

Trinity 3 2017

As the outgoing Chair of Churches Together in Cobham, Oxshott and Stoke D'Abernon , I have good news for you.

This week new plans to make the ministries of the Church of England and the Methodist Church interchangeable were revealed on Tuesday. The plans involve challenges for each Church: the adoption of episcopal ordination, or bishops by the Methodists, and the temporary acceptance of non-episcopally ordained Methodist presbyters by the Anglicans.

The co-chairmen of the group that has drafted the new plans, the Bishop of Fulham, the Rt Revd Jonathan Baker, and the Revd Dr Neil Richardson, a former President of the Methodist Conference, argue that accepting their proposals will “enable a new depth of communion between our Church and enhance our common mission”. It is interesting to note that the Bishop of Fulham offers alternative episcopacy to Anglican churches in London who have a problem with woman clergy and bishops.

The two Churches have been led to the altar in the past, but impediments proved decisive at the final moment. The latest move is a development from the Anglican-Methodist Covenant made in 2003, and the ratification of recommendations for its further implementation made in 2014 by both the General Synod and the Methodist Conference.

The report by the drafting group, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*,

*“proposes that our Churches are now ready to take a new step towards full visible unity in a relationship of communion with one another. . .”*

It states that introducing intercommunion between the two Churches “does not mean structural unity, or an end to our distinctive forms of church polity”. Instead, it proposes a formal declaration of a new stage in the Churches’ relationship. After this, they would “undertake two formal, public commitments:

(a) to share the ministry of the historic episcopate as a sign of the apostolicity of the Church of God;

(b) to welcome all presbyters/priests serving in either Church as eligible to serve in both Churches”.

A stumbling block to the interchange of ministers hitherto has been the insistence by Anglicans, and particularly Anglo-Catholics, that ordination by the historic episcopate is not compromised. The new plan proposes the appointment of a Methodist “President-Bishop”, who would be ordained by three existing Anglican bishops.

This person would serve the usual annual term as President, but would retain his or her episcopal status, in order to take part, with two Anglican bishops, in the consecration of his or her successor. The following year, only one Anglican bishop would be required, and then none. On the other hand, the report encourages full participation in each other’s consecrations.

All subsequent presbyteral ordinations “without exception” would be done by the President Bishop or one of his or her predecessors.

The report addresses Methodist reservations about bishops. “Oversight, in one form or another, is exercised by both lay and ordained people at every level of the life of the Church. Where oversight is invested in ordained ministers it is to be exercised as collaboratively as possible and always for the building up of the Church.”

The challenge for the Anglicans would be to accept the sacramental ministrations of the existing generation of Methodist ministers more widely than in designated local ecumenical partnerships, as at present. The report argues that there is precedent for this, referring to resolutions from the 1920 and 1998 Lambeth Conferences, recognising “that the process of moving towards full, visible unity may entail temporary anomalies, and believes that some anomalies may be bearable when there is an agreed goal of visible unity”.

The report cites earlier unity schemes in the Churches of South and North India, and more recently the interchange of ministries agreed in Ireland in 2014. And it argues that all Churches live with anomalies, “with the principal, distorting anomaly that lies at the root of so many others being our disunity”.

Addressing possible criticisms, the report argues: “The more deeply Anglicans value the historic episcopate, therefore, the more greatly they should rejoice when a non-episcopal Church is ready to consider receiving it with them, and

the more highly they should value the effect on that Church of becoming episcopally ordered.”

Also, it says, the action of receiving episcopal ministry will be something that affects the whole Methodist Church, including those ministers ordained before its introduction.

*“They [will] now exercise their ministry in a relationship of ecclesial communion — including sacramental communion — with the bishop, or, as Methodism might express it, full connexion.”*

Individual churches would have a veto: the report states that the interchangeability of ministers would be “at the invitation of the appropriate authority”, and names incumbents, patrons, bishops and parish representatives as people who could regulate invitations.

The authors of the report advise that considering and, if agreed, implementing these changes will be costly and take time. Consultations and debates will take at least two years, and legal changes would have to be made and approved. They believe this can be accomplished by 2020, but say that other elements, such as who exercises authority over a presbyter/priest working jointly in both Churches, will need to be worked out.

This truly exciting and could see the Methodists back in a close relationship with their Anglican forbears. Wesley lived and died an Anglican and was a great influence in post Reformation theology. The contribution of the Methodist church, particularly in hymnody is massive and has contributed hugely to worship in Anglican and other churches. You have to go a long way to beat a hymn written by one of the Wesley family.

Their contribution to social concern is enormous and the early Methodists deeply influenced the growth of socialism, but more importantly, social concern which brought about many changes in our society, like the introduction of the National Health Service and its associated welfare benefits that we all enjoy.

Anglican/Methodist re-union talks have staggered on since the Church of England rejected conversations in 1972.

Perhaps now the time is right to try and move on.

Amen.