

## **METHODIST – ANGLICAN DIALOGUE**

### **HISTORICAL ROOTS**

John & Charles Wesley were two of the leaders of a revival within the Church of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both were ordained priests of the Church of England, who recognised that there needed to be a spiritual reawakening or revival within the church at that time. Their aim was never to found a separate church, but to enrich and encourage the existing church in its faith, worship, sacramental life, and social concern. It was from these roots that Methodism grew and developed, firstly within the Anglican churches, eventually bursting out to become a church in its own right.

Jumping on to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “United Council of Christian Churches and Religious Communion in Ireland” brought together Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglicans in 1920 to discuss social, but not doctrinal issues.

### **THE TRIPARTITE TALKS**

The most significant ecumenical venture was to take another 43 years, when three sets of bi-partite talks were established in 1963 between the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Anglican churches in Ireland. In 1968 the Congregationalists withdrew, and the remaining talks merged to form the Tripartite Talks. Their intention was to search for unity between the three churches. They produced a major report in 1973, “Towards a United Church”, highlighting agreements already reached and proposing a new united Church. These exciting and progressive proposals mirrored the situations in North and South India, but eventually foundered over the concerns of the Presbyterian Church regarding accepting the historic episcopate.

In 1974 the three governing bodies passed the following resolution:

...We recognise the ordained ministries of our three Churches as real and efficacious ministries of the word and sacraments through which God’s love is proclaimed, his grace mediated, and his fatherly care exercised. We also recognise that our three Churches have different forms of church order and that each of us continues to cherish the forms which we have inherited...

The recognition of the ministries of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches as “real and efficacious” was a major step for the Church of Ireland, whose General Synod in 1935 had not been prepared to accept a similar proposal.

In 1978, the Consultation asked the churches to clarify their terms of reference, specifically “to indicate clearly to us if they wish us to formulate proposals for: 1) a full mutual recognition of ministries; 2) a form of federation; 3) organic union.” This was voted upon in the General Synod, General Assembly and Conference the following year. Synod accepted Organic Union without voting on the other options. The Assembly and Conference voted on all three and the statistics revealed a readiness to a scheme of union.

Among other factors, the Northern Ireland Troubles brought a greater Conservatism in the Churches, and a political shift to the right, and the enthusiasm for reunion felt in the 1960’s slowly died. In 1978 a special meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland suspended their membership of the WCC, followed by their complete withdrawal in 1980. This was followed in 1988 by their rejection of the proposal to form a new Joint Theological Working Party to succeed the Tripartite Consultations.

#### **THE ANGLICAN-METHODIST INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION**

At the 1988 Lambeth conference, it was noted with regret that there was no international dialogue between the Anglican and Methodist churches. With the agreement of the Executive Committee of the World Methodist Conference, representatives of both Communion were appointed and met for the first time in 1992, considering the shared heritage and tradition of the churches, and how their witness to the world might be rendered more effectively by new relationships between the Communion.

The main achievement of the AMIC (Anglican-Methodist International Commission) was the publication of a report “Sharing in the Apostolic Communion” (draft from 1994, final form 1997). This report outlines the convergences between the two communion, and the practical and theological imperatives towards union. The report

acknowledges that there is sufficient doctrinal consensus between the two communions, and that the main area of divergence is over the practice of ordained ministry, and in particular the issues of episcopacy and episcopate. There is a very helpful discussion on apostolicity and apostolic succession, which moves the discussion firmly away from the ‘pipeline theory’ to the concept of the apostolicity of the church.

One of the most important recommendations of the AMIC was the establishment of a Joint Working Group to continue to monitor and facilitate national and international dialogue. Sadly this was not acted upon by the Anglican bishops at Lambeth in 1998, and the proposal has lain dormant ever since.

### **THE JOINT THEOLOGICAL WORKING PARTY**

The dynamic created by the withdrawal of the Presbyterian Church from the Tripartite Consultations in Ireland on remaining partners was understandably demoralising. It has often been described as the difference between “1+1=2, and 3-1=2”. But the remaining two partners agreed to journey on, establishing the Joint Theological Working Party (JTWP) whose remit was: to consider the implications of the work of the Tripartite Consultation, in the new bilateral context; to relate the international dialogue to the Irish context; and to explore opportunities for developing Church of Ireland – Methodist relationships and to make appropriate recommendations for the furtherance of the visible unity of the Church.

Although the circumstances surrounding the formation of the JTWP led to a cautious beginning, momentum gathered gradually. In 1998 the terms of reference were revised to read:

- (a) To examine and express the theological issues involved in the promotion of visible unity between the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland, and to make appropriate recommendations.
- (b) To explore opportunities for developing C. of I./Methodist understanding and relationships at all levels, local, regional and national.
- (c) To study the work of conversations involving Anglican and Methodist churches in England, Scotland and Wales, and relate to the conversations between our two churches in Ireland.

- (d) To study the work of the Anglican/Methodist International Commission and of any other major Methodist/Anglican conversations and to relate them to the work of the JTWP in Ireland.

In line with these more pro-active terms of reference, the committee reported that “its priority for coming meetings must be to move towards a formal statement that we find no theological objections to full visible unity between our churches.”

The report to the General Synod of 1999 stressed that the JTWP was a theological working party, and that their task is not to construct a scheme for unity, but rather to make theological recommendations about how closer unity might be achieved.

## **THE COVENANT**

In 2000 the first Draft Covenant was drawn up and presented to the two churches for discussion and comment. Much of the work of the JTWP in 2001 was spent analysing and discussing the responses received. The final draft of the covenant, presented to Synod and Conference in 2002, met with unanimous acceptance.

The introduction to the draft covenant reiterates the statement in the 1999 report issued to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Conference, indicating that “there are no major issues of essential Christian faith dividing our two churches” and that the issues are “essentially of order.”

The commentary on the covenant observes that while we both agree on the fundamentals of the Christian faith as expressed in the historic creeds, there are disagreements on more detailed issues of faith and theology. However the differences are no greater than the divergence of opinions within each church. While the dominical sacraments are duly celebrated in both churches, there are differences in how they are understood within each church, and that by listening to each other we gain a deeper understanding of these mysteries. “The *fact* of these sacraments... is much greater than our detailed explanations of them.”

The greatest differences lie in the area of ordained ministry, and the covenant proposes an acknowledgement that by God’s grace there is an authentic ministry of

word and sacrament in each church as a starting point for discussions. The nature of Episcopate in each church is presented as the centre of discussion on ministry. There is an acknowledgement that the diversity in practice was made by practical necessity and not theological conviction, and also of the continuity with the early Church in faith, preaching the Gospel, worship, ministering the sacraments, and in apostolic witness. The aim is a reconciliation and interchangeability of ministries throughout both churches.

Many of the responses to the draft Covenant raised their concern over the interpretation of “visible unity.” There was a definite commitment to further working together at many levels, but resistance to full organic unity. Each church valued its own traditions and identity, and worries were expressed that these would be lost in a united church. There was also a fear that one church will swallow up the other, and practical issues over the disposal of redundant buildings. Many responses observed that differences are social rather than theological. As part of my research at the School of Ecumenics, I read through all of the responses, and they made depressing reading, particularly after having read the wonderfully encouraging report from the AMIC (Anglican-Methodist International Commission).

The official signing took place on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2002 at Chrome Hill, Lambeg, Lisburn. It was here that the aging John Wesley intertwined two beech saplings, saying as he did so, that this was how he hoped the church (of England, Ireland), and ‘the people called Methodist’ would be – in relationship with each other and growing side by side.

### **THE COVENANT COUNCIL**

This marked the conclusion of the work of the JTWP, which was succeeded by the Covenant Council in 2003. The remit given to the Council was to monitor and facilitate the implementation of the Covenant, and to continue theological dialogue between the churches. It was acknowledged that while much work had taken place at a theological level by the JTWP, this has not always filtered through to the “grass-roots” level of both Churches, and so education and communication have been major items on the agenda of the Council.

One of the projects to date has been the production of a booklet outlining the strong historical links between the churches. I have some copies here today if anyone has a particular interest in this area. Much time has been spent considering situations where the two churches are already working together, and advising on how these might appropriately be developed. Guidelines have been developed for such situations, and a process of drafting formal Ecumenical Canons for the Church of Ireland is underway. The whole area of Episcopate and Episcopacy has occupied the bulk of our thinking and meeting, and we are working on a way forward to lead to full interchangeability of ministries between our churches, as a major stepping stone on our journey towards the unity which God wills for our churches.

## Appendix

### A Covenant between the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland

1. We acknowledge one another's churches as belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God.
2. We acknowledge that in each of our churches the Word of God is authentically preached and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion authentically administered according to the command of Christ.
3. We acknowledge that both our churches share in a common faith set forth in the scriptures and summarised in the historic creeds.
4. We acknowledge our common inheritance in traditions of spirituality and liturgy. We rejoice in our diversity from which we may mutually benefit as we continue to develop varied forms of worship as appropriate to different situations.
5. We acknowledge each other's ordained ministries as given by God and as instruments of his grace by which our churches are served and built up. As pilgrims together, we look forward to the time when our ministries can be fully interchangeable and our churches visibly united.
6. We acknowledge that personal, collegial and communal oversight is embodied and practised in both churches, as each seeks to express continuity of apostolic life, mission and ministry.

#### **Therefore:**

We believe that God is calling our two churches to a fuller relationship in which we commit ourselves

- to share a common life and mission.
- to grow together so that unity may be visibly realised.

As the next steps towards that goal, we agree:

1. to pray for and with one another and to avail of every opportunity to worship together;
2. to welcome one another's members to receive Holy Communion and other ministries as appropriate;
3. to share resources in order to strengthen the mission of the church;
4. to help our members to appreciate and draw out the gifts which each of our traditions has to offer the whole people of God;
5. to encourage the invitation of authorised persons of each church to minister in the other church, as far as the current disciplines of both churches permit;
6. (a) to encourage united Methodist/Church of Ireland congregations
  - (i) where there are joint church schemes,
  - (ii) where new churches are to be planted,
  - (iii) where local congregations wish to move in this direction;;(b) to encourage united Methodist/Church of Ireland chaplaincy work;
7. to enable a measure of joint training of candidates for ordained and lay ministries of our churches where possible and appropriate and to encourage mutual understanding at all levels in our churches;
8. to establish appropriate forms of consultation on matters of faith and order, mission and service;
9. to participate as observers by invitation in each other's forms of governance at every possible level;
10. to learn more about the practice of oversight in each other's churches in order to achieve a fuller sharing of ministries at a later stage of our relationship.

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