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Unity: England and South India

BY MICHAEL HOLLIS

THIS article expresses a purely personal opinion. I cannot write from the standpoint of a convinced member of the Church of England or as an enthusiastic defender of Anglicanism, for I am neither. After five years as an Anglican bishop, I was released into the limited but creative fellowship of the Church of South India and for fourteen years enjoyed that illuminating experience of the power of God to break down the barriers of our denominational loyalty. Coming back to this country has involved an unwelcome but inescapable return also to the fact of yet unremended separation and to that choice of evils by which one decides which of the different parent Churches is to be the sphere of immediate fellowship and ministry. Whatever be the choice for each individual, in the light of his or her own past and present, it is a bleak and frustrating experience to live in separation from those with whom one has for so many years enjoyed unbroken fellowship in worship, decision, service and witness. Not the least of the sadnesses which this reversion to denominationalism brings with it is the realisation that to the majority of one's fellow Christians here it comes as a complete surprise that there is any difficulty or any sense of loss in this breach of a unity once experienced and now denied by the backwardness of the Churches in this country.

No one who has lived in unity can come with an open mind to the lengthy arguments intended to prove that unity is or is not possible. We have been united, without any sense of disloyalty to truth ever becoming apparent, with a new and deeper perception of the depths of our given oneness in Christ and with a heightened sense of the present reality of the Holy Spirit. We need to be on our guard lest the slowness of so many Christians here to appreciate what God has done and is doing in South India cause within us an unChristlike impatience. But we are bound to bear witness to the vital connection between the mission of the Church to the world and the manifest unity between Christians for which the living Lord of the Church prayed 'that the world might believe'. The Churches of the West, still too much enshackled in the past of 'Christendom', include within their membership many estimable men and women for whom mission and unity are, at best, optional appendages to the essential life of the Church. Worse than that, there are not a few, even among those in important positions, for whom any true union is, consciously or unconsciously, something to be resisted. There is a searching truth in some words that come at the end of Bishop Neill's Bampton Lectures, passionately as many would deny it. 'But, when all is said and done, the last and gravest hindrance to unity is simply the deep desire of the denominations to continue their separate existence. . . . If the Churches really wanted

to be one, they could be one within measurable time; what holds them apart is in large measure the deep-seated love of separate existence, pride in valued traditions, and the sense of superiority enjoyed by those who feel themselves to have been endowed with a special portion of the truth.'

I therefore start with the conviction that no matter of fundamental principle forbids union between Anglicans and Methodists. Not only did I accept this truth intellectually by advocating and voting in favour of the Scheme of Union. I learnt to know it experimentally in the responsible working out of that union within the resultant Church of South India. I know that there ought to be union. I know that there can be union. What Bishop Newbigin, from a very different ecclesiastical background, has written, I can echo from my heart: 'To the Church of South India I owe the richest experience that I have had of fellowship in God's people.' I could wish that, in this and other negotiations for unity in this country, more use were made of the experience of South India and of other effective or promising seekings for God's way to the healing of our unhappy divisions. Those who have stayed at home, metaphorically no less than actually, are seldom well equipped to understand the wonder of adventure.

It is essential to realise that the proposals here being considered seek something radically different from what was aimed at and achieved in South India. There from the first the negotiators were trying to find God's way to one united Church. In England the result of Stage one, with which the two Churches are now concerned, will be the continuance of the same two separate Churches, with their relations somewhat improved but retaining their essential independent power structures unaltered. It is hoped that the removal of certain barriers to closer fellowship will make possible that growth of understanding and desire for unity which are essential if there are to be effective negotiations leading to one united Church. The Report insists that Stage one has no meaning except in the context of a solemn pledge to seek full integrated union at the earliest possible moment. But it proposes Stage one just because the representatives of the two Churches are convinced that the conditions in which effective negotiations for unity can be carried through do not yet exist in this country but have to be created. Stage one cannot ensure success in Stage two. It would still be possible for the two Churches to continue in separation. But failure to go forward might result in a real deterioration of fellowship. It could demonstrate that a powerful section in one or both of the Churches concerned refused to accept any proposals which did not involve the absorbing of one Church by the other, Methodists becoming Church of England, or vice versa. Even worse, it might show that they did not want to be mixed up with the other people anyhow.

This seeking not of union but of the improvement of relations between two Churches, which remain apart, as a step towards union involves another important difference between what happened in South India and these proposals. There were long discussions in South India about the ministry and many ways suggested by which the different understandings and practices found within the negotiating Churches might be dealt with. But the final Scheme of Union definitely sets the

uniting of the ministries inseparably within the total act of God by which he brings into existence the united Church out of the death of the three previously distinct Churches. None of them had ever existed invertebrate, without order and ministry. These ministries we all recognised as having been used by God. Each negotiating Church, in the service of inauguration, offered itself with its ministers to God. We believed then, and we are sure now after twenty one years, that God in that service accepted us and united us, Churches and ministries, into one Church with one ministry. At that moment the ministers ceased to be responsible to any Church or authority outside the Church of South India. The Constitutions and regulations of their previous denominational bodies became for them matters of past history. There is no 'South India pattern' for dealing with the ministries of Churches which remain disunited.

But, in a very real sense, the proposed Service of Reconciliation is concerned to do just this. It will make it possible for the ministers of one Church to conduct services, and to celebrate the Holy Communion, in churches belonging to the other denomination, while themselves remaining ministers of their present Church and subject wholly and exclusively to its authority. The absence of intercommunion, which the Interim Statement calls 'the worst sin and scandal of disunity', would be removed but the denominations would retain their independence. The existing machinery of decision, the present power structures, would continue essentially unchanged. It may be argued that to unite at the Lord's Table while refusing to surrender our separate denominational existences is in fact a greater sin and a more dangerous stumbling block in the way of the Church's witness to the world than is our present lack of full intercommunion. The Church exists to discover and fulfil God's will and it is just at that point that we are most unwilling to abandon our separations.

The immediate difficulty about the ministry is an Anglican one. While there are those within the Church of England who would be ready for a full acceptance of Methodist ministers, given the serious commitment of both Churches to seek union, yet there are others who are conscientiously unable to agree to any step which might appear to cast doubt upon their belief that an episcopally ordered ministry is an essential part of God's will for his church. Not only are they personally convinced that this is true. They hold that it is and must be the teaching of the Church of England, enshrined in its formularies rightly understood and expressed, apart from a few regrettable irregularities, in its historic practice. They would not therefore be able in good conscience to receive communion from a Methodist minister unless episcopal hands had been laid upon him. On the other hand, they would not agree to anything which might mean their denial of the adequacy of their own ordination. But it is equally clear that Methodist ministers will not enter into union or even agree to intercommunion at the price of any similar denial that God has in fact called and ordained them to a true ministry of Word and Sacraments in his Church. In the proposed Service of Reconciliation the two Churches will not officially express any judgment about what God is giving to its own ministers or to those of the other Church. But they will recognise that

the ministers and lay people individually will be free to put upon this service their own interpretations, in the hope that all will then be able in good faith to worship together and to accept the ministrations of all the ministers of both Churches.

This means that no minister will any longer be able to teach that his view is the view of his own Church, whatever his own view may be. He will be free to teach it as what he believes. He will have the right to do all in his power to convince both Churches that his view is the true one and ought to be accepted by both Churches and built into the constitution of the united Church which is to be. He will, in fact, have to recognise the state of affairs in his own and in most if not all other Churches today, the existence of deep differences of understanding and expression both about the ministry and about many other important aspects of Christian faith and practice. Those for whom it is enough that the doors are kept open will be ready to go forward to seek for deeper and more relevant understanding in fellowship with those whom they recognise as their fellow Christians. Those for whom certain doors are closed and must remain closed will reject any such proposal as is here set out in the Service of Reconciliation. Surely we all need very humbly to ask ourselves whether we really know quite as much quite as certainly as the past was inclined to believe.

There are many other problems mentioned in the Report, some of real difficulty, others, in fact even if not obviously, rather to be seen as the products of the past history of Christianity in this country, 'non-theological' but not therefore negligible. There are built-in resistances to union in this country which just do not exist in Asia or Africa. I doubt if any of them, important as they may seem to those who raise them, will in practice prove insuperable, if once this central issue of a tactual episcopal succession can be dealt with. I myself believe that a rigid insistence on episcopal ordination as essential is without biblical support, historically untenable, theologically erroneous and experimentally untrue. I suppose that all Methodists will agree. Yet this does not prevent me or many others finding in episcopacy, rightly understood and used, an element of real value for the total life and witness of the Church. In spite of confident assertions either way, we do not know how many clergymen of the Church of England accept this position or what proportion of responsible lay members of that Church agree with them. The members of the Commission are convinced that the Church of England would not at this moment even consider plans by which there would be, in and through the act of union, a straight acceptance of Methodist ministers and of the clergy of the Church of England as 'equally without distinction or difference ministers of the united Church'. It may perhaps be well to remind readers that these words come from the Basis of Union of the Church of South India. They have therefore set themselves to bring about a closer fellowship of mutual acceptability, in the hope that within it the knowledge and understanding which may lead to readiness for full union will grow. This growing together is to be made possible by the Methodist acceptance of episcopacy and by the lifting of all existing barriers to full intercommunion. Fellowship must come first in order

that unity may follow. At present too few people in either Church know enough about the other Church and its individual members to want seriously to see a united Church come into existence. Because they have not yet grasped effectively that they are in Christ and have not yet vividly seen themselves as called and sent by God with one shared word of reconciliation to the world in which they are set to be Christ's Church, it has not yet become intolerable that they should be one in Christ and divided at the Lord's table. Thus Stage one is designed to make ultimate union inescapable, while not demanding the prior abandonment of any conscientiously held conviction as a condition of this preliminary drawing nearer together. In South India we moved because we had found the way forward. These proposals are based upon the belief that here the way forward is not yet found but that it may be found if the two Churches are ready to move thus far now.

I do not myself know enough about the Church of England or the Methodist Church in this country to judge whether the Commission are right in ruling out an immediate and direct plan for one united Church as impracticable. I am sure that they are right in their determination that no pressure must be put upon anyone to do what he cannot do with a good conscience. This is true even where we believe that the consciences in question are ill instructed and in need of enlightenment. In St. Paul's words 'whatsoever is not of faith is sin'. They are also right in their belief that, as Christians draw nearer to one another, they find that many things look very different. As we examine together what we have been taught to believe to be the things that divide us, we find again and again that these spring from attempts to answer the questions of past centuries and that, in the context of today, we ask different questions and therefore give different and often harmonious responses. Most if not all the differences of understanding cut across all denominational traditions. There is not one Church of England position which can be clearly defined and set over against one Methodist position. No one of the great denominational families is as monolithic as common speech might suggest or as some within them still manage to believe. Stage one is proposed to make possible creative dialogue. Those upon whom rests the responsibility for decisions have to ask themselves not merely whether the proposals give them everything which they would like but also if, granted that we are now where we are, there is any alternative plan better calculated to bring about not absorption but true unity.

In the final form of these proposals and in the Ordinal, in particular in the Service of Reconciliation, there are, from my point of view, very great improvements. The Service of Reconciliation is more unmistakably a reconciling of the two Churches and less dominated by difficulties about the ministry. The Ordinal, though still too much tied to sixteenth century phraseology and insufficiently aware of the centrality of mission, expresses a more adequate understanding of the theology of ordination. It is much to be hoped that the triple substitution of the word 'apostles' for the Johannine 'disciples' (pages 5, 10 and 27) will be corrected before the service is finally authorised for use. I would call attention to three particular points.

(1) Provision is made for a Bill in which is included an explicit alteration in the law, so that it is made plain that any minister who has taken part in the Service of Reconciliation may conduct, or share in conducting, services including Holy Communion in buildings belonging to either Church. This means that a court of law cannot be called upon to rule, on the basis of the present requirement of the preface to the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer, whether the Service of Reconciliation is or is not episcopal ordination.

(2) It is clearly recognised that neither in Stage one nor in Stage two can either Church be expected to terminate that fellowship which it now enjoys with any other Church, be that Church episcopally ordered or not.

(3) There is the unambiguous statement, found both on page 137 (section 412) and on page 139 (section 417), that acceptance at this point of a Service of Reconciliation, including a unification of ministries by laying on of hands with prayer, in no way creates a precedent. The two still separate Churches may during Stage one be led to perceive that there is a better way. Still more decidedly, the united Church of Stage two will be acting within the terms of its own constitution and not bound by any regulations or traditions of the two now separate Churches out of which it has grown. This is the more important because of the hope, referred to in the Report, that other Churches in addition to the two now concerned may take part in negotiations for union.

There is in these proposals a right determination to leave many points of difference in understanding or practice to be worked out together in that closer fellowship which Stage one is to make possible. Much will depend upon the use that is made of these new opportunities locally for it is there in the congregations that God's call to mission and unity needs to be discovered and obeyed. Many of them today are terribly inward-looking and it may have been inevitable that there is much in this Report which tries to reassure the timid that there are precedents for what is here proposed. In fact, the healing of divisions between our major denominationally ordered Churches in this country cannot have any precedent for it has never yet been achieved. We are all being challenged to do what we have not yet done. To confess Christ relevantly and intelligibly to the world of the mid-twentieth century means that we listen to that world and try to answer the questions which it puts to us. The answers of the fifth or fifteenth or eighteenth centuries do not mean, either to us or to those outside the fellowship of the Churches, exactly what they meant to the men and women by whom and to whom they were first given. The true purpose of this as of any other plan for the healing of divisions must be to set the Churches concerned free to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying now in order that they may adventure together into the future. It is useless to talk of listening to the Spirit if we insist in advance on trying to ensure that the Spirit will only say what we want to hear.

This Report is a serious and prayerful attempt to find the way forward here and now for these two Churches as they actually are. Christians are not concerned with Utopia. Stage one will mean that everyone begins to move and that is of immense importance. There

is no hope of progress in Church relations so long as we remain immured within the fortresses of denominational tradition. Once we move out, even if we move somewhat in the wrong direction, the Holy Spirit can lead us as he wants, but, as we were reminded by a very wise and holy man before the Inauguration of the Church of South India 'you cannot steer a stationary vehicle'. Some may wish that the starting point of these negotiations had been different, their aim more adventurous and their proposals more clear cut. Yet history is not reversible and we have to go forward from where we are, even if we wish that we had never come here. There is no such thing as a perfect scheme and God's guidance is never of the nature of a blue print with all the details filled in. Rather he shows us what the next step is to be and will only tell us what comes then after we have obeyed what has already been shown to us. In one sense every advance into unity is a venture into the unknown, a leap in the dark but, from our experience in South India and from the experience of other members of other united churches elsewhere in the world, it can be said with confident thankfulness that the leap is into the arms of God.