



ANGLICAN - REFORMED THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION

Report December 1981

Historical Note

Anglican and Reformed churches have been and still are involved in church union conversations in many different places and at different levels. In the course of such discussions over the years neither Anglican nor Reformed churches have been able to overcome seemingly irreconcilable difficulties standing in the way of church union. There is a substantial and central body of doctrine common to both Communion and therefore the question remains: Why is there so little evidence of Anglican-Reformed rapprochement today?

Anglican and Reformed negotiations have been taking place in several theological/cultural situations on different continents and, since both traditions emphasize the catholicity of the one Church, it is reasonable to attempt an evaluation of the totality of the Anglican-Reformed theological encounter. Such an evaluation at the international level should be both theologically helpful and pastorally significant for churches in national situations where conversations are difficult and progress uncertain.

In the light of these considerations the WARC and the ACC in 1977 resolved to set up an Anglican-Reformed theological consultation with an agreed mandate which would include:

- a) An assessment of church union consultations, taking account of the sociological factors, in which Anglican and Reformed are or have been involved;
- b) the analysis of the specific Anglican and Reformed theological questions which require further examination;
- c) an evaluation of strategic methodological issues, e.g., the advisability of multilateral rather than bilateral conversations;
- d) the question of the relevance of much of our contemporary ecclesiological thinking in relationship to the shift in theological emphasis away from such issues today;
- e) in the light of the above, consideration to be given to a possible programme of continuing Anglican-Reformed Consultation for a specific and limited period of time.

The first international Anglican-Reformed theological consultation was held at St Columba's Retreat House, Woking, Surrey, 11th -16th December, 1978.

Introduction

The movement towards Christian unity in this century began with a missionary motive. Jesus' prayer, as recorded in St. John's Gospel Ch. 17 and 21, was much quoted: "that they may be one, that the world may believe". Missionaries from the west had gone to what was then called the mission field to preach a Gospel of reconciliation in Christ, and they had done so in competition with each other. They came to realise that their Gospel would not be credible unless the churches could be reconciled with each other first.

The movement developed through the work of two distinct groups, "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order". "Life and Work" tackled issues of peace and justice. "Faith and Order" tackled issues relating to the nature and ordering of the Church. Although it was often the same people who were involved in both groups, the two distinct sets of issues were taken up in isolation for each other.

When the churches began to enter formal negotiations for union, they concentrated mainly on questions of faith and order. Some of these negotiations led to church unions, but many others - including most of those involving Anglican and Reformed churches together - have run into roadblocks which have halted further progress.

I. ROADBLOCKS

What have some of the significant roadblocks been?

- a) *The Tension between Organizational/Institutional Unity and Koinonia*

A general difficulty has often been felt, on both sides of unity discussions, about the apparent priority given to organization and constitution as distinct from unity focused in a sharing in witness and worship. Complaint on

this score runs the risk of creating a false dichotomy between a church “organically united” and a church whose unity is merely “spiritual” or disembodied. Nevertheless, a deep realization of unity in Christ should precede any detailed consideration of organization or structure.

b) *Inadequate Motivations for Unity*

One of the principal causes of failure has been an insufficient motive for unity among large numbers of Christians. Unity is seen as desirable, but not as imperative; and when decisive change is required, the motive is lacking. If Christians think of the Church, for example, merely as a support in the struggles of daily life, or as a vehicle which will carry them to a future heaven, rather than seeing that the Church’s mission arises out of the purpose of God to reconcile all things and all people to himself in Christ, they will have insufficient incentive to carry through the changes necessary to achieve reunion.

c) *Establishment/Disestablishment Mentality*

In some places, a significant obstacle to unity has arisen from the exporting of the ethos of establishment associated with the Church of England. In territories of the former British Empire, for example, an aura of supposed superiority has created social, racial and emotional tensions of a serious sort. Nationalism and folk religion connected with the Anglican establishment in England and with Presbyterianism in Scotland have created tensions between Anglican and Reformed churches far beyond the United Kingdom.

d) *The Anglican Communion, the WARC and United Churches*

The association of Provinces of the Anglican Communion through the Lambeth Conference and the ACC provides mutual support and enrichment for its member churches; but at the same time it has on occasion made it difficult for some Anglican churches to enter into a local union because of a fear of separation from the Anglican Communion as a whole. The association of Reformed churches in the WARC does not seem to have exercised a similar influence, although there are independent Reformed churches which impede local unity.

On the other hand, the policies of the Anglican Communion and of the WARC have been similar with regard to the promotion of church unions. The two bodies have encouraged member churches to participate in such union schemes; but when these schemes have been brought to fruition, the internal life and practice of the sponsoring churches has not been affected.

The role of “World Confessional Families”, therefore, must be taken seriously. This means both that one must appreciate their contributions to the cause of Christian unity and that, at another level, one must recognize the reluctance which their existence may from time to time have evoked. The advent of the Roman Catholic Church into the modern ecumenical movement has increased the importance of contacts between families of churches at the world level.

e) *The Problem of Episcopate and Episcopacy*

Finally, there can be no question that the most obvious obstacle to union between Anglican and Reformed churches remains the problem of the relation between *episkope* as such, in all its wealth of pastoral and spiritual implications, and the actual office of bishop. This question arises in a variety of forms. For example: Do some Anglicans see non-episcopal churches as somehow defective as churches? Are bishops necessary as symbols of unity and guardians of doctrine? Why do Anglicans not recognize as bishops those who function as bishops in such churches as the Hungarian Reformed Church? What size of “diocese” or scale of episcopate would make the pastoral nature of the office of bishop clearer? Is there a parallel between the parish minister with his elders and congregation and the bishop with his clergy and people? Why do Anglicans, at least by implication, require from churches uniting with them a view of episcopacy which they do not insist on from all their own clergy and people?

These and other roadblocks have brought progress towards Christian unity to a halt in many parts of the world. At the same time, Western and very particularly Asian, African and Latin American Christians are telling us that church union negotiations are no longer the major issues facing them. They are more directly concerned with divisions and inequalities between black and white, rich and poor, men and women. Thus questions of economic, political and social justice loom much larger than issues of episcopacy, doctrinal formulation and ecclesiastical structures. Furthermore issues of violence and of political, economic and social action are potentially divisive for the churches – and not necessarily along the old confessional lines of separation.

Consequently, the churches are faced with a twofold problem about their efforts towards unity. In the first place, there is the problem constituted by the relative failure of traditional approaches to achieve church unity between Anglicans and Reformed. In the second place, there is the problem created by the fact that Christian unity is now being

understood within a new framework of issues – that constituted by the problems of the unity of humankind. Might it be the case that progress towards Christian unity must be taken together with progress towards human unity, and both set in the context of the unity of God and of his purpose for the world?

II. A NEW PERSPECTIVE

To ask this question is not to detract from work which has already been done in the area of Faith and Order. It is merely to suggest that the full significance of this work can only be realised when it is appreciated in a new perspective which sets the questions of Church unity against the background of the Reign of God inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We have to accept each other, for no other reason than that God in Christ has given himself for us, and that we are accepted in Christ, though unacceptable.

Unity therefore is not an accidental or optional part of the Gospel. God has reclaimed the universe to himself through the reconciling work of Christ (Col. 1:20), and his aim in this act of sheer grace, which is his glory, is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). Needless to say, this unity is not brought about save through conflict with evil and through costly sacrificial action. It costs not only God's giving of himself in the self-offering of his Son, but human participation in the sufferings of Christ for the sake both of social and individual justice. Nevertheless it remains the case that it is God's purpose for unity and reconciliation in Christ which defines the Church's identity and so its calling.

The Church lives, then, between the definitive revelation and inauguration of God's redemptive purpose and its fulfillment in the perfected Kingdom of God. In this time, this time between, the Church exists to be the sign and witness of God's purpose for unity at once by what it says, by what it does, and by what it is. The Church, in other words, is called to reflect the glory of God as revealed in his act of redemption; and the whole of its life and activity must be controlled by this sheer grace. Hence there are three central ways in which the Church is called to participate in God's work:

In the first place, to proclaim the love of God to all humanity and to invite all into the *koinonia* of his Son.

In the second place, to express in action God's love for the oppressed, the outcasts, the poor and the lonely, and God's judgment on wrong doing.

In the third place, to be a living sign in a divided world of that reconciliation of all things in Christ which God is bringing to pass.

The whole people of God is summoned to express its calling in these three ways. This is to say that there is a ministry which belongs to the totality of the membership of the Church taken both collectively and as individuals. It further means that this ministry is directed towards the world of God's creation for the sake of its ultimate fulfillment in the righteousness and peace of his Kingdom.

God has given to the Church a variety of special gifts through its individual members. These gifts are given so that the whole Church may fulfil its calling. Among these special gifts is the Ministry of Word and Sacrament – which must therefore be understood and discussed only in the larger context of the whole Church's participation in God's reconciling work in Christ. This means that all ministries, especially those of bishop, presbyter and deacon, cannot properly be understood apart from the involvement of the whole Church in problems of race relations, wealth and poverty, and political justice.

III. AN AGENDA

In this new perspective on the problems of church unity, what agenda is suggested for future ecumenical discussion of the Church and its unity?

In the first place, all consideration of problems of the Church and its unity must begin with inquiry into the nature of the relationship between Church and Kingdom. We need to ask whether it is proper to identify Church and Kingdom. For example, what is meant when it is asserted that the Church "builds" or "achieves" the Kingdom? Further we need to investigate in this connection the Church's relation and mission to the world since the Kingdom of God is the future of Church and world alike.

From this problem, discussion would naturally move on to a second phase. It would focus on the nature of the Church's apostolicity, asking such questions as (a) In what ways is the present life and structure of the Church related to Jesus Christ as testified to by the apostolic community?, and (b) What does it mean that the Church is "sent" by Christ to share in his mission to the world?

Finally, in the light of this a future consultation would consider the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the context of an understanding of the Church's apostolicity. Here the question of the relationships of ministry, Scripture, creed, and sacrament as instruments of the mission of the People of God in the world would be the centre of attention. In connection with the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, the problem of *episkope* and its mode of exercise in the Church would be considered within a fresh framework of understanding, which might permit criticism of its present forms and the suggestion of new forms in a uniting church.

These three steps represent only the outline of an agenda and not a list of specific items or particular tasks. What is important about it, therefore, is that it offers a fresh theological approach to ecumenical consultation. It calls for an understanding of the faith and order of the Church in the light of God's redemptive act in Christ and in the framework of the Church's life and mission in Christ.

In conclusion it should be emphasized that the testimony of Christians from Asia, Africa and Latin America has brought home to this consultation a realization that in many parts of the world the traditional historical and ecclesiological questions are not the most pressing ones. By far the most urgent issues are the social, economic and political ones and the unresolved issue of the Asian and African traditional religions, which raises a whole series of crucial questions about Christian understanding of the world of God's creation and redemption.

As a result of this shift of emphasis from issues that are theoretical and narrowly ecclesiastical, church unity talks will avoid the charge that ecumenism is a desperate attempt to bring about a marriage of dying institutions in the hope that something of the past may be salvaged. On the contrary, ecumenical discussions should now take place in the perspective of God's total providential care of, and over-all purpose for, his creation, a perspective which is satisfactorily defined by reference to the idea of the Kingdom of God.

This proposed agenda is therefore intended to indicate avenues along which Anglican and Reformed churches may be able to have more fruitful ecumenical discussions in the future. Union schemes have in the past come to grief because of the separation of "faith and order" from "life and work". It is hoped that this new agenda will become the business of future international consultations between the ACC and the WARC. It is also hoped that the fruit of such discussions will provide stimuli and guides for local or national discussions aimed at church union. It should also provide in a local congregation an impetus for shared worship especially around the Lord's table, so that as Christians witness and study the faith together they are drawn more closely together by the grace of Christ. Hence their experience of their unity in Christ would begin to grow in advance of, and as a stimulus to, any national union.

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