

SERVANT OF THE UNION

It is the rare individual who singlehandedly moves history and profoundly influences events. Because we are human we wish to believe that we have made a significant difference. Perhaps it is this unexpressed half-conscious conviction that keeps us striving. Particularly it is true when commitment to the corporate life of an institution is in question. For institutions are notoriously resistant to change.

Where wisdom joins with realism, a more modest assessment and aspiration are born. Directions may perhaps be altered a compass point. History may be nudged to fractional effect. Pressures judged dangerous may be counterbalanced. Oil may be poured where the gears are grinding.

Yet if effectiveness rather than self-expression or self-fulfilment is to be the controlling goal, a further clear-eyed recognition of the inevitable restrictions may be indispensable. The actor is limited by the stage on which he performs and by the lines he is given to speak. He seldom has unfettered freedom to choose his part. He operates within constraints.

Once those constraints are accepted, one further requirement imposes itself. The participant who is content to play the cards dealt to him in the situation and not frustratedly call for a more congenial deck must then be prepared to offer a patient long-term commitment. In the end, the game is not to the fleet of foot, the short-term resident, the flashy card-sharper who rides into the institutional town and just as quickly rides out of it. The price of achievement is a long-term emotional investment, a preparedness to see things through, a willingness to absorb the losses and constantly go back to the table without inflated expectations. Morris West ranks high among the servants of the Baptist Union because to wisdom and realism he has been prepared to add patience and commitment over more than a third of a century.

He has been a Union and Association man from the beginning. It was indeed in the late fifties that he tabled unmistakably the contours of his steadfast commitments. At that early point, three controlling factors may readily be discerned. The first of them was his appointment as editor of the *Baptist Quarterly*.

That occurrence may on the face of it seem to have been but remotely connected to the service of the Union and the churches which belong to it. It was, however, profoundly significant because of the goals it unveiled and the concerns it made explicit. On the one hand, it signalled a policy shift. By 1958 the editor could write: 'It is our earnest desire to make this publication of the maximum use to readers *and to Baptist life in general*' (italics mine). Research into Baptist history was not to be relegated to the sidelines. Yet what was to take a place nearer centre stage was the conviction that history is not just a matter of dusting down the archives. It is also being made in the present; and it has contemporary implications.

On the other hand, and simultaneously, there began in the pages of the *Quarterly* a wide-ranging re-examination of Baptist theology of the Ministry, in the context of the 1957 Baptist Union report on Ordination. This series was the impressive first-fruits of the richer view of what preoccupation with Baptist history implied. It also signalled a preoccupation with the nature of the ordained Ministry which was to run like a constant thread through all Morris West's future way.

The second controlling factor was his speedy election to the Council of the Union. It expressed the recognition of some that a voice had begun to speak which needed to be more widely and influentially heard. It focused the Union commitment and gave it a structured vehicle of expression. It opened the avenue of service that was to extend over the ensuing decades.

The third factor was in its own way an extraordinary indicator of Morris West's own resolution and clear-mindedness. It is only the prima donna mentality that seeks exclusive occupation of the stage and imagines that victories are won by the isolated hero. If battles are successfully to be fought, then allies must be enlisted. The best commitment to a cause is shared commitment. Just as the new editor of the *Baptist Quarterly* had, to the consternation of not a few, sought a revamped editorial board, so the new Council member sought to enlist and entice others to echo his commitment and offer themselves for Union service.

Thus things stood as the nineteen fifties drew to their close. The coming decade provided the formative, and in certain respects the most crowded, years of Morris West's diverse contribution to the concerns of the Union. He was strongly influenced by, though never a naively uncritical supporter of, the then General Secretary, Ernest Payne, who initiated the Ter-Jubilee Celebrations of the Baptist Union. It was that long-running saga which in countless and often unrecognised ways dictated the preoccupations of the sixties. In the Denominational Conferences that opened and closed the crucial decade, those preoccupations found their clearest focus. Over the period, an abrupt change of mood is registered.

The report from the Denominational Conference of 1961 reads like a synopsis of the causes to which the new Council member would commit himself. It also reads like an advance agenda for the actual Union business of the sixties. Independence must be supplemented by interdependency. Association structures and life must be renewed. Ministry matters must be thought through. The spiritual and numerical weakness of the churches must prompt examination and experiment, and teaching and training be better provided. The ecumenical dimension must be grasped and clarified. The way into all these areas must be by the appointment of 'commissions'.

Commissions, under one name or another, there were to be, in almost reckless profusion. Seldom can the Union have expended so much time and paper in so short a period. In the calm before the storm, Morris West was steadily moving towards the heart of the Union's life. He was quickly appointed to the chairmanship of the

Young People's Department Committee, a ready recognition of his potential and a quick route to the General Purposes Executive. He was now a familiar voice and a recognised Council figure.

Arguably, and in many directions, 1963 was a watershed. The Council, by establishing the Advisory Committee for Church Relations, planted a gingerly permanent toe in the perilous ecumenical waters, a pool which Morris West was to make peculiarly his own. He was appointed a Union representative on the British Council of Churches, and a year later gained a place on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He also represented the Union at the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference. Within the life of the Union, he was appointed chairman of the Commission on the Associations.

The Commission on the Associations was a testing assignment. Its Report set off a chain reaction the echoes of which are with us still. That a Report was in the end produced at all was heavily the result of the chairmanship. There was a good deal of the shepherd dog patiently herding recalcitrant sheep. Yet with it all there was a sensitive awareness of underlying issues. Amid the more obtrusive areas of the maximising of 'superintendents' and the re-examination of Association boundaries, it was easy to miss the concern evidenced by the sub-heading 'Towards a Recovery of Confidence'. Interdependency was seeking a cautious foothold and striving to commend herself to men and women of goodwill. The character of the Union as the Associations associating together was being tentatively tabled for calm assessment.

When the Report surfaced, the chairman made no secret of his implacable resolve to resist any familiar Council attempt to shunt off an unwelcome visitor into long-term limbo. If in the end he was outmanoeuvred, as the consequential Boundaries Commission wound its way to an inglorious close, it was partly because issues had been tabled before their 'time' had come. The snake had been scotched but not killed, and its spectre remains to haunt the Union twenty years on.

In the aftermath of the Commission on the Associations, Morris West attempted in more informal fashion to ring some alarm bells in a 1966 paper on 'Baptists and the Future'. Thereby he made it unmistakably clear that his overriding concern was not with abstract theology or organisational neatness but with the faithful effectiveness of congregations in their mission. It was a reaching back to notes already sounded in *Evangelism and the Churches* which he had edited eight years before, and to the living contemporary preoccupations that had marked his contribution to *The Pattern of the Church*. Indeed, in its own way it was a *cri de coeur*, calling for 'radical changes' to promote 'effective local churches' served by a 'properly trained ministry' effectively deployed.

The wider context of such reflections is not difficult to discern. Morris West's own unease was part of an increasing Union sense that the storm clouds were gathering. The Council had listened in 1963 to a call to the Secretariat to survey the state of the denomination and

gather factual information about the state of the churches. It had listened again in 1966 to talk of a 'declining' even 'dying' denomination. Morris West's own reflections barely preceded a Council discussion on the state and mission of the denomination. But the tenor of the debate had little of the sharpness of his own memorandum, and the report ('Call to Obedience') of the working group that followed in 1969 sank without trace. By that time, the Union had fallen victim to the disease of financial embarrassment which, with temporary remissions, was to plague it thereafter.

Yet not all the seed had fallen on stony ground. In 1967 the Council resolved to establish a Commission on the Ministry with Morris West as one of its members. To it he brought a powerful and influential voice. Into it he could and did pour the accumulated concern of the years which the 1966 paper had brought to focus. Within its Report will be found surfacing many of his urgent convictions. After all, had he not been one of the three co-authors of the earlier 1961 *Report on the Doctrine of the Ministry*?

Before the Commission on the Ministry had completed its work, the General Purposes Executive appointed in 1968 a Structure Group to re-examine the workings of the Union, its departments, and its committees. Once again it turned to Morris West for chairmanship. The work was completed in record time. Unusually, virtually all of its recommendations were adopted and implemented.

In all this there is cause for reflection. It is likely that certain qualities are to be found in someone who is invited to stand at the heart and often at the helm of so many significant and sensitive enquiries. Significant, they surely were. Not because all the conclusions commanded assent and approval. At important points they failed to do so. Yet that may not be the important point. Such diverse appointed involvement inescapably betrays the recognition of an unusually wide competence and an unusually judicious capability. Great matters were in issue. And again and again the effect of the work done was not properly measurable by the narrow standard of immediate acceptance or rejection. What counted was that at crucial points the unthinkable became thinkable; the unconscious inheritance surfaced and made its influence upon future years.

If these areas of Union involvement were significant, they were also sensitive. To touch the Associations was to move towards the beating heart of local denominational life. Congregations can watch with relative nonchalance most of the gyrations of the Union; but what if the probing finger comes too near home? To touch the Ministry was to hit a significant section of the denomination where it lives. To touch the structure of the Union was inevitably to throw the staff of Church House into paroxysms of understandable anxiety. A chairman who could handle such crosscurrents effectively as well as humanly and still survive respected and unscathed was by definition a rare animal.

Meanwhile, Morris West's ecumenical commitment and expertise were increasingly being called upon by the Union. The sixties were in this respect the proving years, as on the British and the world

scene he gathered experience and could, from an increasingly informed vantage point, feed into the Church Relations Committee wider perspectives and specialised knowledge. After a shaky start, that Committee began to find its feet and win acceptability. The report *Baptists and Unity* (1967) was the turning point. After long gestation it finally emerged to widespread acceptance even with the Annual Assembly. Baptists had finally something like an agreed platform so far as their understanding of and attitude towards the visible unity of the Church was concerned.

Yet, as Morris West assumed the Committee chairmanship in 1972, no informed observer could doubt that the ecumenical waters were turning choppy for the Union. Baptists might in principle judge that 'visible unity' was a biblically-based goal for the Churches. It was not so clear what Union reaction would or should be when rolling phrases sought translation into the raw specifics of action. The establishment in 1972 of an ecumenical congregation at Skelmersdale was a portent. Its application for membership of the Baptist Union was an embarrassment. Existing 'Union' (Baptist/Congregationalist) churches, faced with the problem of the creation of the United Reformed Church and of their own constitutional relationship to it, were thundering impatiently at the Union door. As the rain descended and the floods came and the wind blew, foundation rocks seemed to be in alarmingly short supply.

Such was the daunting West inheritance. It was dealt with in characteristically clear-minded, patient and moderate fashion, particularly through a newly-created Church Relations Working Group which Morris West also chaired. Agreement by consent was the formula. Only so could the process advance however protracted the discussions might prove. At every stage, Council opinion was consulted and tested. It was 1975 before the issues were finally resolved. There was a very broad consensus that justice had been done.

The implications of visible unity were not, however, to be disposed of merely by facilitating membership of the Union on the part of ecumenical congregations. Church relations in England were in ferment. The Nottingham Conference of 1964 had signalled a new era. The Anglican/Methodist Scheme of Union had failed, but the Congregational/Presbyterian had succeeded. At a conference at Selly Oak, a few short weeks before Morris West's appointment to the chair of the Church Relations Committee was formally accepted by the Council, Methodist representatives urged the United Reformed Church to promote a new ecumenical initiative. Talks about Talks, the Churches Unity Commission, the Churches Council for Covenanting, were about to be launched.

It was a classic and familiar situation, with the Union beset both behind and before. Those behind cried 'forward', and those in front cried 'back'. The degree of mingled balance and decisiveness shown by the chairman of the Church Relations Committee was bound to be of pivotal significance. Would the Union participate fully in the interdenominational negotiations? The case was made persuasively. The Council agreed in March 1974. So did the Assembly (with 56

dissentients).

Two years later, the Ten Propositions burst upon a wondering world. It was decision time. The reactions of local Baptist churches would be of enormous weight. Thankfully, the Church Relations Committee and its Working Group entrusted to their chairman the task of preparing 'A Statement to the Churches' and subsequently an Explanatory Paper to accompany the Council's 'Response'.

That 'Response' was tabled at Council in 1977, as Morris West's chairmanship of the Church Relations Committee reached its close. It was a document that had listened to the Baptist constituency and struggled to speak truth and embody realities in a positive and constructive way. Yet it unmistakably put the Union awkwardly out of step with the anticipated responses of many of its ecumenical partners. What would the Council make of it?

The Council listened to the introductory speech of its Committee chairman with almost painful attention. His survey was a model of clarity and sensitivity. It should probably be adjudged the most important single contribution he ever made to a Council debate. It elicited a depth of appreciation and a measure of united response rarely witnessed in the Council Chamber.

Such was the public face at the heart of the Union. Behind it and around it was a continuous flurry of activity in the constituency on behalf of the Union and the ecumenical enterprise. Speaking, debating, explaining, in denominational and interdenominational meetings alike, was the order of the day. It was a taxing, demanding, constructive enterprise, whose value to the Union it is difficult to measure, and more difficult to overestimate.

Chairmanships might come and go, but membership of the Church Relations Committee and the ecumenical service to the Union it focused went on. Through the better part of two decades, the Union had a continuing, powerful and respected voice on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, as Morris West's stature on the international scene steadily grew.

In the latter part of this period, his concern moved on from the explorations of the nature of church unity to issues of baptism and ministry. One, in fact, of his most helpful publications had been his long essay on 'The Anabaptists and the Rise of the Baptist Movement' contributed to the symposium on *Christian Baptism* edited by Alec Gilmore in 1959. He was thus very well equipped to be a principal spokesman of the Baptist position at the Louisville Consultation when, for perhaps the first time, Baptists and paedobaptists in relatively equal numbers confronted the Christian Initiation divide on the world front. He shared in the protracted Faith and Order enterprise that eventually produced *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, himself serving on the group charged with the baptismal discussion. He participated in informal contacts with the Church of England's Faith and Order Group which sought to clarify underlying issues of divergence on baptism and ministry. Under the aegis of the Church Relations Committee he provided a

Union Occasional Paper on *Church, Ministry and Episcopacy* which endeavoured to take seriously some of the unfinished business arising from the Council's Response to the Ten Propositions.

It would however be a serious miscalculation to imagine that the picture that latterly emerges is that of an ecumenical emissary but intermittently attached to the Union and denominational scene and almost exclusively preoccupied with international affairs. Long service on the Scholarships Committee befitted a College Principal wishing to keep a wary if not a beady eye on relevant doings. Longer service on the General Purposes Committee inexorably concentrated the mind on substantial tracts of the varied Union concerns. The increasingly recognised value of Morris West in this curious arena was partly that his wide scope and long background made him a repository of knowledge and experience. Equally, his value lay in the mediating and reconciling stance he adopted towards thorny issues, and in his acute sense of what in a given situation was practicable. How many others, for example, could reach back to the 1958 beginnings of that stately minuet, the latest number in the slow-moving collaborative dance of the Union and the Missionary Society? To him was to fall the chairmanship of the group charged with seeking joint headquarters for both bodies.

As the seventies drew to their close, he was elected to the Presidency of the Union. On the one hand, that drove him back with renewed vigour to the broad Baptist constituency to which his heart belonged. On the other hand, for a three year period, it formally constituted him an Officer of the Union, granting him a sort of key of the door, to poke out concealed skeletons in strange places if so minded.

Add to this the Moderatorship of the Free Church Federal Council, courtesy of Baptist Union nomination, and the suspicious might be driven to an interesting conclusion. Perhaps the role of elder statesman was at last being foisted upon him. If so, it was a role he adorned, and did not visibly shun. The hair was greying and growing a trifle more unkempt. A mellowing process was at work. The hint of pugnacious and combative angularity was fading. Was he losing his touch, if not his faculties, and effortlessly becoming an archetypal Establishment figure?

The Council had the wit to decide otherwise. In 1982 it elected him as its chairman, for the statutory three year period. Such appointment comes the way of two categories of people. The one is the company of those Council members who incessantly talk in debate and for whom a position of enforced relative silence is desperately sought. The other is the number of those who are believed to possess the competence, clearmindedness, and fairness to guide to a constructive conclusion discussion that too often threatens to teeter on the edge of confusion, chaos and catastrophe. There is little doubt that the Council choice located Morris West in the second compartment. Chairmanship was after all his business. That had been demonstrated as recently as his year of presidency, in a demanding session of the annual Assembly when continued membership of the World Council of Churches, in the light of grants made by the

Special Fund of its Programme to Combat Racism, was debated.

Three reflections impose themselves. The first relates to the necessary price that must be paid by those who would representatively serve others. Certainly, time is mortgaged, nerves are frayed, thought is demanded. If there is reward, there is also sacrifice. Yet there is another, more subtle and less obvious price to be assessed. Constructive work within a body like the Baptist Union requires an inevitable self-limitation on freedom of thought and action. The 'individual' may speak for him or her self, take an unrepresentative line, exert pressure to assist personal convictions to carry the day. The 'representative', though no automatic mouthpiece or captive of his constituency, has voluntarily accepted the limitations his responsibility inalienably carries. He is not simply a 'reflector'. He must lead. He may seek to carry others where he wants to go, but he is inevitably circumscribed. To fail to accept this is betrayal of those representatively served. The price is the danger of pleasing nobody. Enthusiasts at either end of the opinion spectrum may find their apparently reasonable expectancies dashed and may cry 'turncoat'. To preserve personal integrity, maintain a passion for the possible, and not lose touch with those represented, may be a costly and difficult simultaneous achievement. It is part of the genius of Morris West that on the whole he has kept his balance.

The second reflection focuses the issue more specifically on the ecumenical arena, always potentially explosive, where hostility and enthusiasm pull in diverse directions. Morris West has never wavered in his Baptist loyalties. More importantly, he has never neglected his Baptist roots. More importantly still, these things have been unmistakably apparent and perceived. They have been perceived both by a wide range of people in the Baptist constituency itself and by a diverse range of partners on the British and international ecumenical scene. That has meant that he has been in a peculiarly effective way the Baptist face of ecumenism; to the constituency the 'acceptable' face, to the representatives of other Churches the 'reliable' face. For that the Union is his substantial debtor.

The final reflection brings us back to the Baptist Union Council. In some respects the Council is not unlike many a local church. It has weird dynamics. It is unpredictable. It is generally fairly tolerant, except where unacceptable conduct is concerned. It abhors windbags. It can spot a phoney in sixty seconds at twenty paces. It knows quality when it sees it, even if it does not immediately welcome its presence. Its respect and trust have to be won. That Morris West so early gained and so enduringly holds that respect and trust is no mean achievement.

The Baptist Historical Society is right to salute him. So far as the Union and, therefore, its churches are concerned, he has marginally nudged history. It is a verdict that can be rendered on few men and women in any generation.