

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Yes to unity, no to the document

The Methodist Conference directed each District Synod and Circuit Meeting to vote on a resolution that would indicate approval or otherwise of the covenant, 'consisting of a preamble and mutual affirmations and commitments as set out in paragraph 194 of the Common Statement':

We, the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England, on the basis of our shared history, our full agreement in the apostolic faith, our shared theological understandings of the nature and mission of the Church and of its ministry and oversight, and our agreement on the goal of full visible unity, as set out in the previous section of our Common Statement, hereby make the following Covenant in the form of interdependent Affirmations and Commitments. We do so in a spirit of penitence for all that human sinfulness and narrowness of vision have contributed to our past divisions, believing that we have been impoverished through our separation and that our witness to the gospel has been weakened accordingly, and in a spirit of thanksgiving and joy for the convergence in faith and collaboration in mission that we have experience in recent years.

(An Anglican Methodist Covenant, 2001, Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing)

Those who are in favour of the Covenant (including all those who wrote the book) assert:

Denominational separation is sin; Jesus prayed that the church might be one

A united denomination would enhance the mission of the church

Unity between denominations will be a powerful witness to the world

For Methodism to unite with the Church of England would represent our 'returning home'

The covenant is only a first step toward 'visible unity'

The report promises that fundamental issues will be addressed

The report seeks to retrieve the situation after the failure of the unity votes in 1969 and 1971

The report simply contains the sub-text to the affirmations and commitments of the covenant

The covenant is inoffensive to Christians of goodwill, an attempt to move forward together

The covenant creates nationally what has successfully happened locally in LEP's

It is important for Christians to work together to agree on what presently separates us

Those who are against the Covenant assert:

Denominations are not sinful; it is attitudes between them that may be sinful

The mission of today's church needs flexible local congregations, not an even more bureaucratic church

Previous unions (e.g. Methodist Union, 1932) have drained people's energy and weakened witness/mission

The Methodist Church now embodies a strong Free Church tradition, as well as its roots

It is misleading to see this first step as anything other than commitment to a journey, but where will it lead?

The report commits those who agree to it to a particular way of considering the issues

The report is full of rhetoric implying that if the covenant is not accepted it is a further failure

The report misrepresents disagreements and its affirmation and commitments are ambiguous

The covenant mandates management of predetermined change; how successful are LEP's?

The covenant sees different denominational ecclesiology as a 'temporary anomaly' (178)
A united church needs to be holy and Christ-like not just a pragmatic amalgamation

What are the major issues?

Does *episkope* mean bishops should be a separate (and higher) order of ministry?

Should bishops only be able to ordain (ministers) and confirm (members)?

Are non-episcopal ordinations and confirmations valid?

Do ministers (by virtue of their ordination) represent Christ to the church as priests?

Is the hierarchical model of the three-fold orders of ministry and of priesthood biblical?

The Church of England has a priest for the parish, what place would Methodists have?

Recommendations

The report concludes with seven recommendations, on which we are not asked to vote. No 7 reads: 'We recommend that the Joint Implementation Commission give priority in the next phase of our relationship to the interchangeability of diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal ministries, on the basis of the theological agreement set out in the report.'

Why I am against the Covenant

Many of the Christians in the UK that I most respect are Anglicans. My principal objection to the covenant is that before any discussion starts the Anglicans have put into the proceedings something that is optional (three-fold of ministry) as a non-negotiable. If we do not accept that only a bishop can ordain and confirm then we can go no further.

Another preliminary problem is that when we are talking about covenanting with the Church of England, which Church of England are we talking about? We are unlikely to be talking about the Anglo-Catholic wing, which inevitably looks more towards Anglican-Roman Catholic Union than Anglican-Methodist Union. We are unlikely to be talking about the evangelical wing because they are no happier with prelates and priests than many of us are. So we presumably are talking to the middle ground of a church that is threatened to be torn apart. The Church of England has had to provide 'flying bishops' for disaffected parishes, while Anglicans ordained by women in other provinces are not acceptable to minister in the Church of England – what kind of unity is that?

Another difficulty is to identify how much of the covenant book we are actually being asked to endorse. Paragraph 194 asks us to agree that we believe that 'we have been impoverished through our separation'. Many of us might feel that Methodism was (at least previously) the new wine bursting out of the old wineskin. In the affirmations we are asked to affirm that there already exists a basis for agreement on the principles of episcopal oversight (but what we agreed is not what the Anglicans mean by this). In the commitments we are asked to look forward to a time when the fuller visible unity of our churches makes possible a united, interchangeable ministry. As far as Methodists are concerned this would be possible immediately. As far as Anglicans are concerned Methodists would have to be episcopally confirmed before they became lay readers or presbyters. It is difficult to understand exactly what commitment 6 means in every day language, 'we commit ourselves to continue to develop structures of joint or shared communal, collegial and personal oversight, including shared consultation and decision-making, on the way to a fully united ministry of oversight'.

Morally, the covenant is a proposal about *merger*

- though it appears to be a proposal about other things

- it also carries with it an attempt to move the psyche of our people

P180 appears to justify 'formal arrangements'

P178 appears to be about setting a course

The interpretation that some Christians give to John 17 is that it is a sin to have distinctive 'denominational' churches because this is a denial of our unity in Christ (P76). We must really be seen to be dealing with the Bible and not bishops.

Have divisions in the church caused growth/decline or come about because of growth/decline. We cannot be certain that unity will cause either growth or decline. (P99). Why should diversity be tolerated inside denominations – but not outside?

Would the new church that the covenant is leading too be free to do what proclaims the gospel best? Would we be more or less able to contextualise our faith in society through the new denomination? For it would still be a denomination even as a united church.

The rhetoric of ecumenism is that unity schemes that did not come to fruition in the past were failure – and yet if they had been successful we would have said they were the will of God.

The covenant asks us to make commitments toward removing obstacles to full union. P157 is at best misleading at worst untrue. We were told that episkope was about management and oversight but not about a third order of ministry.

What kind of church would the united church be? The question is not really whether we have a three-fold order of ministry or not the question is about with the resultant body is more Christ-like. The debate might be about specifics, the concept of a particular type of bishop, ordination and confirmation. The question is not 'do I like it or not' but is it right?

There is a discussion of priesthood (P144). We agree that Christians have a common priesthood in representing Christ to the world but not that an individual 'priestly caste' represent Christ to the church. (P149) speaks about both – but then P150, 'in this sense' eases us away from the priesthood of all believers (P153). Methodists have had a strong sense of being ordained by representatives on behalf of the community 'they are worthy' but the emphasis that we are being invited to adopt is that the ordination is delegated by Christ to a bishop (P153).

The Church of England finds it hard to understand that it does not really have blanket cover. When we move from collaborative ministry to united ministry what space will there be for us? The parishes are not networks but geographical territories. Today this is impossible and yet if the focus is upon the parish priest, operating from the parish church, as authorised by the bishop there is very little room for us in the new system.

As a Methodist I recognise the validity of baptisms, confirmations and ordinations conducted in the Church of England and without demanding any changes accept the Church of England as it is and look forward to the day when the Church of England without demanding any changes will accept the Methodist Church and recognise the validity of its baptisms, membership and ordinations in the same way.

* The Methodist Church committed itself to the Covenant and it was signed by the President of the Methodist Conference and the Archbishop of Canterbury on 1 November

2003. My impression of the debate in the circuit and the synod was that those who voted 'yes' voted in favour of unity while those who voted 'no' voted against the document. I voted 'no' but through the Peninsula Gospel Partnership my relations with Anglican colleagues have never been closer.