come together). Some of the things that happened in the amalgamating circuits would continue to happen in these areas (for example, the diocesan plan would no doubt be made in areas corresponding to the old circuits, in some cases in smaller areas and in others in larger ones, so that unnecessary travel would be avoided). There would be no need for a constitutional structure for the old circuit units, but where they wished to do things together they could do so. In an increasingly ecumenical age, however, many congregations would want to give time to establishing local links with other churches and they would be freed for that by these changes. Clearly different things would be desirable and possible in town and country dioceses. Second, the district and the circuit would in effect be merged, so that the church would save one layer of meetings and administration. This could lead to a considerable saving in time and administration. Third, the dioceses would work together for some purposes in the way that circuits and districts do at present. For example, the bishops of a group of new dioceses could appoint one of their number to Conference and to the connexional stationing committee (if that body continued) or they could serve in turn (much as chairmen do at present on the President's Council). No formal regional structure is necessary, but it seems likely that the bishops of a number of neighbouring dioceses would find it helpful to meet together from time to time to discuss matters including stationing. If there were at least ten ministers to a diocese, it would be possible for each diocese to send at least one minister and one lay person to Conference. The minister need not be the bishop. Fourth, the role of the Conference in the stationing of bishops would need to be more obviously expressed than it is at present with circuit superintendents. The way chairmen are appointed at present offers one possible method.

This proposal would involve more change than the other proposals, but for some it is both closer to the ideal form of bishop and closer to important elements in our tradition. The bishop would manifestly be a minister like other ministers, but with wider responsibilities. He would have oversight of the whole life of the church (people and property, doctrine and discipline). He would be a pastor of the ministers and of the people. He would preside, whether at diocesan meetings or diocesan ordination services. He would be identified with a place where he could know and be known. Yet in much of this he would simply be a circuit superintendent to whom some further responsibilities had been added. Moreover as a superintendent he would have more power to initiate and stimulate than a chairman would, if he became a bishop.

4. The Chairman

In the way our life is ordered at present chairmen correspond more closely than do the President or superintendents to bishops in other churches. They have a district that is comparable in size with Anglican or Roman Catholic dioceses. They are freed from other duties to have pastoral care of the ministers and to have the general oversight of the district. They are appointed to exercise leadership. Although there are certain constitutional limitations on their oversight of the district (for example, they enter circuits with the permission of the superintendents), these have not in practice usually diminished the oversight that chairmen exercise. Indeed the role of the chairmen has – not surprisingly – developed in natural ways rather than simply in the ways set out in the church's standing orders.

(a) The simplest constitutional change would be for chairmen to become bishops. The only major change that would then be proper and necessary, would be for them to be involved in the ordination of probationers in their districts.

There is a substantial case for making all chairmen bishops. It would involve almost no changes in administration or constitution. It would avoid the clash of loyalty between the claims of the local church and the diocese, and obviate the problem of deciding in which church or circuit the bishop should minister. It would prevent an increase in the number of those attending Conference or being on the Stationing Committee and the danger of introducing another level of oversight between the diocese and the Conference. It would keep the size of a Methodist diocese broadly similar to that of other churches.

(b) Alternatively the chairman could become the presiding bishop and others could be appointed to serve with him, with particular responsibilities. These could be responsibilities for a geographical area or for a sector of the church's work or ministry. There would probably be advantages for the bishop in working as one of a team, but there would undoubtedly be disadvantages as well. Some of these are already experienced by those churches which have suffragan or area bishops. (Of course even without other bishops in the area the bishop would be part of a team ministry with the other ministers and with lay people.) For example, the diocesan bishop's role as the focus of unity would be obscured or diminished, and suffragan or area bishops would easily become simply assistants to the bishop. Moreover, it is not obvious that the oversight of youth work or education or industry in a district or region requires a bishop. A stronger case might be made for a distinct area of national life (like the armed forces), but even then there is the disadvantage of isolating that area from the life of the community as a whole, rather than integrating it. Moreover such oversight does not really require a bishop any more than does the oversight of one of the divisions of the church.

(c) A further possibility is for districts to be divided into two or three with a bishop in pastoral charge for each of the new sub-districts or dioceses. These would be natural sections corresponding where possible with the centres of work, population, or communication. In some cases there might be an advantage in small changes in district boundaries. Such a division of districts corresponds with the view frequently expressed that many of the present districts are too large and bring together places that have little in common. To keep districts at their present size and have bishops without pastoral care of a congregation is possible but would deprive them of what has proved of value in the ministry of our superintendents. If the bishop had pastoral charge of a congregation he would be closer to his fellow ministers – and with such a pattern there need be no greater expense in having bishops than in having chairmen.

There could be advantages for the bishops and the church, if the bishops were to have pastoral care of a congregation or congregations. In particular it would keep bishops in direct contact with the normal circuit work of the church and it would prevent their office from seeming to be administrative rather than pastoral. However there would or could be important implications for the districts in such a change.

First, a sub-district or diocese would hardly need the full range of committees that a district has at present. Either the dioceses would be grouped into districts for such committee work, or a much simpler diocesan structure could emerge. If the second of these happened, there would probably be no need of more than at most two diocesan synods in the year compared with the three (or four if one includes the meeting for candidates) held at present. Some of the committee work, if it were judged necessary, could be done on the day of the synod. Other committees could be merged and could consist of one minister and one lay person from each circuit. For some parts of their work (for example, regional youth organisers) a number of dioceses could be grouped together, as happens at present with districts. Of course, the organisation of the diocese could, if preferred, remain the same as that of a district at present, whether it were smaller than a district or the same size.

Second, the relation of the diocese to the Conference would be similar to that of the present districts. The bishop would be a member of the Conference, but if it were judged that too many of the ministerial representatives were bishops (say twice as many as the present number of district chairmen) then the bishops could have the right to speak but only the same number as are at present chairmen could be voting members. The matter would be determined by rotation or by election.

5. Common Elements

In each of these three proposals (what may be described broadly as having as bishops the superintendents or amalgamated circuits, the present chairmen, or chairmen of smaller districts engaged in pastoral care of a congregation) certain possible courses of action remain open. With each, for example, we would recommend that the President be made a bishop, if he is not one already; that ordination of ministers should be by the bishop in the diocese; that ordination of bishops – following a long Christian practice – should be by three bishops (appointed by Conference), including where possible the President, the service being held normally in the diocese; that the appointment of bishops be under the authority of the Conference; that bishops be bishops for life (as in general with bishops in the church, including the United Methodist Church) although the length of time the bishop presides over a diocese would – as with chairmen at present – depend ultimately on the decision of the Conference.

6. Who should become bishops?

The majority of the working party think that the Methodist Church should receive an episcopal ministry. They believe that the superintendent is the right person to become bishop – but in the context expressed in 3(c). However if the changes involved in such a step were greater than the church would wish at present, then the proposal made in 4(a) and 4(c) for chairman to be bishops would be an acceptable alternative. This would make the area of the Methodist bishops' responsibility similar to that of other churches, which could make work with other churches easier. (Those signing the minority reports also believe that if the Methodist Church were to have an episcopal ministry it is superintendents who should become bishops in the form expressed in 3(c). All members of the working party think that this is closer to the

primitive Christian pattern as well as to our Methodist tradition. Moreover in some areas other churches have been moving in a similar direction.)

7. Where would the historic episcopate come from?

Ideally we would invite all those churches with the historic episcopate to share in the ordination of our first bishop or bishops. It is however unlikely that the Eastern Orthodox Churches or the Roman Catholic Church would feel free to do so without, for example, much closer agreement on doctrine than at present exists. There are other churches with the historic episcopate, like the Church of Sweden (Lutheran), the Churches of the Anglican Communion, and the Old Catholic Church, as well as the churches which have entered into union, such as those in North and South India.

It would be good if those churches, or some of them, officially agreed to share with us the episcopal ministry which they have. It would be a sign of the universality and diversity of the church if churches at home and overseas were represented, as well as churches of different traditions.

There could be simply the ordination of the President as bishop (and perhaps the Ex-President but more fittingly the President alone at the inaugural service) and then he either with those Methodists who are (or have been) bishops in the Churches of North and South India or with two other bishops (and, if so, then most fittingly one Anglican and one Reformed or Lutheran) could ordain the others. (After the first ordinations the ordination could be by the President and others already ordained bishop.) The ordination of the President would take place at the Conference. The other ordinations would more appropriately take place in churches in each of the new dioceses. In this way the whole Methodist people could share in this great celebration.

We hope other churches would be willing to share with us the episcopal ministry which they have. This statement together with the statements approved by the Conference in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme are a sufficient indication to them of how we understand the episcopate and how we would seek to incorporate this form of ministry into the total life of our church.

E. Possible Difficulties

1. Is there not a risk of division in Methodism if this step is taken?

We recognise an element of risk in what we propose. But that is not in itself a reason for not acting. Risk is part of life and part of the Christian life. The question is whether this particular risk should be taken and that means asking whether this step taken now will further God's purpose with his church.

It must be frankly faced that there is in our church a hostility on the part of some to bishops. There are understandable historical reasons for this, although for some this almost instinctive hostility has been tempered by the example of bishops who have shown pastoral or prophetic quality.

It could well be that some would leave the Methodist Church if it took this step. It is likely that they would be a small part of the number who might leave were there at any time a union scheme. It is impossible to judge how many would actually leave if the church took the step proposed. We do not think there would be a large number, but we should know the response of the church at large only as the Conference or the synods considered the proposals and the issues involved in them.

Others in our church see no positive value in bishops that we could not have without introducing the historic episcopate, except what they regard as dubious continuity with the past. They regard receiving episcopacy as a condition imposed by others on us and think we should ask them to give up bishops in the cause of unity. Others believe that bishops are the price we may have to pay for unity, but that it would be a needless disruption of our life as a church for any goal short of union with another church. Others believe that this is a moment when our receiving bishops could break the log jam in the movement towards unity and that we could also benefit in our life as a church from taking this step. It is our judgment that that is so and that this step could promote the unity and mission of the church in Britain.

There are times when someone has to take the initiative. This is especially true in the healing of broken relationships. We believe that this is such a moment in the growing together of Christians and the Christian churches. The Methodist Church is perhaps uniquely fitted to take a step that would be a sign of our faith in the future of the church and a help to others. We use the word sign in two senses: as an indication of what we think the church of the future will be like and as an act or symbolic gesture which will help towards a future that never seems to come nearer.

We are reminded of Jeremiah. He had prophesied the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the defeat of his people, and had been imprisoned for it. Then when the Babylonian armies were laying siege to the city and the prospect for the people seemed bleak, Jeremiah showed his confidence in God's future for his people. He bought a field at Anathoth and in the name of God declared, 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land'. There have been many setbacks in the way to unity, so that many doubt whether the church ever will be one. We believe it will be, and that we can take a step towards it.

We would be taking this step not as a means to improving our relations with one church rather than another, but as a recognition of what in part we believe the church of the future will be and of our willingness to move towards that. In taking this step we would have the resolute intention of keeping our relations with all other Christian churches at least as open as they are at present and we hope that our readiness to act in this instance will be a stimulus to them to receive what others have to give.

This step springs from our belief that God means his church to be united and that its structural unity will assist its mission in the world.

2. Will this not give us two classes of minister, those episcopally and those not episcopally ordained?

One reason for the service of reconciliation in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme was that it would make all ministers acceptable in both churches. It was feared that without such a service Methodist ministers who were ordained before that time would have been unacceptable in many Anglican churches. This seemed unsatisfactory in a scheme that was meant to bring the two churches closer together in preparation for a future union.

The present proposal is not concerned with a scheme of intercommunion or union with the Church of England, nor is it concerned to make Methodist ministers acceptable in the eyes of the Church of England (or of some of its ministers and members). It is concerned to accept here and now what we believe will be part of the life of the church in the future and to discover in our own tradition what bishops can

be. It is our hope that what we discover will itself be a contribution to the church of the future, so that we can offer our own distinctive model and style of bishop. There will therefore be no problem of the kind referred to in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme if we have some ministers episcopally ordained and some not.

3. Will this proposal not create difficulties for the Free Churches and for many evangelical Christians?

We do not think it need.

Our relations with the other Free Churches will remain as they are at present. We shall continue to recognise them as churches and their ministers as ministers of the church of Christ. We shall continue to work with them and seek to become part of a united church that includes them. We do not think our having bishops need create more difficulty than (or as much difficulty as) the differences that exist between us at present: believers baptism or infant baptism, the absence of the two sacraments or the insistence on the two sacraments, the congregational system or the connexional system.

Moreover evangelical Christians who were unhappy about the Anglican-Methodist Scheme need not be unhappy with the present proposals. (We use the word evangelical here in one of its accepted senses, a sense which is clear from the context.) There is no service of reconciliation which could be interpreted as a covert ordination of Methodist ministers. There is no accepting of episcopacy because others require it of us if we are to have intercommunion. There is moreover, as before, the clear insistence that we do not regard the church or the ministry, let alone salvation itself, as in any way dependent on the presence or absence of the historic episcopate in the life of the church.

It is worth observing that so distinguished an evangelical theologian as Dr. James Packer in signing a minority report in the Anglican-Methodist Scheme could speak positively of the historic episcopate, while repudiating any idea that it should be a condition of intercommunion. 'That an episcopal ministry has value, other things being equal, as a sign of the unity, continuity, and authority of Christ's Church, is undoubtedly true, but to suspend full fellowship at the Lord's Table on a non-scriptural requirement, this or any other, is sectarian and wrong' (page 182). It is interesting that the notable Primitive Methodist Professor A. S. Peake who spoke against the historic episcopate in his Presidential Address at the Annual Assembly of the National Free Church Federal Council in 1928 also spoke in the same speech of the church's right to change its form of government. 'No form of organisation has any intrinsic Divine right. The living Church has the competence to create its own organisation and to modify it by retrenchment here and expansion there, as new occasions arise and new needs have to be met.' Half a century later we see such a new occasion and need.

F. CONCLUSIONS

The thirty five years since the war have been marked by a series of attempts to move towards unity. There were the Archbishop of Canterbury's Cambridge sermon in 1946, the Anglican-Presbyterian Conversations in 1949, the Anglican-Methodist Conversations in 1955, the resolve that the churches should covenant together by Easter 1980 made at the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference in 1964, the Anglican-Methodist Scheme in 1968, the uniting of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in England in the United Reformed Church in 1972, and the Ten

Propositions in 1976. All these attempts in Britain and a variety of union schemes overseas manifest the concern of the British churches for the unity of the church.

Every new step the church takes is open to misunderstanding. Sometimes there is a genuine fear that we are deserting our way of doing things for someone else's, or even being taken over by someone else. We believe this fear is ungrounded in this instance. We are doing something which we have encouraged other Methodists (in South India, for example) to do, and which they have not regretted but valued. We are doing it not at the behest of others but on our own initiative and in our own time and way. Sometimes there is a fear of deserting certain churches for others. It is our resolute intention not to do this. We shall continue all our old relationships with them, including the search for unity with them. Sometimes there is the fear that we are obsessed with one thing at the cost of others. We do not intend to be. We think there are many things which God is showing us or encouraging us to receive from others at this time. Communities as diverse as the charismatic movement and Taize, house churches and Black Churches have gifts to bring to the church at large which we need to receive if we are to be faithful to God in the present and the future. We regard the historic episcopate as one gift among many that we as a church should receive from others.

The word bishop evokes hostility in the hearts of some. There are good historical reasons for this, as the episcopal ministry has often been grossly abused in the past. In recent years however we have seen in new churches and in old how bishops can be pastors and prophets. Something of the spirit in which bishops increasingly see their ministry is expressed in the Roman Catholic ordination service, where the charge to the new bishop and the people includes these words: 'The title of bishops is one not of honour but of function, and therefore a bishop should strive to serve rather than to rule.'

We believe that the way our church has lived the Christian life, practised the Christian ministry and engaged in Christian mission would mould the office of bishop, so that we could make a contribution to the united church in this area as others desire us to (*Interim Report*, page 18, and *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, page 38). As part of the universal church we have much to give. With William Arthur at the Second World Methodist Conference in Washington in 1891 we say, 'The whole we are not: and that we not only admit but affirm, and equally do we affirm that we are of the whole.'

Alan G. Cox
Nigel L. Gilson
Gordon F. Simmons
Peter Stephens
Paul R. Williams

G. ADDITIONAL NOTES

1. Chairman

The following statement is made in Standing Order 424 about responsibilities of Chairmen:

1. The prime duty of a Chairman is to further the work of God in his District; to this end he will use all the gifts and graces he has received, being especially diligent to be a pastor to the ministers and probationers and to lead the ministry and laity of the District in the work of preaching and worship, evangelism, pastoral care, teaching and administration.
2. The Chairman, in conjunction with the members of the Synod in its respective Sessions, shall be responsible to the Conference for the observance within the District of Methodist order and discipline.
3. It is the duty of the Chairman to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and probationers in his District.

2. Confirmation

Confirmation has traditionally been associated with bishops. We think there are good arguments for and against the bishop's confirming or receiving into full membership. In our judgement it would easily lead to a lack of balance in his ministry if the bishop presided at all confirmations in his diocese. However we recognise that an increasing number of circuits involve the chairman in services of confirmation or reception into full membership, and this may well reflect what seems most appropriate to our ministers and members. It might therefore be best if we followed the proposal in *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme* (pp. 80-81, sections 250-256): '. . . the minister conducting the service could be named in some such ways as 'the bishop or some presbyter acting in his stead', according to the practice adopted in the Church of South India.' In our judgment there is no necessary reason for departing from our present practice.

3. Diocese

In this report it has been less confusing to use the word diocese for the area within which a bishop works rather than a variety of terms (area, episcopal area, district). We have used the term diocese for the area in which a bishop works in preference to others, simply because this is the traditional term. We are not advocating any change in Methodist usage. The term district or circuit could serve the Methodist Church just as well as the term diocese.

4. The President

The following statements are made about the responsibilities of the President in Standing Orders 11, 200, 786 (4).

111 President's Powers. (1) The President shall have power to assist at any Synod, if requested to do so by the Chairman or by a majority of the Superintendents in the District.

(2) He shall have the right, if requested to do so by any person or persons concerned, to visit any Circuit and to enquire into its affairs and,

in union with the Synod, redress any grievance. In any case which may arise affecting the administration of any Circuit, before application is made to the President the Chairman shall be consulted.

200 Chairmanship. The President of the Conference is, ex officio, chairman of all connexional committees.

786 (4) Resignation. The President, acting in consultation with the advisory committee, has authority to accept the resignation of a minister in full connexion and every such action on the part of the President shall be deemed for all purposes to be the action of the Conference. The President shall report his action to the Conference next following.

5. Superintendent

The following statements about the responsibilities of superintendents are made in Standing Orders 501(1), 520(1), and 521(1).

501. Chairmanship of Meetings. (1) The Superintendent or, failing him, one of his colleagues shall have the right to preside at every official meeting connected with the Circuit, or with any committee, institution or organisation having official connection with the Circuit or with any of its Local Churches.

521. Responsibilities. (1) The Superintendent and other minister or ministers appointed to the several Circuits is and are appointed by the Conference to preach and perform all acts of religious worship and Methodist discipline in each of the Methodist chapels and other preaching-places approved by the Conference already erected or to be erected in each Circuit respectively, within the space of twelve calendar months, at such time or times and in such manner as they find proper; subject, nevertheless, to the Superintendent minister and to the existing laws and regulations of the Conference.

521. The Plan. (1) It is the responsibility of the Superintendent in consultation with his colleagues to make the circuit plan of preaching appointments.

6. Statements on Episcopacy

Anglican statements on episcopacy are to be found in the *Interim Report*, pages 16-27 and 46-49, *Conversations: a Report (1963)*, pages 24-27, *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, pages 27-28, and Methodist Statements in the *Interim Report*, pages 35-37, *Conversations: a Report (1963)*, pages 24-27, *Towards Reconciliation*, page 16, and *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Schemes*, pages 27-28 and 36-42. The service for the ordination of bishops is published in *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Ordinal* (SPCK and Epworth 1968), pages 4-13 and 28-33.

It is worth quoting one paragraph about Methodist Bishops from *Anglican-Methodist Unity: The Scheme*, pages 38-39, section 120.

‘But it should be said at once that Methodist bishops need not and must not be confined to the performance of a round of administrative duties. The Methodist people would be grievously disappointed if their bishops did not also undertake tasks of imaginative and creative leadership in

thought and action. Experiments and enterprises in mission and in the training of Christians, some already begun under present leadership, are looking for the yet stronger lead that a truly pastoral episcopate, working together with its Anglican counterpart, will be able to give. Methodist bishops will vindicate their office by evangelistic and pastoral leadership. Above all, a Methodist bishop will be valued as a father-in-God to the ministers in his care. This pastoral office, essential to the well-being both of the ministers themselves and of the congregations entrusted to them, is already carried out in good measure by the Chairmen of Districts; it is very desirable that bishops in the Methodist Church should be left sufficiently free from routine administration to be able to maintain and develop what has been thus begun, as well as to strike out new lines of approach to evangelism and the service of the community.

7. The Swindon Proposals

Twelve years ago the churches in Swindon faced the challenge presented by the rapid growth that was proposed for their town (to a size of 200,000). They realised that they had the resources to meet the challenge if they worked together. They have been doing this increasingly and have reached the point where they believe that united work should be expressed by having the oversight of the church and ministry in that area focussed in one person. They have talked about this together and have proposed that the person should be a bishop (in the historic episcopate), but that he should be an ecumenical bishop, drawn from one of the churches and acceptable to them all. They hope if their proposal is accepted to offer a new model of what a bishop can be.

The report of the Swindon proposals *A Bishop for All Churches in Swindon* was signed by representative ministers and members of all the churches involved, though one of the three Baptists did not sign and one Baptist did not sign a point that had nothing to do directly with episcopacy. Some of those signing regarded bishops as essential to the church, others as not essential, but as one of several acceptable ways of governing and leading the church. All of them see the bishop as the chief pastor, concerned for the care of the churches and the ministers, and as the leader in mission. They propose that the bishop should exercise authority in a corporate way, through the Missionary Council which is representative of all the participating churches.

8. United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church has a threefold ministry of bishops, elders, and deacons. Its bishops ordain and preside at the Annual Conference and have oversight of the ministers and churches in their episcopal areas. They meet regularly as a council of bishops and are seen as having care of the mission of the church throughout the world. In the USA they have very large episcopal areas, so that the bishop has perhaps ten district superintendents (ministers without pastoral charge of a church) acting somewhat like our district chairmen. In the Central Conferences (in Europe, for example) the bishop also has a number of district superintendents, but he has a much smaller number of ministers and members under his care (perhaps 30,000 members compared with 300,000 members in some parts of the USA), although the episcopal area covers either a whole country or several countries. Bishops are bishops for life in the Conferences in the USA, though retiring at a certain age, whereas in the various Central Conferences they can be, and in some cases are, elected for a renewable period of years.

As we have sought a closer pastoral relationship between the bishop and the minister than is possible in the USA where a bishop may have the oversight of 1,000 ministers, and as the episcopal areas in Europe are much larger than is desirable in Britain, we have not drawn on the model of bishops in the United Methodist Church. It is however important to recognise that the largest part of World Methodism has bishops. They exercise in different ways the diverse functions of bishops in the historic episcopate, and they are seen as an expression of the unity of the church throughout the world and in a measure through the centuries.

H. DISSENTIENT STATEMENTS

We regret that we are unable to sign this Report. We share with the other members of the working-party a concern for closer unity and better pastoral care among Christians. But we are uneasy that the Report's signatories are divided as to the number, the location, and hence the practical significance of the proposed bishops in the life of the Methodist Church. And we doubt the wisdom of seeking to decide the merits of their proposal as long as the Churches' Council for Covenanting offers hope of significant steps towards closer unity between several churches. Our main concern, however, is with the central proposal of the Report: we do not think the case that the Methodist Church should take the historic episcopate into its life has been made out.

1. The Report is quite misleading when it says that we should accept the historic episcopate 'not as a condition imposed on us by others (to qualify us in some way for union or communion with them)'. For it is precisely the expectation that churches which have the historic episcopate will insist on its acceptance as a condition of unity that leads to the proposal being made. There may be no compelling reasons for our not having bishops; but there are compelling reasons for resisting another church's insistence that we have bishops as a condition of unity.

2. Advocates of the historic episcopate normally stress the role of the bishop as guardian of orthodoxy and as focus of unity in the church; and the Report implicitly accepts much of what they say. But it appears to us that these claims are inadequately grounded historically. Moreover, they are inadequate for the ends proposed in the Report. For the Report admits that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are unlikely to take part in the ordinations of bishops which it proposes, and rightly implies that unity with those churches is unlikely to be achieved in the near future. With this admission the Report surrenders the relevance of its claims that episcopacy is the normal form of corporate Christian existence, and a symbol of the church's unity. For most of the churches with whom there is a realistic prospect of unity in the near future do not have the historic episcopate. In this situation the historic episcopate is as much a bone of contention as a focus of unity.

3. We differ from the majority of the working party in our view of the effective range of Christian responsibility in planning of this kind. The Report appears to us to convert a legitimate aspiration to Christian unity into an unwarranted ideology as to the direction of historical progress, and recommends a course of action which is a 'sign' of its conviction. Neither in church nor state, where the range of responsibility is limited to the range of calculable action, can institutions be managed in this way. The Report itself, wishing to use the Swindon case as an example of local pressure for episcopacy, nevertheless advocates a form of diocesan episcopacy not adaptable to the Swindon scheme. Signs and symbols are a doubtful guide to policy.

4. To accept the view that the historic episcopate has symbolic value deprives one of the freedom to question whether it is an appropriate institution for the present and the future. While accepting the episcopacy developed in the second century as a response to urgent problems in the church, we see no reason to believe that it is necessarily God's gift to the church for all times. In general, the church suffers from being too preoccupied with its past, and too little with the demands of the present and the future.

For such reasons, we cannot believe that acceptance of the historic episcopate into the Methodist Church would serve any useful purpose. We say this not because we are opposed to bishops under all circumstances, nor because we believe that Methodism has nothing to learn or to receive from other Christians. Far from it. But we are not persuaded that our imperfections or the imperfections of Christ's people as a whole, would be healed by our adoption of the Report's proposal.

S. H. Travis
W. R. Ward

I can only support the proposal to have bishops of the historic episcopate in our ministry if it is part of a union or covenant scheme in which there is recognition of our ministers. Union or covenant provides a situation of mutual acceptance; bishops without that would give an unacceptable value to episcopacy and reflect on the integrity of our present oversight and ministry. It would appear to be done for the wrong reasons and people would be sceptical about which episcopal hands should be laid on ministerial heads when churches with historic episcopacy do not yet recognise each other. Within a scheme, we should be receiving the episcopate from our covenanting partners.

I commend the picture of a Methodist bishop in this report for the consideration and possible acceptance some day by the Methodist people.

Mary Lenton

(Agenda 1981, pp. 21-42)

(iii) FROM THE FAITH & ORDER COMMITTEE

1. A working party on this matter was set up by the President's Council following a notice of motion accepted by the Bradford Conference in 1978. The notice of motion required that the Faith and Order Committee be consulted. The final report of the working party appears elsewhere in the Agenda (see pp. 21).

2. The committee first considered the matter in January 1980, but decided to delay its judgement in order that there should be no conflict between the proposals of the working party and those of the Churches' Council for Covenanting. Members of the committee were nevertheless able to study the sixth draft of the report individually. As a result of these individual comments, many of which were critical, the Executive of Faith and Order sent a memorandum to the President's Council that was considered in November 1980. The President's Council asked the Faith and Order Committee to present to Conference its own considered theological comment on the report, and consequently a discussion took place and certain resolutions were passed at the full meeting of Faith and Order in December 1980. The committee then resolved, **'That a sub-committee be established to enable further discussion of the fundamental**

theological and administrative questions raised by the report so that a satisfactory comment on it could be presented via the Executive to Conference.'

3. What follows is a series of resolutions by the Faith and Order Committee together with supporting material compiled by the sub-committee, partly from contributions to the debate in the Faith and Order Committee and partly from the judgements expressed in the sub-committee itself. The whole document was thereafter submitted to members of the Faith and Order Committee individually. In order to make clear the distinction between resolutions of Faith and Order and supporting material compiled by the sub-committee the resolutions have been set in bold type.

4. The first question raised was whether the proposal to include an episcopal form of ministry in our Methodist life and system was in accordance with our doctrines. In this context 'an episcopal form of ministry' is taken to have reference to the historic episcopate. The arguments on this matter were fully rehearsed between 1963 and 1969 at the time of the Conversations with the Church of England. The acceptance by Conference of a scheme that involved episcopacy can only be regarded as a clear statement of the mind of Conference on the matter. According to paragraph 31(b) of the Deed of Union, Conference is the final authority regarding the interpretation of doctrine. It is hard, therefore, to maintain that accepting an episcopal form of ministry would be a contradiction of our doctrines. This matter is fully treated in Section C of the report.

5. The committee resolved that, '**To accept the historic episcopate into the life of Methodism would be in no sense a violation of Methodist doctrines**', by 25 votes to 2 with one neutral.

6. If it is clear that accepting the historic episcopate is not a contradiction of our doctrines, it is even more clear that accepting it is not required by our doctrines. Methodism cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church *as Methodism is now*. It will change its structure only when there is good reason. One good reason might be that God is drawing together his wounded and broken Church into one visible body that is episcopally ordered. When the Conference is convinced on this point – and the acceptance of the Notice of Motion may be held by some to imply that it is convinced already – the arguments for proceeding towards the acceptance of episcopacy will be very strong.

7. The next question is, therefore, whether that moment has arrived. Some answer with an unqualified yes. Others say yes only if the move will lead directly and immediately to union with another church or other churches. The committee was offered the opportunity to affirm that the acceptance of the historic episcopate at this moment would be timely and pastorally wise, but declined to do so in those terms. (The actual voting on resolutions took place in December 1980, before the Church of England's response to the Churches' Council for Covenanting proposals were known).

8. In favour of the view that Methodism should espouse the historic episcopate even if the proposals for covenanting failed, it was argued that, in the present state of ecumenical affairs, there was a danger that the spirit of faith would be lost in a maze of intricate ecclesiological negotiations. What was needed was a bold prophetic act affirming that the Church of God was one and that it should appear one. Methodism with its lack of bishops, but with its experience of corporate leadership and its notion of episcopate being vested in the Conference, was in an ideal position to perform this prophetic act; for it could, at one and the same time, claim to bring something significant to the ecumenical process and confess that it was open to discovery that in

the personal exercise of episcopacy there was an expression of God's care for his Church that so far lay outside Methodist experience. This position is taken by the majority within the working party and it is expressed in paragraph B(2) of the report and in the first two paragraphs of the Agreed Summary.

9. Against this, three arguments are put forward by some. *In the first place* progress towards union should be a series of mutual acts and reconciliations, not by unilateral action. The essence of a union scheme is the integration of two Christian bodies that are one in the Spirit but that differ in matters of practice and polity if not actually in matters of faith. To experience such reconciliation and integration is to experience the healing and restoring work of the Holy Spirit. In that context the surrender of some Methodist traditions and the acceptance from others of new styles of Christian life and expression are justified, indeed desirable. But apart from that context, they are artificial and they have little meaning. *Secondly*, the issue of episcopacy should not be exalted to be the supreme factor in ecumenical relations. Were we to accept the historic episcopate there would still need to be a long process of integration before we could unite with another communion. There is no reason why the question of episcopacy should not take its place in that process. *Thirdly*, if all movement in the ecumenical field breaks down because of the difficulty of reconciling episcopal and non-episcopal communions, the proper reaction for Methodism would be to pause to ask what the Spirit was saying to the Churches through the breakdown. It is by no means clear that, in that situation, Methodism would judge that it should seek the historic episcopate unilaterally at once. To some extent the arguments of this paragraph are consonant with the position taken in the second dissentient statement at the end of the report.

10. The resolution that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would be advisable, **'whether a concrete scheme for union with another Church or other Churches was in prospect or not'**, was lost by 9 votes to 15 with 2 neutral.

11. In the event, however, the General Synod of the Church of England gave provisional approval to the proposals of the Churches' Council for Covenanting. This means that the debate in Conference this year will take place with a concrete scheme for a covenant with other churches in, at least distant, prospect. The proper inference from the voting in the Faith and Order Committee is that episcopacy should be discussed now with specific reference to the CCC proposals and that whatever judgements are now reached should not necessarily stand if the CCC proposals were eventually to fail. Nevertheless the report contains much material that is helpful and relevant to the new situation, particularly in the discussion of who should become bishops in Methodism if there are indeed to be bishops.

12. The committee then considered the situation in which, for one reason or another, Methodism had decided to include the historic episcopate in its life. The question then arises: who should become bishops? The report deals with this matter in Section D especially in paragraph (6). A majority of the committee followed the working party in the belief that a superintendent who supervised the preaching and pastoral work over a large area and presided over a group of ministerial and lay colleagues admirably represented traditional Methodism, and such an office was easily reconciled with an episcopal structure. The correct way forward would be to amalgamate circuits into new units, larger than the present circuits but smaller than districts, and so develop our system that the superintendent (and superintendency is an office rooted in Methodism) might be in a position to exercise the episcopal function of oversight and to be recognised as a symbol of unity and continuity over a substantial area. The case for

this development of the office of superintendent is set out in paragraphs D (3) and (6) of the report and the penultimate paragraph of the Agreed Summary.

13. A minority in the Faith and Order Committee argued that, if Methodism was to have bishops, the development of the office of chairman rather than of superintendent would provide the best way ahead. This possibility was recognised in the report in paragraphs D (4) and (6) and in the Agreed Statement. The sub-committee summarises the arguments as follows:

Methodism has already developed its own form of oversight leading to the present office of chairman.

Chairmen already exercise many of the functions that belong to episcopal oversight. e.g. stationing and responsibilities regarding discipline.

Any re-organisation that implied a previous deficiency in our structure or that caused widespread disruption to the system ought to be avoided.

The multiplication of bishops in Methodism so that Methodism had more than other churches would not help ecumenical relations nor encourage our people to take episcopacy seriously.

14. Nevertheless more than two thirds of the Faith and Order Committee supported the view of the working party. The resolution that, **‘a further development of the present superintendency represented the most acceptable method of receiving the historic episcopate’**, was carried by 17 votes to 8 with one neutral.

15. It must be recognised that the historic episcopate does not exist in Christendom in a single universally recognised form. The historic episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church differs from that of the Church of England and both differ from that of the Church of South India, and so on. It would be sad if a bold and prophetic act on the part of the Methodist Church led only to a slight rearrangement of the partitions, that is to say, if the historic episcopate espoused by Methodism received only limited recognition. It would be equally sad if the move created new partitions between Methodism and the other non-episcopal churches. For this reason the committee registered the opinion that, **‘the widest possible consultation with other churches should take place at once’** if Conference decided to proceed.

16. The committee considered the question of how Methodism ought to express its mind on this matter. Many issues, even doctrinal issues, are settled by a simple majority in Conference, and this is a good thing because, if larger majorities were always needed, it would become difficult for Conference to express itself at all. Nevertheless, in a matter of this kind, where the Church is committing itself to a great act of faith and is resolving a problem that has existed since John Wesley laid hands on Thomas Coke on September 2nd 1784, a large consensus is plainly necessary. The matter would, of course, be provisional legislation, but the committee expressed the judgement that, **‘Conference should begin the process of consulting districts and circuits on this matter only if 75% of those voting in Conference expressed themselves in favour.’**

17. In conclusion the committee points out that, despite the wide-ranging nature of the report, there are inevitably many matters that require still further consideration. The significance of the role of bishop in uniting and expressing in a person the pastoral concerns of the whole ministry of the Church, and the manner in which the historic episcopate symbolises and furthers the unity of the Church, through time and across the world, are among them. And there is the further question of the relation of corporate to personal episcopacy. In all Christian communions the will of God is

thought to be expressed partly in the actions, both legislative and pastoral, of certain properly constituted groups (in our case the committees and councils of the Church and especially the Conference), and partly in the words and actions of individuals who are given responsibility in appropriate areas. (There are, of course, other ways in which the will of God is expressed, but we are here concerned only with the constitutional aspect of the matter.) Two questions must be asked. How far do the present proposals involve a change in balance between the two modes, the council and the person? And how will Methodism profit both internally and externally from whatever change in balance there might be? In practice the questions that need further considerations are:

- (a) the relation between the episcopal functions of the Conference and those of future bishops, especially in the matter of ordination.
- (b) the relation of the President as the representative and agent of Conference to the episcopate.
- (c) the contribution which Methodist experience of corporate episcopacy can make to the episcopacy of the future.
- (d) the question of how the disciplines of stationing will bear upon those ministers who become bishops.
- (e) the position of those ministers who will serve in an episcopal church without being episcopally ordained.
- (f) the problem of how a Methodist bishop could be enabled to combine his proper administrative cares with the fulfilment of his pastoral and missionary role.

(Agenda 1981, pp. 55-8)