

FAITH AND UNITY IN THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL: AN ISSUE OF ECUMENICAL INTEGRITY

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Issues of faith and intra-Methodist unity have surfaced a number of times in the recent history of the World Methodist Council (hereafter WMC). That inner unity is obviously significant also for our relationship with other Christian churches. One of the stated purposes of the WMC is 'to foster Methodist participation in the ecumenical movement and to promote the unity of Methodist witness and service in that movement'; another is 'to advance unity of theological and moral standards in the Methodist churches of the world'.¹ The Council has published statements in its own name on several such matters, but on the whole, they have remained documents of record, occasionally remembered. The growing maturity of our relationships with several Christian World Communions means that our ability as an international Methodist body to speak authoritatively on the doctrine and life of our churches has become urgent, if decades of discussion are not remain unproductive.

At the heart of this problem is the question of what kind of body the WMC purports to be. The basis of membership is very general: 'The WMC is comprised of the Churches of the Methodist tradition which satisfy the criteria, including a measure of autonomy which the Council may itself from time to time prescribe'.² There may be a record of such prescriptions 'from time to time', but I am not aware of them. Leaving aside the issue of autonomy and size, it would seem that a claim to belong to the worldwide Wesleyan family is sufficient.

Furthermore, the Constitution (Section II) says, 'The WMC is an association of the Churches in the Methodist tradition throughout the world. It does not seek to legislate for them nor to invade their autonomy. Rather it exists to serve them and *to give unity to their witness* and enterprise'.³

The WMC has no equivalent of a Faith and Order Committee. It has Standing Committees for Theological Education, Liturgy and Worship and for Ecumenical Relations, and theological issues are a part of the work of other committees, but there is no place where theological issues are the centre of attention. This Oxford Institute brings together many of the leading and upcoming scholars in various areas of theology, but it has no power to make judgements for world Methodism.

So, when the WMC approves or receives a report from one of its dialogues, our partners may well ask: what level of authority does this report represent? Recently, in the Joint Preparatory Commission for an Orthodox-Methodist Dialogue, the Orthodox noted that member churches of the WMC had a wide range, not to say contradictory, view on the subject of homosexuality. 'How,' they asked the Methodist members, 'can a Church tolerate such a wide range of views on such a central theological and moral question?' Below, we shall examine the criteria observed by Anglican and Roman Catholic partners in dialogue. But who speaks for the Methodists? Can we speak with any serious degree of unity? Is there a way in which unity of faith and doctrine can be delineated with

¹ *World Methodist Council Handbook of Information 2007-2011*, Constitution, p. 85, (b) and (c). Somewhat parallel are (j) to provide a means of consultation and co-operation between World Methodism and the other world communions of the Christian Church, and also (k) to study union and reunion proposals which affect Methodist member churches and to offer advice and help as desired..

² *Ibid.*, 86, III. Membership. The remainder of this section concerns election procedures, and recognizes that 'Union Churches' are also eligible for membership.

³ The churches are enumerated and described at <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/>

due respect to the autonomy of the member churches of the WMC, across a spectrum from classical Wesleyan, through catholic, evangelical, and charismatic branches, to the 'holiness tradition'? The intention and the language of the Council suggest that there is, but it has not been tested.⁴

Contexts for Methodist integrity: WMC statements

There have been only five occasions when the WMC has ventured to speak for its 'family'. Two statements were issued at the Nairobi meeting in 1986: *The World Methodist Council Social Affirmation*, described as 'adopted'; and *Saved by Grace, A Statement of World Methodist belief and Practice*, and described as 'drafted in Jerusalem and adopted by the WMC in Nairobi, Kenya'. A decade later, *Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith* was adopted at Rio de Janeiro, August 13, 1996, and a further two arose out of debate at the meeting of the Executive Committee in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 2004, *Wesleyan/Methodist witness in Christian and Islamic Cultures*, and *Statement on Unity and Sexuality*, both noted as being adopted by the 2006 Council session.⁵

These statements are not all of the same order. The **Social Affirmation** is a brief affirmation of faith with liturgical responses, consisting of three sections: rejoicing in signs of God's kingdom, confession of sin, and commitment. It confines its language to the general: we are committed to 'seek abundant life for all humanity', 'struggle for peace with justice and freedom' rather than naming particular ills or evils.

From the same Conference, **Saved by Grace** arises since Methodists 'scattered in mission throughout the world...are compelled to give an account of who they [Methodists] are by declaring what they believe and hope'. It adds the pertinent remarks

[t]he good they do appears to some as more obvious than the faith they profess, and yet they claim that the good they do proceeds out of the faith they profess. Many are confused. Methodism appears to them as a collection of various opinions where a person is free to believe almost anything that a person chooses.⁶

Clearly, this gathering felt the need for some ecumenical apologetics - hence this statement, in lively, almost sermonical language. It is the best starting point thus far if the wider Wesleyan family of 2013 wished to compose such a manifesto. The fact that it was 'drafted in Jerusalem'⁷ no doubt lent it some apostolic zeal. It is thoroughly catholic, with a Wesleyan flavour: '[o]ur vision must not contradict what Christians of all ages have experienced and known'. Only at paragraph 7 does it come to 'Wesleyan Distinctives'. Largely without using Wesleyan terminology, it describes prevenient and justifying grace, and sanctification. It affirms the Arminian universality of grace and expects 'the transformation of the world'. It claims hymnody as a notable mark of Methodism's proclamation. At paragraph 9, it returns to what Methodists share in common with other Christians - the Scriptures, the historic creeds, the core beliefs and the Christian life and witness which flow from these.

⁴ There are also practical challenges to Methodist unity where more than one member church exists, and witnesses, separately, alongside another in a single nation or neighbourhood.

⁵ The texts of each of these is available on the WMC website under Resources.

⁶ Paragraph 1.

⁷ So the note at the end of the document.

Rio 1996: The Wesleyan Essentials

By contrast, a decade later, *Wesleyan Essentials of Faith* is a series of 32 dot points under the headings 'The People called Methodists, Our Beliefs, Our Worship, Our Witness, Our Service and Our Common Life'. The Proceedings of the Conference⁸ state that it was 'offered to the churches as an instrument of guidance and healing'. There was, however, a second section which has not normally been published along with the 'Essentials', entitled '**Building on the Wesleyan Essentials...Ideals and Guidelines for use by Methodist Christians in Congregations and Judicatories**'. These are offered first 'within the Methodist family' headed by a 'promise' which included an acknowledgement 'that we are a richly diverse family, living in all parts of the world, in the midst of a variety of challenges, with varieties of ways of expressing our faith'. The promises are then detailed in eight more dot points, including: [to]

- respect each other's integrity in the expression of beliefs and convictions;
- struggle with God's word, understood within different cultures, seeking faith in Jesus Christ;
- strive together to discern God's will to prevent disagreements from becoming alienating and isolating;
- honour the varied beliefs and practices of members of the Methodist family, not misrepresenting or disparaging them;

and the others in the same vein. A further section, moreover, gives 'Some of the ways these promises may be kept', including (there are six dot points),

- by establishing programs to facilitate the linking of churches both within and between countries. Such links (involving the sharing of experience, theology, liturgy and friendship) could not only contribute to an increasing sense of Methodist identity, but could lead to a developing awareness of being part of the wider Methodist family;
- by encouraging the use of this statement along with other documents approved by the WMC such as the WM Social Affirmation and *Saved by Grace* and the reports of the dialogues with other communions;
- by not imposing theological debates current in one members of the family on the whole family, yet not restricting dialogue;
- by the WMC seeking ways, on an ongoing basis, to ensure that it is as fully representative as possible of the world wide Methodist family (especially with regard to age, gender, and

⁸ The report in the *Proceedings of the Seventeenth World Methodist Conference*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, August 7-15, 1996, Joe Hale (ed.), WMC pub., 1997, says that the resolution was brought 'as a joint project from the five committees of the Council', which are, however, not named. Dr Norman E. Dewire presented the work. The document was debated and amended in plenary session.

regional and denominational representation) so as to enable the voices of Methodists around the globe to be heard through participation in regional and international gatherings.⁹

This full page of pleas is followed by four lines applying the principles generally to ecumenical dialogues. The issues would seem to have been chiefly intra-Methodist.

The background to this resolution is not clear in the pages of the *Proceedings*, but it could be regarded as the precedent for what I am proposing. I am not aware of any structured way in which the sort of exchange proposed has been actually carried out. Those whom we appoint to ecumenical dialogues are chosen to represent world Methodism in their persons, denominations, cultures and through relevant intellectual skills, and the invitations come from the General Secretary and the Chair of Ecumenical Relationships after consultation. The last named Standing Committee meets too rarely to have effective input. The members of the different dialogues have, for instance, never met to examine the cohesiveness of what they present as Methodist belief and practice.¹⁰ Debate in WMC on the dialogue reports when they are presented each quinquennium has been almost non-existent. The promises have not been kept, and they should be for our integrity as a world Communion.

Port Elizabeth 2004/ Sydney 2006

The two statements from Port Elizabeth¹¹ both arose from issues of the moment. I was present and involved in the construction of both. There was a demand to say something as a communion about the relationship of Christianity to Islam; some desired to warn of syncretistic approaches; others wished to articulate a continued mission to Muslims. As I recall, there were consultations in the interstices of the Executive Committee meeting of members of the standing committees on Theological Education, Evangelism and Ecumenics & Dialogue. The second issue was put firmly on the agenda by the then President, Bishop Sunday Mbang, who expressed his alarm at the divisions among the churches (within Methodism but also ecumenically) by current debates over human sexuality. The brief statement was forged between the same people, basically warns Methodists that such debates are church-dividing, and counsels respect for differing opinions, the maintenance of peace, and listening to the 'long Christian tradition of teaching on the order of creation', and on marriage and family life. Whether it has had any effect on member churches is a matter of judgement.

The statements above - five in 25 years - seem to be largely for internal use, even when composed as an apology for a wider readership. Two of them may point a way to a common statement of faith amongst Methodists across the world, viz., *Saved by Grace* (1986) and *Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith* (1996) and the first of these raises an interesting question as to the style in which Methodists might make such a confession.

⁹ The spirit of these provisions are interestingly parallel to the important joint statement *Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World, Recommendations for Conduct*, WCC, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance, 2011, which specifically touches on the ethical aspects of dialogue.

¹⁰ The one international arena for this is the Forum on Bilateral Dialogues, sponsored by the Secretaries of Christian World Communions, and facilitated by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. I attended the 10th in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 2012. This report is available on the WCC website under Resources/ Faith & Order, Tenth Forum.

¹¹ The reports were actually adopted by the WMC meeting in Sydney, Australia, in 2006.

Contexts for Methodist integrity: Dialogues

As a matter of fact, the *Wesleyan Essentials* are quoted in full in the forthcoming final report of our Anglican dialogue,¹² as part of answering the question 'Who are the partners in this dialogue?' Methodist members of AMICUM (Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission) sought in vain for any alternative commonly agreed upon account of who we are and what we believe.

The WMC has been a leading participant in theological dialogues from the beginning. The dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church began in 1967 and has produced nine reports; the first eight are described and reflected upon in a *Synthesis, Together in Holiness, 40 years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue*.¹³ To this I shall return.

Other dialogues or theological projects have occurred during this time which we need not explore here. Nevertheless, most significantly for our purpose was the composition of a Methodist codicil to the ***Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*** (JDDJ) made by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. As part of the negotiations for the WMC to add its signature to the JDDJ, a *World Methodist Council Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*¹⁴ was prepared, largely by Professor Geoffrey Wainwright and Bishop Dr Walter Klaiber, twice circulated to member churches for comment, discussed in the Standing Committee on Ecumenics and Dialogue, and presented to the WMC at its conference in Seoul in 2006.¹⁵ The accompanying introduction claims that 'The Methodist Statement sets out Methodist teaching on justification in a clear and positive way, while being able to declare and demonstrate its consonance with the JDDJ'.

This statement on perhaps the most critical of all doctrines in modern church history is unique among the publications of the WMC. No other statement has been so thoroughly examined and argued, and none affirmed with such broadly representative Methodist authority. It was, however, the work of one dialogue, though certainly the longest and most distinguished.

As I say, forty years of Catholic and Methodist dialogue has been formally presented to both churches. So also have its constitutive reports each quinquennium. The Co-Chairmen of the Dialogue comment in *Synthesis*,

The Dialogue has been progressing since 1967 and while its reports were always welcomed, they had not been received very deeply or widely in the two ecclesial communities sponsoring them. It also seemed time for those who had first established the Dialogue to review its achievements and to decide whether they wished it to continue proceeding as it had been up to this point. Finally, it seemed appropriate for both Christian communities to

¹² Expected to be published early in 2014.

¹³ Received by the WMC at Durban, South Africa 2011. Published by the World Methodist Council.

¹⁴ See http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/justificationworld_methodist_council_and_the_jddj.pdf

¹⁵ Co-signed by: for the Methodists: Prelate Sunday Mbang and Dr. George Freeman, chair and general secretary, respectively, of the WMC; for the Catholics, Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal Soo-hwan Kim; for the Lutherans, Dr. Ishmael Noko and the Rev. Sven Oppegaard.

make a more formal response to the achievements of the Dialogue, particularly concerning those areas where it was claimed that consensus had been achieved.¹⁶

Synthesis was sent to all member churches and to all members of the WMC prior to its meeting at Durban. Comment was invited from theologians and church leaders. It too attempted to generate a statement of faith which carried the highest consensus of world Methodism, and the report was received with acclamation at the Council.

A bold attempt it was, but it is also fragile. As the Co-chairs suggest, Methodist response to the reports has been formal (in votes at WMC), sporadic (depending on the willingness and ability of church leaders and theologians to respond critically) and largely confined to the constantly changing membership of the Council itself every five years. The response, they truly say, is neither wide nor deep.

Reception

The first issue is what is called in ecumenical circles 'reception'. Few of the many significant reports are accompanied by study programmes and material which facilitate them in local churches. *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* (WCC, Lima, 1988) is perhaps the major exception. The 2006 report of the Methodist-Catholic dialogue, *The Grace Given you in Christ* is notable for its setting out, in chapter 4, of practical ways in which local congregations might participate in the 'exchange of gifts'. Its intention is renewed in its successor *Encountering Christ the Saviour, Church and Sacraments* (Durban 2011). Both address issues which are alive in local congregations, and between Methodist churches in the same neighbourhood, and both offer accessible teaching material. The WMC does not have resources to undertake this grounding task, but some of our Methodist universities and seminaries may be able to do so on the WMC's behalf.

Moreover, such reception is integral to the dialogue process itself, at least from the Roman Catholic point of view. In his reflections on the 1996 report *The Word of Life*, the Vatican commentator Fr William Henn OFM Cap¹⁷, concludes his assessment (my italics),

To favor this further work, *it would be particularly helpful to promote among the faithful of both communities the reception of what has been achieved thus far in this dialogue process.* 'The Word of Life' (1996) has not, nor does it claim to have, achieved full unity in faith between Methodists and Roman Catholics. But the marks of a firm common foundation are present clearly in this text. These need to be acknowledged widely in both communities, so that prayer and common witness and further dialogue can hasten the day when our present communion in faith can blossom to fullness by the grace and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The second issue follows: is it possible to meet the criteria which might invite a 'formal response' from other churches?

The Anglican Communion's Commission

¹⁶ *Synthesis*, Preface, p 4.

¹⁷ Fr Henn also offers the Commentary and Reflections on the *Anglican-Catholic* (ARCIC III) dialogue report on 1999, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*.

This is about to be tested in the Anglican case. The 'final' report of AMICUM will be considered by the Anglican Communion agency IASCUFO (International Standing Commission of Unity, Faith and Order) in December 2013. Its mandate states that the Standing Commission shall have responsibility *inter alia* :

- to promote the deepening of Communion between the Churches of the Anglican Communion, and between those Churches and the other churches and traditions of the Christian *oikumene*;
- to advise the Provinces and the Instruments of Communion on all questions of ecumenical engagement, proposals for national, regional or international ecumenical agreement or schemes of co-operation and unity, as well as on questions touching Anglican Faith and Order;
- to review developments in the areas of faith, order or unity in the Anglican Communion and among ecumenical partners, and
- to give advice to the Churches of the Anglican Communion or to the Instruments of Communion upon them, with the intention to promote common understanding, consistency, and convergence both in Anglican Communion affairs, and in ecumenical engagement to assist any Province with the assessment of new proposals in the areas of Unity, Faith and Order as requested.¹⁸

This mandate would be a good starting point for a WMC equivalent.¹⁹

The Roman Catholic process

A more demanding level of agreement on the Methodist's partner's part is required, I believe, by the Roman Catholic Church. It is true that there have been 'Commentary and Reflections' to each of the Catholic-Methodist reports since 1986 by scholars designated by the Vatican,²⁰ but these are, as it were, *in via*, remarks on the way. This can be illustrated in each of these commentaries, but to the 2006 *The Grace Given you in Christ*, Fr John T. Ford writes,

Thus, among those reading and reflecting on *The Grace Given You in Christ*, there most likely will be a spectrum of personal reactions - ranging from rejection, through suspicion and discomfort to ready acceptance. Perhaps at the margins, there will be some Christians who feel that consensus statements such as this Report are superfluous. Readers then need to ask themselves not only what does the document say to me, but why am I reading this Report in my own particular way? In effect, reading is not only a matter of objectively examining this Report's contents; it will also challenge many readers to greater ecumenical

¹⁸ IASCUFO's mandate was approved by the Joint Standing Committee in November 2008. The first meeting was in Canterbury in December 2009. See more at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/commissions/iascufo/index.cfm#sthash.jtCE1Sol.dpuf>

¹⁹ AMICUM invited the Rev. Dr David Chapman as a consultant to its 2010 meeting, for which he prepared an exhaustive synthesis of Anglican-Methodist dialogue statements, international and national. This should be published.

²⁰ see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/sub-index/index_methodist-council.htm for these, including the two next cited. There is no Catholic response yet to the 2011 Durban report *Encountering Christ the Saviour*.

openness. Accordingly, reflecting on the 'teachings' of this Report should entail a 'learning' process - a process of critical study and reception that is hopefully, first of all, personal with each reader, and then a process of communal and ecclesial evaluation and reception, not only among Methodists and Roman Catholics, but also among all Christians.

What then, are the next steps? The experience of the Anglican-Catholic dialogue (ARCIC) is instructive. That Commission recognized from the beginning that its agreements could not be ratified by the official authorities 'until such time as our *respective* Churches can evaluate its conclusions'.²¹ The various ARCIC reports were not the end of the dialogue process, but at a certain point, the dialogue discerned that it was ready to present its Agreements for evaluation, actually seeking reconciliation, and thus asking the appropriate authorities in both communions to test the adequacy of the Commission's agreements in the light of their respective faith and practice. Prior to the Lambeth Conference of 1998, all Provinces of the Anglican Communion had been asked by the Anglican Consultative Council whether the agreements on the Eucharist and Ministry and ordination were 'consonant in substance with the faith of Anglicans'.²²

Thus (in 1981) the formal process was begun. The responses from the Provinces were officially 'collated, summarised and published' for Lambeth 1998, the responses having given a clear 'Yes' to the request to discern a consensus. The Catholic Church formally responded to the *Final Report* in 1991. It acknowledged 'points of convergence and even of agreement', but it also raised questions in regard to some aspects claimed as substantially agreed, and which would need greater clarification from the Catholic point of view.

The official Catholic response concluded,

The quite remarkable progress that has been made in respect of Authority in the Church indicates just how essential this question is for the future of the Roman Catholic-Anglican dialogue. The value of any consensus reached in regard to other matters will to a large extent depend on the authority of the body which eventually endorses them. The objection may be made that this reply does not sufficiently follow the ecumenical method, by which agreement is sought step by step, rather than in full agreement at the first attempt. It must, however, be remembered that the Roman Catholic Church was asked to give a clear answer to the question: are the agreements contained in this Report consonant with the faith of the Catholic Church? What was asked for was not a simple evaluation of an ecumenical study, but an official response as to the identity of the various statements with the faith of the Church.²³

Clarifications of Certain Aspects of the Agreed Statements on Eucharist and Ministry (1994) was the Anglican response to this, and it notes Cardinal Cassidy's belief that 'new light' had been thrown on the questions, and had strengthened the agreement' - and that 'no further study would seem to be required at this stage' (itself a somewhat enigmatic conclusion).

²¹ My italics. See, *Clarifications on Eucharist and Ministry*, London, ARCIC 1994, p.2

²² loc. cit. For all the ARCIC reports see

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/sub-index/index_anglican-comm.htm

²³ see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_1991_catholic-response-arcici_en.html This is 'The Catholic Church's response', not that of a named individual.

If the Methodist-Catholic dialogue is to reach a further degree of maturity and fruitfulness, if we seriously believe that progress has been made over forty years and more of formal dialogue, this is the kind of process which would be required for real progress. We may affirm the hope expressed in *The Grace given you in Christ* 'It is time now to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and of the Gospel, and *thereby of the Church*, in one another'²⁴. How would the WMC achieve this?

My suggestion is the formation of an appropriate international Methodist commission or standing committee. We need to achieve a consensus on the authenticity of what we say to other churches which our partners can themselves receive. To do this, we need to create a body within the WMC, described perhaps a 'Commission on Faith and Unity' consisting of a group of say, 12-15 people, representative of our member churches and having diverse areas of scholarship, with power to coopt, working primarily as an e-network; meeting face to face as possible at WMC or Conferences.

Calming our fears

Reading between the lines of the full Rio report on *Wesleyan Essentials*, we may discern that Methodists prize above all things their autonomy as particular churches or denominations! We also have a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' when it comes to doctrinal exactitude. (Here I say no more, except to point to the sobriety of Ted Campbell's discussion of Methodist essentials.)²⁵

Occasionally, Wesley's sermon on 'the Catholic Spirit' has been made to say that for Methodists, doctrine does not matter provided we love one another. That could hardly be further from Wesley's view of the faith.²⁶

Perhaps the right assurance is one which will be presented to the Busan Assembly of the WCC later in 2013 in the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*²⁷, which hopes to achieve convergence far beyond the confines of one denomination. If our ecclesial fear is still that diversity would be unacceptably confined by such a process, listen to this from the above document:

Legitimate diversity is not accidental to the life of the Christian community but is rather an aspect of its catholicity, a quality that reflects the fact that it is part of the Father's design that salvation in Christ be incarnational and thus 'take flesh' among the various peoples to whom the Gospel is proclaimed.²⁸

The promises of *Wesleyan Essentials* could hardly have said it better. Diversity in unity is the outplaying of the Scriptures and the traditions in which the faith has taken human form, including that of the 'Wesleyan family of churches'.

²⁴ Chapter 3, paragraph 97.

²⁵ Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine, The Essentials*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2011, especially his Introduction.

²⁶ Op. cit., p. 177ff.

²⁷ Faith and Order Paper 214, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013.

²⁸ My colleague Professor Norman Young carefully discussed this at a seminar at Rio in 1996, and his address may be read in the *Proceedings*, *ibid.*, paragraph 12. Professor Wainwright has regularly insisted on the same point.