

## THE SUNDAY SERVICE GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING (1990)

- 01 Part of the Faith and Order Committee's report to the Conference of 1987 was as follows :

The range and variety of enquiries from ministers and others seeking the advice of the Committee has been as wide as ever. A persistent enquiry has related to what it means to preside at the Lord's Supper. After considerable debate the Committee offers as a minimum definition of 'Presidency' the saying by the ordained minister of the whole of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

The Conference approved this definition by adopting Resolution 3 (*Agenda*, 1987, p.648)

- 02 The Conference of 1988 received the following Memorial (M.15) :

The Birmingham (West) (5/6) Circuit Meeting (Present: 58. Vote 57 for, 1 against) wishes to express its concern at the implications of Resolution 3 of the Faith and Order Report, passed at the 1987 Conference. The concern of this Circuit Meeting is with the words: ". . . the Committee offers as a minimum definition of 'Presidency' the saying by the ordained minister of the whole of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving." The practice in some churches of this Circuit, as elsewhere, is that lay people assist with Communion, and that this sometimes includes their saying part of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. (The words of Institution are reserved for the Minister.) This Circuit Meeting believes that this is an important practice in our churches and regrets not only the decision of the 1987 Conference, but also the way it was dealt with in four lines at the end of a long report.

This Circuit Meeting therefore requests the Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to reconsider this matter and to report to the Conference of 1989.

The Conference replied :

In the light of a number of enquiries concerning what constitutes Presidency at the Lord's Supper, the Faith and Order Committee proposed to the Conference of 1987, after study of rubrics of the Methodist Service Book, as a **minimum** definition of Presidency, the saying by the ordained minister of the whole of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. The matter was referred to briefly in the general section of the Faith and Order Committee's report. It did not, however, come "at the end of a long report". The Conference had the opportunity to express its mind.

It is in the light of the growing practice in many circuits of dividing up the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving amongst two or three voices that the question was first raised with the Faith and Order Committee concerning what constitutes Presidency, usually because the division of the prayer was

a source of controversy. Some circuits, like the Birmingham (West) Circuit Meeting, insisted none the less on the words of institution being “reserved for the minister”. This latter insistence implies that the saying of these words is a minimum definition of Presidency.

Because fuller consideration is desirable, the Conference refers the question again to the Faith and Order Committee for clarification and report to the Conference of 1989.

### 03 The Context of the Discussion

Two factors underlie our recent discussion of what constitutes presidency at the Lord’s Supper. One is related to the problem, now largely settled<sup>1</sup>, of probationer ministers without dispensations. If such probationers were to share in the leadership of worship when the Lord’s Supper was celebrated, it was clear that an ordained minister must be present. What was not clear to everyone was what the ordained minister must do, if anything, actually to be presiding. Was his or her presence in the congregation sufficient? Or must he or she say certain words or perform certain actions? If the latter, what words must the presiding minister say or what actions must he or she perform? The **minimum** definition of presidency, adopted by the 1987 Conference, answered those questions, though not everyone is happy with the answer.

04 The second factor informing this discussion is the practice in some churches of dividing up the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving amongst two or three voices, presumably to encourage congregational participation. The effect of the 1987 minimum definition is to discourage this practice. That is why the Birmingham (West) Circuit Meeting has asked the Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to give further attention to the matter.

05 The context of the discussion has been described at this point because it is important to know why we are addressing such a question. Arguments about minimum definitions of presidency at the Lord’s Supper do not come naturally to Methodists, and it should be understood that the Faith and Order Committee offered a minimum definition, which the Conference accepted, not as an abstract theological exercise but in response to perceived practical uncertainties. Our natural instincts would not lead us to consider such a question; but circumstances have demanded that we should. Our instincts may well be right, however, in warning us that minimum definitions are not the best of starting points for any worthwhile exploration of the meaning and practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Minimum definitions smack of petty legalism, while the Lord’s Supper is about grace and mercy and life. The question has been asked, and must be addressed; but it is by no means the most important question that can be asked about the Lord’s Supper. We turn, therefore, first to a brief consideration of *The Sunday Service* and in particular of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

### 06 The Sunday Service

*The Sunday Service* is authorized by the Conference and fulfills a normative role in Methodist worship. This is not to say that other forms of worship are deficient or inferior, but rather to emphasize that worship in its fullness includes both Word and Sacrament. One of the fruits of the Liturgical

movement has been a widespread recognition of this truth, which has led to heightened awareness of the importance of the Ministry of the Word in branches of the Church where the Word had previously been undervalued, and of the significance of the Lord's Supper in other sections of the Church where this sacrament had been somewhat neglected.

07 *The Sunday Service* celebrates the Gospel both by word and by sign. The Scriptures are read, expounded and applied to the congregation; the Good News is then portrayed by acted sign in remembrance of our Lord. In the Lord's Supper *The Sunday Service*, like other eucharistic rites, reflects dramatically the actions and words of Jesus at the Last Supper : **taking, thanking, breaking, giving**. This 'Four Action Shape' is a dramatic representation of the scene in the Upper Room, though of course the service as a whole, and the Great Prayer in particular, recalls not only the Last Supper but the whole salvation history.

#### 08 **The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving**

The use of the word 'Eucharist' (*eucharistia*, 'thanksgiving') for the Lord's Supper dates from the early second century and is eloquent testimony to the centrality of thanksgiving within the service from the earliest days. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving which we find in *The Sunday Service* has an exceedingly long history, not of course in its precise wording, but in its structure and themes. Liturgical scholarship has revealed that, from the earliest known sources onwards, Great Prayers have included a *preface*, recalling God's mighty acts in creation and redemption; the *Words of Institution*; *anamnesis* (memorial); *epiclesis* (invocation of the Spirit); together with the familiar introductory dialogue ('*Lift up your hearts*'), the *Sanctus* ('Holy, holy, holy Lord') and the *Benedictus qui venit* ('Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord') and a concluding doxology. Not every known rite contains every one of these features; but there is a remarkable degree of consistency. Our own Great Prayer, then, is only in part a modern composition and it has not been put together haphazardly: it belongs to a long succession. Though it differs in wording from other Great Prayers, its component parts and general structure are the same. In worship, as in much of the Christian life, there is a large element of what is 'given', to be received humbly and gratefully from those who have preceded us in the Christian way. The basic form of the Great Prayer is one such gift.

09 The Great Prayer, then, has a recognizable and venerable form. It also possesses an inherent unity. No single part of it is intrinsically more precious or important than the rest. Some Christians have believed that the Words of Institution alone effect the consecration of the bread and wine so that they become for the communicants the body and blood of Christ. Methodists have never been committed to any such understanding; it has not been our belief that the recitation of a formula effects consecration; and it is significant that theologians of other communions are nowadays disinclined to identify 'the moment of consecration' in so precise a way. The Roman Catholic liturgist, Ambrosius Verheul, for example, has recently argued that the entire Great Prayer has consecratory force and was understood in this way by Justin, Hippolytus, Athanasius, Augustine, and many other patristic writers.<sup>7</sup> Against this background, it is strange to find some Methodists, who favour the leading

of the Great Prayer by more than one person, insisting that the Words of Institution be reserved for the ordained minister.

#### 10 Arguments for a change in our practice

We now consider the arguments that can be advanced against the minimum definition of presidency approved by the Conference of 1987, and in favour of allowing several people to lead parts of the Great Prayer.

- 11 1. Under the influence of the Liturgical Movement, lay participation in Methodist worship has greatly increased. We have been guided away from the notion that worship is a kind of performance put on by one person, the preacher, while the congregation sits and observes. Worship is the offering of the whole congregation, and it is therefore right that, in addition to the corporate singing of hymns and saying of prayers, individuals or groups as well as the leader of worship should play active roles. In many churches, members of the congregation now regularly read lessons and lead prayers. In general, this trend is surely to be welcomed and indeed it is encouraged in *The Sunday Service*. General Direction 7, while insisting that an ordained minister, or a person with a dispensation, shall preside at the Lord's Supper, nevertheless permits active participation by others: "Laymen may be invited to share in the Preparation; the Ministry of the Word, including the intercessions; and in the distribution of the bread and wine."
- 12 It is not difficult to see how, in some churches, this principle has been extended to the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving; and those who have thus gone beyond the provisions of General Direction 7 have no doubt done so with the intention of actively involving lay people at a highly significant part of the service.
- 13 It must be said, however, that the desire, praiseworthy in itself, to maximize congregational participation, cannot be regarded as sufficient justification for the practice we are considering. First, it must not be forgotten that lay people already have an opportunity for active involvement in the Great Prayer: the whole congregation is involved in the introductory dialogue, and says the *Sanctus*, the *Benedictus qui venit*, the acclamations, and the doxology. It is simply not the case that lay people are denied active participation in the prayer. Second, the fact that the whole congregation and not just the minister offers worship does not mean that everyone can, or should, do everything. If the choir sings an anthem, this should be regarded not as a performance for the congregation's benefit but as an offering to God – an offering, moreover, which all the congregation can present; but not all will actually sing it. Again, preaching has an integral place in worship; but preaching is an activity which involves one person in speaking while others listen and respond to the Gospel which is proclaimed. The support of the congregation is a crucial element here: it endorses the word of the preacher as well as being challenged by it. But preacher and congregation fulfill different, though complementary, roles.
- 14 It is the Committee's belief that, if General Direction 7 is taken seriously and applied regularly, there is already ample opportunity for lay participation in *The Sunday Service*, including corporate participation in the Great Prayer. The argument from participation could only be applied to the leadership of that

prayer if it were supported by other, stronger, arguments and if there were no sufficiently weighty arguments against it.

- 15 2. Some Methodists feel a general unease about any kind of 'rigidity' in relation to worship. The freedom of the Spirit, it is said, replaces all forms of legalism. Nothing should be absolutely required. Thus the Conference ought not to require that the Great Prayer be said by the president. It is easy to see why this argument should be attractive, and why apparently legalistic rubrics or directions should be regarded as Spirit-quenching. But this argument is dangerous. If nothing is absolutely required, then, true enough, it is not required that an ordained minister or someone otherwise authorized should lead the Great Prayer. But the argument need not stop there. If nothing is absolutely required, it is not required that there should be a Great Prayer at all; or even that we should celebrate the Lord's Supper; or that we should believe this or that doctrine in order to call our belief Christian. The Spirit blows where he will. It is, of course, inconceivable that anyone should want to push this argument so far; yet any use of the argument requires an entirely subjective judgment from the user as to the point at which to cease pushing it. What is bound to happen in practice is that we invoke the freedom of the Spirit as justification for disregarding customs that we dislike and for adopting practices that we favour.
- 16 Moreover, the argument rests upon a one-sided doctrine of the Spirit. It has been the Church's experience that the Spirit works through both tradition and spontaneity. The ministry of the Wesleys testifies to that truth, and the growth of Methodism in the eighteenth century owes much to the balance that was preserved between traditional forms and new initiatives. Without any kind of spontaneity tradition soon becomes dull and dead. Without tradition spontaneity soon becomes shallow and superficial. Our Christian privilege is to receive the gift of the Spirit both in the depth and clarity of traditional forms and in the joy of immediate experience. To have a form does not inevitably result in formality.
- 17 3. Another argument springs from a desire not to separate the minister from the congregation, or, to put it more negatively, not to allow the minister to set himself or herself apart from the congregation. Why should ministers and others with dispensations appropriate to themselves tasks which might be shared with others? Why does the Conference, indeed, require them to do so? This concern reflects, perhaps, a conscious or unconscious fear of 'clericalism'. It can be answered in two ways. First, we need to take seriously what was said in paragraph 13 above. Of course all Christians are called by God. Of course all Christians are called to worship. But not all are called to the same ministry within the Church or within its worship. We rightly rebuke those misinformed critics who allege that in Methodist churches "anyone can stand up and preach". That is simply not true. Preachers are called by God, and trained and commissioned by his Church. The vast majority of worshippers are not called to preach, or trained and commissioned to preach, so they do not preach. Similarly, not all are called or ordained to the ministry of the sacraments. Not everyone can do everything, for we do not all have the same calling.

18 Second, we need to be clear that this is not a matter of ‘clerical’ presumption. In paragraph 19 below, we shall focus on the president as the representative of Christ, the host, at his feast. To some people, this notion smacks of arrogance: how can anyone claim to perform such a function? But the question rests upon a misunderstanding. It is not a matter of a human being presuming. It is rather that God calls, a person responds to that call, and the Church appoints him or her to the task. The same is true of preaching, as we have already observed. We do well to resist ‘clericalism’; equally, we do well to resist any undervaluation of God’s calling of some women and some men to the ministry of the word and sacraments within the total ministry of Christ’s Church.

19 **Arguments against a change in our practice.**

1. As we have noted above, the Lord’s Supper can be regarded as an acted sign, a dramatic representation of salvation history. It recapitulates the scene in the Upper Room by doing, in remembrance of Jesus, what Christians have done since the earliest days of the Church, from whose understanding of these events the first accounts of that scene are derived. In this dramatic recapitulation, the believers are gathered together. A president, representing our Lord himself, takes the bread and wine, gives thanks to God, breaks the bread, and distributes the bread and wine to the assembled company who eat and drink. This dramatic symbolism must be preserved; it links us with our fellow Christians across the modern world and across the Christian centuries and ultimately with Christ and his disciples in the Upper Room. Awesome as the thought is, one person alone can properly represent our Lord. In the Upper Room Jesus is with his disciples but yet stands over against them. He is the host; they are the guests. By a miracle of grace, the host is also the servant. It is the privilege of one person, the president, to represent the divine host, and servant, at each celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Any other practice mars the powerful dramatic symbolism of the service.

20 It is, of course, true that in some branches of the Church concelebrations occur from time to time, when a number of ordained people say all or part of the Great Prayer together. Such concelebrations have never been a feature of Methodist worship and they depend upon an understanding of ordination, and its implications for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, that differs from our own. Methodists do, however, encounter concelebrations in certain ecumenical contexts, usually when this practice is employed to validate the rite in the eyes of fellow Christians who have scruples about non-episcopal ordination. In these circumstances, concelebration must be regarded as a device for enabling intercommunion to occur and as an expedient for coping with one aspect of our present unhappy divisions. It does not in any way detract from the principle that ideally one person alone should represent Christ the host at the Lord’s Supper; nor, since those involved are invariably ordained, does it have any bearing upon our present concern.

21 2. As we have already suggested, questions about validity and the moment of consecration do not come naturally to Methodist minds, and the Faith and Order Committee does not regard it as desirable that they should. The entire drama is the consecration and guarantees the validity. But the more the president’s part in the service is reduced and the weaker the representative symbolism becomes, the more people will be inclined to look for particular

elements within the service that will guarantee its identity. That is why some people insist that, while others may lead parts of the prayer, the president must say the Words of Institution. We have observed that the isolation of these words from the rest of the Great Prayer is theologically undesirable. But such an isolation is actively encouraged by any reduction of the President's part of the the Great Prayer. It is worthy of note that the Faith and Order Committee regularly receives comments and requests for advice, not only from those who favour more lay participation at this point, but in much greater numbers from people who are anxious about the involvement of lay people in the distribution of the bread and wine and the saying, by these lay people, of the words that accompany the distribution. These latter practices can be justified; but what is already a significant anxiety will undoubtedly be made worse if people other than the president lead parts of the Great Prayer. The effect will be to drive us into the kind of discussions about consecration and validity from which other branches of the Church have, to a large extent, moved on.

- 22 3. 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> This claim imposes upon us a responsibility to think both historically and ecumenically. From the beginning, the drama of the Lord's Supper has been represented with a single person presiding and saying the Great Prayer. Tradition cannot, of course, provide an absolute authority for Methodism. Sometimes in the course of history departures from the norm take place which can soon be recognized as the work of the Spirit. When that happens, and in many ways it did at the birth of Methodism, those involved have a duty to prize and preserve their experience and not to surrender it for the sake of conformity and tradition. The Church is refreshed with living water; it is not a stagnant pool. But this is not to say that every departure from tradition is unreservedly to be welcomed as the work of the Spirit, or that every Methodist deviation from the ecumenical norm should be considered part of our essential witness. Tradition is not invariably right, but it should not be treated lightly. In the case that we are considering, the weight of tradition is heavily in favour of the leading of the Great Prayer by the president alone. This should be regarded as a powerful indication that our present policy is correct, unless equally weighty and convincing arguments can be adduced against it.
- 23 4. The report of the Worship Commission, presented to the 1988 Conference, rightly draws attention to the importance of aesthetic considerations in worship.<sup>4</sup> There can be no doubt that the power and beauty of music and words, among other media, can greatly enhance the quality of our services. The opposite, of course, is also true. Structure and form are also significant, though they should not be obtrusive; and we do well to take into account the structure and form of the Great Prayer. It is written as a recital into which congregational affirmations are inserted. One person leads; the rest burst in with acclamations and carry the prayer on to its final doxology and thunderous 'Amen'. Something similar used to happen in our chapels in earlier days and, happily, is still to be found in less formal worship today. The leader prays deliberately; others break in with 'Praise the Lord' and 'Hallelujah'. It is not idle, either, to recall the cheer-leader at a football match, or when 'three cheers' are called for at a celebration, or when a toast is proposed. One leads; the gathered company responds. In all these circumstances there is an

atmosphere of celebration and exultation, as indeed there should be during the Great Prayer. The form is highly effective; it cannot be improved by dividing up the recital for a number of voices.

24 5. *The Sunday Service* clearly indicates which parts of the service are basic to it and which parts may be omitted. This allows for desirable variation, such as the use of more penitential material during Lent and more overtly joyful elements at festivals. There is plenty of scope for flexibility when the service is varied in this way. But some elements **are** basic, and of great importance among them is the Great Prayer. The effect of making changes at this crucial point is bound to be a general inference that **all** things are variable, and this would immeasurably damage the sacramental life of Methodism. Once again, we need to preserve a proper balance between form and freedom, between tradition and spontaneity. We need to know what is given and what is variable.

25 6. What the Conference of 1987 adopted was a **minimum** definition of presidency. Because this minimum definition has been challenged, the present report has sought to clarify and evaluate the arguments for it and against it. But, if upheld, it remains a minimum definition. It is the Committee's view that to preside at the Lord's Supper, or indeed any act of worship, is to be visibly and unmistakably the one who leads the service. On this basis, there is a great deal to be said for the president beginning and ending the whole act of worship; and he or she should take responsibility for the key elements of the service. In the case of the Lord's Supper, this will certainly include the saying of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving – but that should not be taken to mean that it is desirable for the president to lead the Great Prayer and to take no other leading role in the service. What is important is that the person presiding should be seen to be presiding.

## 26 **Conclusion**

The Faith and Order Committee believes that the arguments in favour of upholding the minimum definition adopted by the Conference of 1987 are more cogent and compelling than the arguments against. The Committee therefore recommends that the Conference, by adopting this report, confirm the judgment of the 1987 Conference.

27 Nevertheless, the Committee is persuaded that active participation in worship, both by the entire gathered company and by individuals and groups within it, is highly desirable. The president should lead the Great Prayer, fulfilling a vital symbolic role, and should further exercise a leading role throughout the service. But he or she need not and should not do everything. Despite the great advances that have been made in many places, it is very regrettable that in many of our celebrations of the Lord's Supper lay people have not been given the opportunity to exercise any functions at all. Lay people should be given ample opportunity, as General Direction 7 permits, to administer, to lead intercessions, to read lessons, to preach. Of necessity, this report has emphasized the president's role. But the whole congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper.

### **References**

1. The Conference of 1988 adopted the report of the President's Council on Presidency at the Lord's Supper, which effectively dealt with the matter of probationers without dispensations.
2. *Studia Liturgica*, Volume 17 (1987), pp. 221-231.
3. *Deed of Union*, Clause 30.
4. *Agenda* (1988), pp. 164-167.

### **RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts the report on the Sunday Service – Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.

*(Agenda 1990, pp.106-114)*

---

The Conference adopted the above resolution, adding:

“as its reply to Memorial M15 of 1998, but adopting the following as the minimum definition of presiding in place of that in the report:

‘the representative person who is authorised to preside in the Church gathered for worship and who on their behalf leads the actions of the Supper – principally giving thanks and sharing’.”