

WHERE ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

THE WORK OF FAITH & ORDER IN THE 1980s

I first met Morris West in 1974 in Ghana at the Accra meeting of the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of churches. That meeting was a turning point for my own ecumenical development and I suspect, looking back, a turning point in the work of the Commission itself. For the first time Faith & Order was meeting in a developing country and the impact of that setting was to affect its work profoundly. There were more theologians from third world countries among the 121 theologians and a more confident Christian feminist voice was being raised. All of this left a significant mark not only on the *Giving Account of Hope* study but also on the classical agenda of baptism, eucharist and ministry.

To someone coming to Faith & Order for the first time from the background of narrow, academic discussions of theology and from the limited English talks of the Anglican-Methodist Scheme for Unity, with no previous Faith & Order experience, with little knowledge of Africa, and no encounter as yet with the Christian feminist movement, it was overwhelming. Just to survive the onslaught of new experiences, let alone make sense of what was happening in those two issue-packed weeks would have been impossible without the support, the quiet and sensitive interpretation of what was happening that Morris gave me. Many evenings he, Rupert Davies, Raymond George and I (the Bristol gang) walked around the darkened campus and against a background of chirping cicadas pondered together on the happenings of the day. Morris's long involvement in Faith & Order, going back to his own student days, enabled him to set what was happening to Faith & Order in Africa in a balanced perspective. His grasp of the issues being hammered out in the sacramental agenda of baptism, eucharist and ministry, and not least of all his understanding as a Baptist of the debate between those who baptise infants and his own tradition, made him an invaluable guide. His ability to keep a perspective in the midst of the onslaughts, creative onslaughts, from those newly brought into the Faith & Order context, helped me to stick with that international forum of theological debate which must be both the most perplexing and difficult because of the diversity of those it brings together: it is precisely because of that diversity that it is the most creative ecumenical forum that exists. It is with gratitude to Morris West for his friendship and guidance in Accra, in Bangalore and in Lima and his continuing friendship that I write these thoughts about the work of the Commission and ask where are we and where are we going in Faith & Order today?

It was at the meeting in Accra that the *Accra Text, One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry* was completed. Already that 'provisional' text demonstrated a growing convergence in the broad ecumenical forum, particularly in the areas of baptism and eucharist, but also witnessing to significant shifts in the understanding of ministry. Equally significant was the initiation of a

new process of theological response and reception. The text was given to the churches.

They were asked to consider whether the work prepared by their theologians was consonant with their own beliefs. In this way agreed statements of convergence prepared by a few theologians were open to becoming statements of the churches themselves. Careful analysis of the 140 or so replies that were returned highlighted areas calling for further work, such as the division between those who practise infant baptism and those who practise so-called 'adult believers' baptism'; *episkope* and episcopacy; and the puzzle of the ordination of women to the priesthood. In this further work, particularly in the development of the work on baptism that took place at the Louisville Consultation, Morris West played an important role. And the fact that the text is acknowledged as one of the most readable texts to come from an international dialogue owes not a little to Morris' careful polishing and eradicating of ecumenical-committee-jargon.

At the Commission's meeting in Lima, Peru, in January 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry* was judged to be 'mature' enough to send to the churches. Five years later it is clear that the many official responses from the churches, 'from the highest appropriate levels of authority' as well as unofficial replies from study groups of all sorts, will take far longer to collate and digest than was originally envisaged. The publication of five volumes of official responses indicates clearly the complexity of a process which cannot be hurried.(1)

Already, some common issues identified in the responses of the churches will need further attention. Three in particular stand out: the first is the relation of Scripture, Tradition and traditions that lie behind the theological convergences of the *Lima Text*. Many have not understood the profound effect that the earlier Faith & Order work at Montreal in 1963 had upon the formation of *BEM*.(2) Indeed, without the understanding of the relation between Scripture, Tradition and traditions achieved in the *Montreal Report*, the *Lima Text* could never have been written. Secondly, many responses have asked what is the ecclesiology lying behind the text? Max Thurian has already begun to show the ecclesiology implicit in the text, but it needs to be drawn out and explicated.(3) Thirdly, many churches have asked for a clearer definition of what a sacrament is. Although the text does not contain any explicit definition it certainly implies that a sacrament is a liturgical sign which 'effectively produces in reality that which it signifies in image or symbol'.(4) Such an understanding of sacramentality is closely bound up with *BEM's* understanding of the nature of the Church. Besides these three underlying issues, the churches in their official responses are pointing to a significant agenda for future work. Some of these issues are: the relation between the different parts of the initiation process; the understanding of the priesthood of the ordained ministry; the ministry of the whole people of God; the threefold order of ministry; the ordination of women to the priesthood. The responses from the British churches, while expressing general appreciation and recognising in the text an important tool for

self-education, also identify areas in all three sections where more work is needed.(5) An obvious example is over the issue of re-baptism. The *Lima Text* states clearly 'Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as "re-baptism" must be avoided' (B.13). Baptists have stated their dissent from this:

The statement is wholly unacceptable in its present form since, on some interpretations, nothing could pass through so restrictive a sieve. In cases of infant baptism which are neither accompanied nor followed by any of the significant features of the initiating process to which the report amply draws attention and where the individual involved is convinced out of an instructed conscience that Christian obedience requires believer baptism, we cannot agree that an *a priori* universal bar should operate.(6)

The Baptist response to the eucharist section questions the over-emphasis on the theology of the elements rather than a theology of 'action'. It finds in the ministry section an unacceptable emphasis on the threefold ministry and looks for clarification on whether this pattern is a prerequisite for mutual recognition of ministries.

The importance of the second and third questions directed to the churches by the World Council is now becoming much clearer. Both of these questions prompt all the churches to move beyond response to the doctrinal statements of the text, to a credible reception of the theological convergences in life. It is not enough for divided Christians to answer how far they can recognise 'the faith of the Church through the ages' in the text. Now comes the demand for action and change. Responding to the text is showing us all a gap in our own lives between what we say we believe and what we practise. It challenges us to make changes in our own worship, educational, ethical and spiritual life and witness. If the churches can respond in their own lives, if they can take direction from the *Lima Text*, then growth towards one another will take place. The seriousness of our response to the *Lima Text* will be measured by our willingness to develop and deepen that fellowship with one another that already exists in virtue of our confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The draft Ecumenical Canons currently before the Church of England which will allow greater eucharistic sharing could not have been drawn up without the theological convergences of the *Lima Text* and are, in part, a sign of a willingness to change and be changed in the process of receiving the insights of the *Lima Text*. The *Lima Text* is proving not simply a convergence text to be responded to in word but a convergence instrument with the power to change the lives of the churches, to produce a real *metanoia* and so to draw the churches together in deeper fellowship. The publication of *BEM* was not simply an ecumenical moment but the beginning of a significant convergence movement within the ecumenical community.

All this is only one part of the call of the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship. The Vancouver Assembly suggested that three marks would belong to a visibly united Church:

First, the churches would share a common understanding of the apostolic faith, and be able to confess this message together in ways understandable, reconciling and liberating to their contemporaries. Living this apostolic faith together, the churches help the world to realise God's design for creation.

Second, confessing the apostolic faith together, the churches would share a full mutual recognition of baptism, the eucharist and ministry, and be able, through their visible communion, to let the healing and uniting power of these gifts become more evident amongst the divisions of humankind.

Third, the churches would agree on common ways of decision-making and ways of teaching authoritatively, and be able to demonstrate qualities of communion, participation and corporate responsibility which could shed healing light in a world of conflict.

Such a unity - overcoming church division, binding us together in the face of racism, sexism, injustice - would be a witnessing unity, a credible sign of new creation.(7)

The programme on a *Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith Today* is devoted to the first mark. The coming together of divided churches has to be on the basis of a common confession of the apostolic faith in word and life. Can the divided churches build confidence in one another that they do indeed believe the same things about the faith once delivered to the saints? To impose rigid uniformity of belief and expression upon Christians would be contrary to the diversity and plurality witnessed to in the Scriptures themselves. But limits to diversity will have to be recognised in the process of deepening fellowship between Christians, whilst a clearer articulation of the central mystery of the Christian faith will be needed to draw divided Christians together.

This new programme of Faith & Order is not an attempt to write a new creed for the year 2000 as a charter for unity. It is at once a more difficult and more imaginative process of ecumenical involvement and common witness and confession, with the potential of drawing Christians together around the central mystery of our faith. Using the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as a methodological tool, the churches are asked to go back through the words of the Creed to the normative witness of Holy Scripture and to re-capture the faith of the Bible reflected in the Creed. At the same time the churches are asked how this faith can be confessed together today in word and in life in different cultural contexts. In the face of the many perplexing challenges to the Christian faith, how can Christians witness to the Gospel more faithfully today? Credal churches are invited to a renewed appropriation of the Creed in word and life and non-credal churches to affirm the Creed as an ecumenical symbol of common faith.

Faith & Order has progressed in two directions. Contemporary confessions of faith have been collected from Latin America, the

Caribbean and Europe, showing how Christians are re-stating their faith in different cultural settings under the pressures and challenges of secularism and communism. Secondly, a preliminary explication of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is beginning to show what must be confessed together and what are the limits to tolerable diversity. This now has to become the study of the churches so that common confession around the Creed may become the confident proclamation of a truly united Church. The process is a long one for the text will have to be hammered out and refined again and again in the arena of church life.

The third feature of a visibly united Church identified in Vancouver was common ways of decision making and teaching authoritatively. A Church that is united will need to have organs through which the mind of the Church can be discovered in the face of new challenges to the faith and life and have ways of proclaiming that mind to the Church and the world. This third part of the agenda of Faith & Order is the most undeveloped part of its work. It is in the bilateral dialogues, particularly in the Authority statements of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue and the work of the Lutherans and Methodists with their Roman Catholic partner, that most advance has been made on this agenda. The multilateral forum must now develop an overarching context in which to set the convergences of the bilateral statements.

The *Lima Text* itself already contains important pointers in those paragraphs which deal with the exercise of the ordained ministry in a personal, collegial and communal way. Ordained persons need to proclaim the Gospel and to serve the Lord in unity of life and witness: there is need for a college of ordained ministers sharing in the common task of representing the concerns of the community but, because of the intimate relationships between ordained and lay, there must also be a communal dimension, so that together the ordained and the community may discover God's will. Such patterns of ministry have to be exercised at each level of the Church's life: the local congregational level, the regional level and the universal level. Although there is much not said in these short paragraphs in the *Lima Text*, what is clear is that the Church is not only manifested in the local community but has to be held together, so there need to be 'bonds of communion', 'bonds of affection' which hold all Christians in a visible fellowship.

The response process of all the churches to the *Lima Text* is teaching us all about how we cohere as churches and how we can respond with authority to questions asked of us. The Church of England's response, for example, has been formulated by the General Synod involving bishops, clergy and laity but only after consultation with theologians and with a lengthy process of study and consultation with diocesan synods. Since for Anglicans provincial response is not sufficient, the Lambeth Conference in 1988 will collate provincial responses showing that the autonomous provinces belong together, are interdependent, and therefore a united Anglican response needs also to be given.

In a similar way other churches, not always used to thinking of themselves as universal communions, are discovering embryonic structures in which a wider and more representative response can be framed. In a consultation of representatives from the World Confessional Families the collation of Baptist responses to the *Lima Text* was most impressively presented.

Behind the two short paragraphs in the *Lima Text* which relate closely to structures of decision-making lies earlier important work of the World Council that needs to be recovered and developed. In the 1970s Faith & Order worked on a study *How Does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today?*(8) In the process of each tradition looking at itself in partnership with other churches undergoing a similar self-examination, it was intended that the churches would discover how they might have common structures of decision-making and teaching authoritatively.

A third contribution came in the work done on conciliar fellowship in the period leading up to the Nairobi Assembly in 1976. That Assembly had this to say about a visibly united Church: 'The one Church is envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united... Each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfilment of their common calling'. This concept of conciliar fellowship did not receive much support or acclaim. Its double reference to both the structural requirements for realising the visibility of the one Church and also to the inner quality of the Church's life, the *Koinonia* and, with this, the potentiality for understanding the Church, was never grasped.

The task of Faith & Order in deepening the convergence in the churches' understanding of the three marks which belong to the visible unity of the Church is immense. It is not simply concerned with understanding and stating those marks but of refining and developing an understanding of those marks in dialogue with the churches. Moreover, the Commission is caught up more and more in the long term, spiritual process of helping the churches to receive the insights of this work.

Another major area of Faith & Order work is the work on unity and renewal in the programme *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*. The unity of the Church, not an end in itself, is integrally bound up with the unity of human community and the bringing of all things to completion in the final consummation of the Kingdom. The Church, the world and the Kingdom belong together and are at the heart of the study. The Church is called to be prophetic sign, foretaste, sacrament, and instrument of the eschatological Kingdom. The Church's testimony to the Kingdom is impaired as long as it remains divided within itself, as long as Christians do not witness to the Gospel together, do not share together at the Lord's Supper and do not engage in common acts of witness and service. The Church's sign to the world of that unity and wills for all humanity is, however, impaired by the human

divisions within the Church, divisions between rich and poor, black and white, women and men, employed and unemployed. Such forms of brokenness in human community belong as much within the Church as society; and the healing and mending of these divisions of human community come about through the working of God's Holy Spirit outside the Church as well as within the Church. The Church, indeed, is called to be a sign, foretaste and instrument but the world as well as the Church is being redeemed by God and the Church needs to be open to receive the insights of God at work in the world.

Since 1968 the programme on unity and renewal has been developed in two ways. Firstly in a series of studies on areas of brokenness - racism, the handicapped, the broken community of men and women. In the *Community of Women and Men in the Church* study the examination of the distorted relationships between men and women in secular structures were seen no less to permeate the life of the churches affecting theological and doctrinal expression, the worship of the Church, its ministry and structural life.(9) All too easily these studies on brokenness became unbalanced. Concentration was almost exclusively upon the exposure of the pain of division in human relationships and the ecclesiological implications often went unheard. But these studies were and are profoundly ecclesiological. They were about that which is destructive of the Church's unity and about the need for renewal within the Church in human relationships, in doctrinal expression, in worship and in ministry. It was precisely at this point that this newer work of Faith & Order had consequences for the classical agenda of baptism, eucharist and ministry. The two agendas need each other. If they are not held together the search for unity is in danger of becoming little more than 'ecclesiastical joinery' and has little to do with true fellowship (*Koinonia*) of those baptised and drawn together in the life of God, the Holy Trinity. The Vancouver Assembly glimpsed the inter-relation of the two agendas bringing them together in the presentation of the three marks of the Church. It spoke of confessing the faith in word and in life and so helping the world to realise God's design for creation; sharing sacramental life and letting the healing and uniting power of those gifts become more evident amongst the divisions of humankind; and demonstrating qualities of communion, participation and corporate responsibility which would shed healing light in a world of conflict. 'Such a unity - overcoming Church division, binding us together in the face of racism, sexism, injustice - would be a witnessing unity, a credible sign of new creation'.

The current work of the Commission on unity and renewal is focusing upon the Church as prophetic sign, instrument, sacrament, mystery in describing the vocation of the Church. In developing these themes in the next years the study will have much to contribute to the ecclesiological work that many churches indicate in their responses to *BEM* they are wanting. Already there are signs that the different emphases in ecclesiology between the churches are being explained and brought closer to one another in the study on *The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*.(10)

We have travelled a long way in describing the current work of the Faith & Order Commission, work devoted to the central aim of the World Council of Churches to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship. In reviewing the work of Faith & Order the vital role of the Commission in encouraging the reception of the theological convergences in the lives of the churches is clear. But where does Faith & Order go from here? Many areas in each branch of its work need joint exploration before consensus or even convergence can be celebrated. But perhaps what is most needed now in this last quarter of the twentieth century is a statement of the goal of unity to which we are committed. What does it mean for each of us to affirm the World Council's main aim to call the churches to visible unity? Can we begin to imagine what this would mean for denominational identity? Is there a shared goal at the centre of all our ecumenical endeavour? Even the few theologians engaged in multilateral and even bilateral dialogue when confronted with this question appear to have very different visions of the unity we seek. And yet, is it not the case that the convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry*, the work on the *Common Confession of Faith*, and the less developed work on *Common Structures of Decision Making* and not least of all the ecclesiology of the *Unity and Renewal Study* carry within them profound implications for a shared vision of unity? Is it not time to draw out some of the implications of the work already accomplished for our vision of unity? Lesslie Newbigin once wrote that 'a sincere intention to seek unity is incompatible with an intention to remain permanently uncommitted to any particular form of unity'.⁽¹¹⁾ To suggest that work is now needed on the ecclesiological vision is not to ask for work unrelated to the agenda already being undertaken: nor is it to require a 'blue-print' of Church order, nor does it deny that our understanding of the goal will inevitably be deepened and enriched as we continue the process of moving together. Inevitably it will make us face urgent questions about unity and plurality, unity and conflict and unity and mission. It will also force us to ask more sharply and urgently what are the appropriate steps we can take now on the basis of the degree of agreement already achieved on the pilgrimage to that goal. And, most important of all the affirming of a goal - the confessing of a shared vision - will help us to assure one another, that we are one in our desire for unity.

NOTES

- 1 Ed. Max Thurian, *Churches respond to BEM* Vols 1-5,
Vol.1, 1986, Faith & Order Paper 129
Vol.2, 1986, Faith & Order Paper 132
Vols.3-5, to be published in 1987.
- 2 Ed. P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer, *Scripture, Tradition and traditions, The Montreal Report*, Faith & Order Paper 42, SCM Press, 1964.
- 3 *Churches respond to BEM*, Vol.1, op.cit. p.5.
- 4 Op.cit. p.10.
- 5 *Responses to BEM*, British Council of Churches, Autumn 1986.
- 6 *Churches respond to BEM*, Vol.1, op.cit. pp.70-78.

- 7 Ed. David Gill, *Gathered for Life*, Official Report of the VI Assembly of the WCC, 1983, p.45.
- 8 *How Does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today?* Faith & Order Paper 91, WCC, 1979.
- 9 Ed. C. Parvey, *The Community of Women and Men in the Church*, WCC, 1984.
- 10 Ed. Gennadios Limouris, *Church, Kingdom, World*, Faith & Order Paper 130, WCC, 1986.
- 11 Lesslie Newbigin, *All in Each Place*, WCC, 1981.

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