

The Methodist/ Roman Catholic International Commission

[excerpted from a presentation to the Centro Pro Unione, December 2006]

The Methodist / Roman Catholic dialogue was among the first to be established after the Second Vatican Council. The World Methodist Council, meeting in London in 1966, accepted the invitation to embark on dialogue and the first meeting took place in 1967.

The Commission works in five-year series of meetings, in step with the meetings of the World Methodist Council. There have been eight agreed statements and these have been presented simultaneously to the Council and to the Vatican. The Council habitually receives each 'with gratitude' and the Vatican acknowledges each by appointing a scholar to comment on the text. With the tacit assent of the Roman Catholic side, the documents have assumed popularly the name of the location in which the relevant World Methodist Council has met and its date.¹

Cardinal Cassidy, speaking to the Conference of the Methodist Church in Great Britain in June 1998, commented on the nature of this particular dialogue, observing that

*'It has been working away quietly (perhaps too quietly!), but steadily. It has been ...like a deepening conversation, in which we have attempted to listen to each other, to find common ground and recognize that there are areas that are not contentious, in order then to look at similarities and differences'.*²

The Reports

The first report of the Commission was presented to the Vatican and to the World Methodist Council in Denver in 1971. This was an introductory and tentative document. The respective teams were, understandably, in exploratory mode, feeling their way in a new situation and with a new relationship. There was an effort to establish common ground on non-contentious issues such as spirituality and Christianity in the contemporary world, and then to move on more sensitive issues such as some associated with Christian home and family life. The latter part of the document raised some of the issues which have subsequently emerged as most significant in the Commission's work: eucharist, ministry and authority.³

While acknowledging the significance of these issues, and, in particular, that of authority, the Commission

¹ The Denver (1971) and Dublin (1976) reports had no formal title, but subsequent reports are as follows: Honolulu (1981) *Towards a Statement on the Holy Spirit*; Nairobi (1986) *Towards a Statement on the Church*; Singapore (1991) *The Apostolic Tradition*; Rio (1996) *The Word of Life*; Brighton (2001) *speaking the Truth in Love*; and Seoul (2006) *The Grace Given You in Christ*.

² As recorded in *Epworth Review* Volume 25, Number 4, October 1998 pp.13-22

³ These issues have emerged as priorities in almost every dialogue. eg. ARCIC,

*... agreed to postpone these important questions because it seemed to us fundamentally important to begin, not with our differences and disagreements, but with our agreements and with that fundamental unity without which all our conversations would cease to be conversations between Christians*⁴

The next report, Dublin 1976, also considered a range of issues. It noted that

*more than once... we have been called to recognize our common heritage; not just to put an ecumenical veneer on the otherwise unalterable furniture of our separation, but to discover the underlying realities on which our churches are founded and to which the common feature of our heritage point. Now we must go further ...*⁵

The third report, *Towards a Statement on the Holy Spirit* (Honolulu 1981) notes that ‘Methodists and Catholics repeatedly discover a notable rapport when they speak of spirituality, the life of the Spirit.’ The second section of this report rejoices in the delicately balanced title, ‘The Holy Spirit, Christian Experience and Authority’, picking up on what may be neuralgic issues for Methodists and Catholics respectively. It highlights the tension between the outcome of the Holy Spirit’s role in drawing believers into faith communities and the role of the Spirit in the teaching and disciplining task of the Church. Among ‘problems or differences which have recurred and seemed most obstinate’⁶, it identifies ‘The Nature of the Church’ as the theme for the next phase.

The fourth report, *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Nairobi 1986), seeks to project a model of church for a time of unity: ‘As we reflect on a reunited Church, we cannot expect to find an ecclesiology shaped in a time of division to be entirely satisfactory’⁷.

The text begins with a broad view of the nature of the Church and gradually narrows the focus to a concentration on the area of Petrine ministry, thus moving from the more generally agreed to the more generally contentious. Here is stated for the first time the goal of this dialogue: full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.⁸

Moving to a more detailed examination of structures of ministry⁹, and, in particular, of the Petrine Office,¹⁰ this report seeks, through Scripture and history, to discern a more universal pattern for ministry. The Church has always needed a God-given ministry, but

...we are not agreed on how far this development of ministry is now unchangeable and how far loyalty to the Holy Spirit requires us to recognize other forms of oversight and

⁴ Denver 100

⁵ Dublin 17

⁶ Honolulu 57

⁷ Nairobi 22

⁸ *ibid* 20

⁹ *ibid* 29-38

¹⁰ *ibid* 39-75

*leadership that have developed, often at times of crisis or new opportunity in Christian history.*¹¹

Prophetically, provocatively or prematurely, but, in any case, tentatively, it suggests that

*It would not be inconceivable that at some future date in a restored unity, Roman Catholic and Methodist bishops might be linked in one episcopal college and that the whole body would recognize some kind of effective leadership and primacy in the Bishop of Rome*¹².

Moving into a more focussed mode, the fifth report, *The Apostolic Tradition* (Singapore 1991) attempts to set out the theological perspectives in which more specific questions may be viewed. With the motif of koinonia very much in the ecumenical mind at the time, the working definition of tradition became 'koinonia in time'. Set in an understanding of 'The Apostolic Faith: its Teaching, Transmission and Reception', it was hoped that ministry might be viewed from a new perspective, that of 'Serving within the Apostolic Tradition' - to use the two main headings in the report.

It is precisely here that the major issues lie: apostolic succession and the role of bishops in the church, the nature of ordination and the location of authority in the Church.

In the sixth report, *The Word of Life: a Statement on Revelation and Faith* (Rio de Janeiro 1996), the Commission was 'looking for commonly acceptable ways of expounding the historical self-disclosure and indeed self-gift of the triune God, focussed in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and brought home to successive generations of believers by the Holy Spirit, released in power at Pentecost'¹³ It sought also to consolidate agreement reached thus far and to provide a basis for movement to more contentious issues.

The report observes that

*...Roman Catholics and Methodists share a common concern regarding the Church universal as an expression of communion in Christ. But they differ widely in their beliefs about the means which God has given to attain or preserve this goal. These differences may be the greatest hindrances on the way to full communion.*¹⁴

However, the publication in 1995 of the Papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*,¹⁵ with its oft-quoted paragraph 96, encouraged the dialogue to suggest that

¹¹ *ibid* 29

¹² *ibid* 62

¹³ Rio 1

¹⁴ *ibid* 130

¹⁵ *Ut Unum Sint: Encyclical letter of the Holy Father John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism*
Paragraph 96 ...*Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to each other, keeping before us*

*Future study could address the related topics of pastoral and doctrinal authority, the offices of oversight in the church and succession in them, and the offer made by Rome of a Petrine ministry in the service of unity and communion*¹⁶

Thus the seventh report, *Speaking the Truth in Love* (Brighton, England, 2001), turned its attention to the issues surrounding teaching authority among Catholics and Methodists. This report deviates from the usual pattern, in that the first section states in systematic form what the commission believes it possible to agree on concerning authoritative teaching, noting the divergences that remain and the questions one side would like to put to the other, while the second describes the practices and understanding of each party in a way readily accessible to the other.

The report indicates considerable agreement in many areas, but differences remain over teaching authority. Acknowledging that ‘Christ’s Church is totally dependent on the free gift of God’s grace for every aspect of its life and work’,¹⁷ the report reflects on how this grace may be channelled and through whom. Paragraph 61 crystallised this –

Methodists and Catholics affirm that baptism, confirmation and ordination are unrepeatable acts whereby God’s grace is conveyed to the recipient in special ways. However, some of our remaining differences centre on whether and how a means of grace may be ‘guaranteed’ or ‘trustworthy’. Catholics ask Methodists how and by what criteria they verify that a particular means is a trustworthy channel of God’s grace. Methodists ask Catholics whether the idea of the guaranteed quality of a sacrament takes full account of the weakness, limitations and sinfulness of the human beings called to be agents of God’s grace....

The eighth and most recent report, *The Grace Given You in Christ* (Seoul 2006), indicates in its subtitle something of the ‘cumulative’ methodology of this dialogue – ‘Catholics and Methodists *further* reflect on the Church.’ (my italics).

The opening chapter is historical in nature and reflects on the perceptions each partner has had of the other over the years. Though there was sometimes genuine understanding, the report observes that mutual evaluations were more often

*... coloured by the religious, social and political conflicts which have generally characterised relationships between Protestants and Catholics, and they were fed by mutual ignorance, defective understandings or partial views of each other*¹⁸.

only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea ‘that they may all be one...so that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (Jn 17.21)?

¹⁶ Rio 132

¹⁷ Brighton 49

¹⁸ Seoul 11

Both communions ‘acknowledge the changes that came with the Second Vatican Council...as a result (of which) there has been a shift from polemics to dialogue, from accusation to respect and from ignorance to trust.’¹⁹

Posing the question ‘What is the Church?’ the second chapter builds on and reaffirms many of the findings which emerged in previous reports²⁰. It concludes that Methodists and Catholics are agreed on much that constitutes Church – the role of the Holy Spirit in calling together the community of God’s people; the trinitarian ‘shape’ of the church as ‘People and Family of God the Father’, ‘Body and Bride of Jesus Christ, God the Son Incarnate’, ‘Living Temple of the Holy Spirit’; on ministry as ‘a gift from God to the Church, a graced service of the Church’s living communion with Christ throughout the world and through the ages.’²¹

The serious divergences are clearly in the consideration of ministry and these include ‘a precise understanding of the sacramental nature of ordination, the magisterial role of the episcopate in apostolic succession, the assurance asserted of certain authoritative acts of teaching, and the place and role of the Petrine ministry’²².

Picking up on the language of ‘gift’ used in *Ut Unum Sint*²³, and acknowledging that ‘the Holy Spirit is the true giver of the gifts we are seeking to exchange,’²⁴ the third chapter seeks to identify the principle ways in which Methodists and Roman Catholics are able to recognize each other’s ecclesial character; and then highlights ‘the gifts we truly have to offer each other in the service of Christ in the world.’²⁵

Acknowledging that there is a difference of starting place: ‘Catholics have an instinct for the whole and an emphasis upon the confident actions of the Church as Church, while Methodists have an instinct for the individual and an emphasis upon the assurance that each individual has’²⁶, and, further, that ‘Catholics tend to think first of *apostolic succession* and Methodists of *mission*,’²⁷ the report proceeds to consider what we might each offer the other.

Among those which Methodists might offer Roman Catholics are²⁸

- the role of lay people in both preaching and the decision-making process of the church;
- a concept of ministry which includes lay people and which includes women among the ordained;

¹⁹ *ibid* 39

²⁰ In particular the Nairobi, Singapore, Rio and Brighton reports

²¹ Seoul 89

²² Seoul 92

²³ *Ut Unum Sint* 28 ‘Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’. (cf *Lumen Gentium* 13)

²⁴ Seoul 97

²⁵ *ibid* 97

²⁶ *ibid* 99

²⁷ *ibid* 101

²⁸ *ibid* 114 - 120

- a characteristic ethos in worship and spirituality, expressed often, though not exclusively, through the hymns of Charles Wesley.

The gifts Roman Catholics, in their turn, might offer Methodists include ²⁹

- an articulated ecclesiology, with a sense of continuity both in space and in time;
- the Petrine ministry, offered as a service of love and unity;
- those doctrines, which at the Reformation, became obscured rather than reformed of excess and which, at the Second Vatican Council, were re-articulated; among these understandings of the Eucharist and of the priesthood;

Noting Pope Benedict's words that 'Concrete gestures that enter hearts and stir consciences are essential, inspiring in everyone that inner conversion that is the prerequisite for all ecumenical progress'³⁰, the final chapter of the report seeks to ground the agreement reached throughout the forty years of this dialogue.

This section is carefully structured in terms of the declared goal of the dialogue – full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life. Outlining a number of principles and proposals for closer working together, the Report allows that

*The practical proposals outlined in this chapter do not exhaust the possibilities for closer collaborationnor are they equally relevant to the groups specifically addressed in this report. Nevertheless, these proposals constitute a comprehensive set of concrete gestures that will assist our two communions as we journey towards the next stage on the way to our full visible unity..*³¹

This report was presented to the World Methodist Council meeting in Seoul, South Korea, in July 2006. It was received with enthusiasm. It has also been presented to the Vatican, who will commission a response.

David Chapman, in a paper presented during the last session of the dialogue, suggests

*Perhaps the most basic question for the Joint Commission to address is how Methodists and Catholics can together revisit the undivided history of the Church to find sources, methods and norms for an ecclesiology that will enable subsequent differences to be overcome.*³²

Recent statements from the Vatican underline the continued necessity for this search.

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²⁹ *ibid* 128-135

³⁰ First Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the end of the Eucharistic Concelebration with the members of the College of Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel, 20 April, 2005, §5.

³¹ Seoul 163

³² *The Nature and Identity of the Church in Methodist-Catholic Dialogue*, 2003

For a much fuller treatment of this dialogue see in *Search of the Catholic Spirit – Methodists and Roman Catholics in dialogue* David Chapman 2004 Epworth Press Peterborough.

Areas for discussion

1. *'Mind the gap!'* intones the intercom on the London Underground. Those undertaking the ecumenical journey need also to mind the gap, the gap between the theological discourse and the lived experience of the faithful. How *do* we best mind the gap?
2. In the light of the recent 'Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine of the Church' (July 2007), and bearing in mind the years of discussion and dialogue on the nature of the church, where to now?
3. Given Philip Jenkins' prognostications, are we simply re-arranging the deckchairs while the ecumenical ship flounders?