

Fifty years of Methodist-Roman Catholic Dialogue.

This article looks at the progress of the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue on its fiftieth anniversary, noting the development of overall relationships between the two communions as well as the specific achievements of the dialogue,- particularly over its last few quinquennia. Very recently, (October 2017),Pope Francis received some world Methodist leaders in audience and called on Catholics and Methodists to continue to journey together. Reconciliation will be the topic for the next quinquennium of the dialogue.

In July 2016, the report of the tenth quinquennium of the international Methodist- Catholic dialogue (MRCIC), *The Call to Holiness. From Glory to Glory* was published and launched at the British Methodist Conference. 2017 sees the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the dialogue.

In 1749, John Wesley published his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* in which he frankly admitted major doctrinal differences but nevertheless argued that ‘if we cannot all think alike, at least let us love alike’. He argued that there were ways in which Catholics and Methodists might ‘endeavour to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom’¹. Unfortunately, Bishop Challenor did not rise to the bait, nor was Wesley always as irenic on other occasions. His famous sermon on Justification by faith began with the assertion that it was this grand doctrine that ‘first drove popery from these kingdoms’². The context of eighteenth century Britain was too hostile and sheer mutual misunderstanding between Protestants in general and the tiny minority of Catholics too great³.

For the next two hundred years, relationships were at best distant, at worst condemnatory. At the first Ecumenical Methodist Conference in 1881, a speaker argued that the three great foes of the true gospel were infidelity, intemperance and popery. To most Catholics, Methodism was yet another heretical sect. As late as 1937, Henry Bett could contrast the experiential emphasis of Methodism with the dogmatic one of Catholicism, almost as if Methodism did not have its own doctrinal standards or the Catholic Church its great contemplatives and mystics!⁴

Even before Vatican II, there were signs of changing perceptions. When the dialogue began in 1967, consideration of Wesley’s irenic letter came to the fore, together with a stress on the need to share in mission for the sake of the world. The first quinquennium set the tone that has been followed in the dialogue ever since, that is of seeking as much common ground and practical co-operation as possible, accompanied by frank honesty as to remaining difficulties and differences yet to be successfully tackled. The dialogue has never underestimated the latter or allowed the Catholic and Methodist people to think that full visible unity is only just round the corner. On the other hand, it has always witnessed to such growing convergence as has been possible and, particularly in the last three reports (2006, 2011,2016),to the increasing exchange of gifts and mutual challenges between the two partner traditions. The very fact that Roman Catholics and Methodists have been willing to challenge each other on issues to reconsider is a sign of growing confidence, not simply in each other but also in the work of the Spirit in and through the dialogue.

¹ Cited by G. Wainwright in his contribution to Rodano, John A, *A Century of Ecumenism* (2010), p. 96.

² *Works of John Wesley* (Abingdon edn, 1985), vol 1, pp. 128-9.

³ For an overview see Butler, D. *John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the eighteenth century* (1995)

⁴ Bett H. *The Spirit of Methodism* (1937), pp. 143-7.

The dialogue has always worked in five year cycles, the timing being determined by the quinquennial meetings of the World Methodist Council⁵. The reports issued have always been presented at these successive meetings and also to the Vatican. The normal tradition has been for the WMC to welcome them and for the Vatican to appoint a suitable theologian to evaluate them. The World Methodist Council has no doctrinal authority per se; more recently, the British Methodist Faith and Order Committee has attempted some evaluation of the reports⁶.

By the time of the fourth report (Nairobi, 1986), the members of the Commission were sufficiently confident in the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit to proclaim that the ultimate aim of the dialogue was henceforth to be 'full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life'⁷.

This report represented a sort of 'moving up a gear' in terms both of growing relationship and common vision. It was the first report to concentrate exclusively on ecclesiology and to highlight the increasing importance of the ecclesiology of communion, as rooted in the New Testament understanding of *koinonia* and as having deep roots both in Catholic theology and in Methodist experience⁸. It included a prophetic paragraph, stating that 'Methodists accept that whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole Church must by that very fact be God's will for His Church'⁹. 'A universal primacy might well serve as focus of and ministry for the unity of the whole Church'. This statement prepared the ground for Methodists to respond positively to Pope John Paul II's later invitation in *Ut Unum Sint* to the leaders and theologians of other churches to discuss the nature of the exercise of the petrine ministry¹⁰.

Another visionary statement foresaw the possibility of an eventual communion between Catholic and Methodist bishops within a single episcopal college¹¹. An important section on ways of being one church explored the possibility of the two communions becoming sister churches within a framework of mutual recognition of differing authentic *typoi* of Christian life¹².

Recognition of the developing relationship led to a decision that the fifth dialogue quinquennium should concentrate on the Apostolic Tradition and its transmission across the ages. It was hoped that a commonly acceptable overview might lead eventually to a resolution of some continuing differences between the two traditions.

⁵ The reports each have a title and are also known by the name of the place where the WMC met to receive them. Thus the tenth report, referred to above will be called the *Durban Report*. The reports are available on the Vatican website and in successive editions of *Growth in Agreement* (WCC/Paulist Press).

⁶ The World Methodist Council is a consultative body of churches in the Methodist and Wesleyan theological traditions. It has no binding theological or governmental authority over its member churches, each being governed by its own Conference. In 1996, it issued a statement of *Wesleyan Essentials of Christian Faith*, which would be generally recognised. However, it has no equivalent of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

⁷ *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Nairobi, 1986), para 20.

⁸ In Catholic theology, see the work of Johann Adam Mohler *Unity in the Church, or the Principle of Catholicism Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the first Three Centuries* (1825, ET 1996). For Methodism, see the 'hymns for the Society meeting, giving thanks, praying and parting' in the classic *Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* (1780) edited by J. Wesley.

⁹ Nairobi, para 58.

¹⁰ *Ut Unum Sint*, para 96.

¹¹ Nairobi, para 62.

¹² *Ibid*, para 24. An idea mooted by Cardinal Willebrands in a sermon was given in Cambridge in January 1970.

Certainly, the resulting report displayed theological elegance of the highest order. It began by stressing that growth in understanding of the Tradition came through hearing and assimilation of the word of God, in which it was important to hold communion with those who had preceded us in faith whilst also recognising that the faith always needed restatement in each changing situation. Both communion with preceding generations and reception of new vision and insight were essential¹³. A symbiotic relationship with human cultures is stressed in para 62. 'From the human environment the Church derives riches that nurture it and which it transforms into intimations of the Kingdom'. A particularly important section on the pattern of Christian life roots baptism in the paschal mystery and stresses that 'the eucharist remains the focus where the pattern of life specific to Christians is shown forth'¹⁴. The pastoral nature of the ministry is strongly stressed with a statement relating ministers both to God and to the community of the faithful. 'The ordained minister is chosen from among the people to represent the people to God and to act in Christ's name and person'¹⁵. Mission is stressed. 'God's love is pure gift...it is other-centred and boundless in its range and scope, devoted to the whole world. In particular, it pushes us out to the poor, the weak, the unloved'¹⁶.

Finally, faced with the problem of the validity of ministerial orders, this report made an important suggestion that 'the mutual recognition of ministry...will also depend upon a fresh creative act of reconciliation which acknowledges the manifold yet unified activity of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages'¹⁷.

At this point, it is helpful to pause and reflect on three things that Catholics and Methodists have in common, a stress on the universal call to holiness¹⁸ and emphases on the universality of the mission and the interdependence of all churches, a point at which Methodism has more in common with Catholics than with some other Protestant churches¹⁹. Methodism developed precisely as a movement to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the nation.' It worked from the beginning on the principle that the needs of the overall mission took precedence over the wishes of any particular local congregation²⁰. Its ministers worked collegially, 'watching over the Connexion and each other in faith and love', a practice analogous to that of Roman Catholic bishops who share a common concern for the whole Church as well as their specific watching over their own dioceses.

The sixth quinquennium looked at faith, understood both as *fides quae creditur*, the dogmatic content of faith and as *fides qua creditur*, confident faith in God as such²¹. To these it added the very useful concept of the *fruitfulness of faith* as a way of stressing that the life of the Church has always been characterised by innovation in forms of devotion and practical Christian service, through which new ways have been found of witness to Christ and individual and corporate living out of the values

¹³ *Apostolic Tradition*, paras 13-21.

¹⁴ Para 44.

¹⁵ Para 71.

¹⁶ Para 40.

¹⁷ Para 94, moving beyond any idea of a simple one sided return or necessary gift, rather reflecting what the Catholic bishops were to say later in the mid nineties in their response to the Called To Be One Process that they envisaged 'a common quest for a new and deeper realisation of the unity the Lord wills and gives to his Church'. Cited in *One in Christ*, (1999), p. 230.

¹⁸ Already given considerable attention in the third dialogue report (Honolulu, 1981)

¹⁹ Baptists, Congregationalists and some other Protestants churches stress the independence of each local congregation 'under the invisible headship of Christ'

²⁰ In accordance with Wesley's direction, 'Go not to those who need you, but to those who need you most'.

²¹ *The Word of Life: A Statement on Revelation and Faith. The Rio Report* (1996).

of God's Kingdom. One may argue that the two traditions have been particularly fruitful across the ages in this respect. The Catholic Church had its sodalities and lay confraternities to say nothing of the plethora of religious orders, the latter showing constant signs of innovation and adaptation from the active women's orders of the seventeenth century through to modern movements, inclusive in some cases of non-Catholics, such as the Focolare and Chemin Neuf. Methodism had its class meetings and modern adaptations, its organisations for particular sections of the Methodist community and/or for particular causes, such as the (British) Methodist Laymen's Missionary Movement and the Wesley Guild. Both churches engage in the Ecumenical Movement, aware that their own catholicity is wounded by lack of communion with other churches²².

Significant recent progress

Over the last three quinquennia the dialogue has made its greatest progress, being particularly active in suggesting forms of local co-operation and reception to draw the two communions ever closer. The eighth round of dialogue deepened mutual ecclesiological reflection, drawing into conversation the Catholic practice of communion and the Methodist charism of connexionalism as a particular way of embodying and expressing the communion of the Church²³. This is a point at which Catholics and Methodists recognise in each other similar perspectives. As Fr. Michael Robertson observed to me, the first time that he heard connexionalism explained by a Methodist minister, he instinctively recognised it²⁴.

A key statement of this eighth round of dialogue, *The Grace Given you in Christ- Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*, indicates the growing maturity of the relationship.

'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 the Gospel, and thereby of the Church, in one another'²⁵.

This is a challenge to reception on the part of both traditions. It is a challenge not just to respond to the prompting of the partner to consider receiving things which previously may have been neglected or even regarded as unacceptable; it is also a challenge to perceive gifts that ought to be received, to take the initiative in inviting the partner tradition to explain the gifts that it has to offer. Methodists accepted that, as a result of the dialogue, there was much they might learn from periods of church history that they have tended to neglect. There were also Catholic devotional practices, such as the Stations of the Cross that they might adopt. 'Greater awareness of the communion saints and the Church's continuity in time, the sacramental use of material things and the sacramental ministry to the sick and the dying, are also ecclesial elements that Methodists might profitably receive from Roman Catholics'²⁶.

Catholics recognised the small groups for mutual fellowship and discipline that had played such a role in early Methodism. They felt that they resonated with the growing emphasis on small

²² Cf *Decree on Ecumenism*, para 4.

²³ To adopt the expression used by Sr Lorelei Fuchs, SA (a current member of MRCIC) in her contribution to John Rodano's *Century of Ecumenism*, op cit, p. 116.

²⁴ Fr Robertson is ecumenical officer for the diocese of Clifton.

²⁵ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, para 97.

²⁶ *Grace*, op cit, para 111.

communities in many parts of their own church²⁷. They recognised the inspiring missionary example of the Wesleys, a point echoed by the late Bishop Michael Putney at the Durham Receptive Ecumenism Conference of January 2006 when he paid tribute to the inspiration he drew from them for his own ministry²⁸. Catholics said they would like to share with Methodists ‘the absolute confidence in Christ’s action through the ministry of word and sacraments²⁹. Methodists had previously been hesitant about this, largely in reaction to their previous fear that an *ex opere operato* theology might encourage a magical or mechanical view of grace. I add that I do not share this fear. I am aware that Catholic teaching has always expected right dispositions in those receiving the sacraments and that though Catholics accept that though sacramental grace is always available, it is not received fruitfully by those who are unbelieving or unrepentant.

For the first time in the overall dialogue, the final chapter contained a detailed list of principles and proposals for developing relations between Catholics and Methodists. Clearly, the Commission thought that the time had come to call for a much wider degree of local contact, co-operation and mutual reception. Catholics and Methodists were reminded of the earlier, 1986, commitment to the goal of “full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.” Both communions could now recognise each other as “fellow Christians” and their churches as “ecclesial communities in which the grace of salvation is present and effective.”³⁰

Other provisions included an obligation ‘for the sake of Christ’s mission to the world...to share resources where possible’. In their relationships each communion should respect the other’s discipline³¹. In accordance both with the teaching of the Decree on Ecumenism and the Methodist Deed of Union of 1932, the sharing of gifts was commended³². ‘These gifts are not owned by anyone, but are held in trust for the one holy, Catholic and apostolic Church and its mission to the world’³³.

Finally, wide ranging proposals and suggestions were made for co-operation in mutual learning, including through attendance at each other’s services of worship, collaboration in evangelism and in service of the poor³⁴.

The ninth round of the dialogue looked at the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Already preliminary consideration had been given to eucharist and ministry in the first and second rounds of the dialogue, though the Commission had then been wary of claiming too much convergence as a result of the gap between the teaching represented in Charles Wesley’s hymns and the teaching and practice of contemporary Methodism³⁵. However, between 1976 and 2006, much had changed both within the wider oikoumene and in Methodism, especially in Britain and America. Within the oikoumene, the huge WCC Faith and Order statement, *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* had been launched as a potential convergence statement. Within Methodism, on both sides of the Atlantic,

²⁷ Ibid, para 122.

²⁸ Ibid, para 127.

²⁹ Ibid, para 134.

³⁰ The term ecclesial communities is used out of respect for Catholic difficulties in recognising all reformation and post-reformation churches as church in the full sense. Methodists do not have such a problem.

³¹ Particularly, no doubt, where Eucharistic sharing and hospitality are concerned.

³² *Decree on Ecumenism*, paras 4,11. *The Deed of Union* speaks of Methodism’s ‘cherishing its place within the Holy Catholic Church, which is the Body of Christ’, implying a need both to learn from and to give to others.

³³ *Grace*, para 144, for these and other principles.

³⁴ Ibid, para 159.

³⁵ *Dublin*, paras 79-98, *Denver*, paras 47-102.

liturgical revisions, affected by both the Ecumenical and Liturgical Movements, had taken place and the eucharist had moved into a more prominent place in Methodist worship and spirituality. British Methodism had, in 1999, issued a new Worship Book and a statement on Eucharistic faith and practice, *His Presence makes the Feast*, in 2003. The American national Catholic-Methodist dialogue had studied the eucharist and issued a joint statement in which the main divergences related more to eucharistic hospitality than to theology as such³⁶.

It was clearly time to readdress eucharistic theology, though in a wider perspective and not simply comparatively. The Commission took as its lead text Philippians 2:1-11 with its call to Christians to enter into the mind of Christ Jesus, as exemplified in the paschal mystery. It is a passage at the heart of both Catholic and Methodist understanding of Christ, in worship and discipleship³⁷. Both Baptism and Eucharist were discussed as means of entry into and involvement in the paschal mystery³⁸. Baptism posed few problems, both communions practising infant baptism, seen as a powerful sign of God's prevenient grace³⁹. Both accept the validity of each other's baptism. Both increasingly see baptism as entry into a lifelong pilgrimage of faith and discipleship⁴⁰. Both acknowledge the pastoral problems that naturally flow from the acceptance of infant baptism and the need to encourage Christian parents to ensure the proper upbringing of their children in faith and the contextual concurrent responsibility of this in the local congregation or parish⁴¹.

The Commission took the bold step of looking at the eucharist in the light of Charles Wesley's *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, published in 1745 and constituting the largest single source of eucharistic hymnody in the Church Universal⁴². This procedure could be questioned. Only a minority of the hymns have ever appeared in subsequent Methodist hymnals. They have never, unlike John Wesley's sermons, his *Notes on the New Testament* and his revision of the Articles of Religion, had official status in any branch of Methodism. However, it should also be stressed that Methodists have always sung their faith and that the hymns of Charles have played a part second to none in forming the Methodist *typos* of spirituality and worship. Ressourcement, recovery of forgotten riches deep within the Tradition, has been at the heart of both Catholic and Methodist ecumenical renewal. The use of the hymns helps both Catholics and Methodists to make the vital connection between what Christ offers us in the eucharist and the way in which we need to respond to Him. The beginning of section II, "We enter together more deeply into the saving mystery of Christ" makes the point brilliantly.

'Christ is present in the eucharist so that his disciples can be one with him, and be drawn more deeply into his saving mystery'⁴³. Both communions admit, however, that in the past their

³⁶ *This Holy Mystery*, (2004).

³⁷ *Encountering Christ the Saviour, Church and Sacraments* (2011), pp. 6-8.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 15,28.

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.25.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 21-4.

⁴² The classic exposition of these hymns, plus a full supplement of them is Rattenbury, Ernest. *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (1948).

⁴³ *Encountering*, op cit, p. 32.

understanding of the eucharist has focussed too much on the death of Christ and too little on the fact that it is also the memorial of his glorious resurrection⁴⁴.

Some old controversies are laid to rest. Methodists are assured that Catholics do not see the eucharist as repeating or adding to the once for all sufficient sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Both communions can now acknowledge that 'Christians do not merely receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice; they are united with it, and can say to Christ:

'We jointly before God appear

To offer up ourselves with Thee'⁴⁵

This point is then developed in the section 'Christ unites the Church with his self-offering'. Great emphasis is also laid upon the eternal priesthood of Christ and on his sacrifice as taking us to the very heart of the life of the Triune God. In what is perhaps the deepest and most beautiful paragraph yet produced in the overall dialogue, we read,

'The sacrificial offering of Christ is something "made flesh" once for all in human history on the cross but the innermost reality of Christ's "Grand Oblation" is an eternal mystery at the very heart of the Holy Trinity. God the Father eternally begets the Son-who is true God from true God- and the Son eternally responds to the Father in total self-giving. Jesus' death on Calvary can be understood as the "sacrament"- the making tangibly visible available to all humanity for our salvation- of this eternal self-giving of God the Son to God the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit, and of the Father's ready welcome and acceptance of that self-giving.'⁴⁶

The report also stresses two key emphases of Methodist eucharistic theology, the role of the Holy Spirit, the 'divine remembrancer' as Charles calls Him and the eucharist as 'the foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all humankind'⁴⁷. A warm tribute to the work on the eucharist in this report was paid by Bishop Christopher Hill, a doyen of ARCIC. He stated that the ARCIC conversations on the eucharist would have benefitted greatly had they been able to have access to the later MRCIC text.

Chapter Four takes a further look at some of the issues relating to ministry previously examined in earlier reports, particularly the fourth and eighth. In particular, it raises the issue of the understanding of the relationship between the priesthood of all the faithful and the specific priesthood of ordained presbyters. The root issue is said to be 'whether and how it is possible to regard the ordained ministry as the means through which Christ makes his priesthood present and effective amongst the people of God at the celebration of the eucharist'⁴⁸. This, however, comes up against a particularly exclusive interpretation of the priesthood of all believers, one which certainly influenced the phrasing of the 1932 (British) Methodist Deed of Union of 1932⁴⁹. It will require patient work.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, para 37, citing *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, no 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ *Methodist Service Book*, (1975) p. B17.

⁴⁸ *Encountering*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ which asserts that 'no priesthood exists which belongs to a particular order of class of men.'

Addressing the common stress on the universal call to holiness.

The most recent session of the dialogue dealt with the theme of the universal call to holiness, stressed strongly at Vatican II and a foundational concern of Methodism. It is too early to give a full appreciation of yet another remarkable contribution from MRCIC, but some points certainly deserve a mention. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the first international dialogue report devoted primarily to the theme of holiness, though Anglicans and Orthodox can justifiably refer to their most recent report, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, as dealing with a closely related theme. The fourth chapter, 'The Saints Above', is the first to deal with the life to come in an international dialogue, though the American-Lutheran-Catholic dialogue of 1986 dealt with some of the same issues⁵⁰. 'The Saints Above' is a valuable reminder to the western Christian world of an aspect of Christian hope which has tended to be marginalised over the last fifty years or so. Chapter 5 contains a very useful summary of key points of agreement as recorded in each of the four preceding chapters, accompanied by notes on some continuing points of difference. It also suggests points for regional and local dialogue between Catholics and Methodists, indicating its hope for 'grass roots' reception in both communions. Two other points of interest are, firstly, the inclusion at the end of each of the first four chapters, of potted biographies of two saints, one from each tradition, and secondly, the inclusion of some hymns and prayers from each tradition for the faithful to use and appreciate, particularly those coming from the partner tradition.

There is a strong emphasis on the link between holiness and unity, a link deeply rooted alike in Methodist hymnody and lived experience and in the teaching of Vatican II⁵¹. 'Holiness and Christian unity belong together as twin aspects of the same relationship with the Trinity such that the pursuit of either involves the pursuit of the other'⁵². The call to holiness is defined as 'relational, dynamic and holistic'. It relates to Christians both as individual disciples and corporately⁵³. The life of holiness is defined as 'fundamentally a walking with the risen Christ'⁵⁴. It is social in nature, echoing the teaching of John Wesley that 'there is no holiness but social holiness'. The delicate question of the holiness of the Church, still a point of tension in ecclesiological dialogue between Protestants on the one hand and Orthodox and Catholics on the other, is dealt with in a nuanced way⁵⁵. The Church has the essential means of grace, the Word, the sacraments, ministry, both ordained and that of those with particular charismatic gifts but, at the same time, acknowledgement of these divine gifts must not obscure Pope Francis', description of it as a 'field hospital', nor mask the reality that 'for the Christian community, holiness is lived through the practices of love despite, and in, our woundedness.'⁵⁶

Chapter 4, on 'the saints above', deals sensitively with the issues of invocation of the saints and purgatory, traditionally regarded by Methodists with suspicion, though less so in an era that has

⁵⁰ Burgess, J and Gros, J (eds), *Growing Consensus, Church Dialogues in the United States, 1962-91* (1995), pp. 374-484.

⁵¹ See, for example the hymns on the Society meeting and parting in the classic 1780 hymnbook, nos 478-539, *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

⁵² *Holiness*, para 5.

⁵³ *Ibid*, para 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, para 93

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, paras 97-99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, para 101. A contemplation of Charles Wesley's hymn, 'Not from a stock of ours alone, Jesus, thy flock we feed', (Wesleyan Hymn Book, 1877, no 874) might help in this context.

seen British Methodist liturgical revision accommodate an increasing desire to thank God for the inspiration of the departed saints and even express a sense that those beyond this life may still in some way need the prayers of the pilgrim Church⁵⁷. Catholics commend the beautiful teaching of Benedict XVI in *Spe Salvi* to the consideration of Methodists as a way of approaching the mystery of continuing purification beyond this life. Benedict describes the pain of any encounter between the soul and Christ as ‘a blessed pain in which the holy power of his love sears thought us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God’⁵⁸. The section on ‘Mary: Life and Sign of Holiness’ strangely makes no reference to the pioneering work of the British national dialogue in the 1990’s nor does it refer to the work of some other British Methodists, such as John Newton, Gordon Wakefield and Norman Wallwork through the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary⁵⁹.

It will be noted that the work in this report, as in its predecessors, constantly harks back to discussions in earlier quinquennia of the dialogue, whilst building from these earlier bases. *The Call to Holiness* builds particularly on the third, eighth and ninth quinquennia. It reveals the particularly disciplined way in which this dialogue has proceeded seeking at each stage to reinforce earlier teaching whilst making further advances where possible.

From the point of view of British Methodism, this report comes at a particularly apposite time when the Church, under the influence of such people as Martyn Atkins, is seeking to recover the disciplined vitality of the early Methodist search for social holiness⁶⁰. The President and vice-President of the British Conference for 2016-7 took, as their theme for that connexional year, *Holiness and Justice*. British Methodists will find in the report much material that complements other material currently being produced by the *Inspire* Movement. We may hope that they will see the connection and resonance with the concerns and teaching of Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church and that they will hope to make the search for holiness genuinely connexional and unifying, one in which both churches ‘kindly help each other on’⁶¹.

A few conclusions.

Where are our two churches now, after fifty years of dialogue? They are certainly in a much closer relationship than was the case in 1967. Increasing numbers of Methodists and Catholics, both church leaders and ordinary faithful, know, understand and appreciate each other better. This is not, of course, all down to the dialogue. Much is also due to the changed ecumenical atmosphere since Vatican II, itself largely the result of the reception by the rest of Christendom of the implications of that Council and the very positive way in which it led to a new evaluation of the positive gifts developed amongst the ‘separated brethren’ (to use the term then employed). Much is also due to

⁵⁷ Ibid para 155, with references to the *United Methodist Book of Worship*, pp. 143, 150 and *Methodist Worship Book*, p. 458.

⁵⁸ *Holiness*, para 153, citing *Spe Salvi*.

⁵⁹ Michael Evans’ booklet, *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness* (1995), is however, listed in the bibliography of the report. Work by the individual Methodists mentioned, and others, can be found in the successive volumes of essays by members of the Society edited under the aegis of Alberic Stacpool and later of Jill Pinnock and Fr. Bill McLoughlin.

⁶⁰ See e.g. his *Discipleship and the People Called Methodists* (2010), also Roberts, Andrew, *Holy Habits* (2016)

⁶¹ Quotation from Charles’ Wesley’s hymn, ‘Thou God of truth and love’.

those individuals who, at the basic local level, have made it their business to form links with each other, such people as the unity contacts in the parishes of the Archdiocese of Southwark.

The dialogue has, however, done much vital theological spadework and made some important advances, most notably in shared eucharistic theology in the 2011 report. It has balanced vision and caution in a most balanced and responsible way. It has acknowledged the final goal, the one Christ Himself prayed for. Some would even argue that an acceptable degree of consensus is within sight on almost all issues⁶².

At the same time, the MRCIC Commission is aware of three key problems still to be overcome. The first is the widely differing context of Catholic-Methodist relationships across the world. In some places, they are good, as is generally the case in Britain. In some parts of the world, particularly where Methodist churches are small but live in a context where the Catholic Church has been historically dominant, they are much less good as a result of memories of discrimination, sometimes apparently continuing, despite the teaching of Vatican II and *Charta Oecumenica*⁶³. In such situations, extremes in popular devotion on the part of one tradition or the other, may have an off-putting effect. The second problem is that of inertia and inadequate reception. Even where historic animosity is now renounced as unbecoming and unprofitable, it is not necessarily replaced by a desire to make what the Methodist Covenant service calls 'new ventures in fellowship'. Church life in all traditions, not just in Methodism and the Catholic Church, can be very tribal and conservative, not anxious to do the sort of rethinking and reception of riches from others implied in the stress, both in the dialogue and elsewhere in the Ecumenical Movement, on the 'exchange of gifts'. Finally, there are a few problems that still seem intractable, particularly that relating to the ordination of women to presbyteral and episcopal ministry, where no solution seems in sight. Methodists will welcome the recent decision of Pope Francis to set up a commission to study the possibility of ordaining women as deacons.

In the light of so much progress made on other questions, the apparently intractable ones can easily cause loss of hope and elan. However, the present MRCIC commission take the only Christianly appropriate stance when they record that 'when we have encountered differences which keep us from being in full communion, we have not experienced them as dead ends, but *as areas where further work is necessary, and where the Spirit of God will need to show us a way forward in God's time*'⁶⁴.

The current MRCIC Commission speak warmly of the way in which their fellowship at work 'has strengthened that sense of a real communion that binds us in God's love'⁶⁵. Additionally, Clare Watkins, a British lay Catholic member of the Commission has talked of the relationship as an

⁶² The late Fr. Michael Richards, a member of MRCIC in the 1990's, told me he felt a basis for consensus had been achieved through the work in *The Apostolic Tradition*, though the question of integrating the ministries was still problematic.

⁶³ A charter for good ecumenical practice, drawn up by the Council of European Churches and the European Catholic Bishops' Conference.

⁶⁴ *Holiness*, para 170.

⁶⁵ *Holiness*, para 172

affective one, an assessment that would be endorsed by those of us who have worked in national Catholic-Methodist dialogues or otherwise in close ecumenical contact with each other⁶⁶.

It is that spirit, of concern for truth and love, which hopefully will influence both the future of the dialogue and the work of its reception.

David Carter.

⁶⁶ There are four national Methodist-Catholic dialogues, in Britain, in America, in New Zealand and in Australia (in the last case the dialogue is with the Uniting Church in Australia, which Methodism joined in 1977). Clare Watkins made her observation at a meeting of the CTE Theology and Unity Group.