

CATHOLIC-METHODIST DIALOGUE. PROMISE, HOPE AND CAUTION.

The international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, jointly sponsored between the Vatican and the World Methodist Council, began in 1967. It has proceeded in five yearly stages with reports being issued and submitted to the two authorities at the end of each quinquennium. The discussions take place between teams of equal size. Formerly, the Methodist team tended to be dominated by British and American theologians. More recently, there has been an attempt to represent third world Methodism and the present Methodist team includes a theologian from the most rapidly growing Methodist church of all, the Korean church.

Now in its ninth quinquennium, the dialogue enters upon a potentially critical phase¹. So far, it has promised much. It has probably exceeded the hopes and expectations entertained by most people at its inception. It has effected major progress in terms of mutual understanding and theological convergence. It now faces some of the most critical and neuralgic issues in theological dialogue.

Nevertheless, important and permanent gains have been made. There is considerable agreement on the fundamental nature and purpose of the Church as communion and instrument of God's mission². There is consensus on the essentially pastoral nature of the ordained ministry³. There is accord on the interdependent and connexional nature the Church⁴. Outside of the formal activity of the bilateral dialogue per se, there has been the signing of the Joint Statement on Justification by the World Methodist Council⁵. There is much to be thankful for.

At the same time, there is reason to hope for further advances. Firstly, because of the evidently warm spirit of partnership in the gospel that prevails both within the international Commission and within the national Catholic-Methodist dialogue commissions⁶. Secondly, because of the warm feeling of mutual respect that has grown up between many ordinary Methodists and Catholics who increasingly realise how much they have in common, especially in their common emphases upon mission, holiness and the interconnectedness of all local churches. Above all, there is a common faith in the unlimited grace of the Holy Spirit, upon His power to save and transform to the uttermost and thus upon His ability to show us

¹ The first six reports may be accessed in the two volumes of *Growth in Agreement*, vol 1 edited by Meyer, H and Vischer, L (1984), vol 2 edited by Gros, J, Mehyer, H and Rusch, W. (2000). The first three reports, dealing with eucharist, ministry, authority and the Holy Spirit are in vol 1, pp. 307-388. The fourth report, *Towards a Statement on the Church* is in vol 2, pp. 583-596, the fifth report, *The Apostolic Tradition*, pp. 597-617 and the sixth report *The Word of Life: A Statement on Revelation and Faith*, pp 618-646. The two latest reports are *Speaking the Truth in Love* (on teaching authority), published by the World Methodist Council, Lake Junaluska, 2001, and *The Grace Given You in Christ-Catholics and Methodists Reflect further on the Church*, World Methodist Council, 2006. The reports may be accessed electronically http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/m-rc/e_mr-c-info.html

² See especially *Towards a Statement on the Church* and *The Grace Given You in Christ*, op cit.

³ *Apostolic Tradition*, op cit, para 73.

⁴ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, paras 60-64.

⁵ For an account of this, see the excellent article by Loyer, Ken in *Ecumenical Trends*, Oct 2006, 'Progress and Possibility: Ecumenism at the 2006 World Methodist Conference'.

⁶ Just one example of this may be given, viz-the extremely warm tribute paid by Bishop Michael Putney, current Roman Catholic co-chair of the International Commission to the enrichment brought to his diocesan ministry by his learning from the example of the Wesleys. This was made during the January 2006 conference at Durham on receptive ecumenism.

the way through even the most intractable of remaining problems even where we are at a loss as yet to guess what the way through might eventually be.

Yet at the same time, one has to sound a note of caution. The problems that remain to be solved, problems that were very clearly identified at various stages in the earlier dialogue reports and most particularly in *The Grace Given You in Christ*, are particularly difficult ones. They relate primarily to authority, to the structure of the ministry, to the precise priestly nature of presbyteral and episcopal ministry and to the nature of the eucharist particularly in respect of its sacrificial nature and the presence of Christ within the consecrated elements. Related to the questions of ministry and eucharist is the related question of the sacramentality of the Church on which substantial, if not absolutely complete progress has been made. These are difficult questions to resolve since they involve the radical rethinking on the part of both churches of positions that, in the past, were defined in rather antagonistically polemical terms. For both sides to redefine their traditional teaching within a broader context that takes full account of the reasons for the reaction of the other and seeks to find a new consensus beyond the partially distorted expressions of separation will demand a profound ecumenical and theological metanoia. Nevertheless, the authentic tradition of both communions calls for such imaginative and humble kenosis. From the Catholic side, there is the call of the Decree on Ecumenism to Catholic scholars to engage in a common search with the separated brethren into the deepest mysteries of the faith⁷. From the Methodist side there is the reminder in the penitential prayers of the 1936 Covenant that failure to make 'new ventures in fellowship' is a sin⁸.

As well as the major task in terms of theological reconstruction, there is the question of reception. Two recent events in 2007 point to the limitations of ecumenical reception within the British Methodist Church. The first related to the decision of the Methodist Council⁹ not to proceed with a debate at the conference on whether Methodism should receive the sign of the Episcopal succession and thus a form of episcopal ministry. This decision was taken because a report *What kind of Bishops?*, making various proposals as to the exact form such an episcopal order should take within British Methodism had aroused scant enthusiasm and a considerable degree of apathy or hostility when presented to the circuits and districts. To a degree this may have been because of the confusion caused by a rather lengthy and complex set of proposals presented but the fact remains that little attention was given in grassroots Methodism to the fact that the Conference had repeatedly indicated its willingness to receive the sign of the episcopal succession within an ecumenical context and that, only four years previously, the Conference had accepted a Covenant with the Church of England in which agreement had been recorded on the principle of episcopacy. All this, however, seemed to count for little in a context where some Methodists continued to cherish outdated prejudices against Anglican prelacy (of a style that has largely disappeared in the contemporary Church of England) and others took the rather isolationist view that Methodism had managed perfectly well with out any form of episcopacy.

The second event was the reaction of the British Methodist Faith and Order Committee to the report *The Grace Given You in Christ*.¹⁰ While expressing a degree of appreciation of the

⁷ Decree on Ecumenism, section 11.

⁸ *Book of Offices of the Methodist Church*, 1936,, p.129.

⁹ The Methodist Council is a smaller body that does much of the preparatory work for the Methodist Conference. It makes recommendations but the Conference remains the final governing authority.

¹⁰ *Conference Agenda*, 2007, pp. 451-162.

Report, it was less encouraging than might have been expected and showed a less firm grasp upon the issues than might have been expected from such a body. It reminded the Methodist people, not without realism and thus a degree of justification, that progress on Catholic-Methodist relationships was not uniform through out the world. It failed, however, to call upon those Methodists who still held negative attitudes towards Catholics to repent of them in accordance with the true Methodist tradition which is to 'ever maintain the kind and catholic spirit of primitive Methodism towards all denominations of Christians holding the Head'¹¹. It showed a lack of full understanding of the concept of the exchange of gifts. It defined infallibility, rather misleadingly, as being 'of the institutional church' (which might lead Methodists to believe that even episcopal appointments were infallible acts of the magisterium!) and, perhaps most surprisingly of all, seemed to fail to recognise that the ecumenical consensus on legitimate and enriching diversity within unity is held even within the Roman Catholic Church.

I mention these things as reasons for caution, though most certainly in no way for despair. There is a lot of work to be done. If, in what follows, I stress points where many Methodists may find difficulty in moving, it is not because I believe my own church, which I love, to be uniquely blind or inept, though I am naturally more aware of its failings than those of others. Roman Catholics will no doubt equally easily see where there would be great problems from the Catholic side. I would not be tackling the issue if I believed the problems insoluble. On the contrary, I believe and hope to show that there are resources available for breakthroughs but both the international Commission and other leaders in Methodist ecumenism will have to work hard if they are to see that they are properly commended and ultimately taken on board by the Methodist people.

Before we look at any of three big issues I have particularly specified, it is worth remembering that, on both sides of the Atlantic, there is a degree of populist Methodist suspicion of hierarchy which it will be difficult to overcome unless Methodists can be shown that there is a vital and essential ministry for bishops and Pope within the Church, a ministry which is about listening as part of leadership and in which bishops and presbyters are serving rulers and ruling servants. This suspicion is deep rooted within the Methodist psyche. In the American context, this relates to the contextual secular republican democratic tradition which so deeply influenced the constitutional development of their Methodism¹². In Britain, it relates to the disputes over ministerial authority and its manner of exercise within the Wesleyan tradition, disputes that led to the creation of a whole series of separate connexions which kept to the overall Wesleyan theological tradition while, at least in the more extreme reactions, turning the ministry into a hired evangelistic agency subject to the authority of primarily lay assemblies¹³. Sociology and politics also played a role in this, many Methodists coming precisely from those social classes that were becoming emancipated in the nineteenth century and were in conflict with traditional forms of authority, secular as well as ecclesiastical. It must be remembered that within all sections of British Methodism, including the Wesleyan tradition within which a higher doctrine and practice of the ministry was partially preserved,

¹¹ cited in J. S. Simon (ed) *A Manual of Methodist Law and Polity*, 1923, p.269, this comes from the famous Liverpool Resolutions of the British Conference of 1820.

¹² See, for example, the statement about episcopacy in Richey, R. and Frank, T.E. *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition*, Nashville, 2004, p. 95 'the bishops' oversight is shared, collective and conciliar, not hierarchical, authoritarian, or individual'.

¹³ Kent, J.H.S. *The Age of Disunity*, 1966, remains an excellent introduction to the disputes and the issues and ecclesiological positions involved.

lay people played a uniquely large role in the service and governance of the local churches; to this day, the majority of services, particularly in smaller churches, are led by local preachers. All this constitutes a tradition from which the Catholic members of the last international Commission confessed they had much to learn¹⁴. This will be an important starting point for continued dialogue though the question of lay roles within teaching and doctrinal definition remains thorny as the preceding Commission indicated¹⁵. As the two churches draw closer, so the handling of their complex heritages of ecclesial culture will become more and more of an issue, a point that has become particularly apparent in the developing covenant relationship between British Methodism and the Church of England.

It should additionally be stressed that, though all the Methodist churches in the world owe their ultimate origins, whether by missionary extension, schism or imitation to either the British Wesleyan Methodist Connexion or the American Methodist Episcopal Church¹⁶, Methodism is now a varied and complex global phenomenon, strong in many parts of Africa and particularly in Korea as well as having a significant presence in most of the English speaking world. Some Methodist churches have entered into wider unions with churches of other traditions, most notably in India, Canada and Australia¹⁷. Many of the small Methodist churches in continental Europe retain a highly pietistic flavour and considerable wariness in relations with the Roman Catholic Church. The World Methodist Council is a consultative body with no binding authority over its member churches and it is the responsibility of the autonomous Methodist conferences to evaluate and respond to the dialogue for themselves. Many have yet to take much formal account of it. From the above, it will be seen that there is no guarantee that all Methodists will receive it in anything like a uniform way.

I intend in this essay to concentrate on the issues of ministry and sacrament but the question of authority is so interwoven with others that it cannot be altogether ignored. I intend also to make use of two important recent concepts in ecumenical methodology, viz- those of differentiated consensus, already employed with conspicuous success in the Joint Declaration on Justification and the even more recent concept, advocated by Harding Meyer of differentiated participation, that is to say the common sharing in a significant office by churches which hold contrasting, though not contradictory, emphases in their understanding of it. Meyer has put this forward in terms of a future common sharing in the historic episcopate and I propose to see how this might be understood in terms of the Roman Catholic-Methodist relationship¹⁸.

Priesthood and Ministry.

¹⁴ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, para 126.

¹⁵ *Speaking the Truth in Love*, op cit, especially paras 77-80.

¹⁶ A key difference to note is that most of the missionary churches of US origin remain linked with the General Conference of the present United Methodist Church, whereas the churches founded by British missions now have autonomous conferences (or have entered into wider unions, as in India). Examples of imitative churches are the nineteenth century British Bible Christians and the American Evangelical United Brethren, both now part of the British and United Methodist Churches respectively. Examples of churches that split from the parent bodies are the various 'black' American Methodist churches and holiness groups e.g. the Wesleyan Holiness Church and, in Britain, the Wesleyan Reform Union. In Italy, Methodism is in a federation with the ancient Waldensian Church, a link that has considerably affected its ethos.

¹⁷ In the Indian sub-continent primarily with Anglicans and Reformed, elsewhere with reformed.

¹⁸ Meyer, H. 'Differentiated Participation: The Possibility of Protestant Sharing in the Historic Office of Bishop', *Ecumenical Trends*, Oct 2005, pp. 9-15.

I will begin with the issue of ministerial priesthood and its relationship to the royal priesthood of all the faithful. Catholics and Methodists have no difficulty in agreeing that the only priesthood of the new Covenant is that of Christ which totally superseded that of the Old Law. Any priesthood which may be exercised by any members of the Church is strictly derivative from and dependent upon that priesthood of Christ. Both churches agree that the New Testament teaches that the entire body of the faithful is corporately a royal priesthood. The disagreement begins at the next stage when considering whether there is any sense in which the ordained presbyters and bishops of the Church enjoy a separate and unique participation in the priesthood of Christ which is not derived simply by delegation from the general royal priesthood of all the faithful but belongs, to use the oft-quoted ARCIC formulation, to a separate realm of the gifts of the Spirit¹⁹.

At first sight, there appears, at least within the British Methodist tradition, to be no room for compromise with the Catholic view. Vatican II may say one thing, reaffirming earlier long-standing Catholic teaching. The British Methodist Deed of Union, still binding (though since the Methodist Church Act of 1976 conceivably reformable) states baldly that

‘The Methodist Church holds to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men’²⁰.

This teaching was reiterated as recently as 1999 in the British Methodist ecclesiological statement *Called To Love and Praise* which said that a minister is neither more nor less a priest than any other Christian²¹. However, the question is not as closed as might seem. In an excellent paper recently presented to the British Catholic Methodist Committee, Trevor Hoggard argued that the teaching of *Called To Love and Praise* in this respect was not fully consistent and that there were signs of openings within the Methodist tradition that might facilitate a reassessment of the situation. He contrasted the continuing re-affirmation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers with the statement later in the same paragraph that the office of an ordained minister ‘consists in enabling the Church’s whole ministry in such a way that Christ is effectively present in preaching, in the sacraments, in the Church’s discipline and pastoral care’, a point that was taken up in *The Grace given You in Christ* and accompanied by the gloss that it ‘reflects the grounding of priesthood in Christ himself that Catholics would wish to be the basis of ecumenical rapprochement.’²²

There is little doubt that since Methodist Union in 1932 and primarily as a result of the influence of ecumenical contact and dialogue, the Methodist position, particularly amongst theologians has shifted²³. It is recognised that the sheer complexity of the totality of Christian tradition, both within Scripture and subsequently, means that the simplicity of earlier formulations has to be revisited. It is important to do three things, firstly to re-examine the context within which the traditional formulations were made, secondly to explore other and

¹⁹ ARCIC, *The Final Report*, 1982, p.36 (Ministry and Ordination, para 13).

²⁰ cited in Brake, G. T. *Politics and Policy in British Methodism*, London, 1984, p.829.

²¹ *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, vol 2, 1984-2000*, Peterborough, 2000, p 49, para 4.5.11.

²² *Grace*, para 133.

²³ Section 1.2 of the most recent British Methodist Statement on ecclesiology, *Called To Love and Praise* (1999) makes this point. Ecumenical and other advances in understanding mean that ‘Christian self-understanding can hardly remain unchanged and static’ (CLP, para 1.2.6.)

perhaps partly forgotten strands within the Methodist tradition that might point in a differing direction and, thirdly, to take account of the witness of ecumenical partners and their struggles to find ways of expressing their essential conviction in a more irenic way.

We should begin then with the context in which nineteenth century Methodism (not, be it especially noted, the Wesleys) formulated its understanding of the priesthood of all believers. It was one of reaction against the exaggerated claims of contemporary Anglo-Catholicism, rather than Roman Catholicism, which had argued for the exclusive mediation of grace through the sacraments administered by episcopally ordained clergy. To Methodists of that era, such teaching contradicted both the broader understanding of the means of grace derived from Wesley's teaching and the teaching of the New Testament about the immediacy of the relationship between the believer and Christ²⁴. It was particularly for the latter reason that the original New Testament stress on the corporate nature of the royal priesthood of the whole Church became somewhat overshadowed by an emphasis upon each believer as having access to Christ. To an extent, in their mutual reaction against each others' emphases, both Wesleyans and Anglo-Catholics had hardened their positions.

In such a situation, we may turn for help to the work of the great Johan Mohler who stressed that within the community of love alternative emphases could always be held in creative tension²⁵. The Anglo-Catholics rightly wanted to restore the proper position of the sacraments, above all the eucharist, within the life of the contemporary Church of England where they were celebrated with somewhat less frequency than is the case even in the modern English free churches. The Wesleyans wanted to stress the immediacy of the relationship of the believer with Christ, an immediacy that is emphasised throughout the canon of the New Testament but particularly within the letters of Paul. Properly understood, these emphases are complementary not antagonistic. As the great Wesleyan exegete, George Findlay stressed, every believer has an immediate relationship with 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me'. At the same time, he or she has a duty to the cosmic Christ who is also head of the Body, a duty of ecclesial belonging, a duty to hear the Word read and preached publicly, a duty to participate actively in the anamnesis of the saving events²⁶.

A subsidiary reason for the Methodist emphasis, particularly in the smaller non-Wesleyan traditions, was a reaction against the overbearing way in which some ministers had exercised their authority within early Methodism, believing that their special call and office allowed, even at times compelled them to ride roughshod over the rights and feelings of the laity. A good example of this can be found in the writing of Alfred Barrett when he states that 'occasional preaching does not impart the ministerial office'²⁷. Theologically, this is of course, completely correct but it demeaned the local preachers many of whom, in fact, preached extremely frequently at great personal cost. The distinction between their office and

²⁴ Wesley's understanding of the means of grace was a particularly broad one. He distinguished between the *instituted* means, i.e. those directly commanded in Scripture, both sacramental and non-sacramental and the prudential means, i.e. those that had developed in later tradition but were of proven spiritual value His definition of the means was wide and included such practical works of mercy as those once defined in the Roman Catholic tradition as the 'corporal works of mercy'.

²⁵ Mohler, J.A. *Unity in the Church or the Principle of Catholicism*, 1825. see esp. ch 1. Mystical Unity and ch 4. Unity in Diversity. Pp 81-95 and 166ff in the English translation, edited by Peter C. Erb, 1996.

²⁶ For a summary of Findlay's teaching on this, see my 'Faith, the Believer and the Church. A Methodist Reflection' in *One in Christ*, 1995, no 2, pp. 63-70.

²⁷ Barrett, A, *Ministry and Polity of the Christian Church*, 1854, p.369.

that of the ministerial and pastoral office could have been tactfully put with out any offence being given. The result was that in the non-Wesleyan connexions, there was a contrary and reactive tendency to devalue the ministerial office, seeing it simply as a hired and disposable agency rather than as a necessary provision of the Spirit for the Church, a fact that had been as much emphasised with classical Protestant teaching as in Catholic.

This leads us to consider the understanding within the earlier Methodist heritage. The Wesleys themselves held to the end of their lives a high doctrine of the priestly nature of the ordained presbyterate as is evidenced both by Charles' constant and unwavering opposition to any of the un-ordained travelling preachers administering the sacraments and John's famous sermon on the sons of Korah²⁸. It is true that John, at the very end of his life, did ordain a superintendent for the Americas and some elders for Scotland and even England. He believed he had the authority to do so but clearly still considered that ordination set one in a special relationship within the Church²⁹.

John Wesley always emphasised the key pastoral responsibilities of the ordained ministry, despairing when he saw them being neglected within contemporary Anglicanism. This emphasis was continued among the early Wesleyans with their doctrine of the pastoral office. This they held to be of divine institution in the Church. The presbyters that they ordained they regarded as under shepherds to the Great Shepherd himself³⁰. There can be no doubt that they saw them as representing the authority and care of Christ within his Church. They saw them as pledged to the life-long itinerant service of the flock. They are to be 'pastors after thine own heart', their ministry being thus a participation in that of Christ³¹.

Of course, it could be argued that this is only an extension of the ministry that every Christian has to be 'Christ to his neighbour'; as such, it would not meet the Catholic criterion of a priesthood differing in kind rather than just degree. However, there can be no doubt that to the early Wesleyans, there was a difference in kind. It involved a particular full time commitment that entailed being solemnly set aside which was expressed alike in the ceremony of reception into full connexion and in ordination. It involved a particularly apostolic discipline of itinerant availability. It was a particularly focused and necessary ministry of Christ within His Church.

In the late nineteenth century, the stress upon the pastoral office became attenuated even within the Wesleyan tradition. There surfaced a doctrine of the representative nature of the ministry which saw the ministry as arising by selection and delegation from within the Church. It is interesting to note, however, that in 1937, the ecclesiological statement, *Nature of the Christian Church*, maintained a fine balance between an emphasis upon ministry as arising within the Church and ministry as a gift of the Spirit to the Church³². The necessary distinctiveness of the ordained ministry as arising from the gracious provision of the Spirit for the Church was being re-emphasised.

²⁸ preached in Cork, 1789. Wesley, J. *Sermons on Several occasions*, vol 3, pp 262ff. In the modern Abingdon edition of Wesley's Works, 1984, edited by Outler, A. this sermon is listed as no 121.

²⁹ The best overall study of Wesley's theology of ministry is Lawson, A.B. *John Wesley and the Christian Ministry*, 1963.

³⁰ See especially, Jackson T. *Christian Presbyters, their office, duties and reward*, 1850.

³¹ *Methodist Hymn Book*, 1933 edn, no 791.

³² *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, vol 1, London, 1984 p.27.

Later British Methodist statements on ordained ministry took this further and bore witness to the increasing influence of ecumenical thinking, particularly that of the more ‘catholic’ section of the Church upon Methodist theology. The 1974 statement is particularly significant. Early twentieth century Methodist thinking regarded the ministry very much in functional terms and would have been very wary of any concept of ontological change at ordination. The 1974 statement however, seeks to reconcile the functional and ontological concepts of the presbyterate. It also seeks to relate the calling of presbyters to the general calling of the whole people of God and to stress that the ordained ministry as much as any other ministry is a ministry within the Church, not above it or beneath it. It expresses it thus

‘A man is not called out of the Church to be a minister. What he receives is a special calling within a general calling... They (i.e. all Christians) are called, all of them, ordained and unordained, to be the Body of Christ to men. But as a perpetual reminder of this calling and as a means of being obedient to it the church sets aside men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focussed and represented, and it is their responsibility as representative persons to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world’³³.

This finely nuanced statement preserves a careful balance between the earlier emphasis upon the representative nature of ministry as representative of the general ministry of the whole people of God whilst also stressing the sign nature of their ministry as representative of the ministry of Christ to the Church. The emphasis upon the focal role of the ministry tunes in well with the modern post-Vatican II emphasis upon the role of the bishops in maintaining and expressing communion.

From a consideration of all these complex developments, we can, I think, propose the possibility of a differentiated consensus between Catholics and Methodists on presbyteral ministry and the distinctive nature of its participation in the ministry of Christ in His Church. Catholics stress the sacramental, priestly nature of this participation, Methodists stress the pastoral participation of presbyters as under-shepherds in the ministry of the Great Shepherd. Both traditions agree that this ministry is for the service of the priesthood of the entire body of the faithful. Both agree that the sealing of the candidate for presbyteral ministry in the act of ordination establishes him (in the Methodist case also her!) in a new and permanent relationship with the Church. Methodists may give greater stress to the pastoral and preaching functions of the presbyterate and Catholics to the anamnetic function of eucharistic presidency in the name of Christ, though both agree that these are the three key functions of the ordained presbyter. On the Methodist side there is a strong emphasis upon the fact that, in varying degrees, through the providential development of Methodism, lay people have acted as valued assistants in many pastoral roles and also in preaching even though they have not taken on the fullness of the presbyteral role³⁴. Such co-operation can perhaps be accepted by Catholics, who are keen to learn more about lay ministry from Methodists, as a particular form of the *conspiratio* that should exist within the Church between lay people and the clergy.

³³ *Statements*, op cit, vol 1, pp 135-6.

³⁴ A point repeatedly asserted within the Wesleyan tradition even in the period of high claims for the prerogatives of the pastoral office. See e.g. Shrewsbury, W.J. *A Scriptural Account of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy*, 1840, ch 7, pp. 225-248. ‘The Test of Scripture applied to the lay agencies of Methodism’

The emphasis upon presbyteral and other ordained ministries as being in the Church is vital to Methodists. It stresses the relationship of mutual trust, respect and affirmation that should exist. William Shrewsbury stressed that the greatest disaster that can befall a church is a 'want of confidence between the ministers and the people'³⁵.

Bishops.

A related issue is that of the episcopate. Currently, most Methodist churches, though not the British church, have an episcopal order though the understanding of its necessity, form and, to some extent, function differ from those held within the Catholic tradition. Methodists do not believe an episcopate in strict succession both in ordination and in tenure of historic sees to be essential to the Church whereas Catholics believe it to have been willed by Christ and, as integral part of his legacy to the Church, to be indispensable. Nevertheless, there remain openings for dialogue and further rapprochement. From the Methodist side, these arise out of continued re-evaluation of the particular tradition of episcopacy in the largest of all the churches, the United Methodist Church, and its de facto partial rapprochement within more recent times with aspects congruent with the Catholic model.

The episcopate within American Methodism arose from Wesley's provision for the American Church in the wake of the consolidation of American political independence. Aware that there were very few Anglican clergy in the new country and aware also that none of the itinerant Methodist preachers there were ordained, Wesley decided to recommend a threefold order of ministry for the new church and then leave it, as he put it 'to the Scriptures and the Primitive Church'. Accordingly, in 1784, he set aside Thomas Coke as superintendent for the Americas and also provided forms that could be used for the ordination of elders and deacons³⁶. Coke then met the American preachers in Conference at which it was decided to adopt the threefold order of ministry based upon the Anglican model. The traditional term 'bishop' was substituted for Wesley's original 'superintendent'. Coke ordained Francis Asbury who had been elected by the American brethren to act with him as superintendent. Coke did not stay long in America. It thus fell to Asbury, a man of immense energy, to set the pattern of the new church, and in particular that of its form of episcopacy, which he did with great vigour. For some years he superintended the evangelistic work and expansion of the new American connexion, not merely sending the circuit riders out into their frontier missions but accompanying them, sometimes even going on ahead of them. At this stage it was the apostolic labour of evangelisation, of initiating, leading, superintending and setting an example in it that was at the heart of the American Methodist understanding of episcopacy.

Asbury and the early American Methodists were convinced of the superiority of the 'grand plan' of an itinerant ministry which they contrasted with what they saw as the rather effete style of the contemporary Anglican episcopate. They gloried in the difficulties they encountered, seeing these as a sign of the truly apostolic scope and nature of their ministry.

³⁵ Shrewsbury, op cit, p.54.

³⁶ Wesley believed, citing precedents from the Church of Alexandria in the patristic era that presbyters had, in extraordinary circumstances, the right to ordain. He certainly believed that such circumstances existed in America where there was still no sign of the Bishop of London responding to requests which Wesley had repeatedly made over previous decades that he ordain more priests for that country. Ironically in 1784 three bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church did consecrate a bishop for America, thus enabling the future Protestant Episcopal Church to survive and function independently of the Church of England. See Lawson, op cit, pp. 47-70

‘We have already shown, that *Timothy* and *Titus* were *travelling bishops*. In short every candid person, who is thoroughly acquainted with the New Testament, must allow that, whatever excellencies other plans may have, *this* is the primitive and *apostolic plan*.³⁷

It was, above all, the episcopate that drove the mission, determining its priorities through its key role in stationing the ministers, that is assigning them to the circuits or groups of churches within which they were to minister.

The episcopate in American Methodism subsequently became somewhat more settled and territorial whilst never assuming a ‘diocesan’ form. It retained responsibility for the stationing and oversight of elders. In more modern times, it has assumed a much greater teaching role, a point at which one discern ecumenical influence. Its overall constitutional role has been deeply influenced by the tradition of all the preachers meeting in Conference and by the republican tradition of separation of powers; thus, traditionally, though bishops presided within conferences, they did not normally speak within them. They sit in the General Conference which is the overall governing body of the United Methodist Church and a bishop always presides within it but they do not have a vote within it. The General Conference is responsible for the updating of the Discipline, the canon law of the church, which regulates the nature and authority of the episcopal office.

There are thus clearly important differences from the Roman Catholic model, particularly in the fact that much ultimate decision making is in the hands of the General Conference rather than the bishops. There is some questioning of this in the recent work, already cited, of Richey and Frank. They argue that, in virtue of their office, the bishops, individually and collectively, have a better overview of the overall needs of the Connection and its mission than any other persons or agencies. They also argue for a presidency within the Council of Bishops that would enable a globally itinerant bishop to be ‘a sign of the Church’s concern for the world, a superintendent whose model is Christ’³⁸. They call for the bishops to play a more dominant role in setting overall policy for the whole connexion. ‘We propose that the UMC renew its episcopal ecclesiology by giving the bishops constitutional and legislative responsibility for inspiring and proposing missional directions for the denomination as a whole’³⁹.

In these proposals, there seems to be, maybe all unconsciously, a greater rapprochement with the Catholic emphasis upon the overall individual and collective concern of the bishops for the Church as a whole.

It certainly seems to me that there is room for a possible differentiated consensus on the nature of the episcopate. Both churches stress the apostolic origins and practice of the episcopate. For the Methodists, apostolicity relates primarily to practice. The bishops reproduced the apostolic practice of constant labour and travel. Paul’s emphasis upon his labours abundant and their attendant hardships is reflected in Asbury’s statement.

³⁷ Asbury, cited in Richey, Russell E and Frank, Thomas Edward, *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition. Perspectives and Proposals*, Nashville, 2004, p.67.

³⁸ Richey and Frank, op cit, p. 124.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 129.

‘If to travel through heat and cold, rain and snow, swamps and rivers...-if these be little difficulties- then our bishops have little to endure’⁴⁰.

He was not however indifferent to continuity, a key concern for Catholic episcopal ecclesiology. He addresses his preachers for the last time.

‘My loving confidential Sons in the Gospel...great grace rest upon you. God’s glory cover your assembly and direct all your actions and deliberations for the apostolic order and the establishment of the Church of God in holy succession until the end of time’⁴¹.

A point that we might not expect is a contrasting understanding of the sacramentality of the episcopate. For Roman Catholics, this derives of course from their receiving the fullness of order at their consecration. For United Methodists it is implicit in the way in which they *enact* their episcopate, though the full theology of this remains to be worked out. Richey and Frank in an interesting passage point to the possibilities. While stressing that traditionally, the bishops have not been seen as sacramental figures and, indeed, were seen as being essentially of the same order as presbyters⁴², they add.

‘The bishop’s role is fulfilled as he or she is simply present in as many times and places as possible...the travel required for this level of omnipresence was for the early bishops a sacramental act. Their itinerancy itself was their witness to the power of God and the saving grace of Christ’⁴³.

The ‘level of omnipresence’ of the bishops also relates to their role in assuring the fullest possible communion in their episcopal areas. ‘When United Methodists gather to seek the means of grace in Christian conversation and conference, the figure to whom they look to make this possible is their presiding officer, the bishop. All the diverse voices of the churches...look to the bishop for order, fair process and a spirit of interaction that will make Christian community possible’⁴⁴.

Finally, we may note the interesting parallels between the function that Richey and Frank advocate for a presiding bishop and the travelling ministry that has characterised pontiffs since the time of Paul VI, most particularly the late John Paul II. The Catholic-Methodist dialogue has, of course, already, touched upon the question of a universal primacy and Geoffrey Wainwright has made suggestions for a possible teaching and missional role for it⁴⁵.

Women and the ordained ministry

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.66.

⁴¹ *ibid*, p.82.

⁴² It should be remembered in this context that it was not only Wesley and the American Methodists who considered that presbyters and bishops were essentially of the same order. Among the early fathers, Jerome certainly held such a view and for a long time, right up indeed till Vatican II, there were those Catholic theologians who considered that the difference was primarily in the extent of jurisdiction. Vatican II, of course, made it clear that bishops were of a different order.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp92-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.92

⁴⁵ see e.g. his ‘The Gift which He on One Bestows, We All Delight to Prove’. A possible Methodist Approach to a ministry of Primacy in the Circulation of Love and Truth’ in Puglisi, J. (ed) *Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church*, 1999, pp. 59-82.

One last, and apparently intractable issue concerning ordained ministry should be mentioned, that is the question of the ordination of women. On this, the two communions have previously registered totally contrary convictions and nothing was said in the most recent report to imply any change of mind on either side. It does, however, occur to me that a solution may only be found when, finally, the two churches come to a common understanding of how experience is to be evaluated. Methodists, particularly those in the American tradition, sometimes speak of a quadrilateral of sources of authority, Scripture (normally held throughout Methodism to have primacy), Tradition, Reason (this third owing much to the Anglican background of the Wesleys and Methodism) and experience. Experience is certainly not regarded as a source that can, as it were ‘trump’ the others, particularly Scripture, but it is regarded as a concurrent source for establishing whether a new development should be ‘received’. Thus, in the ‘Apostolic Tradition’ we read,

‘Methodists ordain women because they believe that women also receive the call, evidenced by inward conviction and outward manifestation of the gifts and graces and confirmed by the gathering of the faithful’⁴⁶.

From the earliest of times, a question put concerning candidates for the role of travelling preachers was ‘Has he the gifts and graces for the work?’ When, in the nineteenth century, a handful of women were received as travelling preachers, it was because they were believed, however unusually, to manifest the gifts and graces for the work. To what extent today can the evident fruitfulness of many Methodist women presbyters and, more recently, a few bishops, be regarded as creating a new context for the discussion of the question at a more universal level? There is an important issue in pneumatology involved and the question of how the Church is to discern and receive the new initiatives of the Spirit within it.

Eucharist and sacramentality.

In *The Grace Given You in Christ*, both churches call for more work on the sacraments, especially the eucharist and do so in the context of a higher degree of convergence on the overall sacramentality of the Church⁴⁷. The Methodists acknowledge that there is a resonance between Catholic teaching on the eucharist and their own teaching as expressed in the hymns of John and Charles Wesley. They also accept that they ‘would benefit from a more developed theology of the eucharist, such as can be found in Roman Catholic teaching’⁴⁸. The Roman Catholics stress their conjoint belief in the real presence and in the eucharistic sacrifice⁴⁹ while adding that they regret ‘any impression they may have given of a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass’.

The call for such further work is timely in view of the fact that since 1976 little has been said in the dialogue about the eucharist. Even more significant is the ecumenical progress that has been made on the subject since, most particularly in the Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry paper of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Division. Also highly significant is the progress made within British Methodism in an internal study, resulting in the report *His*

⁴⁶ *Apostolic Tradition*, para 96.

⁴⁷ The references to this are marked by less hesitancy from the Methodist side than in previous reports.

⁴⁸ *Grace*, paras 109, 111.

⁴⁹ The two points being intimately linked. ‘The sacramental presence of Christ himself is at once the sacramental presence of his sacrifice also, because the Christ who is present is he who has entered the sanctuary once and for all bearing his own blood to secure an eternal redemption’. *Grace*, para 131.

Presence Makes the Feast and, even more, the progress made in the American Catholic-Methodist dialogue in its latest phase and consequent report *Through Divine Love*, a report which is frequently quoted on both ecclesiological and sacramental matters in *The Grace Given You in Christ* and clearly deeply influenced the latter⁵⁰. In this, the United Methodists state a eucharistic faith which might well be considered adequate for a differentiated consensus document on the eucharist. The United Methodists ‘teach that Jesus Christ is ‘truly present in Holy Communion’, though it may not be possible to fully explain this presence. While not affirming the doctrine of transubstantiation, United Methodists do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works’. They continue that the elements are ‘for us the body and blood of Jesus Christ so that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood’. Holy Communion is a ‘representation, not a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ’. They assert that, in the eucharist, they ‘commune not only with those standing by us, but ‘with the saints of the past who join us in the sacrament’, thus becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’⁵¹. In a later paragraph and most encouragingly, both churches ‘see the eucharist as making present the one, irrepeatable sacrifice of Christ’⁵².

All of this preserves the Wesleyan heritage as sung in the relevant hymns of the Wesleys. The stress on not understanding fully the nature of the mystery expresses the doxological awe felt at the eucharist.

‘Who can tell how bread and wine
God into man convey’⁵³.

‘Ask the Father’s wisdom how,
Him that did the means ordain.
Angels around our altars bend
To seek it out in vain’⁵⁴.

Roman Catholics may still wonder whether there is yet the full acceptance of the total objectivity of the sacramental presence of Christ as food as well as host in the eucharist. The Catholics raise again the issue of the objectivity of the sacramental means of grace, saying they ‘would like to share with Methodists the absolute confidence in Christ’s action through the ministry of word and sacrament’⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ *His Presence Makes the Feast* was a report from the Faith and Order Committee of the British Methodist Church to the Conference of 2003. It is commended for study but is not an official declaration of Conference nor was it intended to be; rather, it was intended to stimulate reflection on the nature and practice of the eucharist. It points to the rich diversity of nine key aspects of eucharist, viz thanksgiving, life in unity (koinonia), remembering (anamnesis), sacrifice, presence, epiclesis, anticipation (eschatology), mission and justice, personal devotion.

⁵¹ *Through Divine Love*, para 139.

⁵² *Ibid*, para 144.

⁵³ *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 1745, no 57, cited in Rattenbury, J.E. *The eucharistic hymns of John and Charles Wesley*, 1948, p.213.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁵ *Grace*, Para 134. The issue of confidence in the objectivity of the means of grace was a key theme of the seventh quinquennium of the dialogue, recorded in the report *Speaking the Truth in Love* where Methodists recorded their question as to whether the Catholic faith took sufficient account of the human inadequacy of the Church. While not retracting their previous position, the Methodist members of the eighth Commission do not seem to have made so much of an issue of this on this occasion.

It is instructive at this juncture to record the very definite agreement of the American dialogue that the Church is sacramental because it effects and signifies the presence of God in the world. Such an agreement seems to stem from the common and oft repeated (in both the American and international dialogues) belief in responsible grace and the resultant possibility of true holiness. As with the itinerant ministry, grace is experienced and transmitted through the responsive communion of the Church in mission. A perennially favourite hymn sings

‘All praise to our redeeming Lord
Who joins us by His grace..

And continues in the third verse

‘The gift which he on one bestows
We all delight to prove:
The grace through every vessel flows
In purest streams of love.

And, in the fifth verse

‘We all partake the joy of one,
The common peace we feel,
A peace to sensual minds unknown,
A joy unspeakable⁵⁶.

It is, as the great ecclesiologist Mohler stressed so long ago, through the Church, the communion of love, that the Holy Spirit draws us towards Christ⁵⁷.

From this brief review, it will be seen that I entertain great hopes of substantial further progress in this dialogue. There will still remain other substantial issues, related especially to authority, discipline and reception. Under the question of authority, there remain huge issues relating to the extent and nature of universal jurisdiction and the conditions under which doctrinal definition may be needed in preference to accepting certain opinions as non-binding theologoumena.

The culture of discipline within the two churches will need consideration. In theory, Methodism is the second most disciplinarian church in the world. In practice, under the enormous influence that liberal Protestantism has had over all the major western non-Roman Catholic churches in the twentieth century, Methodism has come to tolerate a diversity of approaches to many key theological issues that would disturb many Roman Catholics, in some cases rightly so.

Finally, there is the fact that, throughout world Methodism, the dominant ethos are still those of evangelicalism and liberal Protestantism. While the international Commission and, indeed, other Methodists, recognise that ‘Greater awareness of the communion of saints and the Church’s continuity in time, the sacramental use of material things and the sacramental ministry to the sick and dying are also ecclesial elements and endowments that Methodists

⁵⁶ *Hymns and Psalms* (the official hymn book of British Methodism), no 753.

⁵⁷ Mohler, op cit, ch. 1 on Mystical Unity.

might profitably receive from Roman Catholics⁵⁸, it will take time and sustained reception for such a need to be really widely felt amongst all the Methodist faithful. The varied reception within world Methodism of the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* document, especially on matters relating to eucharistic theology and the theology of ordained ministry indicates that some, especially in the smaller and more pietistic churches of continental Europe, will not be happy with the understanding of Church as sacrament or the alleged resonance between the emphases of the Wesleys' sacramental hymns and Roman Catholic teaching. For many other Methodists, including those in Britain and America, the sacraments play a more marginal role in the spiritual lives and the recommendations of *The Grace Given You in Christ* may fall on puzzled rather than necessarily antagonistic ears⁵⁹.

There are, as I asserted at the beginning of this paper, grounds for hope but there is also a need for caution lest our optimism be over facile and we expect over-rapid results.

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⁵⁸ Grace, para 111.

⁵⁹ Responses from some Methodist churches to the 'Lima' report can be found in Thurian, M. (ed) *Churches Respond to BEM*, 1985, vol 2, pp 177-254. It will be quickly noted that the response of the United Methodist Church (USA) is the most favourable one, openly avowing that that church needs to recover a fuller sacramental consciousness in accordance with both the Wesleyan tradition and the Great tradition of the Church. By contrast, the response of the Italian Methodist Church, written, significantly, conjointly with that of the Waldensian Church is clearly suspicious of catholicising tendencies in BEM.