

UNITY—LESSONS TO BE LEARNED;
ISSUES TO BE FACED
(1) ANGLICAN-METHODIST
CONVERSATIONS 1956–1972

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THE RT REVD DR ERIC KEMP
Bishop of Chichester

I have been asked to speak about the lessons to be learned from the abortive Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme in which I was engaged at all stages, but before I do that I must spend some time in setting out the background of the Scheme, both in what led up to the start of the Conversations and the other Unity Schemes involving Anglicans which immediately preceded it.

I will begin with the Appeal to all Christian People issued by the Lambeth Conference of 1920. This is in more than one way a historic document, and it led almost immediately to informal discussions between representatives of the bishops of the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches in England, discussions which were interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939 but had shown little sign of producing any positive conclusion.

When the war ended the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, thought that a fresh start should be attempted, and so in November 1946 he preached a sermon before the University of Cambridge which was published under the title of 'A Step Forward in Church Relations'. The phrase in it which attracted most attention was that in which he appealed to the Free Churches to consider 'taking episcopacy into their system'. Conversations between some of their leaders and representatives of the Archbishop produced a report published in 1950 under the title of *Church Relations in England*. Having set out the main points for consideration the report concluded that any further discussions or negotiations should be between the Church of England and individual Free Churches. The Convocations approved the report and issued a general invitation to the Free Churches to proceed to more detailed negotiations. The only one which responded positively was the Methodist Church, and so Conversations began in July 1956.

It is important to emphasise that last little bit of history because later on there was criticism that other churches were not involved in the making of the Scheme. The answer is that they were invited to discussions but did not respond.

The first chairmen of the Conversations were, on the Anglican side, Bishop George Bell, and, on the Methodist side, Dr Harold Roberts. An Interim Statement was published in 1958, setting out an outline programme which received the encouragement of both Churches and of the Lambeth Conference of 1958. George Bell died that year, and when the Conversations were resumed Bishop Harry Carpenter of Oxford took his place. A Final Report of the Conversations was published in 1963, after which there was a two-year gap for general discussion throughout the two Churches.

There seemed to be sufficient support for the proposals to warrant the setting up of a Commission to work them out. This was under the chairmanship of the Bishop of London on the Anglican side. Dr Roberts continued as Methodist chairman. The 1963 Report had been generally welcomed by the Catholic element in the Church of England. Criticism had come chiefly from Evangelicals and from a similar element in the Methodist Church. Because of that Bishop Gordon Savage and Dr J. I. Packer, two leading Evangelicals, were added to the Anglican team and Evangelical representation in the Methodist team was strengthened.

The Unity Commission published an Interim Statement in 1967, and it was immediately apparent that the changes in composition of the Commission had substantially affected reaction in the Church of England. Leading High Churchmen who had hitherto supported the previous documents were now very critical of changes made. I well remember the mood of depression in which the members of the Commission met later in 1967 to review the reactions to what they had done. Some were for stopping altogether, but we decided to continue in the hope that we could recover some of the lost ground. It was not to be, and although the proposals received the support of the Methodist Conference they failed to gain a sufficient majority in the Church of England.

After the General Synod had been set up in 1970 it was thought right that it should have the opportunity of considering the Scheme, but in spite of a powerful speech by Archbishop Ramsey there was a second failure.

One reason for the failure was that between 1955 and 1968 the ecumenical scene had been drastically changed by the Second Vatican Council, which seemed to have opened the way for the Roman Catholic Church to be involved in ecumenical relations such as would not have been dreamed of as possible before the advent of Pope John XXIII. Beside that, Anglican-Methodist discussions seemed to some short-sighted and of small importance.

Another reason arises from the disparity in numbers between the Church of England and the Methodist Church in England. It was much easier to involve Methodists at the ground roots in what was going on than to excite the interest of the ordinary Anglican. I remember Dr Greenslade telling me of an occasion some three years into the discussions when two reports had been published and he went to speak on them to a deanery gathering in north Oxfordshire. In the discussion a churchwarden said, 'I have been much interested in what you have told us because until you came here this evening I had no idea we were having any conversations with the Methodists'. The problem of involving what are generally called 'the ground roots' is a real difficulty in all ecumenical relations.

There were two major issues in the proposals themselves on which the Church of England could not agree. One was the nature of the unity to be sought and how to reach it; the other concerned the unification of the existing ministers of the two Churches.

At an early stage a decision had to be made as to whether the aim was a federation of the two Churches or what is generally called 'organic unity', that is, an ultimate coming together as one body. Ecumenical discussions about unity had come to lay great emphasis on the second of these. The Lund Conference on Faith and Order had stressed the importance of the coming together of 'all in each place', though it failed to go on to consider the right relationship of all in one place to all in another place.

The members of the Conversations were united in saying that organic unity must be the goal, but agreed that it would have to be reached in two stages: the first being the bringing together of the ministries and much of the lives of the two Churches; the second the achievement of unity as one body. This received the general approval of the Convocations and of the Lambeth Conference of 1988 and of the Methodist Conference, and it formed the basis of all subsequent work. It became an embarrassment that Dr Geoffrey Fisher, who had presided over the Lambeth Conference and over Canterbury Convocation in their discussions of the report, subsequently after his retirement became a persistent and vociferous critic of the idea of organic unity. I remember his saying that his vision was that every church in England should have a notice board reading 'Church of England' with underneath it, in parentheses, '(Methodist)', '(Baptist)', '(Congregationalist)' or whatever. In spite of the repeated assertion that the aim was unity not uniformity, this issue continued to dog the discussions, and my impression is that it is more seriously in debate today.

Stage One involved the bringing together of the existing ministers of the two

Churches in a way which would make each acceptable as celebrant of the Eucharist in the other Church. An argument for doing this is that the inability of one Church to recognise the validity of the ordinations in another is not only a theological problem but also constitutes a considerable psychological barrier, so that if it can be overcome at an early stage subsequent discussions will be much easier. The way proposed to deal with this was through the Service of Reconciliation, but this became a major target for criticism.

The service began with a reconciliation of the two Churches and their acceptance of each other as parts of the Body of Christ. It was important that the reconciliation of ministries should be set within this broad context so as to avoid the allegation that the scheme made the Church dependent on the ministry. It was also important that there should be an agreed statement about the nature of the ministry and what it would be in the coming together of the two Churches. It was agreed that the structure should be episcopal, that all ordinations should be performed by bishops, and that a common Ordinal should be agreed and used. As I had a principal responsibility for preparing that material I can say that it was done in careful consultation with other Churches, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox. It formed the basis for the current ASB Ordinal, which can, I believe, be rightly considered as ecumenical.

Behind the proposals in the Service of Reconciliation for the reconciliation of the ministries lay several years of controversy concerning the Schemes of Unity in South and North India, which I must now explain.

The South India Scheme which began to be negotiated in the twenties involved certain dioceses of the Church of India, Burma and Pakistan, and the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist Churches in that area. The Scheme proposed a Church which would be episcopally structured with bishops consecrated in the apostolic succession and all future ordinations performed by them, but with all the existing ministers accepted as equally presbyters (priests) of the uniting Churches, subject only to a prayer that they might serve together. This created a problem for the Church of England. Were all these ministers, episcopally ordained or not, to be acceptable as celebrants of the Eucharist in Anglican churches when they visited England or came in retirement? The Canons require that the celebrant of the Eucharist must have been episcopally ordained (now Canon B 12, para 1). A further question was raised at the Lambeth Conference of 1948 and subsequently in the English Convocations in 1950. Did the fact that those who had and those who had not received episcopal ordination were to be accepted equally call in question the intention of ordinations performed in the Church of South India? A substantial minority of the bishops at Lambeth thought that it did. In the Convocations the subject was postponed for five years. Subsequently in 1955 a decision was made which recognised the validity of the orders conferred by the South Indian bishops, but asserted the requirement of episcopal ordination for all who were to celebrate the Eucharist in churches of the Church of England.

All this had an effect on the Scheme of Union for North India. The Lambeth Conference recommended that in future Schemes of Union the ministries should be united at the outset, and so in that Scheme there was a service in which the bishops prayed over all the ministers a prayer which contained a petition that God would give to each according to his need the Holy Spirit for grace and authority to exercise the office of priest in the Church of God. In England a committee under the chairmanship of Chancellor Wigglesworth recommended that this was sufficient to be the equivalent of an episcopal ordination. This was accepted.

When, therefore, we came to draft the ministerial part of the Service of Reconciliation we had to take account of all this. Although, as I said, there was an official legal view that the North India unification rite could be regarded as an episcopal ordination to the priesthood to those who had not received that, some were

unhappy about the use of the same prayer for both categories of minister. Whatever was said or done, the fact remained that the Church of England did not regard Free Church ministers as priests, and that therefore the North India rite would be an ordination for them but not for the Anglicans taking part in it.

In constructing the Service of Reconciliation we thought that it would be honest to recognise this and to use two different prayers. In the first form of the service, therefore, the bishops lay hands on the Methodist ministers and pray that God will pour upon them the Holy Spirit to endue each according to his need with grace for the office and work of a priest in the Church of God. Later on the presiding Methodist minister lays his hands upon each of the Anglican bishops and priests and prays that God will pour out the Holy Spirit upon them to endue each according to his need with grace for the office and work of a minister in God's Church.

This distinction was accepted by the Methodists on the Commission but met opposition from a number of Anglicans. Some thought that there should be no distinction and that we were asking too much of the Methodists. Others thought that we were not asking enough and objected to the ambiguity, as they saw it, of the words 'each according to his need'. I encountered an objection from another quarter, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Athenagoras, which illustrates the pitfalls of ecumenical endeavours. He had been a strong supporter of the procedure for the reconciliation of ministries in the form I have just described, that is with the bishops praying with the Methodists first and then the Methodists praying over the Anglicans; but when in the final version of the service we reversed the order he said that he could no longer accept it. When I asked him why, he explained that he had been able to reconcile the first version with the Orthodox practice whereby a newly-ordained priest blesses the bishop who has ordained him, but the reversed form did not make that explanation possible.

In the light of what I have said I think you will understand that I view the present proposals for Anglican-Methodist discussions with a certain amount of scepticism because I am not sure that they are facing the problems. One small point in the initial report raises my anxieties. In relation to ordination a great deal of emphasis is put in common parlance on the laying on of hands, but theologically the right definition is 'the laying on of hands with prayer'. The laying on of hands as a gesture has of itself no particular significance. Its meaning in any particular rite is given by the content of the prayer, and from what I have said you will understand the importance of that. I am therefore disturbed that the report speaks only of the laying on of hands in relation to the ministry and says nothing about the prayer. That seems to me to be creating an initial dangerous ambiguity.

I think that in bringing the Churches together there is a proper place for ambiguity: there may be things that we must simply place in God's hands, asking him to bring what he knows to be right out of the situation. There has to be a right balance between avoiding issues and being honest about them. At present I think there is less clarity than there used to be about the nature of the unity that we seek, and without that there are other things that we shall not get right.

I am sure that we must pursue the goal of being brought closer together, but I think that I have learned from the experience of the years 1956 to 1972 that one must never be so committed to one scheme or way that one is not ready to be shown that God wants something else. I once heard Dom Gregory Dix say that the Churches drifted apart and that in God's good time they will drift together again. We must be prepared for there to be truth in that. Nevertheless planning will go on, but we must be agreed on the goal and find a proper distinction between a right ambiguity and fudge.