

The sign of episcopacy: an unwanted gift

The Revd Dr John M Haley, MA

Minister in the Methodist Church, Plymouth and Devonport Circuit

Honorary research fellow, Centre for Ministry Studies, University of Wales, Bangor

In 2003, the Methodist Church and the Church of England signed the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, the common statement of the formal conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England. In Methodism, important issues were considered in the report *Episkopé* and Episcopacy, which was received by the Methodist Conference (2000) and commended for discussion. The Conference report recommends that the Methodist Church should be willing in principle to receive the 'sign of episcopacy' on the basis of the guidelines it sets out. But how do Methodist circuit ministers feel about unity with the Church of England? Would they welcome it? What about the relationship with other churches? Do they believe in the three-fold order of ministry on the Anglican style? Would they be willing to accept episcopal ordination after their Methodist ordination?

Some insight can be gained as to how Methodist circuit ministers (presbyters) would answer for in 1997, as part of a larger project on Methodism in Britain, a survey was made of all Methodist circuit ministers in Britain by sending them a comprehensive 24-page questionnaire. The questionnaire was prepared by the Revd John M Haley, himself a Methodist circuit minister, under the guidance of the Revd Professor Leslie J Francis and the Revd Dr William K Kay at Trinity College, Carmarthen, both of whom have carried out similar work among Anglicans, Roman Catholics and in the Free Churches. Ministers were invited to reply in confidence and this gave rise to a response rate of over 73%. Such a high response rate allows the findings reported here to be treated with confidence. In Table 1 ministers' responses to six statements are shown.

Table 1

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. Christian mission is hindered by disunity between the denominations	67%	17%	16%
2. I would welcome Methodist-Anglican unity	54%	26%	20%
3. I would welcome Methodist-URC unity	55%	28%	17%
4. Church organisation should be determined by mission	88%	10%	2%
5. I would accept Episcopal ordination after my Methodist ordination	25%	22%	53%
6. I believe in the three-fold order of Ministry (on the Anglican style)	16%	31%	53%

On many occasions (e.g. 1952, 1972) the Methodist Conference has affirmed its belief that 'it is the will of Christ that Churches should be organically united for mission'. Although there is little historical justification for the belief that denominational amalgamation will, of itself, make for more effective mission, more than two-thirds of Methodist ministers agreed that Christian mission is hindered by disunity between the denominations (Statement 1).

More than half of circuit ministers agreed that they would welcome Methodist-Anglican unity (Statement 2). However, in case the impression should be given that the Methodist Church must think only of wider unity with Anglicans, slightly more ministers agreed that they would welcome Methodist-URC unity (Statement 3). The very fact that more than half the ministers would welcome unity both with the Anglicans and the United Reformed Church (URC) indicates that many ministers do not regard these as alternatives. What is very clear is that ministers believe mission should determine the organisation of the Church (Statement 4).

Half a century of disjointed conversations about Methodist-Anglican unity have largely sprung from a sermon preached in Cambridge in 1946 by Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, who suggested that the Free Churches should move towards inter-communion with the Church of England by 'taking episcopacy into their system'. The whole issue of episcopacy is a sticking point for Methodist ministers. Though 25% of ministers felt able to agree to episcopal ordination after their Methodist ordination, this idea was unacceptable to 53% of ministers (Statement 5). Previous solutions have sought to offer a service that is considered to be episcopal ordination by those who think that episcopal ordination is necessary but thought of only as an 'act of reconciliation' or 'further commissioning' by those who do not think episcopal ordination is necessary. The latest idea seems to be that some Methodists are consecrated as bishops and that all future Methodist ordinations are episcopal, resulting

in a gradual introduction into the Methodist Church of an episcopally ordained Ministry and a phasing out of the Ministry of those who are not episcopally ordained. All that Methodist circuit ministers are seeking is a mutual recognition of different forms of Ministry as equally valid. Anglicans seem unprepared to have intercommunion with a non-episcopal Church. The implication of the consecration of Methodist bishops and ordinations thereafter being episcopal is that the non-episcopal Ministry is somehow incomplete or inferior. Are we really contemplating moving towards a Methodist Church with some ministers whose ordination is thought to be more complete (and therefore more acceptable to many Anglicans) than others?

Methodist ministers were asked whether they believed in the three-fold order of Ministry (on the Anglican style, i.e. bishops, priests, deacons). This is obviously different from the issue of personal willingness to be episcopally ordained. It is not only a matter of whether ministers agree with something that could be a fundamental part of any new Church that would come about as a result of Methodist-Anglican unity but is also something towards which the Methodist Church already seems to be moving, especially if it agrees to receive 'the sign of episcopacy'. Just 16% of ministers agreed that they believed in the three-fold order of Ministry but, while a number were not certain, more than half of the ministers did not agree with this form of Ministry (Statement 6). Any move towards the idea that District Chairmen (or inclusively but unattractively 'District Chairs'), circuit ministers (presbyters) and Methodist Deacons are in a hierarchical pyramid, or should be, is something that is unacceptable to more than half of Methodist circuit ministers and should be resisted. It is not simply a matter of whether or not certain ministers are called 'bishops' instead of Superintendent or Chairman (Chair). It is the pattern and theology of Ministry that goes with it. It is, of course, possible that the Methodist Church would not have the style of episcopacy often associated with the Church of England but, as the report rightly notes, the primary understanding of what bishop means in this country is shaped by the Church of England context. Fears that Methodist bishops could be in a hierarchy and adopt trappings with which many Methodists would be uncomfortable are undoubtedly well founded.

John Wesley insisted that no form of church order should ever be seen as absolute and called the notion of unbroken apostolic succession 'a fable'. Though 'bishop' is a New Testament word it is unlikely that bishops in the hierarchical sense existed before the second century. The adoption of a theology of episcopacy that sees certain things (E.g. ordination and confirmation) as being the prerogative of the bishop alone and the imposition of a hierarchical structure where the bishop is head of the diocese would be alien to Methodism. The report even considers the principle of 'subsidiarity'. Does the Methodist Church really believe that it needs to import this 'historic succession' from another Church? Is it really prepared, as the report *Episkopé* and *Episcopacy* suggests, 'willingly to receive it'? Isn't it rather odd that the report suggests that the Methodist Church 'in contemplating the possibility of receiving the sign of the historic episcopal succession, expects to engage in dialogue with its sister Churches to clarify as thoroughly as possible the nature and benefits of this gift'? In short, does this mean that, as the report suggests, the Methodist Church agrees in principle willingly to receive the 'sign of episcopacy' as a gift and at the same time discusses what the nature and benefits of this gift are?

Ministerial age: What do younger ministers think?

Older Methodists will remember that the Methodist Conference twice voted in favour of a Methodist-Anglican unity scheme (1969, 1972) only for the scheme to be rejected by the Church of England. Nearly thirty years later there are many more Local Ecumenical Projects and there is generally a much greater openness between the denominations and a willingness to work together. However, though this is to be welcomed, it does not necessarily indicate a growing appetite for structural unity (Table 2).

Table 2
I would welcome Methodist-Anglican unity: responses by age

Age	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
45 years or under	47%	27%	26%
46 years or over	57%	25%	18%

The general trend is clearly that younger ministers are less ready to agree that they would welcome Methodist-Anglican unity, with fewer than half of the younger ministers saying that they would welcome it and more than a quarter saying they would not welcome it.

A key issue for any form of unity must be on what basis that unity would take place. In a Methodist-Anglican unity scheme that talks about the 'sign of episcopacy' it seems clear that unity would be on the basis of Methodists accepting the three-fold order of Ministry and episcopacy as being of the essence of the Church, a sign of apostolicity that it would be unreasonable to expect others to give up. However, claims made for the episcopal office as a sign of apostolicity, faithfulness and doctrinal orthodoxy, have been disputed so hotly that these are now rendered as a 'sign but not a guarantee'. Though it is thought unreasonable to ask others to give up the 'sign of episcopacy', is it not equally unreasonable to ask the Free Churches to give up the sign of 'non-episcopacy'?

Methodists have traditionally considered that the Bible is the guarantee of doctrinal orthodoxy, that it is in Scripture that the authentic apostolic message is found, and that the right use of Scripture is more important than a particular mode of ordination, which may be an option but is certainly not a Scriptural requirement. It seems that many Methodists do not believe that the Church is defined by its form of government and cannot accept that the Anglican style of episcopacy and three-fold order of Ministry are fundamental to the nature of the Church. Could it be that steps towards the imposition of episcopacy and the three-fold order of Ministry force the issue of where Christians find their unity? Will it be the case that ministers feel that they must begin to choose between 'evangelical' or 'ecumenical' unity? Is that the way that the Methodist Church wants to go? The report *Episkopé* and Episcopacy may describe 'the sign of episcopacy' as a gift to the Methodist Church. Many Methodist circuit ministers, especially younger ministers, clearly feel that it is a gift that the Methodist Church neither needs nor wants.