

Dialogue for the sake of Mission

The Covenant Proposals between the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland

A former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Revd Dr Norman Taggart, has asserted, ‘The search for visible forms of unity is not a distraction from the task of proclaiming the gospel....It is an essential part of our response to the gospel and unless we find ways of expressing our unity in Christ, we shall remain what we must now appear in the eyes of the world - insincere preachers proclaiming a gospel that does not work’¹. He further observed that, ‘disunity distorts truth, wastes resources, hinders witness, impoverishes worship and discredits the gospel’.

Such convictions lie at the heart of ‘the special relationship’ between the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland, a relationship which has deepened significantly this summer as both governing bodies ratified the Covenant proposed between them.

Background

As early as 1905, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches in Ireland established a joint committee to confer from time to time on ‘matters of common interest’². In the years following, the major Protestant churches met in a variety of ‘pairings’ for such dialogue. Then, as Dr Ian Ellis observes, ‘The New Delhi Assembly’s emphasis on the unity of the local church, followed by the Montreal Faith and Order Conference....followed finally by the 1964 Nottingham Conference all gave an impetus to the renewal of union conversations between the Protestant Churches in Ireland.’³ The Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches entered into unity discussions, but, with the invitation extended to the Church of Ireland, the Congregationalists withdrew. The resulting three sets of bipartite conversations merged in 1968 to form the Tripartite Consultation.

For a variety of reasons, political, social and theological, the seventies and eighties saw the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) gradually withdrawing from a number of ecumenical bodies.⁴ Radical changes of personnel representing PCI on the Tripartite Consultation brought about a situation in 1988 where it felt wise to move

¹ From one of a series of *Irish Ecumenical Pamphlets* and quoted in ‘Christian Unity : an ecumenical second spring ?’ Michael Hurley , S.J. Veritas. Dublin 1998 p.xvi

² Quoted in ‘Vision and Reality : a survey of twentieth century Irish Inter-Church relations.’ Ian Ellis Institute of Irish Studies. Belfast 1992 p.1. Dr Ellis provides an account of the theological and historical factors prevailing in the Irish ecumenical scene. Indispensable reading for any who happen to think that Ireland is simply Britain writ small !

³ ibid. p.98

⁴ 1980, from WCC; 1988, from the Tripartite Consultation; 1990, from the successor to the British Council of Churches, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland.

from the model of unity consultation to that of theological working party. The governing bodies of the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland approved this proposal, but the Presbyterian Church decided to withdraw from any theological discussion with either church.⁵ Ironically, however, the Final Report of the Tripartite Consultation affirmed, ‘In our common mission, we need one another.’

Joint Theological Working Party

In 1989, the General Synod and the Conference established a new body of six members from each church with the remit

- To consider the implications of the work of the Tripartite Consultation in the new bilateral context
- To relate the work of the proposed Anglican-Methodist International Commission to Anglican/Methodist relations in Ireland
- 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
- To report annually to the two churches

Nothing very radical there, but the feeling was very much one of retrenchment, not of progress. After a number of years seeking to discern the way forward, response to the Anglican Methodist International Commission (AMIC) documents gave the necessary impetus, and, in 1999, the governing bodies were invited to ratify new terms of reference.⁶ In doing so they endorsed the measure of agreement reached by JTWP and encouraged it ‘to hasten forward with its work’.⁷

The Covenant

At a residential meeting, attended by the Primate of All-Ireland, Most Revd Dr Robin Eames, and the then-President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Revd Dr Kenneth Wilson, the perspective from which JTWP came to see its ongoing work was that of mission; clearly there was theological difference, but what was paramount in

⁵ Paradoxically, it was still considered possible to continue training Methodist and Presbyterian candidates together for ministry and to continue joint and alternating ministry schemes in various parts of the country (with the Methodist Church);

⁶ (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 Church of Ireland/Methodist understanding and relationships at all levels, local regional and national;

© To study the work of conversations involving Anglican and Methodist Churches in England, Scotland and Wales, and relate these to the relations between our two churches in Ireland;

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

(e) To report annually to our two churches.

⁷ Minutes of Conference 1999, Methodist Church in Ireland. p.83

the ‘new’ Ireland⁸ was joint witness to the truths and relevance of the faith. This would be facilitated by a public and formal recognition of what the Archbishop of Armagh memorably referred to as ‘the special relationship between the two churches’. A Covenant text, based on the Fetter Lane Declaration of the Church of England and the Moravian Church of Great Britain⁹, was drafted (Appendix 1).

The Covenant (in both initial draft and final form) opens by affirming what each church can, in good conscience, say about the other in terms of

- unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity;
- the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion;
- the common faith set forth in scripture and summarised in the historic creeds;
- a common inheritance and an acceptable diversity in worship;
- ministry;
- oversight.

It affirms the belief that the churches are being called into a fuller relationship of commitment to common life and mission and a growing together in unity.

Ten steps are proposed towards that end, of which it might be said that

- 1 – 5 concern and should be implemented by local circuits and parishes
- 6 - 9 are more structural and should be implemented by the governing bodies at national level
- 10 relates to the ongoing theological dialogue and exploration.

Note that, in the text, mission – the apostolic mission of the whole people of God; a concern for continuity of mission; sharing a common mission; strengthening the mission of the Church; consultation on mission – features prominently.

It is not, in the vast scheme of things, a radical, innovative or exciting document. Let us be among the first to say so, but, in words used of another situation, it is as little as some were prepared to agree to and as much as some could accept.

⁸ Since 1988 and the disbandment of the Tripartite Consultation, many new factors had come into play in the Irish scene, and particularly in the Republic of Ireland, where each church found itself in a minority position (Protestants of all persuasions are considered in total to be 3.5% of the population)

- Two successive Heads of State who have been women....the impact of this on public thinking should not be underestimated;
- The cataclysmic events which overtook the Roman Catholic Church, starting with the Bishop Casey affair (no pun intended) and continuing in a variety of child sexual abuse scandals, revelations concerning one of which brought down the Government of the day;
- A very rapidly rising tide of secularism .

This is documented very readably in ‘Goodbye to Catholic Ireland’ Mary Kenny. Sinclair Stevenson London 1997

⁹ The Fetter Lane Declaration formed the basis for an agreement between the Moravian Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland Diocese of Connor. Most Irish Moravians live within the geographical area of the Connor Diocese.

Process

The Covenant, in draft form, was presented to the General Synod and the Conference in summer 2000. JTWP asked that it be sent to circuits and parishes for response and comment. This was agreed, with the Conference asking that explanatory notes be included.

A total of sixty five responses were received, the majority of which came from Methodist circuits. This was disappointing, but, in part, reflects a difference in how the churches operate: Conference may 'direct', Synod 'recommends'. A number of responses came from places where ministers and rectors had called joint meetings. There were also letters from individuals and interested groups, such as the theological students of Edgehill College (Methodist) and the District Home Mission secretaries.

In the light of these responses, small alterations were made in the text, primarily in the interests of clarification. A Revised Draft (Appendix 2) was presented to the General Synod and the Conference of 2001, urging that 'the journey of exploration be continued'.

The Covenant was presented for a final vote to the General Synod and the Conference 2002. The Synod, after a very moving discussion, passed the resolution 'to enter into a covenant relationship with the Methodist Church in Ireland' unanimously. Three weeks later, the Methodist Conference passed the same resolution in respect of the Church of Ireland with an overwhelming majority.

The Covenant will be formally signed in September 2002 and JTWP will disband after the General Synod and the Conference of 2003, having taken a year to set in place an appropriate implementation body.

'Do we need this ?'..... perceptions and reflections

Some of the responses revealed an astonishing lack of familiarity with the other church, and, in some cases, with the 'home' church. Clearly a process of education and familiarization is needed to dispel at least some of the more bizarre notions -

'To enter a relationship with the Methodist Church would be to reduce the Church of Ireland to the status of a Protestant sect', JTWP was informed, in no uncertain terms, by one individual.

'You can't trust that document; after all, we all know John Wesley was never an Anglican', one church steward warned his minister.

Thankfully, these were the extremes!

Where the churches were already working together, the responses were very positive, especially in terms of mission and witness to the community. The sharing of buildings and resources, even if this did not always extend to total sharing of worship services, was seen as beneficial both to the congregations and to the communities they serve.

Responses were gratifyingly positive from places where the churches had got together to discuss the proposals. One minister commented that, whereas the document had received only a lukewarm response at his Quarterly Meeting, at a subsequent joint meeting with the local Church of Ireland rector and his congregation, it received a much warmer response from both sets of lay people.

The questions raised most often concerned.....

- a lack of knowledge that there had ever been any talks going on at all
- relationships with other churches, especially with the Presbyterian Church
- the whole notion of ‘unity’
- theological difference on baptism and on ordained ministry

These particular questions were addressed in the final edition of the Covenant, distributed to both Synod and Conference members and to the wider constituency.¹⁰

There were other issues as well, not least that of a larger church being perceived as absorbing a smaller church....would denominational identity be lost ?

The perceived style of worship of ‘the other’ bothered a number of people in both churches, though the reality is that there is as much variation within each church as there is between them.

And then, and to caricature the position, some Methodists were worried that Anglicans did not preach the Gospel and some Anglicans were worried that Methodists did not validly administer the sacraments.

Northern urban congregations felt that, on the whole, they were getting on very nicely being ‘civil and strange’. Southern rural congregations acknowledged, sometimes reluctantly, that things would be a good deal better if they could work together, particularly with regard to youth work.

A Witness

‘.....when it really worked and everybody forgot about their denomination and we worked as God’s people in Monkstown, how the Lord blessed us. This happened particularly in the 1990’s when we turned outward to the community as a united church. There was an outburst of creativity in ministry and mission unlike anything I had known previously. For example the prayer life of the Church was revolutionized. We had prayer triplets that crossed the denominational divide. We had half-night and all-night prayer meetings. One of these meetings we held in the centre of the community around an open-air bonfire and (we) were able to talk to the night people and late night revellers. Each week we chose a different street in the community to pray for. The week prior we visited every house, told them what was happening the next week and sought specific prayer requests which became the focus of prayer, personal and public, where confidentiality permitted, for the following week. This prayer life in which more than 100 took part became the engine for outreach which

¹⁰ Copies of this will be available to the members of the Working Group at Oxford

took us into the local pub, paramilitary clubs and many other places we could never have dreamed of reaching as an individual church. Much of the success we enjoyed was reaped because we did not go as an individual denomination. Many of those reached classified themselves as members of neither the Methodist nor C. of I., but as members of the Church of the Good Shepherd and God's Kingdom.¹¹

On the ground ?

It is too early yet to say what impact the covenant process is having on the ground, but stories are filtering through from places where ministers, clergy and people have seized on the opportunities opened by the Covenant relationship.

In a rural area of Co. Wicklow, the local rector finds himself in charge of a number of country churches. The Archbishop of Dublin has given permission for a Methodist minister, who resides in the area, to take services and to administer Holy Communion in the Church of Ireland according to the Methodist rite. This has been a mutually enriching ecumenical experiment with minister and rector working in association in all areas of church life as a team. This is a real recognition of ministry.

Of this arrangement, the Archbishop has written, '....I sanctioned this long before the endorsement of the Covenant of our respective bodies and it has worked out extremely well. Even though it may not be a normal type of situation it has certainly highlighted the possibilities for a number of people, not only in the parishes but outside them as well.'¹²

It is clear that the full implementation of the Covenant proposals, in spirit and in truth, will depend on the good will of local church leaders and on relationships between ministers and clergy as well as on those in the pews.

The vision

'The heart of ecumenism is renewal...we need to dwell far less upon our ecclesiastical structures and far more upon what we can do together as Christians, learning from one another across the denominational borders, in the deepening of spirituality, in the exploring of theological depth, in evangelism together and in together saying something and doing something towards the secular community beyond the Church's frontier. If we pursue this path it may be that in time free local developments will alter the total scene and one day make structural unity inevitable.'¹³....Words as relevant today as they were thirty years ago and as apposite to Ireland as to the situation to which they were originally addressed. What they speak of is, in fact, a new creation.

Gillian Kingston, July 2002

¹¹ A response from the Revd. Richard Russell (M.C.I.) to JTWP

¹² In a personal, and unsolicited, letter, dated 9th July 2002

¹³ Archbishop Michael Ramsey, presenting the 1968 scheme for unity in May 1972

To Ponder

O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory; though him who for the finishing of thy work laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

(after Sir Francis Drake)

It is not given to thee to finish the task but neither art thou free to desist there from.