



31. What happened to the discussions between the Church of England and the Methodists?

For several years now, formal conversations have been taking place between representatives of the Church of England and the Methodist Church with a view to getting the moves towards union of the two churches back on track, following the abortive proposals of 1972 and 1982.

The talks were led jointly by the Revd Dr John B. Taylor, former President of the Methodist Conference, and the Right Revd Barry Rogerson, Bishop of Bristol and President of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the United Reformed Church, the Baptist Union, and the Moravian Church (The Brethren) were also present at these talks.

One of the Methodist representatives was the Reverend Peter Sulston, formerly Minister in Rickmansworth and a moving spirit in the process that has led to our Local Ecumenical Partnership at St Mary's.

The Common Statement prepared as a result of the conversations, has now been published and commended by the Methodist Conference and General Synod to the Churches for study.

The St Albans Diocesan Synod has considered the Report, 'An Anglican-Methodist Covenant', and passed it to the Deaneries and Parishes for study. It begins with an account of the origins of Methodism and the circumstances in which it became separated from the Church of England, glances briefly at some of the misunderstandings and other issues that have divided the two Churches, and considers the state of the two bodies today.

It points to the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' of 1888 and, following from it, the 'General Appeal' of the Lambeth Conference of 1920, in which, in a slightly different form, the Anglican Communion set out what it considered to be the basis for unity:

1. The Holy Scriptures as the ultimate standard of faith;
2. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds as statements of faith
3. The Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist as the expression of the corporate life of the Church;

4. A ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church . . . (The Conference went on to suggest that the Episcopate would be the basis for such a ministry.)

The Report considers the fifty years of abortive discussions between the Methodist and Anglican Churches. It looks at how they are working together nationally and locally, at their understanding of the faith and of the sacraments. It refers to the agreements which have been reached since 1982 on mutual recognition with the Evangelical Church of Germany, with the Moravian Church, and with the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches. It considers the meaning of Episkopē (oversight), and how it is vested in the Bishops, collegially and individually, in the Church of England, and, in the Methodist Church, in their Conference collegially, which delegates powers to the Chairmen of Districts.

The conclusion it reaches is that, ultimately, there are only two major issues dividing the Churches: (i) the position of women in the position of Episkopē, and (ii) whether ministers who have not been ordained to the presbyterate may preside at the Eucharist.

It recognises that (i) may be resolved eventually, and that, in the event of union between the Churches, the need for non-presbyteral presidency may disappear. It also notes that divisions over these and other issues arise within the churches as well as between them.

The report recommends that the two Churches enter into a Covenant, acknowledging past mistakes, and affirming:

- ◆ their recognition of each other as true Churches;
- ◆ that in each the Word of God is authentically preached and the Sacraments administered;
- ◆ that they confess the apostolic faith; that their ordained and lay ministries are given by God, and possess the inward call of the Holy Spirit and Christ's Commission;
- ◆ that both Churches embody the nature of the Church and that oversight (Episkope) is exercised within them.

- ◆ 'We affirm that there already exists a basis for agreement on the principles of episcopal oversight as a visible sign and instrument of the communion of the Church in time and space.'

The Churches should commit themselves, as a priority:

- ◆ To work to remove the remaining obstacles to unity, in particular, a united, interchangeable ministry;
- ◆ To realise more deeply our common life and mission;
- ◆ To welcome each others' baptised members;
- ◆ To encourage forms of eucharistic sharing;
- ◆ To listen to each other and take account of each others' concerns;
- ◆ To continue to develop structures of joint or shared oversight.

The report concludes by recommending that it be studied by the two Churches, and their ecumenical partners, and that the United Reformed Church in particular be invited to participate in a three-way conversation.

It recommends that the governing bodies of the two Churches enter into the Covenant on the basis of the findings of the report, and that a Joint Implementation Commission be established to carry forward the implementation of the commitments in the Covenant. The Commission should, as a priority, consider the interchangeability of the diaconal, presbyteral, and episcopal ministries of the two Churches.

The Report is to be considered by the Rickmansworth Deanery Synod in February and will, no doubt, eventually come before our United Council.