

**Statements and Reports of
the Methodist Church
on
Faith and Order**

**Volume Two
1984-2000**

Part Two

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5 Ecumenism

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(i) Unity Schemes

COMMITMENT TO MISSION AND UNITY (1998)

Standing Order 330 requires the Faith and Order Committee to scrutinise all matters concerning the faith or order of the Church presented to the Conference by other bodies, and in particular to consider and report upon matters which arise in connection with ecumenical proposals. The Committee has therefore given careful attention to *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, the report of the Informal Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

It is not the responsibility of the Faith and Order Committee to present that report to the Conference, nor to propose resolutions in respect of it, but, in fulfilment of the requirements of Standing Orders, the Committee offers the following observations:

- 1 The report describes 'a common goal of visible unity' and presents a picture of a 'visibly united Church' in terms which are entirely consistent with previous Methodist statements. The reminder that unity in Christ 'is given in and with diversity' is important, as is the reference to the wider ecumenical endeavour to which both churches are committed.
- 2 Although the goal of visible unity is described, *Commitment to Mission and Unity* does not propose a unity scheme. Rather, it seeks to initiate a process, involving formal conversations, with a view to resolving some outstanding issues, and leading to mutual recognition, solemn commitment to each other, and the finding of ways in which the two churches can more effectively carry out their mission in the world by acting together and by being seen to do so. The Faith and Order Committee believes that the report is correct in proposing this 'step by step' approach.
- 3 *Commitment to Mission and Unity* identifies ten 'issues to be resolved', most of which relate to ordained ministry. In each case, the positions of the two churches are briefly though accurately explained and the task that would face those engaged in formal conversations is described. There is no doubt that some of these issues will prove exceedingly difficult to resolve, though to consider any of them incapable of resolution would be to display inadequate faith in the Holy Spirit's power to lead and guide. The Faith and Order Committee is convinced that, while the issues are being addressed, the mutual recognition and solemn commitment described in chapter IV could and should lead to closer co-operation and public awareness of it.

- 4 The Faith and Order Committee rejoices in the fact that the Methodist Conference has, during the last half century, consistently been positive in its response to proposals for unity schemes and covenants. The Committee strongly urges the Conference to make a similarly positive response to the resolutions about *Commitment to Mission and Unity* which will be put to the Conference, and which reflect the resolutions adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England.

RESOLUTION

The Conference receives the report.

(Agenda 1998, pp.128-129)

(ii) Local Ecumenical Partnerships

EXTENDED MEMBERSHIP (1992)

The Conference of 1991 referred the following Suggestion (S.1) to the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Ecumenical Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1992:

The Bristol Synod (R) (Present 252. Vote: 249 for, 2 against, 1 neutral) draws the attention of Conference to an anomaly in Local Ecumenical Projects, especially those which are long established. Those who become members through joint Confirmation receive multiple membership of all participating denominations. Those who transfer in, or were members of the participating churches before the formation of the LEP, have to retain their one denominational membership only. The Bristol Synod requests the Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee, in conjunction with the Ecumenical Committee, to explore the implications of offering 'extended membership' of all participating denominations to communicant members in LEPs who do not have multiple membership through Joint Confirmation, on the understanding that such 'extended membership' would terminate when the member left the LEP.

As directed by the Conference, the Faith and Order Committee and the Ecumenical Committee have considered both the desirability and the practicability of introducing Extended Membership into Local Ecumenical Projects.

1 *Definitions*

Communicant Membership generally implies that through baptism and a subsequent rite of or equivalent to confirmation a Christian is expected and permitted to receive Holy Communion in his or her own denomination. (This procedure is slightly confused by communion before confirmation, by the practice of the 'open table', and by those churches which practise only believers' baptism.)

Common Membership can exist between Methodist and United Reformed congregations because they have very similar procedures for making and recording full church members.

Statistical Membership involves the returning of national membership figures, often for assessment purposes, and no two denominations adopt the same procedure. The main point is that in joint churches no members are recorded more than once! (The Methodist-URC statistical forms have varying degrees of success.)

Multiple Membership occurs in those Local Ecumenical Projects where, through a joint Initiation or Confirmation Service, certain denominations can confer full initiation and communicant status on the same candidate simultaneously. (This generally means Anglican, Methodist and Reformed only but can involve others, though not Roman Catholics.)

Extended Membership is about multiple membership being conferred without any further initiation rite on those communicant members of a Local Ecumenical Project whose denominations would permit it. (It is not clear whether this extended membership would be permanent or temporary.)

2 *Difficulties*

- a) Multiple Membership involving Anglicans requires that all candidates are episcopally confirmed. In the case of Extended Membership this would not be the case.
- b) The Church of England has no equivalent to the membership roll in the Free Churches (the Electoral Roll is something different) and so it would not be clear which Anglicans were enjoying Extended Membership in a Local Ecumenical Project.
- c) There would be little point in the Methodist Church offering the possibility of Extended Membership in a Local Ecumenical Project unless several other denominations had agreed nationally to do the same.
- d) In practice Local Ecumenical Projects differ enormously in their make-up, from the covenant variety (which may be quite loose in structure and may include Roman Catholics who could not participate in either Multiple or Extended Membership) to the fully integrated and long-standing congregations. It would be difficult to decide when a particular Local Ecumenical Project could implement Extended Membership.
- e) If, for example, a person enjoying Anglican membership in the form of Extended Membership wished to be ordained in the Church of England, episcopal confirmation would be first required. This raises a serious question about what reality Extended Membership would actually have.

3 *Benefits*

- a) Eligibility for election to the local, regional and national governing bodies of the participating denominations would be open to every church member of a Local Ecumenical Project on the same basis. (The situation regarding eligibility for office across the denominations is better than it used to be but is still not mutually or uniformly satisfactory.)
- b) In Local Ecumenical Projects of long-standing which practise Multiple Membership those having Multiple Membership may well be in the majority. Extended Membership would remove the anomaly of two categories of member in one congregation or group of congregations,
- c) Communicant Members arriving in a Local Ecumenical Project, where many or a majority of whose congregation had Multiple Membership, would be accorded the same Multiple Membership upon their joining the congregation.

d) Similarly, those Communicant Members whose congregation joined an existing Local Ecumenical Project would be afforded the same Multiple Membership as those who had participated in a joint confirmation or initiation service.

4 Recommendations

Recognizing both the difficulties in implementing Extended Membership and the benefits it could bring, the Faith and Order Committee and the Ecumenical Committee recommend that the Conference

invite the appropriate denominational and inter-church executives and working parties within Churches Together in England to undertake further work on the theology and practice of church membership and the question of Extended Membership.

direct the Ecumenical Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, to monitor the progress of the above invitation and to report to the Conference of 1994.

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the Report on Extended Membership in Local Ecumenical Projects as its reply to Suggestion S.1 (1991).

The Conference, through the Ecumenical Committee, invites the appropriate denominational and inter-church executives and working parties within Churches Together in England to undertake further work on the theology and practice of church membership and the question of Extended Membership.

The Conference directs the Ecumenical Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, to monitor the progress of the above invitation and to report to the Conference of 1994.

(Agenda 1992, pp.125-128)

‘EXTENDED’ MEMBERSHIP (2000)

1. In 1995, the following Memorials were presented to the Conference:

M1 Local Ecumenical Partnerships

The Wimbledon (3/13) Circuit Meeting (Present: 42, Vote: 40 for, 1 ag, 1 neut)

1. expresses its frustration that it is still not possible for members confirmed or received into full membership before the first joint confirmation service of the LEP to be ‘joint’ members of LEPs.
2. thanks the Consultation on the Future of Ecumenical Projects, convened by Churches Together in England in February 1994, for the careful consideration given to this issue, and its recommendations for study.
3. wishes strongly to encourage the Methodist Church and other Free Churches to enter into consultation with the Church of England with a view to the enacting by all the relevant denominations of legislation permitting LEPs to extend the membership of those confirmed or admitted into full membership before the holding of joint confirmation services, or joining the LEP by transfer of membership, to membership of the other participating denominations, and therefore to so-called ‘joint’ and extended membership.

M2 Joint and Extended membership of LEPs

The London SW Synod (Present 297, Vote: 274 for, 21 ag, 2 neut)

1. expresses its frustration that it is still not possible for members confirmed or received into full membership before the first joint confirmation service in Local Ecumenical Partnerships to be regarded as ‘joint’ members or to benefit from ‘extended’ membership;
2. recognises the work of the Consultation on the Future of Ecumenical Projects convened by the Churches Together in England in February 1994, and commends its report and recommendations on this subject for study;
3. recognises the changes authorised by the Church of England General Synod in its autumn 1994 meetings for admission to membership of electoral rolls but does not regard these changes as dealing with the situation as described in 1 above.
4. The Synod therefore urges the churches already in negotiation on this issue to redouble their efforts to introduce the necessary legislation to permit the partner churches in LEPs to extend the membership of those confirmed or admitted into full membership before the holding of joint confirmation services, or joining the LEP by transfer of membership, to membership of the other participating denominations, and therefore to so-called ‘joint’ or ‘extended membership’.

2. The Memorials Committee proposed the following reply to both Memorials, which the Conference adopted:

The Memorials Committee recognises the frustration widely felt on this question and understands that, as a result of the Consultation on the Future of Local Ecumenical Projects referred to in the Memorial, Churches Together in England has set up a high level group to consider with some urgency baptism and membership issues. The Methodist Church is represented on this group, which also includes representatives from other churches deeply involved in Local Ecumenical Partnerships (as they are now to be termed). As part of the 'Called to be One' process, Churches Together in England has invited a group to look at the subject of Christian initiation, including multiple and extended membership. A report will be sent to member churches later this year and it is anticipated that the concerns raised by the Wimbledon Circuit will be addressed in that report. The Memorials Committee recommends that this memorial be referred to the Ecumenical Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1996.

3. In 1996, the Ecumenical Committee reported that the Churches Together in England (CTE) Group on Baptism and Church Membership had not completed its work. In 1997, the Group had published its report, but the Methodist Council reported that there had been insufficient time for proper consideration to be given to it. The Council was given leave for a full reply to be brought to the Conference of 1998.
4. In 1998, the Methodist Council reported that the Committee for Local Ecumenical Development and the Faith and Order Committee had now had the opportunity to study the CTE report, *Baptism and Church Membership (with particular reference to Local Ecumenical Partnerships)*. The Council's report noted the CTE report's recommendation that

... a church/denomination, some of whose local churches participate in LEPs and which is willing to consider the possibility of permitting 'extended' membership, should, in consultation with other such denominations, find ways of permitting it which are compatible with its own understanding and practice of church membership.

5. In addressing the question as to how the Methodist Church should respond to that recommendation, the Council observed:

At the present time, the Methodist Council is engaged in a process of re-examining the whole concept of 'church membership'. It may be thought, therefore, that this may not be a good time to consider 'extending' membership. There would be little point in devising ways of permitting 'extended' membership 'which are compatible with (our) own

understanding and practice of church membership', if that understanding and practice were liable to change in the foreseeable future. It might be better for the review to be completed before the possibility of 'extended' membership is addressed.

On the other hand, ecumenical factors ought to be taken seriously when all matters of ecclesiology and church government are under consideration. It would be wrong to review 'membership' in Methodism without reference to the existence of LEPs or other ecumenical developments. The Council therefore proposes to address the recommendation quoted in paragraph 10 above as part of its ongoing review of church membership, and will report to the Conference in due course.

6. The Council reported to the Conference of 1999 in *Membership and Christian Discipleship*. The matter of 'extended membership' was considered in the context of the report's main recommendations. The Conference, though it adopted most of the proposals contained in the report, declined a resolution which would have opened up membership of the Methodist Church to unconfirmed people and which would have led to the introduction of a periodic redrawing of a local church's membership list. The decisions of the Conference, taken together with its adoption of the Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, mean that no fundamental change in the Methodist Church's understanding or practice of membership has been agreed or is likely to be agreed in the foreseeable future.
7. It is now possible, therefore, to revisit the CTE report's recommendation.
8. The working party which produced *Baptism and Church Membership* came into being partly as a result of a resolution of the 1992 Conference which urged the appropriate working parties within Churches Together in England 'to undertake further work on the theology and practice of church membership and the question of Extended Membership'. It is clear from the Memorials submitted to the 1995 Conference that the need for 'extended' membership is keenly felt in many LEPs. The Conference's own resolution of 1992 suggests that the Methodist Church would in principle be open to finding ways of permitting such extended membership.
9. *Baptism and Church Membership* acknowledges that, among the churches, there are considerable differences in the understanding both of 'church' and of 'membership'. For example, all who are baptized, live in the parish, and regard themselves as members of the Church of England are formally so regarded. However, each parish establishes an electoral roll of those 'members' who live in the parish or attend worship and ask to be entered on the roll. Though both churches practise confirmation, there is nothing in the Church of England that corresponds with the Methodist practice of 'reception into membership' during a service of worship after candidates have been approved by the Church

Council. If there were a concept of the meaning of church membership common to all, or several, denominations, the implementation of 'extended' membership would be facilitated; but no such common understanding exists.

10. Nevertheless, it may be possible for some denominations to adopt procedures which would enable them to extend membership, as they understand it, to other Christians. The Church of England has made considerable progress towards the extension of 'membership' (as that Church understands it) in its 1995 amendments to the Church Representation Rules. It is now possible for anyone able to make the following declaration to be entered on the electoral roll of a parish:

I am baptised and am 16 or over. I am a member in good standing of a church not in communion with the Church of England, which subscribes to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and also am a member of the Church of England and I have habitually attended public worship in the parish during a period of six months prior to enrolment.

11. Since entry on the electoral roll entitles a person to elect or be elected on to the councils of the Church of England, this is a very significant development. Is there any comparable step which the Methodist Church could take?
12. To answer this question, it is necessary to reflect upon how a person becomes a member of the Methodist Church. Prior to the early 1990s, whatever many people thought was the case, Methodist membership was conferred by the vote of the Church Council. The subsequent service was strictly speaking a recognition service, rather than one of reception. A Faith and Order report in 1992 clarified the situation that then existed and argued that people should be received into membership in an act of worship (which should include confirmation for any persons not previously confirmed), the Church Council having approved the reception of such people. The Committee's recommendation was adopted and the Deed of Union amended accordingly.
13. A person becomes a member of the Methodist Church by being received as such during an act of worship. In most cases, Reception into Membership accompanies Confirmation. But it happens from time to time that a person who has been confirmed and/or been a member of another Christian communion wishes to 'transfer' his or her membership to the Methodist Church. Provision is made for this both constitutionally (Standing Order 052(1) and (2)) and liturgically in *The Reception of Christians of Other Communion into the Membership of the Methodist Church (The Methodist Worship Book, pp.353f)*.
14. *The Reception of Christians of Other Communion into the Membership of the Methodist Church* was designed for use when persons who 'had been' members of other communions are now 'transferring' to the membership of the Methodist Church. The Faith and Order Committee believes, however, that with two small modifications, this service could be used to confer 'extended membership'. It would then be possible to

receive people into Methodist membership, without expecting them to renounce their 'membership' of other communions. The Faith and Order Committee has sought the advice of the Committee for Local Ecumenical Development, and of the Law and Polity Committee, which judges that no change would be required to Standing Order 052 to enable this to happen, though since clause 8(e)(i) of the Deed of Union could be interpreted as permitting only outright transfer, it would be prudent for the Conference to amend it as proposed in resolution 2.

15. If a person who had received 'extended membership' were to leave the LEP and to join a solely Methodist local church, his or her membership would be transferred in the usual manner. If the receiving church were of another denomination, either the person's membership would be transferred to that denomination, if that were possible, or the appropriate process under clause 10 of the Deed of Union would be invoked to determine whether the Methodist membership lapsed.
16. These modifications would be required in the words addressed in no.1 of the service to those to be received:

*N and N (N), you ~~have been~~ **are** members of other communions within the Church of Christ. Do you ~~now~~ wish **also** to be members of the Methodist Church?*
17. It is to be hoped that other churches involved in LEPs will also find ways of extending membership, as the Church of England has already done. A group convened by the Free Churches' Council to discuss extended membership was informed, in January 2000, of the recommendations of the Faith and Order Committee on this matter and responded positively and indeed enthusiastically. If extended membership were to be conferred by another denomination, or more than one, as well as by Methodists, in the same service, it might well be appropriate to produce a special liturgy for the occasion, incorporating the necessary elements of each denomination's rite. In these circumstances, the words and actions of nos. 1-3 (MWB pp.353f), as amended above, should always be included.
18. If the Conference adopts the resolutions which follow, it will be possible for the Methodist Church to confer 'extended membership' in the way indicated above, provided that the Conference of 2001 confirms the proposed amendment to the Deed of Union.

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the report.

The Conference amends clause 8(e)(i) of the Deed of Union as follows:

- (i) the admission into membership of persons received from other Methodist churches or *who are members of* other Christian communions;

WORSHIP IN LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS (1999)

Introduction

In 1996, Bristol District Synod sent the following Memorial to the Conference:

The Bristol Synod (R) (Present 267. Vote 254 for, 5 Ag, 8 Neut) recognises that Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) have peculiar pressures, regarding the ordering of worship, that sometimes requires them to go beyond current denominational practices. In recognising this, the Bristol Synod invites Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to provide guidelines for use by LEPs and Sponsoring Bodies, that clearly state the essentials of 'Methodist Worship' which need to be considered when drawing up and approving Orders of Service for use within LEPs that have Methodist involvement. Such guidelines to be available for approval of Conference in 1997 and to include the whole range of services currently approved for use by Conference.

The Conference replied as follows:

The Conference shares the Bristol District Synod's concern about the pressures sometimes faced by LEPs in respect of the ordering of worship. In some LEPs it is customary for the authorised rites (where applicable) of all the participating churches to be used in turn. In others, locally-prepared orders, often drawing upon a number of denominational rites, are drafted. The Conference understands that the Faith and Order Committee is often invited to offer advice on such local orders and is glad to do so.

Though the Bristol District Synod's suggestion that guidelines be prepared is attractive, the precise terms of the Memorial are not without difficulty. Guidelines about 'essentials' could lead to 'minimalist' rites, where acts of worship were reduced to their 'essentials'. Equally seriously, there would be a danger of introducing denominational considerations unnecessarily: the Conference understands that the Faith and Order Committee's comments on and criticisms of 'local liturgies' submitted to it have rarely been 'denominational' in nature. For these reasons, the Conference does not feel able to direct the Faith and Order Committee to produce guidelines in the precise terms suggested by the Bristol District Synod.

Nevertheless, the Conference believes that the idea of guidelines for LEPs on 'local liturgies' deserves further exploration and therefore refers paragraph 1 of the Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1997.

The Faith and Order Committee reported as follows to the 1998 Conference:

The Faith and Order Committee felt that, while it would be possible for Committee to produce some guidelines on good practice in the development of local liturgies, it would be much better if some ecumenical work could be undertaken in this area. The Committee therefore referred the matter to the Joint Liturgical Group, which in turn consulted the CTE Group for Local Unity. These two bodies resolved to set up a joint working party. For a variety of reasons, it proved impossible for the working party to meet before March 1998.

The Faith and Order Committee has now been informed that the joint JLG/GLU working party does not believe that it would be possible, given the great variety that exists within LEPs, to produce the sort of ecumenical guidelines that have been suggested. JLG has resolved that those of its member churches who wish to produce their own guidelines should be encouraged to do so, in consultation, if they so wish, with other churches.

The Faith and Order Committee has therefore resolved to draw up some guidelines, which will eventually be available to Methodists involved in LEPs. The Committee regrets the delay which the ecumenical explorations have caused, but believes that it was proper to make those explorations.

Report to the 1999 Conference

The Committee has now drawn up the following guidelines, drawing heavily upon *The Methodist Worship Book*, and invites the Conference to approve them.

WORSHIP IN LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS GUIDELINES

Introduction

In 1996, in response to a Memorial from the Bristol Synod, the Methodist Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the production of liturgical guidelines for Methodists involved in Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) and Sponsoring Bodies, with particular reference to 'local liturgies'.

In many LEPs, the authorized forms of service of each of the participating churches are used in turn. If a denomination has no authorized form of service, its 'week' reflects the liturgical traditions and usage of that denomination. So, for example, in a Partnership involving Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists, and having a weekly celebration of Holy Communion, *The Alternative Service Book* may be used on one Sunday each month; *The Methodist Worship Book* may be used on another Sunday; and the service on another Sunday may be in accordance with the usage of Baptists.

The advantage of such rotation is that the tradition of each participating church is honoured and shared. LEPs are not distinct denominations; they are partnerships of churches of two or more denominations.

Other LEPs, however, have felt that to use the authorized services (or their equivalents) of the participating denominations in turn perpetuates a sense of division. They argue that, since the denominational liturgies or usages have much in common, and since the members of the LEP worship as one body, they should be able to use forms of service which they can all 'own'. For this reason, ecumenical liturgies from such sources as the Church of South India have been used or 'local liturgies' have been produced.

The constitutions of most LEPs allow for all the possibilities described above, but indicate that forms of service other than those already approved by the participating denominations should be approved by the Sponsoring Body. Some denominations also insist that an appropriate person or body from within the denomination must approve such 'local liturgies'. Although the Methodist Church does not require this, the Faith and Order Committee is glad to be consulted and willing to offer advice.

The Faith and Order Committee has prepared the following guidelines on 'local liturgies' in respect of Holy Communion, of Baptism and Confirmation and of Services of the Word (Preaching Services), which are the services for which 'local liturgies' are most frequently prepared.

HOLY COMMUNION

The role of the presiding minister should be clearly indicated in the text of a service of Holy Communion. According to *The Methodist Worship Book*:

The term 'presiding minister' . . . means a presbyter or a person with an authorisation from the Conference to preside at the Lord's Supper. The presiding minister should begin and end the service. She/he should also greet the people at the Peace and preside over the fourfold Eucharistic action by taking the bread and wine, leading the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, breaking the bread, and presiding over the sharing of the bread and wine. Other people may be invited to share in other parts of the service.

The Methodist Worship Book provides Guidelines for Ordering A Service of Holy Communion, as follows:

The Gathering of the People of God

The presiding minister and the people gather in God's name.

Notices may be given and news items may be shared.

Acts of approach and praise are offered in song and prayer.

A prayer of penitence is followed by an assurance of God's forgiveness.

There may be a brief introduction to the service.

A short prayer reflecting the season or festival is offered.

The Ministry of the Word

The scriptures are read, concluding with a passage from the Gospels.

God's word is proclaimed and shared in songs, hymns, music, dance and other art forms, in a sermon, or in comment, discussion and in silence.

Prayers are offered for the Church, for the world and for those in need; a remembrance is made of those who have died; and the Lord's Prayer may be said.

The Lord's Supper

The Peace is introduced by an appropriate sentence of scripture and may be shared by the presiding minister and the people.

The offerings of the people may be placed on the Lord's table.

The presiding minister takes the bread and wine and prepares them for use.

The presiding minister leads the great prayer of thanksgiving:

The people are invited to offer praise to God.

There is thanksgiving for creation,
for God's self-revelation,
for the salvation of the world through Christ,
and for the gift of the Holy Spirit,
with special reference to the season or festival.

God's glory may be proclaimed in a version of 'Holy, holy, holy'.

The story of the institution of the Lord's Supper is told.
Christ's death and resurrection are recalled.

God is asked to receive the worshippers' sacrifice of praise.

There is prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit that the gifts of bread and wine may be, for those participating, the body and blood of Christ.

The worshippers, offering themselves in service to God, ask to be united in communion with all God's people on earth and in heaven.

The prayer concludes with all honour and glory being given to God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the people responding with a loud '**Amen**'.

The Lord's Prayer is said, if it has not been said earlier.

The presiding minister breaks the bread in silence, or saying an appropriate sentence.

The presiding minister and people receive communion, after which the elements that remain are covered.

Prayers and Dismissal

A short prayer is offered in which the worshippers thank God for the communion and look forward to the final feast in God's kingdom.

There may be a time of praise.

The presiding minister says a blessing and sends the people out to live to God's praise and glory.

Particular attention should be given to the following points:

- 1 The Ministry of the Word should provide for the reading and proclamation of Scripture, and a reading from the Gospels should invariably be included.
- 2 The Lord's Supper should invariably include the four actions of 'taking, giving thanks, breaking and sharing'.
- 3 The 'great prayer of thanksgiving', sometimes called the 'eucharistic prayer', should invariably include all the elements shown above, though not necessarily in the order indicated.

BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

Baptism

According to *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*:

Normally baptism shall be administered by a minister, or by a ministerial probationer appointed to the Circuit. However, where local considerations so require, it may be administered, with the approval of the Superintendent, by a deacon or diaconal probationer appointed (in either case) to the Circuit, or by a local preacher. In an emergency baptism may be administered by any person.

Baptism may, in Methodist usage, be administered to young children or to people 'able to answer for themselves' (who have not previously been baptized). In *The Methodist Worship Book*, four services which include Baptism are provided, to allow for the different circumstances that may be encountered: young children and 'adults' together; 'adults' only; young children only; the Baptism of young children only with the confirmation of adults. But a great deal of text is common to all these services. This is very important, because it should be clear, in Baptismal liturgies, that Baptism is Baptism, whatever the age of the recipient.

- 1 In any service of Baptism, one would expect to find:

A declaration, setting out the meaning of Baptism and including appropriate passages from the scriptures

A request for Baptism

A prayer of thanksgiving for the gifts of water and the Holy Spirit

The Apostles' Creed (or other Affirmation of Faith)

The candidate(s) [or parent(s)] declaring the names of those to be baptized

The pouring of water over the head of each candidate, or the dipping of the candidate in water, accompanied by the words 'N, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' [This pouring or dipping and the words which accompany the action are the irreducible minimum requirement for a Baptism.]

The making of the sign of the Cross on the forehead of those newly-baptized

Promises, in which the newly-baptized commit themselves to the Christian life, or parent(s) undertake to give newly-baptized children a Christian upbringing, and the congregation promises to maintain the Church's life of worship and service.

The liturgical usage of other denominations is similar, though the order in which the above elements appear varies.

2 The Baptism of those who are able to answer for themselves should normally be followed immediately by their Confirmation and Reception into Membership. The liturgy needs to provide for this.

Confirmation, as practised by Methodists, is always accompanied by Reception into Membership.

When Confirmation and Reception immediately follow Baptism, the service should contain the following elements:

A request for Confirmation

A prayer asking that God will strengthen the candidates to live as faithful disciples of Jesus and fill them with the Holy Spirit, which concludes with the minister laying a hand on the head of each candidate while words such as the following are said:

'Lord, confirm your servant *N* by your Holy Spirit that *she/he* may continue yours for ever. **Amen.**'

Reception into Membership with the words:

'*N and N (N)*, we receive and welcome you as *members* of the Methodist Church and of the church in this place.'

followed by the offering of the hand of fellowship

The post-Baptismal promises should come at this point in respect of those able to answer for themselves, even if they have already been made in respect of young children.

When the Confirmation is of persons baptized on a previous occasion, all the above elements are included, and the Apostles' Creed is said after the request for Confirmation.

SERVICES OF THE WORD

The Methodist Worship Book provides the following Guidelines for ordering a Service of the Word, or Preaching Service:

The Preparation

The leader and people gather in God's name.

Notices may be given and news items may be shared.

Acts of approach and praise are offered in song and prayer.

A prayer of penitence is followed by an assurance of God's forgiveness.

There may be a brief introduction to the service or a short prayer reflecting the season or festival.

The Ministry of the Word

The scriptures are read, including a passage from the New Testament. God's word is proclaimed and shared in songs, hymns, music, dance and other art forms, in a sermon, or in comment, discussion and in silence.

The Peace may be shared and introduced with an appropriate sentence of scripture.

The Response

Prayers of thanksgiving are offered for God's gift of creation and redemption in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Prayers are offered for the Church, for the world and for those in need, and a remembrance may be made of those who have died.

The Lord's Prayer is said, unless it has been said earlier.

The leader and people dedicate themselves to God in prayer.

The offerings of the people may be placed on the Lord's table.

The Dismissal

A final act of praise is followed by words of blessing and dismissal, or 'The Grace' is said.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Guidelines on Worship in Local Ecumenical Partnerships and authorizes their publication.

(Agenda 1999, pp.215-221)

(iii) Episcopacy

EPISCOPACY (1998)

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Conference of 1997 adopted Notice of Motion 14:

In order to enhance and develop discussions between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy and report to the Conference of 1998.

- 2 'Episcopacy' refers to the office of a bishop in the Church of God. An 'episcopal' church is one which includes the office of bishop within its structures and its understanding of the nature of ordained ministry.
- 3 The word 'episcopacy' is derived from the Greek word *episcopo*, which means 'oversight'. *Episcopo* is exercised in all Christian communions, whether or not they are 'episcopal' churches. Thus, in British Methodism, oversight (*episcopo*) is exercised corporately by the Conference, and also individually, for example by the President, by the District Chairmen, and by Superintendents.
- 4 Although the origins of the word 'episcopacy' and the recognition that *episcopo* is to be found in all churches are significant for any discussion of the subject, it should also be remembered that the words 'episcopacy' and 'bishop' have overtones which are influenced by historical association and by what the words signify in current use.
- 5 The Faith and Order Committee, in preparing the present report, has been conscious of the substantial amount of work that has been done in previous decades in addressing the matter of episcopacy from a Methodist perspective. This report offers a summary of that work, some of which may be unfamiliar to many members of the Conference. It should be remembered that both the ecumenical scene and Methodism itself have changed during the last sixty years, and that every document quoted below should be understood in its historical context.

PREVIOUS METHODIST CONSIDERATIONS OF EPISCOPACY

a) From 1932 to 1947

- 6 In the years preceding World War II Methodism's statements on Episcopacy tended to be framed in negative or defensive ways. The 1937 report *The Nature of the Christian Church* said . . . we cannot speak of "the three-fold ministry" [bishops, elders, deacons] as claiming the authority of the New Testament. Further, there is no evidence that definite prerogatives or powers are to be transmitted. We have no information about the manner in which elders were ordained . . . (*Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order* [referred to hereafter as *Statements*], p.26)

However a more positive note was sounded:

The dominant principle of the ministry in the New Testament is that of the manifold bounty or grace of God. (*Statements*, p.27)

- 7 In 1939, a response to *The Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England* included these words:

The Methodist Church does not claim that either episcopacy or any form of organisation even in the Apostolic Church should be determinative for the Church for all time. It would not be able to accept Episcopacy and Episcopal ordination if such acceptance involved the admission that either of these is indispensable to the Church . . . The Methodist Church is unable to accept the theory of Apostolic succession . . . as constituting the true and only guarantee of sacramental grace and right doctrine. (*Statements*, p.187)

- 8 Following World War II the situation had changed in many ways. After many years of discussion and consultation among the denominations, the Church of South India was inaugurated in 1947. The Methodist Conference was happy to support this Union which involved an episcopal element in its governance. Many of the anxieties Methodism felt had been allayed and a vision of how bishops might function creatively was attractive.
- 9 By 1946, when Archbishop Fisher, in his 'Cambridge Sermon', invited the Free Churches to enter into communion with the Church of England by 'taking episcopacy into their systems', ecumenism had moved on. The British Council of Churches had come into existence in 1942. Ecumenical cooperation was beginning to take place more frequently at local level. The terrible experience of war had changed priorities. Now, when a group of Anglo-Catholics produced a volume entitled *Catholicity*, Dr Newton Flew (President of the Conference, 1946) was able to draw together another group which published *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (1950). This was not a defensive document against

‘Catholicity’, as might have been expected, but a claim to Protestantism’s place within a much larger and deeper catholicity. The way was open for the Conference in 1955 to accept the invitation to ‘conversations’ with the Church of England.

b) The Anglican-Methodist Conversations

10 In the period 1958-68 reports from the Conversations and later the Anglican-Methodist Commission contained statements about episcopacy. These reports were adopted by the Conference.

11 An *Interim Statement* (1958) recognized that the continuity of the Church in history is important to Methodists alongside another important note of the Church, Christian fellowship or koinonia. Those elements of fundamental value to Anglicans find expression in Methodism in ways different from the episcopally ordered life of the Church of England, also directed towards continuity and unity. Statements like those of Anglican participants encouraged Methodists to see the possibility of episcopacy in a united church in a favourable light:

A firm conviction that the historic episcopate has been given to the Church by divine providence . . . does not require the conclusion that the gracious activity of God is only known in the episcopal Churches . . . We look forward to the ministry of a reunited Church which shall stand in the historic succession and shall inherit those powers, traditions and responsibilities which God has given to all or any of the uniting Churches. (*Interim Statement*, p.26)

12 Methodists responded by rejecting

a mechanical doctrine of unbroken succession by ordination from the Apostles themselves [as] both historically and theologically vulnerable [but] readily assent that the ministry is a gift of God to the Church and that by the second century the Christian community everywhere regarded its episcopally ordained ministry as possessing a commission ultimately derived from that given by the Lord to the Apostles . . . Since by far the greater proportion of Christendom rejoices in possession of this gift, it might be that God is now calling Methodism to find in it a confirmation and enrichment of its own inheritance. (*Interim Statement*, pp.35f)

13 Methodism was asked to consider

whether it would not be making a substantial contribution to the reunion of Christendom and to the development of her own inheritance if [the necessary functions of oversight expressed in particular ways already in Methodism] were brought together in the office of a consecrated person, called of God, authorized by the Church, and representative of the continuity and solidarity of the Church. (*Interim Statement*, p.36)

- 14 The bishop would be
 a humble man of God, the father of Christ's flock, the pastor
 pastorum who builds up the life of the Church, maintains faith
 and order, and represents the unity and universality of the
 Church. (*Interim Statement*, p.36)
- 15 The final report of the Conversations (1963) set out again what the
 Anglicans had said about bishops in *The Doctrine of the Church of
 England* (1938) and the *Interim Statement*. The Methodist signatories
 made clear their willingness to receive
 the gift of episcopacy that is greatly treasured by their
 Anglican brothers as a focus of unity . . . and continuity, and
 as a source of inestimable pastoral worth. (*Conversations
 between the Church of England and the Methodist Church: A
 Report* [referred to hereafter as *Report*], p. 12)
- 16 It was recognized that Methodism had '*episcopus* in a corporate form . . .
 distributed among various officers . . . as representatives of the
 Conference.'*(Report*, p.26) There did not 'seem any objection in
 principle to the coalescence of the functions of *episcopus* in a single
 person' (*Report*, p.26) as long as Methodists had no less freedom of
 interpretation than Anglicans enjoy in respect of the historical
 episcopate. It is clearly assumed that Methodism would be accepting
 more than a name, but an office defined by responsibilities associated
 with existing bishops in the catholic tradition. In 1965 the Conference
 gave general approval to the main proposals of the Report with a large
 majority and by doing so set aside the reservations about episcopacy
 made in the 'Dissentient View', a chapter written by four of the
 Methodist members of the Conversations. (*Report*, pp.57-63)
- 17 The Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission took on responsibility for
 developing the process further. It reported in three volumes in 1967 and
 1968. *Towards Reconciliation* had two sections concerned with
 'invariability of episcopal ordination' and 'The Laying on of Hands', but
 the chief contribution to the definition of bishops was in *The Ordinal*.
 Here the Presiding Bishop was to declare:
 A Bishop is called to be a Chief Minister and Chief Pastor and,
 with other bishops, to be also a guardian of the faith, the unity,
 and the discipline which are common to the whole Church,
 and an overseer of her mission throughout the world. It is his
 duty to watch over and protect the congregations committed to
 his charge and therein to teach and to govern after the example
 of the Apostles of the Lord. He is to lead and guide the
 Presbyters and Deacons under his care and to be faithful in
 ordaining and sending new ministers. A Bishop must,
 therefore, know his people and be known by them; he must
 proclaim and interpret Christ's Gospel to them; and lead them
 in the offering of spiritual sacrifice and prayer. He must take

care for the due ministering of God's Word and Sacraments; he must also be diligent in confirming the baptised and, whenever it shall be required of him, in administering discipline according to God's holy Word. (*Anglican Methodist Unity: 1 – The Ordinal*, pp.30f)

- 18 *The Scheme* contained a summary of how episcopacy would be exercised in Methodism during Stage One of the scheme of union.

All episcopacy belongs to Christ, the Good Shepherd, and the bishop's commission by Christ expressly assigns him to be the chief pastor of the ministers and the people in his charge. As father-in-God to both he is called to feed the flock of Christ in tender concern for their well-being, not as a lord and master, but as a servant of the servants of Christ.

Both as pastor and guardian the bishop must, whenever necessary, within the framework of the Methodist Constitution, see that discipline is exercised within the fellowship of the Church, and that in all such matters every proper step is taken to heal, forgive, restore, or, when all else fails, to rebuke, reprimand, or exclude. Discipline includes not only the proper operation of church courts, and the pastoral care of those who have erred, but the oversight of teaching and preaching and the supervision of public worship.

Continuity with the historic episcopate will both initially and thereafter be effectively maintained, it being understood that no one particular interpretation of the historical episcopate as accepted by the Methodist Church is thereby implied or shall be demanded from any minister or member of it.

Bishops shall officiate in the ordination of all Methodist ministers and in the consecration of bishops.

Consecration to the episcopate, like ordination to the ministry, shall be for life. It will be possible, however, for a bishop to return to circuit work, while retaining the order and title of bishop. (*Anglican Methodist Unity: 2 – The Scheme* [referred to hereafter as *The Scheme*], p.39)

- 19 Emphasis was given to the view that Methodism was not being required to adopt a specific model of episcopacy from the past 'but to join in a search for what episcopacy might become for us and our children.' It was expected that bishops would

undertake tasks of imagination and creative leadership in thought and action. Experiments and enterprises in mission and in the training of Christians are looking for the yet stronger lead that a truly pastoral episcopate will be able to give. (*The Scheme*, p.38)

Bishops would vindicate their office by evangelistic and pastoral leadership. They would be valued as fathers-in-God to the ministers in

their care. It was recognized that the Methodist Chairmen of Districts exercised many of the powers and functions of the diocesan bishop, but did not ordain. (*The Scheme*, p.41)

- 20 The Methodist Conference gave strong support, well in excess of the 75% required, to the unity proposals, but the Anglican Convocations in July 1969 were not able to agree by the necessary majority. The situation remained essentially unchanged when the General Synod debated the Scheme again in 1972. However the position of the Methodist Church had been made clear.

c) The Covenanting Proposals and other considerations of episcopacy: 1978 – 1988

- 21 Subsequently, episcopacy has been discussed again in Methodism in two slightly overlapping processes. The first was in connection with a further set of unity proposals, published in 1980, *Towards Visible Unity: Proposals for a Covenant* (referred to hereafter as *Proposals*). Preliminary discussion centred on ‘The Ten Propositions’ which included, as Proposition 6:

We agree to recognize, as from an accepted date, the ordained ministries of the other Covenanting Churches, as true ministries of word and sacraments in the Holy Catholic Church, as we agree that all subsequent ordinations to the ministries of the Covenanting Churches shall be according to a Common ordinal which will properly incorporate the episcopal, presbyteral and lay roles in ordination. (*Proposals*, p.71)

- 22 The report stated that

Consecration to the historic episcopate by episcopal ordination will become the practice of all our Churches from the point of Covenant onward. (*Proposals*, p.9)

- 23 Within the rite ‘The Making of the Covenant’ it was to be declared:

A bishop is called to lead in serving and caring for the people of God and to work with them in the oversight of the Church. As a chief pastor he shares with his fellow-bishops a special responsibility to maintain and further the unity of the Church, to uphold its discipline, and to guard its faith. He is to promote its mission throughout the world. It is his duty to watch over and pray for all those committed to his charge, and to teach and govern them after the example of the Apostles, speaking in the name of God and interpreting the gospel of Christ. He is to know his people and be known by them. He is to preside at the ordination of new ministers, guiding those who serve with him and enabling them to fulfil their ministry.

He is to baptise and confirm, to preside at the Holy Communion, and to lead the offering of prayer and praise. He is to be merciful, but with firmness, and to minister discipline, but with mercy. He is to have a special care for the outcast and needy; and to those who turn to God is to declare the forgiveness of sins. (*Proposals*, pp.18f)

24 In a later section of the Report it is stated:

While there is no single pattern to which episcopacy must conform, there are nevertheless distinctive characteristics and functions whose combination in a single role constitutes the meaning of the title 'bishop' within episcopal Churches.

A bishop:

- represents the unity and continuity of the Church, thus enabling it in each place and time to relate to the Church universal;
- exercises leadership and oversight in the worship and witness of the Church, to ensure that the faith is safeguarded, the word proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered;
- carries pastoral responsibility for the people committed to his charge, and especially for the presbyters and other ministers of whom he is given oversight;
- presides at ordinations;
- shares in the councils of the Church, with a special concern for those matters which relate to its life at regional, national and international levels. (*Proposals*, p.49)

Though a group of Anglicans within the Commission could not commend the proposals, and the General Synod did not approve, the Methodist Conference did (in 1981 and 1982) and by doing so further expressed its mind about episcopacy.

25 A second set of discussions directly related to episcopacy took place within Methodism itself. The 1978 Conference considered a report setting out some of the implications of a possible future decision to accept some form of episcopacy in British Methodism. The report took for granted that the Conference would never make the decision unless two conditions were fulfilled:

- (i) that the action would clearly advance ecumenical relations generally and particularly those in which Methodism was directly involved.
- (ii) that within the limits implied in (i) Methodism would be free to develop a form of episcopacy that was

consistent with her doctrines and usage. (*Statements*, p.202)

- 26 The same Conference adopted the following Notice of Motion:

The Conference believes that the coming great church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order. One step towards this would be for the Methodist Church to include an episcopal form of ministry in its life. This would be a sign of faith in the future and a way of helping churches with and without bishops in the search for unity. If the responses of other churches to the Ten propositions would cause delay in the process towards unity, the Conference directs the President's Council to consider, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, whether the Methodist Church should not take this step. (*Statements*, p.206)

- 27 This gave an opportunity for Methodist understanding of episcopacy to be reconsidered and attention given to what model might be developed upon which Methodist bishops might function. The Conference of 1981 was not asked to adopt the report of the working party set up to make this investigation, though the Conference commended the report for study. The working party did not have a common mind on all matters; however it did agree that the office of Superintendent should be developed as the basis for an episcopal structure. When the President's Council considered the draft report it recorded its view that 'no scheme is likely to gain acceptance in Methodism which does not make use of the already developed and significant role of the Chairman'. (*Statements*, p.205) The Faith and Order Committee was required to express its judgement and did so by supporting the working party's view that 'a further development of the present superintendency represented the most acceptable method of receiving the historic episcopate'. (*Statements*, p.230) The working party's report and the comments of the President's Council and the Faith and Order Committee may be helpful if the question is before the Conference again, but it cannot be said that the 1981 Conference added to or clarified Methodism's understanding of episcopacy.
- 28 In its report on episcopacy in 1981 the Faith and Order Committee had stated its judgement that 'to accept the historic episcopate into the life of Methodism would be in no sense a violation of Methodist doctrines'. (*Statements*, p.228) The committee was asked to explain its judgement by reference to the doctrinal clauses of the *Deed of Union* and by reference to Methodist usage. It reported to the 1982 Conference. In the *Deed of Union* Methodism commits itself to Scripture, the Apostolic Faith, the historic creeds and the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation.

Scripture does not require episcopacy, nor does it preclude it . . . The creeds were composed and the Faith was preserved for centuries within a church that was episcopally ordered . . . The repudiation of episcopacy was [not] one of the fundamental

principles of the Protestant Reformation . . . Luther's doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers was not directed against bishops but against a false distinction between the ministry of bishops and priests and the ministry of the rest of the people of God. (*Statements*, p.232)

- 29 The *Deed of Union* requires ordination of ministers and 'the acceptance of episcopacy is a further step within the terms laid down by the Deed'. (*Statements*, p.233)

The two areas in which the acceptance of episcopacy would be most likely to affect our usage are the act of ordination and the question of how authority is distributed through the Church. (*Statements*, p.234)

- 30 Having in mind the Covenanting Proposals, then still being considered, the report stated that

If Methodism adopts an episcopal order and, as is generally supposed, the President becomes a bishop, if he is not one already, then our usage in regard to ordination will not be fundamentally changed. (*Statements*, p.235)

- 31 The committee drew attention to how responsibilities in Methodism were constantly being re-arranged by the Conference and so to re-arrange responsibilities so that bishops were given some form of authority would not be 'a dislocation of our usage'. (*Statements*, p.202)

- 32 The Conference's next statement about episcopacy came in 1985 as part of its response to the World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*:

The Methodist Conference has ruled that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate our doctrinal standards, and indeed has shown itself ready to embrace the three-fold ministry to advance the cause of visible unity. Such an acceptance would see the historical episcopate as a valuable sign of apostolicity, but not as a necessary sign, nor as a guarantee . . . We see the historic episcopate as one possible form of church order . . . but neither normative nor clearly superior to any other. We agree that the episcopal, presbyteral and diaconal functions need to be exercised in the Church [and] are, or could be, adequately discharged by the Methodist Church as at present constituted. (*Conference Agenda*, 1985, pp.582f)

- 33 However it went on to say:

There is the challenge to all churches to recognize that their structures are in constant need of reform. We accept this as applying to ourselves. God is calling us to a fuller ministry than we have yet known. (*Conference Agenda*, 1985, pp.584)

- 34 The question of episcopacy came before the Conference again in 1986 and 1988 in the wide-ranging report on The Ministry of the People of God. This report judged that the time was not right for Methodism to introduce the historic episcopate into its system. Far-reaching changes were being proposed that would absorb energy and imagination; any move to take the historic episcopate into our system would at present be damagingly divisive within Methodism; and the ecumenical situation was uncertain and changing, so the ecumenical implications of any such step would be unclear. The report recognized that oversight is found in Methodism both corporately and individually, and was concerned to emphasize that all ministry should be exercised in a collaborative style. (Conference *Agenda*, 1988, p.864)

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

- 35 The draft Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, which was received by the 1995 Conference, contained the following reference to episcopacy:

A connexional understanding of the Church recognizes the need for ministries of unity and oversight ('*episcopate*') within the universal fellowship of believers. In the Anglican-Methodist Conversations, and in the subsequent Covenanting Proposals, the British Methodist Church expressed a readiness to accept '*episcopate*' in the form of bishops . . . If in practice episcopacy serves to reinforce the unity and *koinonia* of the whole Church, it is to be welcomed. Thus episcopacy can be a valuable witness, (though not the only witness) to continuity in and faithfulness to the apostolic tradition. (Conference *Agenda*, 1995, pp. 197f)

- 36 *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* (referred to hereafter as *Sharing*), a report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission, was published in 1996. It contains the following paragraph, which helpfully sets out the Anglican understanding of the 'historic episcopate':

Within Anglicanism, the historic episcopate denotes the continuity of oversight in the Church through the ages from the earliest days, expressed in a personal episcopal ministry, the intention of which is to safeguard, transmit, and restate in every generation the apostolic faith delivered once for all to the saints. It is not the only way by which the apostolic faith is safeguarded and transmitted, nor is it exercised apart from the Church as a whole. It is exercised within the Church, recalling the people of God to their apostolic vocation. It is exercised in an interplay with the whole people of God, in which their reception of that ministry is a crucial element . . . It is a personal episcopal ministry, but always exercised collegially (i.e. together with other bishops, and with the clergy within each diocese), and also communally (i.e. together with the

laity and clergy in synod, convention or council). (*Sharing*, pp.30f)

- 37 The Anglican-Methodist International Commission admits that Methodists have not always

experienced the historic episcopate as a sign of the unity, continuity or apostolicity of the Church. To the extent that they have experienced it otherwise, the effectiveness of the sign has been de facto called in question. A sign, even when it is given by God, can become . . . an occasion of disunity rather than unity. By the same token, in the mercy and calling of God, it can become again a gift of grace. Anglicans who treasure the historic episcopate within the polity they believe God has given them, seek to offer it to Methodists in the hope that it can become again for all of us a gracious sign of the unity and continuity Christ wills for his Church. (*Sharing*, pp.32f)

- 38 The Commission recognizes that

Much of what Anglicans value in the episcopal succession, Methodists have sought to ensure in their own succession of ministries: first, collegially and communally in the decisions of Conference governing the life of local churches; and then personally in the prayer and laying on of hands as a normal sign of maintaining a faithful ministry in the Church in every generation. (*Sharing*, p.34)

- 39 The Commission concludes this section of its report as follows:

None of our churches, viewed from the human perspective, can claim to have been fully obedient to the call of Christ; no ministry has perfectly pointed the Church to the faithfulness of Christ; yet both our churches recognize the presence of the crucified and risen One in our midst, and the guiding and healing hand of the Holy Spirit. In repentance and faith, therefore, this Commission encourages Methodist and Anglican Churches everywhere . . . to recognize formally the apostolicity of each other's churches and our common intention to maintain the apostolic faith. Following this mutual recognition the churches together may institute a united ministry which includes the historic succession as we have described it. (*Sharing*, pp.35f)

- 40 The report, *Commitment to Mission and Unity* (referred to hereafter as *Commitment*) is before the 1998 Conference. It recommends the setting up of formal conversations between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, indicating that such conversations would need to address a number of outstanding issues, including the nature and style of the office of bishop. The report states that

. . . the office [of a bishop] is relational in character and must be exercised in, with and among the community which it is called to serve. The office should not be so overburdened with bureaucratic demands that bishops are prevented from being alongside their people, or that their collegiality with their fellow bishops, presbyters and deacons is diminished. It is a ministry of service which requires an appropriate lifestyle and pastoral demeanour. (*Commitment*, p. 10)

- 41 *Commitment* then briefly describes models of episcopacy in the Church of England and refers to the ways in which *episcopate* is exercised in Methodism. It concludes:

Formal conversations will need to agree a common understanding of the nature of the episcopal office, the style of its exercise and what models will be appropriate in a united Church. (*Commitment*, p. 10)

- 42 *Commitment* also notes that in the Methodist Church ‘women presbyters exercise a ministry of oversight as Chairmen of Districts and are eligible to serve as President of the Conference’, while the Church of England excludes women from being consecrated as bishops. It observes that

Formal conversations will have to face this disparity and its implications for the reconciliation of ministries and thus for visible unity. (*Commitment*, p. 11)

- 43 The Faith and Order Committee understands that the *Interim Report* of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union may be presented to the Conference in 1998. Though the Committee has not had sight of this document, it understands that it contains references to episcopacy. The Faith and Order Committee has been consulted, and has offered its comments, about the proposal, *Towards the Making of an Ecumenical Bishop for Wales*, prepared by the commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales, recommendations about which may be before the Conference of 1998. The Committee is also aware of the conversations taking place bi-laterally between the Methodist Church and the Church in Wales, in which episcopacy is also likely to be a matter requiring careful consideration.

CONCLUSION

- 44 The Conference of 1997, in adopting Notice of Motion 14, directed the Faith and Order Committee to clarify British Methodism’s understanding of episcopacy. Having briefly reviewed Methodist considerations of this subject during a period of sixty years, the Committee believes that the following summary may be helpful to the Conference:

a) The Conference has asserted its view that episcopacy is not essential to the Church, but has also expressed its belief that the coming great Church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order.

- b) The Conference has declared that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate the Methodist doctrinal standards.
- c) In the context of proposals towards closer unity, the Conference has on several occasions indicated its willingness to embrace episcopacy, while insisting that Methodists should have no less freedom of interpretation than Anglicans enjoy in respect of the historical episcopate.
- d) The Conference has recognized that *episcopate* is already exercised in personal and communal ways within the life of the Methodist Church.

45 Many different understandings, styles and models of episcopacy are to be found within the universal Church. The Faith and Order Committee has not attempted to describe them in the present report but rather 'to clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy', as required by Notice of Motion 14. Nor has the Committee discussed the issues, already very thoroughly addressed in the 1981 reports, which would arise from a Conference decision to introduce episcopacy into Methodism. The Committee will be happy to prepare a further report, describing various models of episcopacy and setting out the issues referred to in the previous sentence if the Conference so requires. To test the mind of the Conference, resolution 2 below is supplied.

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the report.

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to bring a further report, including consideration of the matters raised in paragraph 45 above, to the Conference of 2000.

(Agenda 1998, pp.67-79)

The Conference adopted the first resolution, but adopted the following in place of the second:

'The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference of 2000 a further report on episcopacy which:

- (i) explores the understanding of corporate and personal oversight implied by our present connexional and district practice;
- (ii) explores models of the episcopate from the world-wide church;

and on the basis of (i) and (ii)

- (iii) proposes to the Conference guidelines on issues of oversight, including those concerning bishops, which may guide Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations and assist the development of our own structures.'

EPISKOPÉ AND EPISCOPACY (2000)

CONTENTS

- A. INTRODUCTION
- B. TERMINOLOGY
- C. THE EXERCISE OF *EPISKOPÉ* IN BRITISH METHODISM
 - 1. *Communal Episkopé*
 - a) The Conference
 - b) The Circuit and the Local Church
 - c) The District
 - 2. *Collegial Episkopé*
 - a) The Connexion
 - b) The Districts and the Chairmen
 - c) The Circuit and the Local Church
 - d) Forms of Collegiality
 - 3. *Personal Episkopé*
 - a) The Connexion
 - b) The District
 - c) The Circuit
 - d) Accountability
- D. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATIONS OF EPISCOPACY
- E. MODELS OF THE EPISCOPATE FROM THE WORLD-WIDE CHURCH
 - 1. The United Methodist Church
 - 2. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the Methodist Church in Portugal
 - 3. British Anglican Churches
 - a) The Church of England
 - b) The Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales
 - 4. The Roman Catholic Church
 - 5. The Moravian Church
 - 6. The Church of South India
 - 7. The Uniting Church of Australia
 - 8. Episcopacy in the Leuenberg, Meissen, Porvoo and Reuilly Ecumenical Agreements
 - 9. A Development in the United States of America
 - 10. The World Church
- F. *EPISKOPÉ*, EPISCOPACY AND BRITISH METHODISM
- G. RECOMMENDATIONS
- H. GUIDELINES
- RESOLUTIONS
- REFERENCES

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The Conference of 1997 adopted Notice of Motion 14:

In order to enhance and develop discussions between the Methodist Church and the Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to clarify British Methodism's understanding of episcopacy and report to the Conference of 1998.

2. The Faith and Order Committee presented to the 1998 Conference a report which quoted extensively from the many statements about episcopacy which had been made in Methodist documents since the time of Methodist union. The Conference adopted the Committee's report and the following resolution:

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference of 2000 a further report on episcopacy which:

- (i) explores the understanding of corporate and personal oversight implied by our present connexional and district practice;

- (ii) explores models of the episcopate from the world-wide church;

and on the basis of (i) and (ii)

- (iii) proposes to the Conference guidelines on issues of oversight, including those concerning bishops, which may guide Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations and assist the development of our own structures.

3. The present report seeks to address the issues raised in the direction given to the Committee by the 1998 Conference.

B. TERMINOLOGY

4. It is important to distinguish from the outset between '*episkopé*' (the Greek word for 'oversight') and 'episcopacy', which refers to the oversight exercised by bishops. Generally, it is only those Churches which include the office of bishop within their structures which are called 'episcopal'.
5. *Episkopé* is exercised in all Christian communions, whether or not they are 'episcopal' churches. Thus episcopacy is not essential to ensure *episkopé*, though it is highly valued by the majority of Christian Churches.
6. The words 'oversight' and '*episkopé*' themselves convey a range of meanings. Some of these are given focus in the biblical image of the shepherd, which speaks of pastoral care and a concern for unity; it also speaks of leadership, enabling the Church to share in God's mission and maintaining and developing structures appropriate to that task. The exercise of *episkopé* also reminds the Church of its roots in Scripture and tradition and encourages it to be open to the Spirit's leading in the contemporary context. *Episkopé* includes the exercise of authority, a sometimes uncongenial concept which is nevertheless required by church order.
7. Some episcopal Churches (notably the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches) claim that their bishops belong to the 'historic episcopate' or stand in the 'historic succession':

Within Anglicanism, the historic episcopate denotes the continuity of oversight in the Church through the ages from the earliest days, expressed in a personal episcopal ministry, the intention of which is to safeguard, transmit, and restate in every generation the apostolic faith delivered once for all to the saints.¹

Other Churches which have bishops, such as the United Methodist Church, do not claim to be in ‘the historic succession’. In Part E of this report, where various models of episcopacy are to be considered, it will be important to distinguish between those churches which make the claim and those that do not.

8. The very important World Council of Churches Faith and Order paper, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, speaks of ordained ministry being exercised in ‘a personal, collegial and communal way’.² Since the publication of *BEM*, these three terms have increasingly been used in the discussion of ministries of oversight (*episkopé*). ‘Personal’ is self-explanatory. ‘Collegial’ oversight entails a group of people (usually ordained, and, indeed, ordained to the same order of ministry) jointly exercising *episkopé*. An English example is the House of Bishops of the Church of England. ‘Communal’ *episkopé* is exercised by a council or assembly, which may to a greater or lesser extent be ‘democratically’ elected, and which may include both lay and ordained people. The Methodist Conference is an example. The word ‘corporate’ is sometimes used in place of ‘communal’ in this context, as it is in the resolution (see 2 above) adopted by the 1998 Conference. In this report, the terms ‘corporate’ and ‘communal’ are used interchangeably.
9. The words ‘Connexion’ and ‘connexional’ are so familiar to Methodists that it may seem strange to refer to them in this section about terminology. Yet it is important to note that both words, and especially the adjective, can be used in two ways. The Connexion is usually taken to mean the whole of the British Methodist Church, embracing every District, Circuit and local church. There is another usage, however, in which the Connexion is distinguished from the Districts, Circuits and local churches, as in references to the Church ‘at connexional level’, as opposed, say, to ‘District level’. Both usages are present in this report; it is hoped that in every case the context will make the meaning clear.

C. THE EXERCISE OF *EPISKOPÉ* IN BRITISH METHODISM

1. Communal *Episkopé*

a) The Conference

10. Any treatment of the Methodist experience of *episkopé* must begin with the Conference. The early Methodist Conferences were dominated by John Wesley, who set the agenda, summed up the conversation (the conferring) that ensued, and at the end announced what the programme or policy was to be. One preacher, after the 1774 Conference, was heard to remark: ‘Mr Wesley seemed to do all the business himself.’³ But Wesley believed that his power was God-given. As far as he was concerned, the Conference had no rights other than those which he conferred upon it. As he said:

I myself sent for these, of my own free choice; and I sent for them to advise, not *govern* me. Neither did I at any one of those times divest myself of any part of that power above described, which the Providence of God had cast upon me, without any design or choice of mine.⁴

Clearly, then, the first form of *episkopé* to appear in Methodism was personal *episkopé*, the ministry of oversight (both pastoral and authoritative) of one man. But by Wesley's express design, that was to change after his death.

11. After Wesley's death, the Conference was given legal continuity by the Deed of Declaration, which Wesley had executed in 1784 to bestow upon the Legal Hundred those powers which he himself had held. The Legal Hundred (whose original members were selected by Wesley to provide a cross-section of the itinerant preachers) was the 'official' Conference, though other preachers were eligible to attend and it was the whole Conference which exercised general oversight within the Connexion. From that time onwards, the Conference exercised, as it still exercises, *episkopé* over the people called Methodists.
12. Though the character and constitution of the Conference has changed over time, the Conference continues to exercise a corporate rôle of *episkopé* over the connexion. This can be illustrated in a number of ways. First, the Conference exercises *episkopé* by directing and leading the Church's thoughts and actions. It makes authoritative statements on matters of faith and order, thus seeking to preserve and transmit the apostolic faith, and on social and ethical issues. It also seeks to discern the will of God in the world and to enable the Methodist people to respond to their missionary calling.
13. Second, subject to, and indeed in accordance with, the Methodist Church Act and other legal instruments, it is the Conference which can and does establish the constitution of Methodism at every level. In the case of significant changes in polity, the 33 Districts (and sometimes the Circuits and local churches) are consulted. But the final word rests with the Conference.
14. Third, we may consider the Conference's rôle in relation to ordained ministry. It is the Conference which approves those who are to be trained for diaconal or presbyteral ministry. It is the Conference which admits them, in due course, into full connexion with itself and which authorizes their ordination. Those who ordain do so only with the specific authority of the Conference to ordain named individuals. Almost all ordinations take place during the annual meeting of the Conference, in the region where the Conference is meeting, rather than in the Districts in which the ordinands serve. It is the Conference which stations the ministers and deacons. In all these matters, the Conference acts on the advice of other bodies – the Connexional Candidates Selection Committee, or the Stationing Committee, for example. But in every case it is the act of the Conference itself which is decisive.
15. Fourth, all who preside at Holy Communion in Methodism are authorized by the Conference to do so – ministers, by virtue of their ordination which took place on the authority of the Conference, ministers of other communions who are 'recognized and regarded' or 'authorized' by the Conference, and, exceptionally, lay persons or deacons who, where eucharistic deprivation

would otherwise exist, are authorized by name by the Conference, with the matter subject to annual review.

16. Between the Conferences, the Methodist Council performs an oversight rôle. The Council is authorized to act on behalf of the Conference and is charged to keep in constant review the life of the Methodist Church, to study its work and witness throughout the Connexion, to indicate what changes are necessary or what steps should be taken to make the work of the Church more effective, to give spiritual leadership to the Church.⁵

In discharging its responsibilities, the Council is to ensure that the decisions of the Conference are fully implemented and to supervise the general work of the connexional Team.⁶ Thus it may be said that the Council exercises delegated *episkopé* on behalf of the Conference.

b) The Circuit and the Local Church

17. Moving away from the Conference, it is important to note that at every other level of Methodism's life, some sort of communal *episkopé* is exercised too. Each local church has its Church Council, which has authority and oversight over the whole area of the ministry of the church, including the management of its property. Aims and methods, the determination and pursuit of policy and the deployment of available resources are its proper responsibility.⁷

18. Yet in terms of oversight, the rôle of the Circuit is even more significant. To quote from *Called to Love and Praise*, a Statement adopted by the 1999 Conference:

The grouping of local churches in Circuits reflects the Methodist belief that no local church is an autonomous unit complete in itself. Rather, it is linked essentially and structurally to the wider Church. Circuit structures represent interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility and submission to mutual jurisdiction. Indeed, the Circuit, rather than the local church, has been the primary church unit in British Methodism. The appointment of Superintendent Ministers, with overall responsibility for the sharing within the Circuit of pastoral work, and for the preaching plan indicates the communal, interdependent character of the Church. The Circuit system also makes possible the deployment of resources in an area wider than that of the local church.⁸

19. This report will consider the rôle of the Superintendent Minister later. But first, it is instructive to look at the *episkopé* which belongs to the Circuit Meeting. This body is made up of the ministers and deacons appointed to the Circuit, various circuit officers, and representatives of each local church. It is the Circuit Meeting, not the local church, which invites ministers to serve in a Circuit (though such invitations are dependent upon the approval of the Conference, which, in the last analysis, stations ministers). It is the Circuits which provide funds for the stipends of ministers, from contributions received from the local churches. The Circuit is

the primary unit in which local churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help.⁹

The Circuit Meeting . . . shall exercise that combination of spiritual leadership and administrative efficiency which will enable the Circuit to fulfil its purposes . . . and shall act as the focal point of the working fellowship of the churches in the Circuit, overseeing their pastoral, training and evangelistic work.¹⁰

c) The District

20. There are approximately 660 Circuits, with an average of ten local churches in each. Each Circuit in turn belongs to a District, of which there are 33 (not counting overseas Districts). This much larger unit is ‘an expression, over a wider geographical area than the Circuit, of the connexional character of the Church’.¹¹ It

. . . serves the local churches and Circuits and the Conference in the support, deployment and oversight of the various ministries of the Church, and in programmes of training.¹²

21. The District relates both to the Conference and to the Circuits. The District Synod, in its Representative Session, is the forum in which aspects of the agenda of the Conference are received in a more localized setting and issues affecting the life of the Circuits are discussed. The Synod orders District affairs and develops District policy. Unlike the Conference, the Synod cannot direct the Circuits, except in some matters of finance and property, but by exploring important issues and by fellowship and sharing it has the capacity to lead and inspire. Most of its lay members are representatives from the Circuits, but all ministers and deacons in the active work and probationers are required to attend, unless given a dispensation from doing so. It is to the Synods that the Conference refers proposals for significant changes of polity. It is by the Synods that the vast majority of members of the Conference are appointed.
22. It is clear that, at four levels of the Methodist Church’s life, communal *episkopé* is to be discerned. Moreover, there is a sense of representation at every level. Most people who serve on Church Councils are elected by the local members; most Circuit Meeting members are appointed by Church Councils; most Synod members represent Circuits; most Conference members are elected by District Synods.
23. On this point, *Called to Love and Praise* is again worth quoting:
- The Methodist understanding of authority and Church government derive from the character of Methodism as a ‘connexional’ Church. The interdependence which properly lies at the heart of connexionalism naturally precludes both independency and autocracy as modes of church government. Insofar as such interdependence involves submission to higher authorities (at any level), that submission is to an authority representative of the churches over which it is set. In terms of the contemporary missionary strategy of the Church, authority is vested at each level in bodies which both represent and serve the local Christian communities.¹³

24. The communal exercise of *episkopé*, especially by the Conference, but also throughout the Church's life, is characteristic of Methodism's way of exercising oversight. But what of collegial and personal *episkopé*?

2 Collegial *Episkopé*

a) The Connexion

25. The Representative Session of the Conference is, as we have seen, an example of Methodism's communal exercise of *episkopé*. The Ministerial and Diaconal Sessions, however, are better described as collegial. In each, members of the same order of ministry 'watch over' each other and take counsel together about the work of the Church, with particular regard to their own order. In former times, ministers (presbyters) valued being in the succession of 'Mr Wesley's preachers'. Collegiality was nurtured in initial training in Methodist theological colleges and sustained through an itinerant ministry that often entailed moving to a new Circuit every three years. Ministers came to value 'the brotherhood (as it then was) of the ministry' and together had a wide knowledge of the Connexion. In the last fifty years, however, changes in patterns of training, in invitation and stationing, and in the increased time ministers now spend in fewer Circuits and fewer Districts, as well as the development of non-itinerant forms of ministry, have diminished this sense of collegiality.
26. The Methodist Diaconal Order, however, is consciously a religious order as well as an order of ministry. Its exercise of collegial oversight is found not only in the Diaconal Session of the Conference but also in the Convocation, which all deacons, diaconal probationers and student deacons are required to attend, unless a dispensation is received from the Warden. Convocation provides an opportunity not only for study, reflection and fellowship, but also for decision making and mutual accountability. Though the Warden exercises personal *episkopé* within the life of the Order, oversight is frequently seen to be exercised collegially through the Staff Team.
27. The connexional Team exists to support and encourage the Church in its ministry and mission. The Team works under the oversight of the Methodist Council and the Methodist Conference. Both its supportive rôle and its accountability to oversight indicate that the connexional Team is not intended, constitutionally, to embody collegial *episkopé*. Nevertheless, in practice the Team may be said to exercise a limited form of collegial *episkopé*. Part of the ministry of support and encouragement to the Church exercised by the Team involves considerable day to day responsibility for the Church's work. The Methodist Council further charges some connexional Team members with the responsibility of representing the Church's views, for example in areas of public policy. The exercise of such responsibilities by the connexional Team entails a kind of collegial *episkopé*, one derived ultimately from the Conference.

b) The Districts and the Chairmen

28. Like the Ministerial Session of the Conference, the Ministerial Session of the Synod is an example of collegial *episkopé*. All members of this 'college' are expected to attend, unless given a dispensation. The Ministerial Synods play an especially important rôle of oversight in relation to probationers.

29. Later in this report, there will be some consideration of District Chairmen and the personal *episkopé* which they exercise within their Districts. It is relevant here, however, to consider three developments which have occurred in recent years with regard to the Chairmen collectively, which suggest a growing collegial exercise of *episkopé*. The first is that the Chairmen have officially become much more active in the process of stationing ministers in Circuits. They meet together to try to deal with matters of stationing with a connexional approach in mind, rather than acting as individuals, concerned mainly if not exclusively with their own Districts.
30. The second development is that the Chairmen now officially meet together at least three times a year, not only 'for the discussion of stationing issues' but also for the consideration of 'other matters of mutual concern and reflection upon the work of God in the Districts and Connexion'.¹⁴ The Chairmen's Meeting, however, has no specific powers, legislative or otherwise.
31. Third, at the Blackpool Conference of 1996, a statement was read out on behalf of all the Chairmen. This may be regarded as a significant development, suggesting the Chairmen acting as a 'college', part of the Conference and yet, in this instance, a distinct body within it.

c) The Circuit and the Local Church

32. There is a sense in which, within a Circuit, the Staff Meeting exercises collegial *episkopé*, as ministers, sometimes with deacons and lay workers, confer about the work of the Circuit. An extended form of this occurs when the Staff meet with the Circuit Stewards. Circuit and local church Leadership Teams could also be regarded in this way, although they may more closely approximate to the communal model.
33. The Local Preachers' Meeting, which includes ministers as well as local preachers among its members, is another example of collegial *episkopé*. Oversight is entrusted to this meeting with regard to the approval and training of those answering a call to be local preachers, to continuing local preacher development, and to matters of character, fitness and fidelity to doctrine.¹⁵
34. Within a local church, the collegial model of oversight is most clearly seen in the Pastoral Committee, where *episkopé* is exercised jointly, usually by consensus decision.

d) Forms of Collegiality

35. In paragraph 8 above, it was said that 'collegial oversight entails a group of people (usually ordained, and, indeed, ordained to the same order of ministry) jointly exercising *episkopé*'. That is an accurate account of how collegiality is practised in most Churches and it is found in Methodism in, for example, the Ministerial Session of the Conference and the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order. There are, however, other ways in which 'colleges' are constituted in Methodism, involving not only those ordained to one particular order of ministry. Ministers, deacons, probationers and other lay people (church stewards, class leaders and pastoral visitors) may all be members of the same local church Pastoral Committee, for example.

3. Personal *Episkopé*

36. Personal *episkopé* is widely exercised in Methodism. Ministers in local churches, Circuit Superintendents and District Chairmen are valued as pastors and leaders, and their office is recognized as conferring authority and influence. They are respected as representative persons; and this is particularly true of the President of the Conference, whose *episkopé* in other respects is limited by the short-term nature of the office.
 37. It is important to the Methodist ethos that personal *episkopé* should wherever possible be exercised in a collegial or a communal context. While pastoral care is often best given on an individual basis, matters of pastoral discipline are normally resolved by groups charged with this responsibility. A very common model of leadership is the ‘minister in council’ model, where the minister meets to make decisions with other ministerial or lay colleagues (the latter often elected representatives). Sometimes the exercise of personal *episkopé* means that the minister stands ‘over against’ the other members of the meeting, as, perhaps, when he or she is representing the interest or missionary needs of the wider Church; but the more characteristic model is leadership from within, and personal *episkopé* is characteristically exercised where the minister lives and works among the people.
- a) The Connexion
38. The President of the Conference has considerable authority under the Methodist constitution, but this is derived authority; the President acts as the representative of the Conference. There is a sense in which the President oversees the work of the whole Connexion, but since he or she serves for only one year, this is not a sustained ministry of oversight. The President’s chairing of the Methodist Council is essentially different from the ‘minister-in-council’ model, because of the discontinuity of the office.
 39. There is, however, continuity in the office of the Secretary of the Conference. This, combined with the unique overview of the Connexion which the rôle provides, has meant that, more at some times than at others, the Secretary has had considerable influence, if not formal authority. Some Secretaries have exercised a significant ministry of pastoral oversight. But an instinctive resistance to too much power or influence being vested in the holder of any office has ensured that this has been personal authority accorded to individual Secretaries, rather than an acceptance of the office as conferring *episkopé*.
 40. Prior to restructuring in the mid 1990s, the General Secretaries of the Divisions and their equivalents in the earlier Departments, who, with one exception, were ministers, exercised personal *episkopé*. In their relationship with the Boards, they may be thought to have approached the minister in council model (except that they did not chair Board meetings). The move towards opening most positions within the connexional Team to ordained or lay candidates has been made without addressing the serious question of how *episkopé* – whether collegial or personal in form and whether by ordained or lay people – is to be exercised at Connexional level in a way that is consonant with its exercise elsewhere. Though such sharing of responsibility is consistent with the Methodist belief in the ministry of the whole people of God, it contrasts with staff teams elsewhere in the Connexion, which usually consist largely of ministers and are usually ministerially led. Connexional

Team members are less likely than staff in Circuits and Districts to understand their work in terms of personal *episkopé* either (compared with Superintendents and Chairmen) over their colleagues or (compared with circuit ministers or lay members of Circuit Leadership Teams) over the work which they are servicing.

41. The previous paragraphs suggest that personal oversight at connexional level is less clearly understood and effectively exercised than elsewhere in Methodist polity, and is not as satisfactorily provided for as are communal and collegial oversight. The Faith and Order Committee is conscious of the fact that the recently introduced connexional structures are still developing (see paragraph 27 above, for example) and does not therefore consider it appropriate to make specific recommendations about this matter at the present time. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that this is a matter of church order which it ought to keep under review; it undertakes to do so and to report further to the Conference in due course.

b) The District

42. Because, in Methodism, the geographical unit closest to a Roman Catholic or Anglican diocese is a District, the Chairman has often been perceived as exercising a rôle comparable with that of a bishop. But there are significant differences.
43. For example, a Methodist Chairman would not normally confirm, and has no authority to decide who shall be ordained, nor indeed, does he or she ordain, unless he or she is the President or is acting as the current President's deputy (a rôle almost invariably undertaken by a former President). As we have seen, the authorization of ordinations is an act of the Conference, and it is the senior representative of the Conference, or a deputy, who carries out the act. Constitutionally, the Chairman has little authority, though in practice most holders of the office enjoy considerable respect and have considerable influence.
44. The rôle of the Chairman is, in many ways, that of a circuit minister writ large. What the minister is to the congregation, the Chairman is to the District. It is a preaching, teaching and sacramental rôle. It has a large element of pastoral care; the Chairman is specifically charged with responsibility for the pastoral oversight of the ministers, deacons and probationers in the District. The Chairman also has the duty 'to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and ministerial probationers of the District'.¹⁶ While the Chairman's rôle in the formal disciplinary procedures of the Church is not now as great as it once was, he or she may nevertheless have considerable personal influence and a significant informal rôle in disciplinary matters.
45. The Chairman has an important representative rôle, representing the wider Church in the local churches and the local in the wider, often shouldering connexional responsibilities, while also representing the Methodist Church in ecumenical circles and in the community at large. The Chairman is a focus of unity, and acts as a 'link-person' within a District. This involves, for example, communication, transmission of information and teaching. The Chairman may exercise a prophetic and visionary rôle, initiating new ventures in fellowship, discipleship, training and mission.

46. The nature of the rôle has developed considerably since 1957 when ‘separated’ Chairmen became the norm. This has happened in response to the requirements of the Church and the expectations of the people. Though Chairmen do not normally confirm or ordain, as we have seen, their office does seem to be increasingly regarded as ‘episcopal’.

c) The Circuit

47. It is often said that, in many ways, the most striking example of personal *episkopé* in British Methodism is to be found in the Circuits, in the person of the Superintendent. The Superintendent is, among the ministers of the Circuit, first among equals. He or she is responsible for the making of the preaching plan for all the churches in the Circuit. He or she has the right, seldom exercised, to preside at all official meetings. He or she is responsible for ensuring that the Church’s discipline is upheld within the Circuit, and its doctrines not violated. In addition to these constitutional responsibilities, there are traditional expectations of the Superintendent’s ministry: he or she is expected to exercise a preaching, pastoral, representative ministry across the Circuit, bringing leadership and co-ordination to its life.
48. The rôle of the Chairman as a minister of *episkopé* is severely qualified by Standing Orders, in favour of the Superintendent. Although ‘it is the duty of the Chairman to exercise oversight of the character and fidelity of the ministers and ministerial probationers in the District’,¹⁷

It is the responsibility of the Chairman to strengthen the hand of the Superintendent and uphold his or her authority and rights under the Methodist constitution . . .¹⁸

Each Chairman is authorized to visit officially any Circuit in the District to which he or she is invited by the Superintendent or respecting which, after consultation with the Superintendent, he or she is satisfied that his or her assistance or intervention may be necessary for the advancement of the work, the preservation of peace and order, or the execution of the connexional economy and discipline. The Chairman of the District shall not so far set aside the office and responsibility of the Superintendent as to intervene in the administration of a Circuit or to preside at any meeting for the administration of discipline or for any other circuit purposes in any Circuit except when, in special circumstances, the Synod otherwise directs, or by the invitation or with the consent of the Superintendent. Even in such circumstances, unless the Synod otherwise directs, the Superintendent shall be responsible for administering, after consultation with the Chairman and his or her own colleagues, any measure of discipline which may be deemed necessary.¹⁹

49. For such reasons, when the Conference of 1981 considered the possibility of introducing episcopacy into its polity, there was deep division about whether this should be done by developing the rôle of the Chairman (as the President’s Council believed) or by developing the rôle of the Superintendent (as a major report before the Conference proposed). In the event, the Conference commended the report for study, without expressing any judgment on its conclusions.²⁰

50. Every minister in pastoral charge of a local church also exercises *episkopé*, supplying leadership, teaching the faith, and offering pastoral care. Commonly used terms like ‘pastoral charge’ and ‘pastoral oversight’ themselves bear witness to this fact.

d) Accountability

51. It is important to note, at the end of this brief glance at the personal *episkopé* exercised connexionally and in Districts and Circuits, that the Methodist way of doing things ensures the accountability of those who exercise oversight. Superintendents, in common with their colleagues, are subject to the processes of invitation and re-invitation. Chairmen serve for a fixed term, which is renewable by the Conference on the recommendation of the District. Officers of the Conference similarly serve for a fixed term. Personal *episkopé* can be exercised only with the consent of those among whom and with whom it is exercised. Occasionally, there may be tension between the exercise of personal *episkopé* by a minister, who by virtue of his or her ordination is a focus and representative of the calling of the whole Church, and the exercise of communal or collegial *episkopé* and decision making.

D. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATIONS OF EPISCOPACY

52. It is abundantly clear that oversight, *episkopé*, is exercised within the Connexion, and that it is exercised in personal, communal and collegial ways. For a variety of reasons, over a period of years, the Methodist Conference has considered the questions whether, when, and in what circumstances, it would be appropriate to move beyond the recognition that *episkopé* is exercised within the Connexion to the introduction of **episcopacy**. The 1998 report (see paragraph 2 above) quoted extensively from the many statements about episcopacy which had been made in Methodist documents since the time of Methodist union. It is neither necessary nor desirable to reproduce all those quotations here, but it may well be helpful to summarize them as follows.
- a) The Conference has recognized that *episkopé* is already exercised within the life of the Methodist Church.
 - b) The Conference has asserted its view that episcopacy is not essential to the existence or apostolicity of the Church, but has also expressed its belief that ‘the coming great Church will be congregational, presbyteral, and episcopal in its life and order’.
 - c) The Conference has declared that the acceptance of the ‘historic episcopate’ would not violate the Methodist doctrinal standards.
 - d) In the context of proposals towards closer unity, the Conference has on several occasions indicated its willingness to embrace episcopacy, while insisting that Methodists should have no less freedom of interpretation than Anglicans enjoy in respect of the ‘historic episcopate’.

E. MODELS OF THE EPISCOPATE FROM THE WORLD-WIDE CHURCH

53. The 1998 Conference, in commissioning the present report, directed that it should ‘explore models of the episcopate from the world-wide Church’. This section of the report sketches out a selection of such models, beginning with

Churches from the Methodist tradition, then in the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Moravian traditions. The concluding paragraphs of the section consider the place of episcopacy within a number of united Churches and important ecumenical agreements.

1. The United Methodist Church

54. The United Methodist Church (a global Church based in the United States of America) is an example of a Methodist Church in which *episkopé* is exercised by bishops. Although John Wesley disapproved of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury being called ‘bishops’, he ‘appointed’ them (or ‘ordained’ them, as he sometimes wrote) to superintend the work in America. Within Wesley’s own lifetime, the term ‘bishop’ was in use in American Methodism. The bishops of the United Methodist Church are elected by a Jurisdictional or Central Conference and usually consecrated at a session of the same Conference. They are regarded as elders (presbyters) exercising a particular office, rather than members of a distinct order of ministry, though on retirement they are eligible to attend the Council of Bishops without voting rights. It is their responsibility to lead and oversee ‘the spiritual and temporal affairs of the United Methodist Church, and particularly to lead the Church in its mission and service to the world’,²¹ and to transmit, teach and proclaim the apostolic faith. The bishops appoint district superintendents, consecrate bishops and ordain elders and deacons.
55. The United Methodist Church places great emphasis on the collegiality of bishops:

Bishops, although elected by Jurisdictional or Central Conferences, are elected general superintendents of the whole Church. As all ordained ministers are first elected into membership of an Annual Conference and subsequently appointed to pastoral charges, so bishops become through their election members first of the Council of Bishops before they are subsequently assigned to areas of service.²²

The Council of Bishops is thus the collegial expression of episcopal leadership in the Church and through the Church into the world. The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world, and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity . . .²³

56. *Episkopé* is exercised in the United Methodist Church not only by bishops, but also by district superintendents. The rôle of the latter is largely pastoral. The Book of Discipline indicates that they are to give pastoral support and supervision to the clergy of the district and encourage their personal, spiritual and professional growth. They are to enable programmes that may assist local churches to build and extend their ministry and mission with their people and to the community. They are also to participate with the bishops in the appointment-making process and to assist the bishop in the administration of the Annual Conference.²⁴ There is strong emphasis on the bishops and district superintendents as leaders in mission:

The task of superintending the United Methodist Church resides in the office of the bishop and extends to the district superintendent . . .

The purpose of superintending is to equip the Church in its disciple-making ministry.²⁵

57. It should be noted that the United Methodist Church does not claim that its bishops stand within the 'historic succession'.

2. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the Methodist Church in Portugal.

58. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) and the Methodist Church in Portugal (IEMP) both provide examples of Methodist Churches that have recently moved from non-episcopal to episcopal forms of Church life.
59. The MCSA began as an overseas District of the British Methodist Church. After becoming autonomous, it continued to be structured along similar lines to British Methodism. In the 1980s discussion about whether to retitle MCSA's District Chairmen 'bishops' gathered pace. In ecumenical contexts, and in relation to the media and political authorities, some argued, the term 'District Chairman' did not achieve sufficient recognition. Amongst opponents of the proposed change there were suspicions about the 'trappings' of episcopal office and serious anxiety about an erosion of the democratic accountability of Church leaders if the Church decided to have bishops. In due course the Conference of the MCSA decided to change the title of District Chairmen to 'Bishop'. Greater autonomy has been given to Districts. The Annual Conference has become a triennial Conference. Between Conferences a Connexional Executive oversees the Church; nearly half of its forty members are Bishops.
60. For the first century and a quarter of its existence the Methodist Church in Portugal was also an Overseas District of the British Methodist Conference. In 1996 the 'Iglesia Evangelica Metodista Portuguesa' became an autonomous Church. It chose to entitle the leader of the Church 'Bishop'. *The Basic Doctrines and Statutes of the IEMP* affirm that, for reasons of 'order, discipline and efficiency', the IEMP sets aside by ordination a diaconal ministry and a ministry of Word and Sacrament. They continue:

The Episcopate of the IEMP is not a ministerial order different from, or hierarchically superior to, the Presbyterian order, but an office within that order. Its functions comprise a pastoral ministry, which embraces the whole Church and includes the pastoral care of all the other presbyters, and the preservation and elucidation of the faith. The Episcopate is a symbol of Church unity and the Bishop is primarily responsible for the official representation of the Church on all occasions and in all places where such representation is required.²⁶

3. British Anglican Churches

61. For British Methodists, considerations of episcopacy notably take place in the context of their experience of it in the three churches of the Anglican Communion in Wales, Scotland and England. At the present time, Methodist representatives are participating in important ecumenical conversations in England, Scotland and Wales, each of which involves an Anglican Church and in each of which, therefore, episcopacy is an issue to be addressed.

62. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, a report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission, helpfully sets out the current Anglican understanding of the 'historic episcopate':

Within Anglicanism, the historic episcopate denotes the continuity of oversight in the Church through the ages from the earliest days, expressed in a personal episcopal ministry, the intention of which is to safeguard, transmit, and restate in every generation the apostolic faith delivered once for all to the saints. It is not the only way by which the apostolic faith is safeguarded and transmitted, nor is it exercised apart from the Church as a whole. It is exercised within the Church, recalling the people of God to their apostolic vocation. It is exercised in an interplay with the whole people of God, in which their reception of that ministry is a crucial element . . . It is a personal episcopal ministry, but always exercised collegially (i.e. together with other bishops, and with the clergy within each diocese), and also communally (i.e. together with the laity and clergy in synod, convention or council).²⁷

63. It is not to be assumed, however, that because the Church of England, the Episcopal Church of Scotland and the Church in Wales are all members of the Anglican Communion, the same model of episcopacy is to be found in all of them. Episcopacy may be exercised with different 'styles' and may 'feel' different in different contexts. For example, the episcopal office in the Church of England, which is the Established Church in that country, carries with it certain differences of function and perhaps status from those obtaining in the non-established Anglican churches in Scotland and Wales. Bishops of the Church of England are nominated by the Church, but, unlike their counterparts in Wales and Scotland, appointed by the Crown.

a) The Church of England

64. Within the Church of England, the bishop in his diocese is the chief pastor and principal minister. He ordains priests and deacons. He confirms. His responsibilities include 'conducting, ordering, controlling and authorising all services . . .' and 'of granting a faculty or licence for all alterations, removals, or repairs to the walls, fabric, ornaments or furniture . . .'.²⁸ He institutes clergy to vacant benefices. He may well perform a function in affairs of state as a member of the House of Lords. He represents the whole Church in and to his diocese, and his diocese in and to the councils of the Church. 'He is thus a living representative of the unity and universality of the Church.'²⁹ With his fellow bishops he has the responsibility to guard the Church against erroneous teaching.
65. But the concept of a single bishop in a diocese has been modified. There are suffragan bishops or area bishops, who exercise some of the functions of the diocesan bishop, sometimes in clearly-defined sections of a diocese, sometimes throughout a diocese. They act under delegation from their diocesan bishops. There are now the Provincial Episcopal Visitors, recently consecrated as bishops to provide ministry and pastoral care to those within the Church of England who are opposed to the ordination of women and who do not feel able to accept sacramental ministry and pastoral care from diocesan or suffragan bishops who have ordained women to the priesthood. Numerous

reports to the General Synod, on matters related to the exercise of episcopacy, make it abundantly clear, not only that practical changes have occurred, but also that there is a developing understanding of what episcopacy means.

66. The Church of England describes itself as 'episcopally led and synodically governed'.³⁰ The rôle of the bishops within that synodical government appears to be highly significant. The Synodical Government Measure of 1969 provided for the formation of the General Synod and enabled 'the laity to take their place alongside the clergy in the Councils of the Church'. Diocesan Synods also now exist and are designed to be democratically representative. The bishop presides at the Synod, though others may do so at the bishop's invitation.
 67. The General Synod is presided over by the two Archbishops. Within it, the House of Bishops exercises a certain amount of collegial power. Matters of doctrine, liturgy, ceremonial and the administration of the sacraments go before the House of Bishops before going to the Synod and then are referred back for final approval, thus reflecting the bishops' continuing authority over matters of oversight and the guardianship of faith and order. On occasion the House of Bishops is responsible for bringing before the Synod legislation which is largely of its own (the House of Bishops') making, for example, the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993 which provided for extended episcopal oversight, including Provincial Episcopal Visitors.
- b) The Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales
68. The 'feel' of Anglicanism in Scotland and Wales is significantly different from that in England. This may in part result from the fact that the Anglican Churches of Scotland and Wales are not established. Furthermore, because there are comparatively few bishops (six in Wales and seven in Scotland) and because the churches themselves are relatively small, both episcopal collegiality and a sense of closeness between bishop, clergy and people are perhaps more evident than in the Church of England. Bishops are individually involved in a wider range of national church activities than is the case in England.
 69. In the Interim Report of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union, episcopal ministry in the Scottish Episcopal Church is described in the following terms:

Paramount in the personal dimension of this ministry of oversight is the need for pastoral care and leadership in mission in a way that brings cohesion . . . In the Scottish Episcopal Church bishops serve in collaborative ministry with each other, other ministers and the councils of the Church at all levels. For the discharge of their duties they are answerable to the Church. They have a constitutionally defined rôle alongside others in the governance of the Church.³¹
 70. The Church in Wales, like the Methodist Church, is one of the Covenanted Churches which are exploring the possibility of an 'ecumenical bishop'. Though the outcome of this exploration cannot at present be known, the engagement in it of the Church in Wales illustrates a willingness (expressed in the Welsh Anglican/Methodist talks of 1965) 'to look forward to what

episcopacy may become, as we live together'. In Scotland too there is a recognition that episcopacy is evolving.

71. The Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Church in Wales and the Church of England have all experienced developments in their understandings and styles of episcopacy. Especially in ecumenical conversations, they have revealed an openness to further developments. In the context of a discussion of 'the Apostolicity of the Church and Ministry', the report of the Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran Churches, declared that 'all our churches are churches in change... Anglicans, for example, are presently concerned to find the right balance between synodical government and episcopal oversight.'³²

4. The Roman Catholic Church

72. The Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical understanding of episcopacy. Episcopal consecration confers 'the fullness of the sacrament of orders . . . the apex of the sacred ministry'.³³ The bishops are the successors of the apostles. They care for the flock of Christ by governing it and teaching it.³⁴ Each 'individual bishop . . . is the visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular church'.³⁵ Bishops 'have the sacred right and the duty before the Lord to make laws for their subjects, to pass judgement on them, and to moderate everything pertaining to the ordering of worship . . .'.³⁶ The Second Vatican Council stressed the collegiality of the episcopate, referring to the ecumenical councils held through the centuries. 'But the college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is simultaneously conceived of in terms of its head, the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor . . .'³⁷ who 'has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church'.³⁸ Thus, bishops have considerable authority and power within their dioceses, but it is always exercised under the higher authority of the Pope. Diocesan bishops are sometimes assisted by Auxiliary bishops who act under their authority. Bishops ordain and usually confirm, though this latter responsibility is sometimes delegated to presbyters.
73. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic understanding of episcopacy has advanced in parallel with the recovery of the understanding of the Church as *koinonia* (fellowship, communion), and bishops are seen as leaders of their local churches and active collaborators with the Pope, rather than simply as his agents. It is also true that much modern Roman Catholic theology emphasizes the duty of bishops to listen to and represent their local churches. Yet the Roman Catholic model of episcopacy remains essentially hierarchical and the bishops' collegiality is based on the principle of 'hierarchical communion' with the Pope, juridically enforced.

5. The Moravian Church

74. The Moravian Church, which profoundly influenced early Methodism, is an example of an episcopal church, in the historic succession, in which Church-governmental and administrative functions are not necessarily linked to the office of a bishop. The bishop is seen as 'a living symbol of the continuity of the Church's ministry'. His primary responsibility is spiritual; he has a special duty to intercede for the Church; he is a pastor to the pastors; he should visit congregations in order to deepen their spiritual life and his opinion should be sought in matters of doctrine and practice. The Bishop represents the whole

Church in the act of ordination, but ordains only on the authority of a Provincial Board or Synod.³⁹

6. The Church of South India

75. The twentieth century has witnessed a number of important schemes for Christian unity and some significant ecumenical agreements. Whenever episcopally-ordered Churches (especially those which claim the historic episcopate) have been involved, episcopacy has been an issue to be addressed.
76. The Church of South India (CSI) is an example of a United Church into which Methodists entered, and which involved acceptance by Methodists and other non-episcopal churches not only of an episcopal Church structure, but also of the historic episcopate.
77. Acceptance of the historic episcopate within the CSI was a much debated issue by the participating Churches in advance of Union. Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and other Reformed Church representatives agreed to lay aside their historic reservations about episcopacy for the sake of Union. Methodist missionaries from Britain, who originated mainly in the Wesleyan tradition, self-consciously provided a bridge between Anglicans and the 'Free Churches' on this issue. To achieve Church Union compromise was necessary, not least on episcopacy. The CSI Constitution, written before Union, deliberately did not include the expression of a particular understanding of episcopacy.

7. The Uniting Church of Australia

78. By contrast with the CSI, the Uniting Church of Australia is an example of a uniting Church that considered accepting the historic episcopate, but resolved for the time being not to do so.
79. The Uniting Church of Australia brings together Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist traditions. In the earliest stages Anglicans were also involved. *The Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union* looked in detail at episcopacy and recommended accepting the sign of the historic episcopate on the basis that the office of bishop was present in the Church from the earliest times. It was recommended that the sign be recovered from the Church of South India, because the Joint Commission understood that Bishops in the CSI avoided 'prelatical episcopacy'. The pattern of 'bishop in presbytery', the Report suggested, might find wide acceptance in the proposed Uniting Church in Australia. Ultimately, Church Union proceeded along non-episcopal lines, and without Anglican participation.

8. Episcopacy in the Leuenberg, Meissen, Porvoo and Reuilly Ecumenical Agreements

80. The Leuenberg Agreement is an ecumenical accord between Churches of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Most of the Methodist Churches of Europe, including the British Methodist Church, have accepted it and are members of the Leuenberg Fellowship of Churches. The Meissen Agreement is between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany (a federation of Churches from Lutheran, Reformed and United Church traditions). The Porvoo Common Statement marks an agreement between the

British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. The Reuilly Common Statement resulted from conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Because British Methodists are part of Leuenberg, but not of Meissen and Porvoo, the Leuenberg Agreement is of particular interest.

81. The Leuenberg Agreement allows for areas of doctrinal disagreement between member Churches. It provides for church fellowship, but does not seek formal church union. In the original Agreement little is said about understandings of ministry, and nothing specifically of episcopacy. Yet the Agreement does declare ‘mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for inter-celebration at the Lord’s Supper’.

82. In a subsequent document, *Sacraments, Ministry, Ordination*, participating Churches state a set of theses on Ministry, which include the following:

In ecumenical discussion there is . . . increasing talk of a ‘service of *episkopé*’. In the New Testament there is no clearly recognizable difference between presbyters and *episcopoi*. Certainly not all congregations had *episcopoi*. Nevertheless the ‘historic episcopate’ did develop in the tradition.⁴⁰

83. In Reformed churches, it adds, presbyters have exercised a service of *episkopé*, and in the Lutheran Churches there is an episcopal ministry. But, despite different practices, ‘the Churches of the Reformation are unanimous that they do not regard the churches as founded on the office of bishop. They understand the ‘service of *episkopé*’ exclusively as a service to the unity of the church, not as an office (*Amt*) over the church, but as a service (*Dienst*) in the church.’⁴¹

84. The German churches, which are signatories to the Leuenberg Agreement, are also part of the Meissen Agreement. In Meissen, the crucial paragraph is #16. This spells out a disagreement at the heart of the Meissen Agreement:

Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches, though being increasingly prepared to appreciate episcopal succession ‘as a sign of the apostolicity of the life of the whole Church’ hold that this particular form of *episkopé* should not become a necessary condition for ‘full, visible unity’. The Anglican understanding of full, visible unity includes the historic episcopate and full interchangeability of ministers. Because of this remaining difference our mutual recognition of one another’s ministries does not result yet in the full interchangeability of ministers.⁴²

85. In Porvoo, even this obstacle is absent, and consequently the Nordic and Baltic Churches, which have the historic episcopate, are in the same degree of fellowship with the Anglican Churches of the British Isles as Provinces of the Anglican Communion outside the British Isles.

86. The Reuilly Common Statement was published as recently as 1999. It includes the following sentences:

Anglicans believe that the historic episcopate is a sign of the apostolicity of the whole Church . . . Anglicans hold that the full visible unity of the Church includes the historic episcopal succession

. . . Lutherans and Reformed also believe that their ministries are in apostolic succession. In their ordination rites they emphasize the continuity of the Church and its ministry. They can recognize in the historic episcopal succession a sign of the apostolicity of the Church. They do not, however, consider it a necessary condition for full visible unity . . . Anglicans increasingly recognize that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been preserved in churches which have not retained the historic episcopal succession. However, Anglicans commend the use of the sign to signify: God's promise to be with the Church; God's call to fidelity and to unity; and a commission to realize more fully the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles. Because of this remaining difference . . . our mutual recognition of one another's ministries does not yet result in the full interchangeability of ordained ministers.⁴³

9. A Development in the United States of America

87. The *Concordat of Agreement* between the Episcopal (Anglican) Church of the United States of America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which currently has bishops who are not in the 'historic succession', offers a model for reconciliation between a Church claiming the historic episcopate and one not claiming it. The *Concordat*, which has been approved by the Lutheran Church and awaits approval by the Episcopal Church, will, when fully ratified, enable full interchangeability of ministries and a degree of mutual consultation and accountability. To enable this to happen, the Episcopal Church will temporarily suspend the restriction that no one shall exercise ministry as a bishop, priest or deacon who has not been ordained within the historic episcopate.⁴⁴ The two churches will acknowledge each others' ministries as 'given by God . . . in the service of God's people'.⁴⁵ The Episcopalians will acknowledge that the historic episcopate is not 'necessary for salvation or for the recognition of another Church as a Church'.⁴⁶ The two churches will remain free to keep their existing links of communion with other churches, whether episcopal or non-episcopal. The Lutherans will receive the sign of the historical succession through the future consecration of bishops by others who stand in that succession, though they are not thereby required to affirm that such episcopacy is necessary for the unity of the Church.⁴⁷

10. The World Church

88. The development of British Methodist understanding of *episkopé* and of episcopacy does not take place in isolation from the World Church. The British Methodist Church is committed to an enriching and challenging pattern of relationships with partner Churches from Methodist and other traditions. From the brief sketches above, it is clear that British Methodism's partners in the World Church have explored very similar questions to those addressed in the present report. They have come to a wide range of conclusions. Some have continued without bishops; some have introduced bishops, but not within the historic episcopate; yet others have accepted the historic episcopate.

F. *EPISKOPÉ*, EPISCOPACY AND BRITISH METHODISM

89. The 1998 Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to offer 'guidelines on issues of oversight, including those concerning bishops, which may guide Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations and assist the development of our own structures'.
90. It is clear to the Faith and Order Committee that the issue is not simply one of terminology. The expression 'District Chairman' has come to be regarded by many people as unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it violates the principle, strongly endorsed by the Conference, of the use of inclusive language. Second, it is largely unintelligible to the wider community. From time to time, and as recently as 1998, the suggestion has been made that these difficulties could be overcome if the 'Chairmen' were called 'Bishops'. But, while it is clear that 'District Chairman' is not a satisfactory term, the Faith and Order Committee believes that the straight substitution of the term 'bishop' is not an acceptable solution to the difficulty, for the following reasons.
91. First, the proposal to entitle Chairmen 'bishops' takes it for granted that the Chairmen would be the obvious people to be so named. The 1981 report (see paragraph 49 above) took a different view. A change of name should not take place without a serious study of the implications of such a change, some of which are addressed in paragraphs 102 – 109 below.
92. Second, although the Faith and Order Committee does not intend to pass any judgment on Methodist Churches in other parts of the world which have adopted the title 'bishop', the Committee believes that the ecumenical context which obtains in the British Isles renders such a course inappropriate for British Methodism. Only confusion would result if a title extensively used throughout the Christian world, but not previously used in British Methodism, were suddenly adopted and invested with a distinctive meaning, which took no account of the traditional rôle of a bishop, as described in paragraph 94 below. Such a procedure would be likely to hinder rather than to advance the cause of Christian unity, especially in relation to Churches which place great emphasis upon the historic episcopate.
93. This is not to say that there is only one way in which episcopacy can be understood. Section E above briefly illustrated the diversity which presently exists. Nevertheless, there are common features in the picture that emerges from that section. They are as follows.
- 94. It is generally agreed, in episcopal churches, that bishops are to exercise oversight, both within their particular areas of responsibility and in the wider Church. Bishops exercise their oversight both individually and collegially, and in many episcopal churches play a leading rôle, alongside presbyters, deacons and lay people, in church government. They have responsibility for the transmission and safeguarding of the apostolic faith, for providing for the administering of the sacraments, and for leadership in the Church's mission. They ordain presbyters and deacons. Their prophetic rôle includes the responsibility to represent the concerns of the wider Church to their dioceses, as they listen to and share with others the insights and witness of their own local churches.**
95. These common features of episcopacy, as it is generally understood among episcopal churches, would have to be taken seriously by British Methodism if

the introduction of a form of episcopacy to Methodism were to contribute to, rather than to impede, progress towards unity.

96. The report adopted by the 1998 Conference, having surveyed the discussion of episcopacy in British Methodism from 1937 onwards, noted that, while British Methodism does not regard episcopacy as being an essential element of Church order, the Conference has expressed its willingness to embrace the historic episcopate in order to further the cause of Christian unity.
97. In view of the significance which many churches attach to the historic episcopate, it would be misguided to introduce a form of episcopacy into British Methodism which would not be recognized by other churches as being within the historic episcopate. The recent *Concordat* of the Evangelical Lutherans and Episcopalians in the United States of America (see paragraph 87 above) illustrates the point that for significant progress to be made towards the reconciliation of ministries, the question of the 'historic succession' cannot be evaded. If Methodism is to advance towards unity with episcopally ordered churches in the historic succession, then at some stage, it must embrace episcopacy in that succession. This has been acknowledged in the past, as, for example, when, in its response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Conference of 1985 declared:

. . . we await the occasion when it would be appropriate 'to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'.⁴⁸
98. The Conference of 1978 expressed its belief that episcopacy would be one of the characteristics of 'the coming great Church'. It is unrealistic to imagine that the considerable majority of Christians whose churches are episcopally ordered would be willing to give up a sign of apostolicity which they cherish, and indeed it would be unreasonable to expect them to do so. It would be characteristic of Methodism to be open to the possibility that something that had not previously been a feature of Methodist life might contribute to it and enrich it.
99. Hitherto, the Conference has taken the view that such a momentous step should be taken only in the context of a unity scheme, rather than as an independent denominational act. The time and energy that would be involved in doing the latter would be considerable, and could be justified only if it were clear that the introduction of episcopacy to Methodism would either significantly enhance the way in which *episkopé* is exercised among us or that it would help to bring the unity of the Church closer. Since *episkopé* is already exercised throughout the Methodist Church's life (though imperfectly), and since discussions of various sorts are currently underway with the Anglican churches of England, Scotland and Wales, in which episcopacy is one of the issues under discussion, it would be unwise for the Methodist Church to act independently at the present time.
100. The judgment of the Faith and Order Committee is, therefore, that it would be helpful for the Conference to affirm its willingness to embrace episcopacy in the context of a unity scheme or as a significant step to bring the unity of the Church closer, but that the Conference should not seek to develop its own form of episcopacy outside that context. The Committee hopes that the preceding sentence will be read, not as a turning away from considerations of

episcopacy, but rather as a call to engage seriously with partner churches in the search for a form of episcopacy which all can own and cherish.

101. If conversations with a church or churches within the historic episcopate were to lead to a scheme for full visible unity, such a scheme would clearly need to set out a proposal for the way in which episcopal ministry would be exercised in the united Church. It could be, however, that conversations might result in a scheme for much closer relationships and partnerships, including perhaps reconciliation and interchangeability of ministries, while the churches continued to exist as separate entities. If the introduction of the historic episcopate to those churches which previously lacked it were part of such proposals, it would clearly be helpful for the Methodist Church to have a considered answer to the many questions which would need to be addressed before episcopacy could be introduced. These are set out in paragraphs 102 to 109 below.
102. First, who would become bishops? In previous considerations of this question, British Methodism has looked at three possibilities. The 1981 report claimed that

As the bishop is a focus of oversight and unity in the church, it would be natural for the President to be a bishop. Moreover, he engages in the kind of ministry traditionally associated with bishops (for example, in ordaining and in presiding over the Conference to which oversight of doctrine is committed). However to have only the President as bishop would be to remove the bishop from the close contact with the local church and the local minister which is generally seen as one of the most valuable parts of his ministry. Moreover the presence of perhaps ten or a dozen Past Presidents engaged in a ministry that is not necessarily one which focusses oversight and unity would severely distort the rôle of a bishop in the church . . . If the President is to be a bishop, which we judge to be right, then it is important that the more usual expression of episcopacy be elsewhere.⁴⁹

103. Those observations from the 1981 report, with which the Faith and Order Committee concurs, leave two possibilities for ‘the more usual expression of episcopacy’: the District Chairmen and the Circuit Superintendents. If the latter became bishops, this would presumably require the formation of fewer and much larger Circuits, since it would not be easy for over 300 bishops to relate to the bishops of other churches, or for that matter to each other. What, in these circumstances, would become of the Chairman’s rôle? On the other hand, if the Chairmen rather than the Superintendents became bishops, how would their rôle and their constitutional responsibilities, and those of Superintendents, as set out in the Deed of Union and Standing Orders, need to be amended in order that appropriate oversight might be exercised?
104. Second, there is the matter of the relationship between the bishops on the one hand and the Conference and its President on the other. As we have seen, *episkopé* is exercised corporately by the Conference and, derivatively, by individuals, as well as collegially. There is no reason to suppose that the introduction of bishops would detract from the authority of the Conference, since bishops would exercise oversight under the authority of the Conference and be accountable to it.

105. The relationship between the bishops and the President (if the latter were not a bishop) would, however, raise difficulties. The latter, or his or her deputy, acts on behalf of the Conference at ordinations, the vast majority of which take place during the period when the Conference is meeting and within easy reach of the Conference venue. This practice is derived from, and has helped to maintain, the connexionalism that is such an important part of Methodism. Yet it is a universally recognized feature of episcopacy that bishops ordain and such ordinations usually take place within the diocese where those to be ordained serve. It would be extraordinary to have Methodist bishops who did not ordain, and the introduction of bishops would therefore be bound to involve some changes in the way in which Methodist ordinations are organized. Yet it ought to be possible to devise some means whereby bishops, alongside the President or a deputy, could play a leading rôle in ordinations, thus preserving the connexional principle while introducing episcopal ordination. For example, if the Chairmen became bishops, ordinations could take place at the Conference for groups of three or four Districts. The President or a deputy would preside at the services. Each bishop, with the President, could ordain the candidates from his or her District. It would be less easy to see how this problem might be resolved if the Superintendents were to become bishops.
106. There are other issues, however, about the relationship between the President and Methodist bishops. The former fulfils many rôles during the presidential year, for example in visits to Districts and to some extent in matters of discipline, which might be thought to be 'episcopal' rôles. If Chairmen or Superintendents became bishops, some re-evaluation of presidential responsibilities would be necessary.
107. Third, another common feature of episcopal churches is the concept of bishops acting collegially. Reference has already been made to the Church of England's House of Bishops and to the United Methodist Church, in whose understanding 'the Council of Bishops is the collegial expression of episcopal leadership'. At present, British Methodism has no equivalent. The District Chairmen meet together regularly, but they do not have authority to speak or act corporately on behalf of or to the Connexion. Nevertheless, as has already been pointed out, there have been developments in the way in which Chairmen operate collegially, and the introduction of bishops would require closer examination of the collegial rôle that they might properly exercise.
108. Fourth, careful consideration should be given to how episcopacy relates to county, regional and national structures and to how 'subsidiarity' may develop in the way in which authority is exercised within the Church. Would it be appropriate to have more than one type of episcopal area (for example, metropolitan districts, rural areas, small town) some with 'separated' and some with 'non-separated' bishops?
109. Fifth, there is the question of the means whereby British Methodism should receive the historic episcopate. In the context of conversations involving British Anglicans, it would clearly be appropriate for them to be involved in the first Methodist episcopal ordinations. But it would also be appropriate for the Methodist Church to receive the sign from a church or churches within the historic episcopate with which it is already in communion. The Church of South India is an obvious example.

110. The questions raised in paragraphs 102 to 109 above need to be addressed in the context of Methodism's experience of the exercise of *episkopé*, communally, collegially and personally, as described in part C of this report, and in the light of the guidelines in part H. The Faith and Order Committee believes that widespread discussion of these questions is desirable in order to discover how a Methodist episcopate would operate and therefore offers the third recommendation in part G and Resolution 3 to enable such a process.

G. RECOMMENDATIONS

111. The Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Conference, while taking no immediate steps to introduce episcopacy into Methodist polity, should affirm its willingness to do so in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments, on the basis of the Guidelines set out in section H below.
112. The Committee further recommends that these Guidelines be adopted by the Conference in order (a) to assist Methodist representatives in ecumenical conversations faithfully to convey to others the mind of the Conference and (b) to assist in the development of our own structures.
113. Finally, the Committee recommends that this report be commended to the Methodist people for discussion, and that they be invited to comment on the issues raised in paragraphs 89 – 109 above.

H. GUIDELINES

114. The Faith and Order Committee proposes that the following Guidelines be adopted as a summary statement of the Methodist Church's position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.

1. The Methodist Church recognizes that *episkopé* is exercised within its life in communal, collegial and personal ways.

a. The Methodist Church values communal *episkopé*, exercised by representative bodies throughout the Church's life.

The Conference and the District Synod, in their representative sessions, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils are examples of the exercise of communal *episkopé*.

b. The Methodist Church values collegial *episkopé*, and its tradition of expressing collegiality, not only among members of the same order of ministry, but also among lay persons and ordained persons.

Examples of such collegiality include the Ministerial Session of the Conference, which is made up of ministers, and Local Preachers Meetings and local church Pastoral Committees, where collegial oversight is shared by ordained and lay persons.

c. The Methodist Church values personal *episkopé* in every part of the Church's life, but believes that such *episkopé* should be exercised within a collegial or communal context.

It is important that personal *episkopé* be allowed for within connexional structures in ways consonant with its exercise in Circuits and Districts. Because the *episkopé* exercised by individuals within the life of the Methodist Church is derived or representative oversight, it is important that those who exercise personal *episkopé* remain accountable to the wider Church. It must be recognized that the need to be accountable and the need to maintain proper confidentiality may sometimes be in conflict.

- 2. The Methodist Church is a connexional Church and all *episkopé* should be exercised within this context. In the development of any structures, due consideration should be given to their impact upon the life of the whole Church. There is a proper balance to be maintained between, for example, Circuit and District or District and Connexion.**

While recognizing the value of a diocesan model, the Methodist Church would be uneasy about the development of any models of personal *episkopé* which isolated Districts from the whole Church.

- 3. The Methodist Church began as a missionary movement and continues to have mission at its heart. Methodists believe that a key function of *episkopé* is to enable and encourage the Church's participation in God's mission.**

The missionary imperative was an important consideration in the introduction of 'separated' Chairmen. The experience of some Methodist Churches, including the United Methodist Church, which have adopted episcopal systems of oversight provides encouraging precedents for expressions of *episkopé* that are mission-led.

- 4. In the furtherance of the search for the visible unity of Christ's Church, the Methodist Church would willingly receive the sign of episcopal succession on the understanding that ecumenical partners sharing this sign with the Methodist Church (a) acknowledge that the latter has been and is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and (b) accept that different interpretations of the precise significance of the sign exist.**

As to (a), this was something that the Conference asked of the Church of England in 1955 as the 'Conversations' began. Many people in our partner churches would themselves be anxious to ensure that nothing done in the uniting of ministries should imply that previous ministries were invalid or inauthentic.

As to (b), Methodism has previously insisted that there should be freedom of interpretation as to the significance of the historic episcopate. The concept that episcopacy is a 'sign but not a guarantee of the apostolicity of the Church' may be widely acceptable as a testimony to its symbolic witness to links across time, while testifying too to the obvious truth that bishops are not automatically and invariably wise or faithful.

- 5. The Methodist Church, in contemplating the possibility of receiving the sign of the historic episcopal succession, expects to engage in dialogue with its sister Churches to clarify as thoroughly as possible the nature and benefits of this gift.**

In considering the introduction of the historic succession to Methodism in the sort of circumstances outlined in Guideline 2, the Methodist Church recognizes the need to explore its potential for complementing and enriching the Methodist Church's present experience of *episkopé* and for enhancing Methodism's sense of communion within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

6. The Methodist Church would be unable to receive the sign of episcopal succession in a context which would involve a repudiation of what the Methodist Church believed itself to have received from God.

An obvious and important example of what is meant by this Guideline is the ministry of women. Since women were ordained to the presbyterate in the Methodist Church, every office for which male ministers are eligible has been open also to women. In its preliminary consideration of the scheme for an Ecumenical Bishop in Wales, the Conference was extremely concerned by the statement that the first such bishop would necessarily be male, and it gave its approval for further work to be done on the scheme on the understanding that serious efforts would be made in the ongoing discussions to ensure that such a restriction should not obtain in relation to any subsequent appointment.

7. The Methodist Church, in receiving the sign of episcopal succession, would insist that all ministries, including those of oversight, are exercised within the ministry of the whole people of God and at its service, rather than in isolation from it and in supremacy over it.

In earlier conversations, the Methodist Church has emphasized the value which it would place on the pastoral office of bishops, and on bishops having leadership responsibilities for mission and a representative rôle in community affairs. The view has been expressed that they should know and be known at many levels, and that they should exercise authority with gentleness and be humble servants of Christ.

As the survey of styles of *episkopé* and of episcopacy indicated, Methodists should not fear that the adoption of episcopacy would, of necessity, involve the adoption of a hierarchical model. Increasingly, in episcopally ordered churches, emphasis has been placed on the pastoral, teaching and missionary rôles of the bishop. As *Commitment to Mission and Unity* insists:

The office [of a bishop] is relational in character and must be exercised in, with and among the community which it is called to serve. The office should not be so overburdened with bureaucratic demands that bishops are prevented from being alongside their people, or that their collegiality with their fellow bishops, presbyters and deacons is diminished. It is a ministry of service which requires an appropriate lifestyle and pastoral demeanour.⁵⁰

***RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the Guidelines set out in this report as a summary statement of its position on *episkopé* and episcopacy.

The Conference affirms its willingness in principle to receive the sign of episcopacy in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments, on the basis of the Guidelines set out in this report.

The Conference receives the report and commends it to the Districts, Circuits and local churches for discussion.

The Conference invites the Districts, Circuits, local churches and individual Methodists to send comments on paragraphs 89 to 109 to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee not later than 31 December 2001, and directs the Faith and Order Committee to report to the Conference of 2002 on the comments received.

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3. *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume 1*, 1965, p.242
4. *Ibid.*, p.243
5. *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2*, (cited hereafter as 'CPD'), 1999 edition, Standing Order 211(2)
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9. *CPD*, Standing Order 500
10. *Ibid.*, Standing Order 515(1)
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16. *CPD*, Standing Order 424(3)
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20. The text of the report, together with the comments of the President's Council and of the Faith and Order Committee, can be found in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, pp. 204-231
21. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, #514
22. *Ibid.*, #527(1)
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27. *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*, pp.30f
28. Canon C18
29. *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church: An Interim Statement*, 1958, p.25
30. For example in *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, 1996, p.12
31. Quoted in the *Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1998, p.99
32. *Called to Witness and Service – The Reuilly Common Statement*, 1999, p.30
33. *The Documents of Vatican II*, 1965, p.41

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p.44
36. Ibid., p.52
37. Ibid., p.43
38. Ibid.
39. See *Anglican-Moravian Conversations*, 1996, pp.89f
40. *Sacraments, Ministry, Ordination, Leuenberg Texts 2*, Lembeck, Germany, 1995, p.98
41. Ibid.
42. *The Meissen Agreement Texts*, Council for Christian Unity Occasional Paper 2, 1992, p.18
43. *Called to Witness and Service – The Reuilly Common Statement*, 1999, pp.31f
44. *Called to Common Mission*, #16
45. Ibid., #7
46. Ibid., #13
47. Ibid., #18
48. *The Methodist Conference Agenda*, 1985, p.571
49. *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, p.215
50. *Commitment to Mission and Unity*, p.10

The Conference adopted the resolutions, deleting ‘in the context of appropriate ecumenical developments’ in the second resolution.

(iv) World Council of Churches

BRITISH METHODIST RESPONSE TO THE LIMA TEXT (1985)

1. Preamble

- 1.0 The British Methodist Conference of 1985, meeting in Birmingham, England, sends greetings to the Secretariat of the World Council of Churches in Geneva; we rejoice in the common life in Christ that we share with other member churches and we are happy to have this opportunity of joining together in theological affirmation. We believe that our faith in Christ, which is known to us in both individual and corporate experience, needs to be expressed in the clearest possible terms and we commit ourselves to full co-operation with other member churches to this end. We hope that, as we study together and listen to each other's comments, we shall be led to a deeper understanding of our common inheritance, a more complete sense of our unity in Christ, and a firmer grasp of the Gospel that we preach.
- 1.1 We are deeply grateful to the Faith and Order Commission of the W.C.C. for the initiative it has taken. Throughout the pages of **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** we find ourselves being urged to seek for further reconciliation with all those communions from whom we are formally divided. It is right that we should be so urged. While we have no wish to forget our history, and while we treasure much that is distinctive in our tradition, we are sure that structural division and divergence in doctrine, openly declared, often hinder our mission to the world. In the past we have profited from ecumenical conversation and been glad to share in Local Ecumenical Projects, but we have also known disappointment, and some of us are tempted, at the present time, to continue the ecumenical quest in a purely pragmatic way. There is an understandable hesitation about engaging in theological discussions with those in whose company we have sought but not found greater visible unity. The Faith and Order Commission has challenged us not to lose heart and shown us a way forward. We respond with gratitude.
- 1.2 We also pay tribute to the achievement of the Faith and Order Commission in producing **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry**. In little more than a hundred paragraphs we find ourselves confronted with the most pressing issues raised by three pivotal doctrines. We appreciate both the learning and the reconciling spirit that the work displays. The positive tone fills us with hope that the Christian communions are moving forward together, not yet in perfect order, but with the same goal in view. For this we are abundantly thankful. We are glad that doctrine, so often in the past a cause of dissension, is now proving to be a means by which we are drawn together. In giving us this text the Faith and Order Commission has set an example and issued a challenge. We willingly take up the challenge and hope to follow the example.

- 1.3 The approach adopted by the Faith and Order Commission is judicious and encouraging. The aim does not appear to be the creation of any contrived consensus. There is no attempt to ignore the present diversity. On the contrary, the strength of the text lies in the fact that it recognises diversity while at the same time looking for and revealing convergence. The text, therefore, gives room both for the preservation of traditional attitudes and convictions, and also for growth. This surely points the way in which ecumenical discussion must proceed in the immediate future. Convergence in doctrine must be recognised and welcomed and developed before questions of structural unity can properly be raised. We believe this approach is both realistic and hopeful and we congratulate the Faith and Order Commission on making it clear.
- 1.4 We are asked to give answers to four specific questions and we have tried to ensure that our answers passed three critical tests, all of them stated or implied in the text itself. In the first place, they must be the answers of the whole Methodist church in Britain and not of one group or committee within it. Certainly the Conference speaks for Methodism but, on this matter, the Conference could not speak until it knew the minds of the whole church. Consequently the Conference of 1983 asked the Synods, Circuit Meetings and Church Councils of Methodism to spend time discussing the text and to pass on their comments and conclusions to the Connexional Faith and Order Committee. A year was given over to this process and we can confidently say that every group that wished to be heard has been heard.
- 1.5 Secondly our answer must be given in the full knowledge of how other communions are moving towards their answer. It is no longer possible, if it was ever desirable, to put forward theological comments as if the way in which they would be heard and interpreted by others was of no consequence. Now, when other communions are engaged in the same discussions as we are engaged in ourselves, it would be perverse to attempt to operate in a denominational vacuum. It is not, therefore, enough for us to speak our mind; at least, not until our mind has been exposed to the minds of others, so that we become conscious not only of our speaking but of their hearing. We have urged ecumenical discussion of the text on our people and in the final stage we have held profitable meetings with representatives of the Church of England, the Baptist Union and the United Reformed Church.
- 1.6 Thirdly our answers must follow the lead of the text and be positive. We rejoice in the convergence to which the text alludes and we wish to encourage it in every way we can. On many occasions in the past the Methodist Church has declared itself to be firmly committed to the search for visible unity. We stand now where we always stood. Our answers must be honest and faithful, and frank, if need be, but they must be eirenic. We hope and believe that even the greatest difficulties discussed in this response will be seen as part of our quest for a deeper unity in Christ. If we struggle now, it is in order that, in God's own day, we may be one.

2. **The Four Questions**

- 2.0 We come now to the four questions. It must be said that, had we been asked to comment on the text in general, our response would not have followed the path of these four questions. When the matter was discussed in our various

councils, it proved difficult to keep to this agenda, and many of the comments we have received followed their own logic and gave no direct answers to the questions. Nevertheless answers must be given. We shall, however, be most true to the Methodist Church as a whole if our answers to the questions are fairly brief and if we then continue at greater length with comments and issues raised by the undertaking as a whole.

2.1 **The extent to which your church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church through the ages**

2.1.0 We have difficulty with this question because it is not clear what is meant by the phrase 'the faith of the Church through the ages'. There are great difficulties if the phrase is to be understood **descriptively**. If that be how it is to be interpreted we are being asked if the text expresses what has in fact been believed by Christians down the centuries. There is, however, great diversity within the Christian tradition. Many elements of this diversity complement one another, but many elements are also mutually incompatible. Furthermore, there are problems about apprehending in one intellectual and cultural milieu the thought of another. Thus, the linguistic formulation of one generation may not necessarily mean the same things to a later generation. Again, much twentieth-century Christian consensus represents a position that in former centuries would have been accepted by only a minority of Christians. If, therefore, the question be interpreted in this straight-forward descriptive sense, we can but reply that the text represents only certain aspects of the Church's faith of baptism, eucharist and ministry as embraced down the ages.

2.1.1 Perhaps, however, the phrase is to be understood not descriptively but **prescriptively**. According to this interpretation we are being asked if we believe that the text expresses how what we judge to be the essential and enduring convictions of the historic faith are to be understood today. Any positive response to such a question must be qualified by the awareness that our lives are not free of error or sin, and that there is a proper humility that should attach to all theological formulation since our stated faith is not identical with the truth we imperfectly apprehend. There may be error in our understanding, categories and language. 'God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts'. On the other hand we are confident that the Holy Spirit gives us real insight and understanding. If the phrase 'faith through the ages' be understood prescriptively rather than descriptively our response to the question is basically positive.

2.1.2. We recognise the centrality of the doctrines of baptism and eucharist. They proclaim in word and sign the whole Gospel of creation and redemption. All that we affirm as Methodists regarding the need of our race for salvation, the all-sufficiency of Christ, and the fulness of salvation in this life and the life to come can be expressed in these two sacraments. We recognise that they are expounded in the text most carefully and we gladly agree that, in that exposition, we find the essential matter of the faith through the ages. We recognise also the great significance of the doctrine of the ministry. There is no Church without ministry. God must be served and the world must be served, so we cannot discuss the operation of the faith of the Church through the ages without giving due care to this subject. It would be idle to deny that the subject has been contentious or that it has involved the Methodist Church

in much painful debate, both internally and externally. Nevertheless, ministry is at the heart of the Gospel of reconciliation. Although our response is in general positive, we have serious reservations, and these are detailed later. However, we rejoice to testify that we are able to embrace as friends in Christ others with whom we continue to have differences. Our response to the first question, therefore, is that we recognise in the text a comprehensive account of how those grounded in the true faith have tried, in their several ways, to give common expression to the faith that is in them. We see in the fact of doctrinal convergence a sign that the Spirit is leading the churches to a position in which they can at last express formally what has always been true in divine reality, that they are one in Christ.

- 2.2 **The consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognise the text as an expression of the apostolic faith.**
- 2.2.0 Clearly, the most obvious consequence is a greater awareness of the riches of Christian belief, a deeper understanding of the doctrines of other churches and, without doubt, a deeper understanding of our own. There is hope, too, that we can build on the baptismal unity that is already established. We hope to pursue this further, building on our experience in Local Ecumenical Projects where joint approaches to Christian initiation have made great strides. We are looking for signs of hope that the divergence between those who practise infant baptism and those who practise believers' baptism can be overcome.
- 2.2.1 In response to paragraphs 15-16 on baptism, and 51-55 on ministry, we gladly affirm our recognition of the baptisms, confirmations and ordained ministries of our sister churches within the fellowship of the World Council of Churches.
- 2.2.2 Beyond considerations such as these, we find this a difficult question to answer, at least until we have been able to study the responses of other churches. We do not yet know the extent to which other churches will recognise the text as an expression of the apostolic faith. Our highest hope is that all member churches of the WCC will give a positive answer to the first question and that, as a consequence, the text will become a basic document for all dialogue thereafter. Yet it has to be recognised that our own comments and qualifications, modest as we hope they will appear, may be met with other, and perhaps opposite, comments and qualifications, so that a common acceptance of the text as an agreed starting point may not be possible. Nevertheless the advantage of having before us this ecumenically achieved rehearsal of these critical subjects cannot be over-estimated. It may be necessary for us to settle for a more limited hope, that the exercise in which we are now engaged will reveal to us how much we have in common and how easy it is to lose our sense of proportion regarding our differences. If we can become aware of how much in **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** we all agree with, it may be possible to approach our disagreements in better heart.
- 2.3 **The Guidance your church can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual life and witness**

- 2.3.0 We are grateful to have received this text. We are glad to have had the opportunity to discuss it at every level of our church life. Because the opportunity was also a duty many have turned their attention to the issues of baptism, eucharist and ministry who would not otherwise have done so. No study of sacramental theology can fail to enhance worship. No study of ministry can fail to strengthen the calling of the church both in its service of God and in its service of the world. It would be hard to compile a list of all the gains from a careful study of this text, but that is not what we are asked to do. We are asked to consider the guidance our church can take from it. There are two matters referred to in the section on baptism, which are already the subject of reports called for by the Conference. They are the admission of baptised children to holy communion and the question whether the practice of delaying baptism until maturity, for conscientious reasons, might be given an acknowledged place in our practice of Christian initiation. Both involve serious theological issues and, to some extent, they point in opposite directions. Nevertheless both are under active consideration in British Methodism at this moment.
- 2.3.1 For many years there has been among us an increasing concern for the eucharist as the expression of Christian worship in its fulness. The publication of **The Methodist Service Book** in 1975 both epitomised and stimulated that concern. The section of the text on the eucharist will, therefore, be read in Methodism with far more interest and understanding than would have been possible a decade ago. The description of the eucharist as **anamnesis**, memorial, which has already proved a major point of reconciliation among Christians, is particularly congenial to our tradition, both of theology and hymnody. It must be said that the mystery of Christ's presence in the eucharist, though real to our experience, has not been much discussed in Methodism outside academic circles. We are sure that the time has come for a wider study of this issue and of eucharistic practice generally. This cannot but have a positive influence upon all our other services of worship. It must be remembered that, due to both the tradition and the present structure of Methodism, most of our services do not and cannot include holy communion. For the guidance of our church, therefore, in its worship, educational and spiritual life, this section of the text is most timely.
- 2.3.2 The section on the ministry may well be less successful in providing us with positive guidance, for discussion of the nature of the Church's ministry has been with us ever since Methodist Union in 1932. Our Deed of Union has much to say about the ordained ministry. The Conversations with the Church of England showed great concern for the same topic.

Similar discussions took place in relation to Covenanting for Union, and we encounter the same issues in Sponsoring Bodies and Local Ecumenical Projects all over the country. That is not to say that we have nothing to learn. It is doubtful whether the personal, collegial and communal aspects of ministry are fully understood in Methodism and, despite our convictions about the ministry of the whole people of God, we have been all too ready to identify the Church's ministry with the ordained ministry. As far as the mutual recognition of ordained ministers is concerned, we have listened to the testimony of churches that are episcopally ordered, we have judged that the acceptance of episcopacy would be no contradiction of our doctrines, and

we await the occasion when it would be appropriate 'to recover the sign of the episcopal succession'.

2.4. **The suggestions your church can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today"**

2.4.0 We make four suggestions, all of them related to the section on ministry. First, we believe that future discussion of ministry must be given much greater prominence to the vocation of the whole people of God. The need for an ordained ministry would never be denied in Methodism. Ministry in this sense is essential to the being of the Church, but we believe that throughout the Church of Christ there has been a serious loss of proportion. So much ecumenical discussion has been concerned with the validity of orders that the impression has been given that the doctrine of the Church is centred in the doctrine of the ordained ministry. We believe that this is a distortion of the truth and, as a distortion, can only confuse the understanding of the Church and its ministry. Moreover, in practice in many churches, the ordained ministry has come to take responsibilities and perform functions that are not proper to it; the people, the **laos** of God, have been inclined passively to acquiesce and even to forget that, as the people of God, they have been called to minister themselves. We believe that an expression of the apostolic faith today must concentrate on the calling of the whole people of God, must include a charge to the people to be what they are, and, if necessary, a charge to the ordained to enable this to be so.

2.4.1 Secondly, when the ordained ministry is under discussion, we believe that the question of the ordination of women cannot be avoided. We understand how deeply held are the convictions of some who oppose the ordination of women, but we should not be true to our belief or our experience if we did not bear our witness to the opposite point of view. We are asked to address ourselves to 'the Apostolic Faith Today' and it is proper for us to consider the force of the word 'today' in that phrase. How does the apostolic faith today differ from the apostolic faith in other generations? One answer is that our generation has seen profound changes in social organisation in almost every society in the world. The church is challenged by such changes, not necessarily to approve them, but to discover what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through social change, and to interpret the Gospel so as to meet the new situation. We do not believe that the vocation of women to the ordained ministry is simply the result of social change. The image of God in Gen. 1:27 is applied to both male and female, and the flesh that our Lord took is a flesh that is shared by both male and female. A profound differentiation between the sexes at this point and the consequent exclusion of one of the sexes from the ordained ministry cannot, in our view, be accepted. The fact that we are now able to recognise the implications of these biblical affirmations may be a consequence of social change, but the affirmations themselves are not. After decades of hesitation, we in Methodism have come to accept the vocation of women to the ordained ministry. Today we believe in the principle more firmly than ever before. We believe that any project concerned with 'the Apostolic Faith Today' must come to terms with this reality.

- 2.4.2 Thirdly, we are aware of the difficulties that all churches have encountered in their attempts to establish a satisfactory model of the diaconate. We believe in the serving Church and we believe that the Christian Church does in fact offer service to God and to the world. We are not alone in confessing that we have not been able to create and preserve a model of a vigorous diaconate, open to both sexes and not directed to the presbyterate (although the Wesley Deaconess Order comes very close to it). On the other hand we take very seriously the concern that a separate diaconate might lead to a devaluation of the ministry of the laity, and cannot accept that a separate diaconate is necessarily appropriate in every situation in the church. However, we wish to approach this issue with sympathy and receptivity and pledge ourselves to a continual exploration of it. In this the Faith and Order Commission may well be able to help us all.
- 2.4.3 Fourthly, we cannot forget that, as we meet to discuss the faith of the Church, millions are starving, millions are suffering oppression, and rich nations with a Christian heritage are more concerned to acquire nuclear missiles than to relieve distress. We all live under the threat of disaster. Some of us fear the apocalypse tomorrow, others experience the apocalypse now. ‘The Apostolic Faith **Today**’ must speak to this situation. World hunger, political oppression, and nuclear wars are not theological terms, but a faith which does not address them is no faith at all. We do not suppose that the Faith and Order Commission needs to be informed on this matter. The Methodist Church, as much in penitence as in anger, simply adds its voice to those who are calling for the total world-wide commitment of all who hold the apostolic faith to the causes of justice, righteousness and peace.

3. **General Comments**

- 3.0 The doctrinal standards of the British Methodist Church are not set out, as are those of some other churches, in a finite and comprehensive statement. The Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union refer to ‘the Apostolic Faith’, ‘the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation’, and ‘the Evangelical Faith’. The doctrines of this faith are held to be ‘based upon the Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures’. They are to be found in ‘Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons’. These authorities do not impose ‘a system of formal or speculative theology’ but they do ensure ‘loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel’. It is against this background that the response of the Methodist Church must be understood. The doctrinal identity of Methodism is guaranteed by common respect for these standards, by the use of a common hymn book, a common service book and common patterns of worship, by a connexional system that ensures remarkable consistency of usage in Methodism, and by loyalty to the interpretations of the doctrinal standards given by the Conference from time to time.
- 3.1 We experienced two difficulties in discussion which showed themselves at every level, though they were not always clearly articulated. In the first place, it had to be decided among us what was the precise setting in the life of the church in which the text belonged. Because of Methodist tradition, we are held together by a common life of worship, fellowship, and service, rather than by subscription to a series of articles. Consequently, when we speak of confessing the faith, we think primarily of a community addressing

God in worship or a preacher proclaiming the Gospel to the world. We believe that something similar is true of other churches. The present text requires of us systematic intellectual discussion but not an immediate response either in terms of worship or practical action. The result has been that, in many places, the discussion was left to groups with proven theological and theoretical expertise. This is in marked contrast to the discussion of documents connected with the Conversations with the Church of England and with Covenanting. In both those cases significant practical consequences were involved and Methodists felt themselves to be existentially engaged. In the case of the present text the significance of the convergence clearly documented in it has not been fully appreciated and the undertaking has been seen as largely theoretical. We make this as a statement of fact based on the evidence of this enquiry. The Methodist Church as a whole does not undervalue the cause of doctrinal accuracy, still less the pursuit of doctrinal convergence. We hope, in due time, to appropriate much of the text into our doctrinal tradition so that it becomes not simply a series of propositions to discuss, but an affirmation of our Christian commitment and understanding. Nevertheless the present hesitation must be recorded. It may imply a judgement on Methodism, but perhaps it also indicates that the movement of the people of God cannot always be controlled, in terms of either stimulation or restriction, by those responsible for doctrinal definition.

- 3.2 The second difficulty concerns the theological method adopted in the text. Nowhere is this defined, and it is not clear what authority the text wishes to accord, say, to reason or tradition. Neither is it clear what approach to the authority and use of scripture is being adopted. The authority of the New Testament over our church life today may be accepted in principle, but what kind of authority this is, how it is to be applied, and how it is to be related to our understanding of the continued work of the Holy Spirit, are questions that need to be addressed. For example, given that baptismal practice and theology took certain forms in New Testament times, it has still to be asked how this fact is to be honoured in a society and church which differ so much from that of the New Testament period. The lack of clarity over methodology may be instanced by noting that each of the three doctrines under discussion attracts to itself a whole cluster of biblical images. Each image is by itself illuminating, but a question arises as to whether all these images can be united into a coherent whole, and, if so, how. It is well to discuss baptism in terms of 'the sign of new life', 'participation in Christ's death and resurrection', 'the gift of the Spirit', etc., but it is not clear how these ideas relate to one another, neither is it clear what authority these biblical images have for theological formulation today. We have no doubt that the method employed in this text falls within the broad agreement regarding scripture and tradition reached by the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963. Nevertheless, we were not always able fully to appreciate the way in which the argument was constructed.
- 3.3 Finally, we believe the report could have been bettered if greater attention had been given to the cultural context of both theology and ecclesiastical structures. This cultural context may manifest itself in at least two ways. First, theological positions which commend themselves – or even appear axiomatic – to minds formed in one cultural milieu may nonetheless appear as problematic to minds formed in another. We do not draw the conclusion

that we cannot therefore speak of truth *per se* as opposed merely to what is true for a particular cultural perspective. We do, however, draw the conclusion that there is a proper humility, caution and openness that should attend our theological formulations. We believe that an awareness of the possible cultural relativity of our theology should encourage this. Secondly, and just as important, different aspects of the faith may be existentially central to people living in different cultural settings. For example, Christians living in poverty and under oppression may find it proper to highlight certain aspects of the eucharist, whilst those living in a European suburb may find it proper to highlight others. Similarly, one pattern of ordained ministry may be appropriate in one society, but less so in another. These factors may be recognised without at the same time countenancing partisanship, and whilst also encouraging a broad vision and a willingness to listen to every voice in the church. Indeed, we rejoice in the breadth of vision and depth of experience that is available to us within the multi-cultural context of the world church. At the same time we would not wish to underwrite any suggestion that a final and complete statement of one faith is possible or even desirable within the cultural diversity of the modern world. These are immensely complicated questions, and we simply raise them here. We do, however, believe the report should have given them more attention, and recommend that the Faith and Order Commission seek to rectify this in its future work.

4. Specific Comments

4.0 The discussion of the text will no doubt give rise to a very large number of queries in all the churches where it takes place. It has been so in Methodism. Interesting as all these queries are, it is impractical to include them all in a response of this kind. It seems better to select some issues as samples or tokens of the very detailed discussions that have taken place. The following paragraphs are included because they relate to matters that either were much commented on in Methodism or are particularly important from a Methodist point of view.

4.1 Baptism

4.1.0 The observance of baptism in Methodism, as in other churches, has been beset by at least three dangers. One is the danger that it might be reduced to a social custom. A second is that it might become a private service fixed at a time to suit the family without the participation of a Christian congregation. A third is that it might give rise to confusions and misconceptions due to the obliqueness of its symbolism and the failure of our preachers and teachers regularly to expound the rite. The Methodist Church has been conscious of these dangers and much progress has been made at least with regard to the first two points. By far the most common practice among us now is for baptism to take place within the normal Sunday worship in the presence of the whole congregation and only after careful preparation. There is more preaching and teaching on the sacraments now than there has ever been and it is hoped that discussion of the present text will provide a further stimulus.

4.1.1 There was some difficulty about how the word 'baptism' was being used in the text. At one point it appeared to be a purely descriptive term for a particular ritual action apart from any specific theological meaning (e.g. 17).

At another point the term is used as having essential theological sense, 'incorporation into Christ', 'washing away of sin', 'new birth', etc., (e.g. 1,2). There is a certain ambiguity here. For example, is it being said that the rite 'effects' these things, or simply that it 'signifies' them as being important elements in the Christian life into which the baptised person is initiated? Methodists do not wish to deny efficacy in the sacraments. However, they plead that the nature of this efficacy be clarified, believing that there are some interpretations of the notion which they must reject. Methodists would want to emphasise that the efficacy of the sacraments depends upon God and not upon any supposed automatism in the rite. We have much to gain from the sacramental understanding of sister churches, but it will be easier for us if we proceed slowly without the fear that certain interpretations are taken for granted.

- 4.1.2 A particular example of this difficulty is found in paragraph 3 where it is said, 'By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ and where the power of sin is broken.' These are stirring images and they can well be understood with regard to Christian life as a whole. But if we are to relate them to the baptismal moment, particularly the infant baptismal moment, difficulties at once arise. Careful consideration of the biblical understanding of signs leads us out of the difficulty, but there is an obvious danger that some will simply read off these phrases in terms of a mechanical process and the result will be not merely divergence but polarisation.
- 4.1.3 To speak more positively, we deeply appreciate the stress on corporateness in the discussion of baptism. In the Gospels, baptism is associated with the river Jordan. The image suggests crossing the boundary, and so links with Paul's baptismal image of moving from the lordship of sin to the lordship of Christ, from one social identity to another. If that were taken as the reality of baptism, it would be considerably different from the individualistic thought of the washing away of sin. We are among those who have suffered from too great a stress on the individual to the detriment of our doctrine of the Body of Christ. It is good, therefore, to be reminded that baptism is the seal of our common discipleship, that the baptised are buried with Christ and raised here and now to a new life in the power of his resurrection, and that we are thus brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism is thus a springboard for unity (para. 6). The corporate emphasis in baptism signifies not only admission to the Body of Christ, which is protection and salvation, but also commission in the Body of Christ, which is exposure and witness. Perhaps, following this line of thought, more could be made of baptism as a witness to the world, a witness of God's prevenient love, a witness of his forgiving grace, a witness of new life, and a witness of unity.
- 4.1.4 Much attention was given to para. 12 and its commentary. Methodism has never varied in commending infant baptism to its members. The sentence, 'A solemn obligation rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism', tends to recur in our documents. Consequently, many of us, reading Section IV A on 'Baptism of Believers and Infants', take the view that the argument there in favour of infant baptism is muted. We would like to hear more about baptism as the sign of grace that is prior to response, about baptism as the sign of admission to the covenant people, about the

unsought givenness of life itself, of name, home, family and religious context, about the place of children in the body of Christ. It is proper that the theology of believers' baptism, that is to say, of that method of initiation which limits baptism to those who are themselves able to confess the faith should be treated with due care, but perhaps the balance has swung too far in that direction. At the same time we recognise that there is growing interest in believers' baptism in many churches, including Methodism at present, so much so that the Conference is even now considering whether it is possible for the Methodist Church to embrace both patterns of initiation. The matter is fraught with danger. Doctrine cannot easily be refashioned nor tradition easily diverted, and it is open to doubt whether our tight and homogeneous connexion could contain what might amount to two different, and perhaps competing, ecclesiologies. We are aware that the United Reformed Church has, under very different circumstances, been able to unite both traditions. We shall observe this example with the closest attention.

4.1.5 We agree with the firm statement in para. 13 that baptism is unrepeatable, and we wish that a reason were given for the statement. If Christians were told why baptism is unrepeatable they might be happier, since the reason must be linked with what we think baptism does. Nevertheless we are aware of a number of Christian people of all age groups who have been through an experience of profound renewal and who long to express that experience in what they conceive to be the appropriate way, that is, by total immersion. Many of them would want to describe that immersion as baptism, regardless of whether they had been baptised as infants and subsequently confirmed. There are indeed dangers that such a practice might be divisive, that it might encourage elitism, and that it might disturb those with a confident faith in the significance of infant baptism. In pastoral conversation these dangers should be pointed out, and those concerned should be encouraged to find expression for their experience in other means of grace – for example: the Holy Communion or the Covenant Service. It is important that the profound experience be accompanied by an appropriately dramatic celebration.

4.2 Eucharist

4.2.0 Methodism, like most other churches and perhaps more than some, has made great gains in both experience and understanding of the holy communion in the last two or three decades. Liturgical reform has provided the most striking example of convergence between the churches, and Methodism has been glad to be involved in it. The publication of *The Methodist Service Book* in 1975, replacing *The Book of Offices* of 1936, was for many of our congregations a turning-point. Holy Communion is now more frequent in Methodist churches than it has ever been and in many places the full order of holy communion is now established as a regular monthly service. Much of the text on the eucharist can now be read by Methodists with an enthusiasm that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Even the term 'eucharist', for so long regarded with suspicion among us, is slowly coming to be accepted as an accurate and universal term rather than a sectarian one. The note of thanksgiving sounded in almost all modern liturgies has influenced all our other services. The sermon, for so long the climax of our normal worship, is now commonly moved into the centre of the service so that, after God's Word has been proclaimed, there is an opportunity for the people to respond with prayer, with confession of faith, with self-offering,

and above all with thanksgiving. The idea of a eucharistic pattern in all worship is now gaining ground, although only a fraction of our services are eucharists. We believe it very important to note that many of the elements listed in para. 27 do in fact occur in services that are not formally eucharists.

- 4.2.1 The very richness of meaning in this sacrament makes it easy for different people to stress different aspects and it should be added that there are some in Methodism who are resistant to the idea that this service should be understood primarily in terms of eucharist. For some it is the Lord's Supper, a memorial of Christ's death and a solemn personal communion between believers and their Lord. Some argue that, if service-books are to be used at all, Cranmer's service, as it has come down to us in Methodist tradition, is much to be preferred to modern liturgies, and some affirm that the giving of the peace, especially if it involves people moving about, is an unwelcome distraction. While it is not to be expected that the text would be equally welcomed by all, perhaps a greater stress on the eucharist as a service of holy communion would have gone some way to satisfying those who make affirmations such as these.
- 4.2.2 The statement in para. 13 that Christ's mode of presence in the eucharist is unique raises problems for many Methodists. In what sense is it true, and in what sense has the whole Church, at least through the last four centuries, considered it to be true? It is unique in the sense that Jesus said (according to Paul and perhaps Luke) that when we do this in remembrance of him he is present in his body and his blood; but it is equally true that Jesus said (according to Matthew) that where two or three are gathered in his name he would be in the midst of them; and that, if his disciples taught the nations to observe what he had taught, he would be with his disciples until the end of the age. Christ's presence in the eucharist is unique in the sense that every means of grace is unique, but is it unique in the sense that it is superior to all others? Does a discussion which concerns modes of the divine presence allow us to use 'unique' in a comparative sense? Methodism, in common with those churches that look to the Reformation for inspiration, has always prized preaching as a vehicle for the divine Word. Through the Holy Spirit Christ is present to the congregation in the word of the preacher. Few of us would want to compare different activities of the Spirit and suggest that one is more significant than another. We do not, of course, deny that in some churches the eucharist holds a unique and central place. In other churches preaching is central. This does not mean that in these latter churches the eucharist is not valued. It is not so prominent, but it may nonetheless be profoundly significant, an inner holy of holies, rarely approached, rather than a public altar used day by day.
- 4.2.3 This leads directly to a comment on paras. 30 and 31 where it is said that the eucharist should be celebrated frequently, at least every Sunday. These paragraphs do not take into account those traditions of the church, which, whilst having the highest regard for the eucharist, do not practise a weekly communion. John Wesley was firm in his belief in regular and frequent communion, and in recent years Methodism, profiting from its participation in the Ecumenical Movement and the Liturgical Movement, has moved nearer to its founder in this matter. Nevertheless, there are practical difficulties. As we have already indicated, the history and the structure of Methodism make weekly celebrations in all our churches all but impossible.

The Methodist Church began as a preaching mission within the Church of England. The parish churches provided the eucharist, the Methodist preachers provided the preaching and teaching. The pattern by which the Methodist preachers worked was retained after the separation; Methodist societies sprang up all over the country, but, although they were organised into circuits, provision for the eucharist was not easily made. Still today one Methodist minister serves several churches. Fewer than one in four of our services are led by an ordained minister. It follows that the normal Methodist service, taking normal in a purely statistical sense, cannot be a eucharist. Provision is made by the Conference for congregations that suffer consequent deprivation by authorising individual lay persons to preside at holy communion in particular places. The Conference has always resisted attempts substantially to extend the list of authorised persons, and a very considerable extension would be necessary to make weekly communion possible. We find it hard, therefore, to accept the thrust of paras. 30 and 31. We would reiterate that a eucharist less frequently celebrated is not necessarily a eucharist less highly valued.

4.2.4 It must also be recognised that, because the Methodist tradition has always meant frequent preaching services without communion, Methodists have learnt to nourish themselves on that kind of worship and many would not now wish to see the balance altered in favour of more frequent communion. They would argue that it is not now a matter of administrative necessity, but rather that the infrequency of celebration actually heightens the sense of the eucharist's importance. On the other hand, there are many Methodists who have learned increasingly to value more frequent celebrations of the eucharist. No suggestion is made by any of us that those who celebrate weekly eucharists should change their practice, but, by the same token, we believe paras. 30 and 31 are stated too strongly. The report falls short in that it contains no discussion of the relationship between the eucharist and other forms of worship, such as the preaching service, where the eucharistic shape is present, but the holy communion is not. Such a discussion could also deal with the important relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Ministry of the Word. It is even possible to infer from para. 2 that the Christian receives salvation only through the eucharist. Those who are inclined to make such an inference conclude, as might be expected, that, in the present text, preaching is undervalued. Furthermore, one cannot overlook the practice of the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends. The Methodist Church differs from both these bodies in important matters, not least with regard to the sacraments, but we would shrink from using the kind of language that serves to exclude them from the general tradition of Christian worship. While we appreciate the vigorous and positive approach of the text for ourselves and can applaud so much of the argument, we fear that it errs in being too exclusive.

4.3 **Ministry**

4.3.0 We have already said that one of our chief anxieties concerns the understanding of ministry and particularly the relation of the ministry of the ordained to the ministry of the whole people of God. The study of ministry can have a number of starting-points. One can begin with the need for a guarantor of true faith and worship, in which case matters of order are all-important and the discussion will centre on the ordained ministry and from

whence it derives its authority. Such discussion is likely to locate the idea of ministry primarily within the Church. Alternatively, one can begin with the calling of the whole people of God to mission in the world, in which case the ordained ministry exists as representative of the total ministry of the Church, and the idea of ministry is located on the frontier between the Church and the world. We recognise that the former approach enshrines an important principle. We recognise that the Church must be ordered, that it must be visible, that it must be clearly defined, that it must be secure in its rites and its doctrines. We recognise too that in practice we have not been very successful in structuring the Methodist Church for mission to the world. Nevertheless we believe that the second approach must be taken very seriously and we regret the shortcomings of the text at this point. We give our full support to the first six paragraphs, but we believe the proportions are wrong. In a document on ministry too much space is devoted to the ordained ministry. We recognise that the Faith and Order Commission deliberately set itself to discuss issues which divide the churches, and the ordained ministry has certainly been one such issue, but greater attention to the ministry of the whole people of God might have revealed a convergence that would have facilitated discussion of the vexed questions relating to ordination.

- 4.3.1 The need of a ministry within the church is accepted by all. What is said in paras. 11 and 12 is well said. The word must be preached, the sacraments duly administered and the faithful community must be cared for. In such tasks the ordained ministry plays a leading, indeed an essential, role. But not all ministry within the Church is the province of the ordained. Preaching, teaching and pastoral care are functions often carried out by the laity. When we turn to the ministry of the Church to the world, the significance of the lay role becomes even more impressive. We believe that this aspect of the Church's ministry and this function of the laity have not received in the text the treatment which they deserve.
- 4.3.2 We recognise in para. 17 an attempt to reconcile traditions in which the word 'priest' is used and prized with those in which it is treated with suspicion. The Deed of Union prevents us from conceiving of the ordained ministry as an exclusive order with a priestly (i.e. sacerdotal) character of its own. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the need of the Church for persons who are called and set apart for leadership in pastoral care, preaching and intercessory prayer, and for presidency at the sacraments. Given this, the debate about the use of the word 'priest' is really a very subtle one. It turns upon the question whether the ordained minister contributes to the eucharist in his/her own person some essential element other than the right to preside at it. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister, then the word 'priest' is not appropriate. If the eucharist is the offering of the people presided over by the ordained minister and specifically activated by the minister's presence, the word 'priest' is appropriate. It would have been preferable if the interpretation given in the text to priestliness as consisting in self-offering obedience could have been applied to that particular priestly service also. As it stands, the text appears to allow a distinction of kind between the priestly service of the ordained ministry and the priestliness of the laity. We see ample evidence of convergence in this area, and we regret that a distinction remains. That distinction makes relationships between the churches more difficult.

- 4.3.3 As we have already said in para. 2.4.1, the Methodist Church accepts women into its ordained ministry on the same conditions as men and sees no reason to reconsider its position. We rejoice in the contribution that women are now making in the ordained ministry. We recognise the wisdom of what is said on this matter in para. 18 and we offer to the churches that are still undecided our witness that the destruction of this barrier has redounded to the glory of God.
- 4.3.4 So much has been said in ecumenical discourse about the three-fold ministry that we hesitate to say more (paras. 19-32). Our response at this point is, therefore, deliberately brief. It simply indicates our position for the sake of completeness, but does no more. On one hand the Methodist Conference has ruled that the acceptance of the historic episcopate would not violate our doctrinal standards, and indeed has shown itself ready to embrace the three-fold ministry to advance the cause of visible unity. Such an acceptance would see the historic episcopate as a valuable sign of apostolicity, but not as a necessary sign, nor as a guarantee. Churches without the historic episcopate and the three-fold order of ministry, such as our own, have their own ways of seeking and guarding apostolicity, and of attending to the orderly transmission of ministry. Thus the ends imperfectly realised through the historic episcopate have been and are realised equally well by other structures, with the result that we see the historic episcopate as one possible form of church order, with considerations that commend it, perhaps particularly appropriate in some cultural settings, but neither normative nor clearly superior to any other. Thus, on the other hand, the Methodist Conference has never acknowledged that Methodism needs the three orders including the historic episcopate to make up any lack in its ordained ministry. We agree that the episcopal, presbyteral and diaconal functions need to be exercised in the Church, but the report offers no clear reason why these functions are best exercised through three (or for that matter two, four or seven) distinct orders of ordained ministry, and this criticism is reinforced by the lack of clarity with which these functions are defined, and the extent to which they overlap. Thus, the Conference has always maintained that the necessary functions listed in paras. 29-31 are, or could be, adequately discharged by the Methodist Church as at present constituted. Para. 37 of the text is not unsympathetic to this view. If, however, we are to consider the ordained ministry in the abstract, apart from any specific scheme for uniting particular churches, the Methodist Church would judge that the text shows too great a leaning towards the three-fold ministry (e.g. para. 22). Those churches with a three-fold ministry are exhorted to exploit its potential; those without it are asked to consider it as having 'a powerful claim to be accepted by them.' This imbalance is hard to justify unless there is an implication that, at this point, the churches with a single order are to some extent deprived. The text might reasonably have regarded the three-fold order as one possible structuring of the ordained ministry rather than as the normative one. The Methodist Church would be willing to accept the three-fold order, but not to allow that it is at present deprived.
- 4.3.5 Our next comment has already been anticipated in the previous paragraph. The allocation of different functions to each of the three orders of ministry in paras. 29-31 seems a little forced and difficult to square with the realities of church life. For example, the presbyter is placed within the local community, but many presbyters serve the church at regional or national

rather than at local level, and some exercise their ministry largely in secular employment. Again, the functions of the diaconate are not clearly defined, and insofar as they are clear, it is not easy to distinguish them from those of the laity. This is in fact recognised in the commentary in para. 31. Again, the episcopal function of representing unity and continuity in the Church, referred to in para. 29, is given to all the ordained in paras. 8 and 14. We wonder whether it is necessary to be so partial towards the three-fold order of ministry when the distinctions of function are none too clear, and when one of the orders is confessedly so poorly defined.

4.3.6 We acknowledge that a charge of partiality derives as much from the standpoint of the critic as from the actual content of the text. We welcome so much that is conciliatory to non-episcopal traditions, and have observed many instances of balanced judgement in the text. The orderly transmission of the ordained ministry, quite apart from a threefold order, is a powerful expression of the continuity of the church (para. 35). The succession of bishops is only one way in which apostolic tradition may be expressed (para. 36). Continuity in apostolic faith has been preserved in churches which have not retained the historic episcopate (para. 37). The episcopal succession is a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church (para. 38). Above all, there is the challenge to all churches to recognise that their structures, no matter how securely grounded in doctrine, are in constant need of reform. We accept this as applying to ourselves. God is calling us to a further ministry than we have yet known. Some of our shortcomings are known to us. Some need to be revealed. We enter into this discussion, not simply in order to bear a testimony, but to hear the testimony of others. Our hope is that the responses of sister churches to the text will help us to understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of our ministry as we have not done before.

4.3.7 As a church which does not have the office of bishop and which has not preserved ministerial succession within the historical episcopate (even though we have our own structures for the orderly transmission of ministry, and structures for the exercise of **episcopè**) we warmly appreciate the eirenic and conciliatory tone of paragraphs 35-8. In view of this we are bound to express disappointment at the caution and ambiguity of paragraph 53a. Here churches that have preserved episcopal succession are asked to recognise simply the 'apostolic content' of ordained ministries such as our own. This does not necessarily demand the interpretation that such churches are being asked to accept non-episcopal ministries as having parity with their own, even though this interpretation might be strongly implied by many statements earlier in the text. There are, for example, those who would gladly recognise the 'apostolic content' of, say, the ministry of the word exercised by the Methodist ministry, but who would at the same time contest the 'validity' of our orders.

5. **Conclusion**

5.0 It cannot be denied that, despite our clearly expressed gratitude to the Faith and Order Commission and support for the W.C.C., our response has contained some serious reservations. These reservations must be put in the context of a long and painstaking search for theological unity in which we are glad to be involved and which we cannot take lightly. We ask the Faith

and Order Commission, when they consider our response, to take account of the following factors.

- 5.0.0 In the first place we believe the ecumenical cause can best be served at the present time by complete openness. We believe it is possible to fall into error by contriving doctrinal accommodations that do not accord with the will and conviction of the people we represent. If we are to avoid this error, it is inevitable that our response will from time to time sound critical or even express complete dissent. However unfortunate this may be, we believe the Commission would prefer a frank appraisal of Methodist reaction to one which is diplomatic but not entirely accurate.
- 5.0.1 Secondly, while the reservations have to be expressed, the joy of Methodist people at the process of doctrinal convergence may be expressed even more feelingly. Our gratitude is nonetheless real because we have found it necessary to raise difficulties. We believe that, in the past, we have proved ourselves willing, not only to take great pains in the cause of ecumenism, but also to be led into strange territory as far as ecclesiastical polity goes. If we hesitate now it is not as those who have no intention of going further. It is in order that we may proceed in full conviction of the rightness of the way.
- 5.0.2 Thirdly, the Commission chose to concentrate on three crucial but contentious areas. It might have been possible to produce a text on some other subjects where convergence was equally evident and divergence considerably less. The Commission chose the more daring way. Differences were, therefore, inevitable, but we have no doubt that the end of this exercise will prove that the faithful application of W.C.C. partners to those difficult doctrinal issues was both necessary and abundantly worthwhile.
- 5.0.3 Fourthly, while we rejoice in the doctrinal convergence that has taken place, we do not suppose that a uniform statement of the faith is in prospect, nor do we of necessity wish that it was. History has provided us with many different expressions of the common faith. They can all profit from one another – that indeed is the purpose of the present exercise – but they are unlikely ever to be comprehended in one single expression of the faith. Individual distinctiveness and group distinctiveness will continue to give rise to different theological languages. When God has made his creatures so diverse, could we wish it not to be so? There is a danger that the unity we seek may become too restrictive. Our hope at the present time, therefore, is that, as we grow to understand and trust one another more, we shall be able to share our experiences and, acknowledging our differences, continue in full fellowship together to glorify our common Lord by worship and service in the world.
- 5.0.4 Fifthly, we must remind ourselves that our time is not God's time. We have shared in reconciliations that our fathers and mothers prayed for but never saw. Similarly some of our goals will be achieved by another generation who will understand them better than we do. Our very mortality makes us impatient, and it is well to be impatient, as long as there are obstacles that devoted enthusiasm can remove, but it is not given to us to measure out history. With all our impatience we must commit the ecumenical quest to the Spirit working in his Church.

- 5.1 We are grateful that this whole conversation takes place in a context of mutual trust born of what is essentially a common faith. The faith is the gift of Christ our Lord. We have no unity but in him; but in him we can have no disunity. Our differences are **ours**. They cannot divide his church. Grace and peace to you all.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report and direct that it be sent to the World Council of Churches as the response of the Methodist Church to **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry**.

(Agenda 1985, pp.566-586)

(v) The Roman Catholic Church

UT UNUM SINT (1997)

Under Standing Order 330(8) the Faith and Order Committee is empowered to deal with any communication touching matters of faith or order which is received during any connexional year. The Committee has responded to the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* in two ways.

First, it has contributed a paper to the British ecumenical discussion of the encyclical under the auspices of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Second, it has sent a response (which covers the same points as the paper submitted to CCBI) to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. The response reads as follows:

The Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church of Great Britain sends its greetings to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and offers the following response to Pope John Paul's Encyclical Letter, *Ut Unum Sint*.

First, we welcome *Ut Unum Sint* as the first positive encyclical on ecumenism, and in particular we rejoice to read that Pope John Paul sees the Roman Catholic Church as irrevocably committed to ecumenism (3). Moreover, he states (20) that the promotion of Christian Unity is not a sort of appendix to be added to the Church's traditional activity. Ecumenism is 'an organic part of her life and work'.

Second, we share the Pope's awareness of the doctrinal differences which remain to be resolved and of the contribution which bilateral and multilateral dialogues (of which the Roman Catholic/Methodist International dialogue is one) have made to this process (28ff and 49).

Third, we note the Pope's reminder (39) that disagreements should be resolved in the light of Scripture and Tradition. Methodists recognize 'the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures . . . as the supreme rule of faith and practice', while recognizing not only the Church's tradition but also reason and Christian experience as further sources of authority.

Fourth, we share Pope John Paul's view (66) that the relationship between Scripture and the Church is vitally important, and believe that the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* could serve as an important resource for future ecumenical consensus on biblical interpretation.

Fifth, we wholeheartedly endorse the Pope's advocacy of fellowship in prayer (21-27) and in dialogue (28-39).

Sixth, we note that the Pope writes of the way in which, on various ecumenical visits, he and others 'experienced the Lord's presence' (72). We draw attention to the Roman Catholic/Methodist Dublin Report of 1976 which stated (in connection with the Eucharist and other ways in which Christ's

presence is made known) that ‘wherever Christ is present, he is present in his fullness’. This leads us to suggest that the Eucharist could be a means as well as an end of unity. As the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism* indicates: ‘(Christ instituted the Eucharist) by which the unity of the Church is both signified and brought about’.

Seventh, we rejoice in the Pope’s desire (96) to have dialogue with other Christians on the nature of the office of the Bishop of Rome. The Roman Catholic/Methodist report (Nairobi, 1986) indicates that, though the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is not established from the Scriptures in isolation from the living tradition, ‘Methodists accept that whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole of Christ’s Church must by that very fact be God’s will for his Church. A universal primacy might well serve as a focus and ministry for the unity of the whole Church’. The report further indicates that Methodists need to be clear as to where the Pope acts as a universal primate and where as a diocesan bishop.

Finally, we look forward to ongoing dialogue on these issues.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Report.

(Agenda 1997, pp.255-257)

The Conference adopted the above resolution, adding, after ‘Report’, ‘and welcomes the Pope’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and directs the Methodist Council to consider the implications for the Methodist Church and to bring a report to the Conference of 1998’.

UT UNUM SINT (1998)

At the 1997 Conference Notice of Motion 45 asked the Methodist Council to consider the implications for the Methodist Church of the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and report to the Conference in 1998. The Council referred this work to the Faith and Order Committee and the Committee for Local Ecumenical Development.

The Faith and Order response to *Ut Unum Sint* was delivered and debated at the 1997 Conference. That response was very positive and was warmly welcomed by Cardinal Cassidy, the President of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity at the Vatican. The encyclical marked a step forward in conversations about ecumenism. The previous one on ecumenism from Pope Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos*, had suggested the kind of ecumenism which desired a return of others to the Roman Catholic fold whereas Pope John Paul's encyclical was composed in the light of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Decree on Ecumenism and the Constitution on the Church in particular. These documents were clear that other churches had ecclesial character, were not deprived of the means of grace and had many elements of sanctification and truth (eg Decree on Ecumenism 3.1 & 3.2; Constitution on the Church 8.2). The present encyclical goes further than the Vatican II documents and draws on the positive results of the international dialogues which have gone on since the Council. One of those dialogue partners has been the World Methodist Council and reports of those dialogues have been published every five years since 1971.

The response that the Methodist Church in Great Britain has given to *Ut Unum Sint* would seem to have the following implications:

1. Dialogue should continue between the Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain, both at the national level (in particular the Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee) and at local level through Churches Together. It is important to develop everywhere an atmosphere of mutual trust which will enable differences between us to be acknowledged and discussed, and the reasons for them better understood. The promotion of local unity through Local Ecumenical Partnerships and the work of the Association of Interchurch Families must be encouraged.
2. Priority should be given to making better known the agreed statements which have been published and the remaining issues between the two churches. The results of the ongoing dialogue should be readily available for Catholics and Methodists (the 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991 and 1996 reports, and the national ones on Justification, Reconciliation and the Virgin Mary). Many are unaware that conversations have been proceeding for over 25 years. The results of the dialogues require recognition by the Methodist Conference if

they are not to be forgotten. The British Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee is at present summarising these agreements.

3. Since the goal set before us by the Nairobi report of the International Roman Catholic/Methodist commission is 'full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life' (Nairobi 20), we should not allow our sights to be set lower than this, although we recognise that there are many difficulties on the way which have yet to be resolved.
4. *UUS* 21-27 describes the primacy of prayer. The Methodist church welcomes this call to common prayer along the ecumenical path to unity and recognises the need for Christians to 'meet more often and more regularly before Christ in prayer'. Christian unity is a matter not just of organisational adjustments or shared mission but of being of one heart and mind in Christ Jesus.
5. A significant part of *Ut Unum Sint* invited the other churches to a dialogue on the office of the Pope (*UUS* 88ff). This had already begun with the 1986 Nairobi Report and will continue through the national committee which is considering it. A simple pamphlet might be one way to allay Methodist fears at this stage since the Nairobi report is not well known.
6. Eucharistic sharing is still a significant problem between our two churches. We are pleased the Episcopal Conference in England and Wales is at present working on a document on the eucharist which will look at the question of eucharistic hospitality. The importance of eucharistic hospitality for interchurch families must be a part of this thinking.
7. We are divided on some social issues. The social questions could be part of our dialogue, as in the case of *The Common Good* where there was much agreement among us. *UUS* 68 says, 'In this vast area there is much room for dialogue concerning the moral principles of the Gospel and their implications'.
8. The Methodist Church does not stem directly from the Reformation. This means that there is no shared history of confrontation, as is the case with some churches in the Reformed tradition. Nevertheless, the Methodist Church has shared the widespread Protestant view of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. At the same time we have inherited from John Wesley a recognition of the importance of emphasising the fundamentals of the faith upon which we are not divided, on the basis of which we can join hands with those with whom we may in other things disagree. We recognise that Christians should not 'underestimate the burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past, and of mutual misunderstandings and prejudices' (*UUS* 2).

9. Pope John Paul suggests that the destiny of evangelization is bound up with the witness of unity given by the Church (*UUS* 98) and that divisions between Christians impede the very work of Christ in reconciling all things to himself. We share this view of the link between unity and evangelization.

In conclusion the overall implication of *Ut Unum Sint* is that our churches should continue in dialogue and prayer and seek to grow together in faith, mission and sacramental life. This, however, is not a matter for national and international dialogues alone, but for ventures in faith and openness to one another in every circuit and Roman Catholic parish.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report.

6 Other Faiths

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MULTI-FAITH WORSHIP (1985)

Preamble

The Conference of 1984 received a Suggestion from the North Lancashire Synod noting 'with deep concern the proposals to involve the Methodist Conference in Multi-Faith Worship'. The Conference referred the suggestion to the Faith and Order Committee and the Inter-Divisional Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths for report. Both groups have been active on the matter during the year. There is, however, a practical difficulty about two separate bodies producing a joint report in a short space of time, and this is compounded by the fact that the Faith and Order Committee in full session meets only in December or January. Consequently the present report, which is the product of work in both committees, has not reached the stage of final approval in both groups. Nevertheless we present this report to Conference for adoption with the assurance that discussion of the matter will continue and that further reports will appear in the **Agenda** in future years.

1. The Suggestion refers, we assume, to an event called 'Rapport '84', which was organised by Wolverhampton Methodists on the Thursday evening of the Representative Session of Conference, i.e. at a time when it has been customary to hold a Christian 'Festival of Praise'. The timing may have led to the assumption that a multi-Faith act of worship was replacing a Christian act of worship. Such, however, was not the intention. The aim of those who organised 'Rapport '84', was to celebrate the common humanity of all people, whatever their race, colour, culture or tradition of Faith. In particular, they wished to portray the richness of religious life to be found in Wolverhampton, without requiring agreement with all beliefs and practices, hoping that those who attended might be prompted to reflect, as perhaps never before, on the questions posed for us all by the fact of religious diversity.
2. At the same time, the Suggestion appears to imply that an act of multi-Faith worship necessarily involves some compromise of 'belief in the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God and Saviour of the World'. It thereby raises a major matter of 'general principle'.

Multi-Faith worship has tended to take one of three forms:

- i. Services from one Faith with guest participants from other Faiths;
- ii. Inter-Faith services in which each Faith group contributes from its own tradition what seems appropriate to the occasion;
- iii. Inter-Faith services with an agreed common order.

In the first case, all participants can offer testimony to their own convictions and religious experience; in the second case, all the participants are free to respond as they feel able to what is offered by the others; and in the third case, Christians need never agree to any common order which compromises their own faith.

The still developing situation nevertheless presents many problems. Suppose, for example, that a group of Methodists proposes to attend the worship of another Faith in their area.

For some Christians, even being present at another religion's place of worship can seem to be a betrayal of the gospel. For others, there is no problem in being present as an observer. But what if an observer is drawn to participate in some way, as might be expected of him or her by Hindus in their temple? The kind of participation involved seems to many to be the crucial issue.

Such concerns, reflected in the North Lancashire District's Suggestion, were present also in the minds of those who organised 'Rapport '84'. Indeed, an important benefit resulting from that event might prove to be the sharing of such concerns with the Methodist Church as a whole.

3. Issues raised by worship in a multi-Faith society are posed and discussed in **Can We Pray Together?**, a British Council of Churches publication prepared by its Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths. This valuable document is indispensable reading for people concerned with issues raised by 'Rapport '84'. This is shown by the booklet's sub-title, **Guidelines on Worship in a multi-Faith Society**.
4. It may be of value to indicate the nature of some of the most important of these issues.
 - i. Can members of different world religions learn from one another about the nature of God?
 - ii. How are Christians in multi-Faith Britain to understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and in particular his atonement?
 - iii. What is the mission of the church in a multi-Faith society?

To raise these questions is not to presume upon the answers, but to enable adequate discussion to take place amongst us.

5. What is of the greatest importance is that Methodists should realise how and why the matter of multi-Faith worship has recently arisen with such urgency. Especially since the end of World War 2, parts of many cities of this land have become populated by people of other Faiths than Christianity. Neighbourliness will face many Christians with new and delicate questions. For example, what kind of funeral service, if any, can be devised to enable members of other Faiths to express their respect for a Christian who had been much involved in community relations? Or how can a Christian respond with integrity to an invitation to the wedding of the child of friends of another Faith? The Faith and Order sub-Committee on Other Faiths and the Inter-Divisional Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths will continue to reflect on such matters and bring the fruit of such reflection to future Methodist Conferences. It is equally important, however, that both committees should stimulate adequate discussion at every level of the Church's life.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Multi-Faith Worship.

(Agenda 1985, pp.635-637)

The Conference, in adopting the above resolution, added:

'This Conference encourages the Methodist people to engage in multi-faith dialogue with their neighbours as the first steps towards mutual understanding, tolerance and love.'

THE USE OF METHODIST PREMISES BY OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES (1997)

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
- 2. BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT**
- 3. CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE**
 - Developments in Britain
 - Informal and formal meetings among people of faith
 - The World Church
- 4. TRADITION**
 - Holy places
 - Churches as Symbol
 - The Church of England
- 5. SCRIPTURE**
 - Appropriating scriptural models of 'sacred place'
 - Hearing the imperative of 'hospitality'
 - Buildings: legitimate or not?
 - Reflection on Scripture in relation to the Working Party's remit
- 6. CONCLUSION**
 - Guidelines

1. INTRODUCTION

Liturgy often speaks volumes about the beliefs of those who use it. The contemporary Methodist hymn-writer, Fred Pratt Green, has a verse in one of his hymns which describes the way Methodists have come to value their places of worship. The hymn has found ready acceptance among the Methodist people:

Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
(from *Hymns and Psalms* 653)

Another piece of hymnody describes the process by which buildings become significant to Christians:

Here holy thought and hymn and prayer
Have winged the spirit's powers,
And made these walls divinely fair,
Thy temple, Lord, and ours.
(quoted by Gordon Wakefield in *Epworth Review*, May 1982)

A service recently prepared by the Faith and Order Committee contains these words for use as a new church building is dedicated:

Let the door(s) of this church be open!
May the love of Christ dwell within this house
and may all who enter here find peace.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

After consultation with the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths, the Property Division brought to the 1994 Conference a report which was adopted as a reply to Memorial M129 which concerned the use of Methodist premises by other faith communities. The Conference, as well as adopting the report, expressed the judgement “that there should be a careful reconsideration of the principle governing the use of Methodist premises by persons of other faiths, including the question of non-Christian worship”, and directed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths, “to report to the Conference of 1995 on the issues involved, other than any legal issues . . .”

As a result, the Faith and Order Committee and the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths set up a joint Working Party, which has produced this report. The Conference *Agenda* in 1995 and 1996 explained why there had been delays in the production of the report. The report as it now follows is substantially that of the Working Party, as amended after discussion in meetings of the two Committees.

The 1994 report to the Conference referred to the last time the question had arisen, between 1970 and 1972. In a reply to the Conference in 1972 on the use of Trust Premises, the Faith and Order Committee stated that there, “is evidence that minority religious groups recently arrived in Britain have difficulty in obtaining premises for their worship” (Conference *Agenda* 1972 p.281). Five ‘opinions and recommendations’ were brought to Conference.

The first four did not require a change in the 1932 Model Deed and were accepted by Conference. They were as follows:

- 1) Local Churches should take the initiative to establish ‘dialogue’ with the representatives of other faiths’.
- 2) Adherents of other faiths should be allowed the use of Methodist premises for their secular and social activities.
- 3) Such occasions may be permitted even when an incidental religious rite is involved, as for example, the saying of grace at a meal, a brief blessing attached to a wedding reception following a religious wedding elsewhere (but not a full religious wedding service), or an act of individual prayer demanded at a particular hour. [*occasions already legally permissible*]
- 4) Christians should take opportunities where it is permitted for the sympathetic observation of other faiths, with a view to deeper understanding, and should gladly accept whatever experience and communion with God arises in such relationships. Those Christians who

are called to make a deep study of another faith would best do so by sympathetic observation of its worship in its regular services. Christians should scrupulously avoid those forms of inter-faith worship which compromise the distinctive faiths of the participants and should ensure that Christian witness is not distorted or muted; nor should they encourage occasions in which those of different faiths do in turn what is characteristic of their own religion, but in the present climate of opinion with its tendencies to syncretism should stress the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

The fifth recommendation was as follows:

The Committee is of the opinion that to give permission to non-Christian communities as an expression of Christian love and the desire to improve relations to hold their worship in Methodist premises does not of itself imply any denial of the uniqueness and finality of Christ or any judgement on the truth of other religions. It therefore recommends that when a non-Christian community seeks permission to use Methodist premises for its worship because no building is immediately available for its use the Superintendent, Minister and Trustees should be given discretion to grant permission as a temporary measure if they are satisfied that the worship will not offend the Christian conscience and that such permission will have the goodwill of the local congregation.

This fifth recommendation would have required legal changes and was not adopted.

As the Methodist joint Working Party was meeting, a Church of England Report, *Communities and Buildings*, was also being prepared by the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Board of Mission. It was submitted to the General Synod in 1996 and dealt with two issues: the sale of church buildings to other faith communities and the use of church premises by people of other faiths.

The present report seeks to reflect on contemporary Experience, the historical Tradition of the Church, and the Bible, and seeks to use the power of Reason to derive its conclusion. It attempts to define two theological principles which are invariable and to offer some provisional guidelines, recognising that these may change in the light of further experience. **The conclusion is that no theological imperative exists at present which should impel the Methodist Church to seek to alter the Deed of Union in order to allow formal (see section 3.2) acts of worship on its premises by other faith communities.**

3. CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

The Working Party has canvassed the views and experience of members of other faith communities and has also invited responses from within Methodism. As a result, three major elements in contemporary experience are now identified: the changes in the multi-faith experience of British society since 1972; the distinction made by all faiths between formal and informal religious acts; and the perspectives of Christians in other parts of the world.

The Working Party believes that experience leads to the conclusion that the rather loosely-defined view formulated by the Conference in 1972 remains a viable, though still provisional, position.

3.1 Developments in Britain

By 1972, churches had increasingly encouraged the use of premises by community groups, many of which had no religious foundation, especially in areas of social and economic deprivation: when use was requested by other faith communities, there was unease which led to debate. There were then, and there remain now, Christians who believed that generosity and hospitality towards those of other faiths – expressions of the commitment to love – demanded an open door. Other Christians believed, and continue to believe, that it is unhelpful to the proclamation of the gospel to create or maintain confusion about the distinctiveness of different approaches to God.

In the intervening period, most of the other faith communities have become established elements in a multi-faith society and have either acquired or built premises of their own – which, incidentally, they have seen as important signs of permanence and acceptance. Those whose faiths derived from the Asian Sub-Continent were and remain very critical of the secularisation of British society and indeed of the secularism which undergirds the attitude of many modern Christians to their places of worship. For many of them, a Temple is permanently a House of God. Requests for use of Methodist or other Christian premises now seem to arise from upwardly-mobile groups or from schisms within such other faith communities. The first has led to some requests in suburban areas which are not ‘deprived’ or which have only recently become religiously plural. The second raises questions about the propriety of becoming involved in the disputes of other communities.

The years since 1972 have also seen a growth (still seen as inadequate by many) in inter-faith dialogue. Such dialogue has led to a greater awareness of, and a greater respect for the sensitivities of each community. It has also led to a growing shared realisation that it is unhelpful to blur or to ignore the distinctions between faiths.

3.2 Informal and Formal Meetings among People of Faith

The Working Party has confirmed that there is broad agreement among all the major faith communities that, however difficult to justify theologically, there is a distinction to be made between private acts of prayer or the saying, for example, of grace at a meal, and the more formal community gathering for the purpose of worship; there is agreement also that being hospitable may imply the former but not the latter.

There are a number of different ways of expressing this distinction. It is possible to speak of ‘religious’ as opposed to ‘secular’ events. This is, however, an inaccurate description of gatherings in any faith community. Just as within Christian circles it would be wrong to suggest that, for example, a church-based sewing club, meeting in the church hall, was a ‘secular’ occasion, so it would be wrong to use that language in other faiths. Nor is the use of the word ‘cultural’ entirely acceptable in this context. The celebration following a wedding ceremony may not contain more than brief prayers, but

for many in other faith communities it would properly be seen as an extension of, and still a part of, the religious framework. It would not simply be a social and cultural event. Such illustrations are plentiful.

The Working Party wishes to make use of the less explicit terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ as a more accurate and less tendentious way of describing a shared view across religious communities. (This usage was adopted by the recent Church of England report, *Communities and Buildings*.) If we consider the following statements offered to the Working Party, they amount to the beginning of such a shared view:

A Hindu woman: “Hindus would be happy that Christians should pray in the temple, but not that they should follow Christian worship in the temple.”

A Muslim man: “My own opinion is that the specific place where the worshippers congregate should be for the sole use of the particular group, and there is no resentment to that practice from any group.”

A Sikh woman: “Worship should be restricted to that particular faith”.

As the Church of England report notes, the use of a specific building is typical of formal gatherings for worship. Further, formal acts of worship often require not only the **absence** of symbols of other faiths, but the **presence** of the symbols of the worshipping community. The use of a Christian building for formal gatherings of Sikhs, for example, would require the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib, and for Hindus, the various *murti* (deities).

There are, of course, gatherings which may be hard to fit into either of the suggested categories, and these are not insignificant. For example, a Qur’anic school for Muslim children may not be a formal event, but it is, and is intended to be, an act of religious education and nurture which, as indicated by the principles stated later in this report, the Working Party would not believe appropriate within a Christian building.

It may be that this distinction between the formal and the informal throws light upon the undoubted view of many believers that even within one building there are parts which are ‘more holy’ than others. Methodists (as indicated below in section 4), reject much of the notion of holy buildings; nevertheless, they instinctively make similar distinctions.

The Working Party does not believe that it is possible to provide detailed rulings on these matters, but broadly considers that these elements in contemporary experience suggest that formal gatherings by other faith communities on Methodist premises are not appropriate.

3.3 The World Church

Since 1972, one of the most important developments within most religious traditions has been the growth of that zealous pursuit of a particular faith-group’s interests which is often called fundamentalism. This has had considerable influence on inter-faith relationships throughout the world. Events such as that at Ayodhya, India, in December 1992 (when members of a

resurgent Hindu sect deliberately destroyed a mosque) remind us of the powerful significance of places of worship. Christians facing religious discrimination in Pakistan, sometimes prevented from building churches, are understandably puzzled if Methodists in Britain invite Pakistani Muslims to use their premises for prayer. In parts of the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere, similar considerations apply. As noted earlier, Christians in the world church are also critical of the secularised attitude to church buildings which has developed in the West. The Working Party recognises that the world wide experience of Christians must be taken into account when considering the use of Methodist premises by other faith communities.

4. TRADITION

4.1 The elements from the tradition of the Church which the Working Party selected as most important were the development of the concept of holy space and the role of symbols. This section indicates that, although other churches have formalised the designation of sacred places, this thinking does not usually find a ready home within Methodism. Methodism has no formal theology of sacred places. Nevertheless, Methodists hold their buildings in high regard. Reference is also made to the recent Church of England report, *Communities and Buildings*.

4.2 Holy Places

In the early Christian era, there were many examples of the designation of holy or sacred places. This practice undoubtedly existed alongside a strand of thinking which distrusted cultic activity associated with sacred sites. It is not possible to paint a simple picture. What is undeniable is that over the centuries churches became for all practical purposes holy places, not only because worship took place within them, but because they were filled with symbols which provided a means of promoting and focusing that worship. Ceremonies or liturgies for the formal setting-aside of places and buildings date from early in the Christian era, and are of course still used by many churches. The 'defence' and/or repossession of such places and the objects they contained has of course been the focus of violence over centuries between Christians and members of other faith communities.

The Reformed tradition, springing from a challenge to many of the outward signs used by the Roman church to encourage the faithful, has from its earliest days emphasised a pragmatic approach to buildings for worship and has broadly rejected the notion of 'sacred' ground or the need for 'consecration' of sites, buildings or symbols, preferring the less defined notion of 'dedication'.

John Wesley believed that the gathering of God's people for worship was the crucial factor in establishing a place of worship and fellowship. The Methodist church has broadly maintained that position, always preferring to speak of a worshipping community rather than its buildings as the locus of God's activity.

None of these historical points should be taken to mean that Methodists have held their buildings, and particularly (where such distinction can be made) worship spaces within such buildings, in other than high regard. From

hymnody and liturgy, as noted in the Preface, comes the affirmation that places of worship become for the worshipping community significant symbols of encounter with God.

4.3 Churches as Symbol

Churches have always contained symbols and all Christians make use of symbols within their formal worship. Bread, wine and water have sanction directly from Jesus, and for many, candles, bells, crucifixes, icons, stained glass and so on have become highly significant. Most of the great historic churches have been built as places of beauty and have themselves been seen as an offering to God. Again, with only some exceptions, Methodism has tended to be much more pragmatic, seeing buildings mainly as ‘containers’ for whatever kinds of liturgy they are designed to accommodate – often, in earlier days, with the emphasis on the ability for the maximum number to see and hear the preacher.

Nevertheless, because of the encounters with God which have taken place within them, Methodists share with other Christians a sense of the importance and significance of their buildings. The Working Party believes that this extends to the whole premises, but is focused naturally on the building or area within which formal worship takes place and specific symbols may be present. It may be helpful therefore to speak of the building itself as a symbol of the continued existence of a worshipping community, even though theologically that existence is not dependent upon the bricks and mortar. This symbolism undoubtedly extends beyond that congregation. That is, any building used by a Christian community is a symbol to its neighbourhood of the presence of that community within it. The Working Party noted that such symbolism is not confined to Christian tradition, but is equally important in other faith communities. It is manifestly the case, for example, that the Swaminarayan Temple built recently in Neasden, north-west London, is intended to be a statement of the permanence and importance of that community and its faith.

Thus there is a need for considerable caution in relation to the housing of the formal worship of other faith communities, both for the sake of those for whom a particular building has become Christian and important, and for those within the neighbourhood for whom it is also a symbol of Christian faith.

4.4 The Church of England

The Working Party gratefully acknowledges the work represented by *Communities and Buildings*, which has been helpful to much of its thinking.

As the Board of Mission report makes clear, the Church of England has had a somewhat undefined view of the question of sacred or holy places, and has never authorised an official liturgy of consecration. Nevertheless, the report has to deal extensively with the questions raised by the sale or disposal of formally consecrated places. The Working Party commends the Church of England report for study by anyone seeking an extended treatment of some of the Biblical material, and of the questions raised by the change of use of buildings, or the sharing of those buildings with other faith communities.

On the specific issue addressed in the present report, *Communities and Buildings* sets out a very demanding set of guidelines which should be fulfilled before any hospitality is offered to those of other faiths for formal worship – though it is important to note that such use is not ruled out. These guidelines have helped the Working Party to formulate its own *principles and guidelines* for Methodism.

5. SCRIPTURE

5.1 Because, in the matter of the ‘sacredness’ of Church buildings, Methodist people have tended to be more pragmatic than systematic, they have been eclectic in their appeal to Scripture to support diverse theological positions and have focused that appeal mostly in their hymnody and liturgies. Within wider discussion of this matter, the Working Party has noted three principal strands of usage of Scripture, each with its own character, the three together reflecting the wide range of approaches to the Bible characteristic of Methodism. One strand ‘echoes’ in Christians’ present experience some of Scripture’s stories; another draws on a key element in Christian character, ‘hospitality’; the third strand appeals to a small group of passages which appear to be ‘anti-Temple’ and consequently, to give comfort to a studied indifference to buildings, if not to outright hostility towards them. The Working Party offers only brief comment on each strand, for it believes that appeal to Scripture offers no simple solution to the present problem.

5.2 Appropriating Scriptural Models of ‘Sacred Place’

First, the Working Party has identified a practical, often ill-defined, sense that, because a building has housed a community’s life in faith, then scriptural language about ancient places as a focus of God’s presence may properly be borrowed and adapted. Within the British Methodist tradition, this sense has sometimes expressed itself through ‘sacred’ place-names for buildings; churches’ names (Bethel, Zion, Salem, etc) may evoke scriptural stories of memorable encounters with God and say something clearly about the ways in which later communities wish to value their buildings. ‘Geographical’ names hardly evoke a like resonance, but experience shows that, whatever reason may dictate to the contrary, buildings tend to acquire a sense of the community’s story, particularly of its dealings with God:

These stones that have echoed their praises are holy,
And dear is the ground where their feet have once trod;
Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims,
And still they were seeking the City of God.

(from *Hymns and Psalms* 660)

In various ways, at diverse times, in life’s greater and lesser moments, we and our forebears have encountered God. Consequently, Christians tend to take up scriptural stories of special encounters and use them analogously within the liturgies and hymnodies of their communities. For example, the stories of Bethel and of Solomon’s Temple are echoed and reworked in *Hymns and Psalms* 494 and 531; Paul’s reminder to the Corinthians that they are God’s Temple informs the ending of *Hymns and Psalms* 494. For their own purposes

in their own less splendid, but, to them, no less holy, buildings, countless preachers have reworked Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, and *Hymns and Psalms* 659 offers them a sung version for stone-layings. Derek Farrow's Christian reworking of Solomon's prayer, intermingled with other allusions, probably crystallises this specific Methodist view of 'the sacred' as it takes up its echoes of Scripture. Christian scriptures provide the language and models for the Church's continuing story . . . '*It is like this.*'

5.3 Hearing the Imperative of 'Hospitality'

Second, as we have said earlier, there is a strong appeal to Scripture by many who wish to urge 'hospitality' as a good reason for welcoming people of other faiths to use Methodist premises.

Attention should naturally be drawn first to Jesus' command for love of one's neighbour (Luke 10:25-37; see also Mark 12:31, quoting Leviticus 19:18). In the familiar passage from Luke, the lawyer's dispassionate question, 'Who is my neighbour?' is turned back on him: 'Which one of these acted like a neighbour . . . ? You go, then, and do the same.' And, though difficulties of interpretation exist, Jesus' dramatic narrative of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 provides further powerful illustration of the way in which 'neighbourly' care must be expressed in attention to practical needs.

The principle of hospitality as such is variously enjoined elsewhere in Scripture. Although a number of passages relating to hospitality in the New Testament probably refer specifically to hospitality towards journeying fellow Christians (for example, I Timothy 3:2, I Peter 4:9), others appear to have a broader reference; for example:

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to *strangers*. (Romans 12:13)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to *strangers*, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

It is probable that there is here a reflection of a principle like that of Deuteronomy 10:19 with its demand to care for the 'resident alien'.

Because the hearing, reading and study of Scripture has traditionally shaped the Methodist people's perception of 'scriptural holiness', hospitality stands squarely in any account of Christian character, and this, in the contemporary world, must surely include relationships with those of other faiths.

5.4 Buildings: Legitimate or Not?

Third, the Working Party has considered an argument centred on a common reading of Stephen's speech (see Acts 6:8 – 8:1). It is sometimes urged that in this narrative Stephen represents a tradition which draws both on Israel's prophetic tradition – understood to be generally critical of cultic religion and of shrines, particularly of the Jerusalem Temple – and also draws on a reading of gospel traditions of Jesus' alleged attitude to ritual and Temple.

There is little evidence to suggest that the gospel writers thought Jesus to be opposed to the Temple; indeed, Luke-Acts gives a strong indication of its

writer's positive attitude to it. For example, the post-resurrection Christian community both prayed and taught there.

Because Stephen's speech is a focal point for those who are indifferent to buildings, and who reckon Methodists as descendants from the Hellenists, it is important simply to note that there are other ways than this of reading Stephen's speech and of following Luke's argument from Scripture. It may certainly be argued that the passage has more to do with the issue of the reception or the rejection of Christ than with any 'anti-building' theology.

The writer to the Hebrews sees the new covenant mediated through Christ as being without the cultic institutions of the old, but it is doubtful how far this can be pressed as an argument against the propriety of distinct buildings for liturgical use within the historical development of Christian worship.

5.5 Reflection on Scripture in Relation to the Working Party's Remit

Reflection on the three ways in which the Working Party has seen Scripture being used does not suggest that there is good reason to alter the Conference's earlier decision.

By appropriating Scripture's stories, later Christians, including Methodists, have taken up in varying measure something of the earlier senses of 'the holy' and consequently recognised in their buildings a special, symbolic character.

In relation to such buildings, while the Working Party is conscious of the unconditional demands of hospitality in personal and group relations, we recognise that the Christian buildings' special character helps to mark out how the Biblical demand for 'hospitality' may be understood. The Working Party wishes to affirm the Christian virtue of hospitality. Hospitality comprises kindness and welcome to the stranger, and generosity, love and growing trust should flourish even where distinctions among faiths remain. In our judgement, however, the word 'hospitality' should not be pressed to mean that Christian churches, themselves symbols of Christian presence, should be available to other faith communities for their sacred purposes.

While God is not contained by church buildings, they remain signals of a gospel that 'God is' and is 'for us'; that gospel is expressed through Christian symbols and Christian discipleship. To affirm the 'specialness' of such buildings in no sense denigrates the faith and worship of others.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Working Party has had a limited brief to reconsider the theological principles governing the use of Methodist premises by people of other faiths, prior to any consideration by the Conference of necessary legal changes which might be required. Its recommendations are necessarily limited to that brief. Yet, in expressing the conclusion that no change is required in the present position with regard to the use of Methodist premises by those of other faith communities, the Working Party wishes to emphasise its total support for widespread and serious efforts, at every level of the church's life, to increase understanding between Methodists and those of other faiths. Nothing in what

follows should be understood to be inimical to friendly, respectful and open relationships on all sides. The Working Party strongly re-affirms the Principles on Dialogue and Evangelism adopted by the 1994 Methodist Conference, and commends friendship-building and appropriate joint action. Inter-faith encounter can enrich both the communities and the individuals taking part. Such encounter can be a source of harmony and a positive aid towards the elimination of prejudice and tension.

The conclusions reached should neither be seen as an adverse judgement upon the validity of non-Christian ways of worship, nor as a denial of the spiritual riches found within other faiths. Rather the Working Party believes that in upholding the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition of worship and life, it is also affirming a positive awareness of the importance of each faith to its own followers.

6.2 The theological principles which the Working Party affirms as an invariable basis for Methodists in contemplating the use of Methodist premises by those of other faiths can be briefly and simply stated. (They can, we believe, be seen as requirements of the Deed of Union and the 1976 Methodist Church Act.)

1. **It is inappropriate for teachings contrary to Christian doctrine to be proclaimed on Methodist premises.**
2. **It is inappropriate for Methodist premises to be used in any way which will negate (or cause confusion concerning) the distinctiveness of Christian doctrine.**

6.3 The Working Party has concluded that the previous guidelines adopted by the Conference in 1972, although they can be seen as imprecise, represent a proper attempt to maintain an important distinction. Those acts of hospitality in which those of other faiths may be welcomed to use Methodist premises for what this report has described as informal events are rightly seen as a part of the process of building good relationships. Where local congregations wish to extend such hospitality they are, as the guidelines below indicate, encouraged to do so. Likewise the Working Party strongly commends joint events organised by inter-faith groups or councils at which the mutual sharing of beliefs and their meaning can be explored.

Nevertheless, through consultation with those of other faiths, and through examination of contemporary experience in the light both of the tradition of the Church and the insights of Scripture, the Working Party is convinced that the application of the two principles stated above leads to the conclusion that the use of Methodist premises for the purposes of formal acts of worship in other faith traditions is inappropriate.

6.4 Guidelines

The Working Party offers some simple guidelines which it believes may usefully be applied in local situations.

- 1 Any decision to invite or allow the use of Methodist premises for informal events by other faith communities should be preceded by careful discussion.

- 2 Such discussion should seek to establish firm support for such a proposal, so that the welcome is genuinely that of the whole Methodist community. It is generally unwise to provoke serious dispute within one faith community in order to invite another faith group to use its premises.
- 3 Consideration should also be given in such circumstances to the likely perceptions in the neighbourhood of the meaning of such invitations, and this is particularly important in relation to Christians whose experience in other parts of the world may be very different from that which obtains in much of Britain.
- 4 Where, in the light of all these considerations, a local congregation decides to move forward to welcoming the use of its premises, it will be sensible not to allow the use of areas which are normally used for Christian public worship.
- 5 The responsibility for allowing the use of trust premises rests with the Managing Trustees. The requirements of the Model Trusts (see especially 13 and 14) and of Standing Orders (see especially 920-929) must be observed.
- 6 All agreements to allow the use of trust premises by other faith communities should be subject to at least annual review.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Report.

(Agenda 1997, pp.236-248)

GUIDELINES FOR INTER-FAITH MARRIAGES (2000)

The guidelines below are for ministers and other people authorized to conduct marriages and subject to the discipline of the Methodist Church who are asked to officiate at a Christian marriage service where one partner belongs to a world faith other than Christianity. They replace the guidelines given on page E3 of *The Methodist Service Book* of 1975 and should be read in conjunction with *CPD Book VI Part 9 B.11*. They presume knowledge of the following Methodist Conference documents which encourage respect and co-operation between faiths: *Relations with People of Other Faiths*, 1983 (*Agenda* p.57f.); *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs*, 1994 (*Agenda* p.589-596; available from Methodist Publishing House as *'Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths'*, 1997, Ref. PA662); *Called to Love and Praise* 3.2.9 - 3.2.16, (1999 *Agenda* p.186-189). For the sake of brevity, the term 'minister' is used throughout to denote ministers and others authorized to conduct marriages.

INTRODUCTION

1. All faiths cherish marriage and most would agree that seeking God's blessing on a marriage is vital. In Britain's pluralist society, there are more and more opportunities for marriage between people of different faiths. There are some who would see this as a cause for celebration, for it can betoken the meeting of faiths at a very deep social level, that of the life of the family.
2. Several options are open for a couple from different faith backgrounds when they are planning the marriage ceremony. Some will decide to supplement a ceremony in the Register Office with informal prayers in the home. This gives maximum flexibility to the couple to invite religious leaders, friends and family members from both faith communities to offer prayers for the blessing and protection of the marriage. Others opt for two formal ceremonies, to reflect the two faiths within the marriage. It is also possible that the couple will decide to have one ceremony only and will choose either the Christian marriage service or a ceremony in accordance with the practices of the other faith.
3. If the couple choose to be married according to the practice of the other faith concerned and the participation of a Christian minister is invited, the principles given in Paragraph 12 can be applied. To refuse such an invitation when it is acceptable to the persons to be married and their families could be inimical to the good relations between the two communities that the occasion requires.

THE NEED FOR PASTORAL CARE

4. Within all faith communities in Britain, marriage outside the faith is a difficult and sometimes controversial subject. Fears can arise that the person concerned will be lost to his or her faith or that the whole community of faith will be weakened as a result of such a marriage. This can result in tension within the faith community, anguish for the parents and pain for the couple to be married. In some instances, prohibitions are in force, as when a woman is

prohibited from marrying outside the faith. A person who seeks to marry someone of another faith can, therefore, feel abandoned by his or her community or family

and deprived of pastoral advice, an experience intensified when the person is breaking tradition, custom or law.

5. Pastoral care of the couple both before and after the marriage service is, therefore, essential. It is particularly important that the couple should be encouraged to talk to each other both about their respective faiths, so that respect for the faith of the other can develop, and also about what becoming an 'inter-faith family' involves; for example, the necessity of reaching decisions about the religious education of children or the funeral rites to be followed when a family member dies. Care should be taken by the minister that any advice given does justice to and does not misrepresent the faith to which the partner who is not a Christian adheres.

6. Pastoral care of the couple will be enhanced if local links of friendship can be developed between the two religious communities concerned. This can help the marriage to be accepted in both communities and open up opportunities for hospitality, ongoing support for the couple and trust-building between faiths.

THE MARRIAGE SERVICE

Conscience

7. No minister should be required to officiate at a marriage service if it is against his or her conscience. However, it should be remembered that hesitancy or refusal on the part of the minister could convey condemnation of the other faith, reinforce the couple's sense of isolation and hinder good community relations. A minister who is prevented by conscience from officiating should ensure that the couple is referred to a colleague not so prevented.

Preparation

8. It is important that the partner who belongs to another faith should be happy not only to take part in the Christian service but also to accept the Christian understanding of marriage as outlined in the Marriage Service. The minister, for example, should look for evidence in the couple of mutual respect and love, life-long commitment, faithfulness and the wish to grow together through life in friendship, wisdom and holiness.

Legal

9. Note should be taken of the requirements laid down by law, as given in *The Methodist Worship Book*.

Liturgical

10. '*The Methodist Marriage Service*' and '*Blessing of a Marriage Service*' each form a coherent and carefully-worded whole. However, it is possible within Methodism to add to or omit from the liturgy, as long as, in the Marriage Service, the words of declaration and the words of contract required by law remain. Therefore, in order to affirm respect for the beliefs and commitment of the partner from another faith, a prayer, hymns and/or readings from the other faith can be included. This could extend to an appropriate symbolic action from the other faith tradition. Consultation with the couple concerned is essential in this process. Nothing should be included without the consent of both parties and care should be taken that the additions are consonant with the Christian faith as a whole and the Christian concept of marriage.

11. Omissions from the liturgy should be minimal but examples might be phrases which one partner could not say in good conscience, for example the trinitarian formulations in Section 14 of the Marriage Service and Section 10 of the Blessing of Marriage Service. It might be acceptable to replace these with 'in the name of God' which could be said by both partners with good conscience.

12. The participation of a priest or religious leader from another faith community in a Christian marriage service would not normally be expected. However, where such participation

- a. is requested by the couple;
- b. has the agreement of the other faith community; and
- c. will not change the fundamental Christian nature of the service

it should be welcomed. To debar a leader from another faith from making a contribution from that faith tradition, for instance, would imply a lack of openness and trust on the part of the Christian community which could be very hurtful to the other partner and his or her faith community and hinder the good relations between the two communities that the occasion requires. However, discernment should be used to ensure that any involvement by a person from another faith enhances the service for the couple to be married and is acceptable to all the parties concerned.

Further Help

13. Further help, practical or pastoral, or referral to local contacts or specialist resource people, can be gained from the Connexional Secretary for Inter-Faith Relations at Methodist Church House.

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages.

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7 INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

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MASCULINE TERMS IN THE METHODIST SERVICE BOOK (1984)

A memorial presented to the Conference of 1983 asked that the generic use of the word 'man' and other such usages be removed from *The Methodist Service Book* when it was reprinted in 1984. The Conference was not able to accept the memorial because the changes requested would have required a complete revision of the book, which, for a variety of reasons, was not in prospect. Nevertheless the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce alternative wording and to consider how it could be made available to the Church pending a full revision. An important question is at once raised concerning the scope of the alternative wording. The problem is more complex than at first sight appears. In the first place, our Lord lived in the flesh as a male. He is, therefore, referred to as Son. He prayed to God as 'Father' and the idea of this Father-Son relationship has entered into Christian theology and devotion at the deepest possible level. The same considerations do not apply to the Holy Spirit, but the language relating to the Holy Spirit rarely causes problems of this character. It may be that, in the course of time, the Church will find ways of speaking of relationships within the Trinity using language that transcends gender, but that time is not yet. At present we have no acceptable alternative to continuing with the traditional forms.

Secondly, much of the language of service books is drawn directly from the Bible. The biblical authors lived in a patriarchal society and readily used masculine language both for God and for people. The Bible, however, is a historical text with which we are not free to tamper. It can and must be interpreted for the present day, but it cannot be re-written. In some cases, language that appears unnecessarily exclusive in one translation is less difficult in another. For example, in the Ordination Service, the *Revised Standard Version* of Romans 12 uses a large number of masculine pronouns. *The Jerusalem Bible*, while being equally faithful to Paul, manages to use less. Those who read lessons in public will doubtless bear this in mind, though it would be wrong for the Conference to recommend alternative versions to those given in the text of the service book purely on this criterion.

Thirdly, there is the problem of texts, ancient and modern, that are in ecumenical use. Chief among these are the Nicene Creed, the Collects, and the 1936 Service of Holy Communion. Each text presents a different problem and unilateral revision is no answer. Further consideration will be given to the issue by ecumenical bodies. In the meantime, no changes are recommended. This applies especially to the 1936 service which, if used, should be used in its entirety.

A fourth problem concerns the hymns printed in the text. Fortunately the compilers of *Hymns and Psalms* were aware of the issue and, if congregations have both the service book and *Hymns and Psalms*, they will be able to use the latter on those few occasions when the text of a hymn presents difficulties.

There remain a number of cases where masculine words are used unnecessarily and where it is possible and advantageous to change them. Recommendations are given in a leaflet which is available from the Methodist Publishing House and which will be included in all new copies of the service book sold.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Masculine Terms in *The Methodist Service Book*.

(Agenda 1984, pp.23)

The Conference adopted the above resolution, adding:
'but without placing any obligation on the Faith and Order Committee to eliminate the generic use of the word 'man'.

THE GENERIC USE OF THE WORD 'MAN' (1987)

(M.7. Agenda 1986)

The Teddington (3/9) Circuit Meeting (Present:35. Vote:22 for, 4 against, 9 neutral) whilst welcoming the initiative of the Conference in this matter, requests the Conference to re-examine the list of proposed amendments to the Methodist Service Book which were published with a view to reducing the generic uses of the word 'Man'. The main point of the Memorial is that many of the alterations result in clumsy English and poor theology.

1. Some important instances of the generic use of the word 'Man' have not been included; e.g in the Collect for the 9th Sunday before Christmas (page C3). Even though this may be an ecumenical text, it is basic to the whole exercise.
2. In some instances the proposed amendment does not have the same meaning as the word altered: (a) 'Neighbours' on page B5 may seem to refer only to a few people who live nearby. Not every worshipper will immediately think of Luke 10. (b) In this usage 'man' included children. 'Man and Woman' is not necessarily an adequate alternative: e.g On Page B26 six lines from the bottom, it could well be argued that children stand in need of justice quite as much as men and women. (c) In the Ordination Service to alter 'mankind' on page G12 to 'Creation' is to enormously extend the presbyter's office well beyond that recognised elsewhere in the Christian Church.
3. (a) In some amendments the English usage is less than happy. 'Us male and female' is clumsy; 'all people' seems awkward in certain contexts (B7, 21 and 24).
(b) The generic 'man' includes all generations in a way none of the alternatives necessarily does.
(c) The Circuit Meeting suggests the use of the word 'everyone' may be an acceptable alternative in certain places.

Finally, this meeting asks the Conference to clarify what is intended by the phrase (in the Conference resolution of 1984) 'next' re-print of the Methodist Service Books? Does this phrase mean the next time the Methodist Publishing House re-orders from its printers, or is some more extensive revision envisaged in several years time?

REPLY

The Faith and Order Committee reaffirms its commitment to the revision of the liturgy in the interest of promoting inclusive language, and after careful consideration of the various points raised by the Teddington Circuit accepts the force of much of the argument presented. The difficult nature of the task of finding appropriate, elegant forms of expression which are theologically adequate is well illustrated in the Memorial.

The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends that the specific points raised under headings 2 and 3 be considered together with any other suggested

amendments when the Methodist Service Book is revised. In relation to the alteration of ecumenical texts the Faith and Order Committee continues to recommend that changes are made only after consultation with the Joint Liturgical Group and the English Language Liturgical Consultation, whose concerns are akin to those expressed in the Memorial.

In view of the financial outlay involved in the making of slight changes in the text of services, and general undesirability of wholesale alteration in successive reprints of what is basically the same edition of the Service Book, the kind of amendments needed must await the major revision envisaged for the mid-1990's.

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopts the Reply to M.7 (1986).

(Agenda 1987, pp.646-648)

In place of the above resolution, the Conference resolved that the reply of the Conference to Memorial M.7 (1986) was contained in its own Resolutions. The Conference further resolved to refer to the Faith and Order Committee the resolution with which the next report, 'Inclusive Language', begins.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (1989)

The Conference of 1987 referred to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report the following resolution:

‘The Conference appoints a working party to look at inclusive language within the whole context of the position of women within Methodism, taking account of the work of other denominations and bodies, and to report to the Conference of 1989 as part of our response to the Decade of Solidarity 1988-1998.’

The Faith and Order Committee itself referred this resolution to a working party, whose report to the Main Committee in January 1989 included a proposal that a working party should be set up to carry out an ‘audit’ of Methodism in relation to the place of women and men within the Church which could then be presented to synods, circuit meetings, church councils and other bodies to provoke self-examination and suitable response. The Main Committee, while not dissenting from this proposal, felt that it should be referred to the President’s Council which for some years has been exploring the community of women and men within the Church.

The working party also proposed that a group should be appointed to produce a resources pack which would enable sections of the Church to look at themselves and discover new possibilities. The Faith and Order Committee judged that this proposal would most satisfactorily be dealt with by referring it to the Inter-Divisional Resources and Publications Committee.

The Faith and Order Committee believes, therefore, that the proposals of the working party naturally find a place within the remit of other bodies, and therefore confines its present report to the Conference to those aspects of inclusive language for which it has a particular responsibility.

The Committee remains committed to the principle of inclusive language. The orders of service presented to the Conference in Section C of this report conform to that principle. As the Committee reported to the Conference of 1987, it is hoped that ecumenical texts, not directly under the Committee’s control, will have been revised to render their language inclusive by the time that *The Methodist Service Book* is replaced.

To date, the Committee’s commitment to inclusive language has been related to the very important issue of the words we use for human beings, male and female. The Committee has now resolved to explore a much more difficult question: it has set up a working party to consider our language and imagery about God within the framework of our concern for inclusivity and in relationship with our understanding of male and female in God’s image. It is clear that the working party will need time to deal in depth with this sensitive question and that both the Committee and the Conference will in due course need to give careful consideration to the working party’s findings; but it is also clear that there is an unresolved issue here that must be thoroughly explored before a new service book is authorized.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report on Inclusive Language.

(*Agenda 1989, pp.102-103*)

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ABOUT GOD (1992)

Contents

Summary of Report

Introduction

Language and Imagery about God

- a) The witness of scripture and the later tradition
- b) 'To whom then will you liken God?'
- c) 'Male and female he created them'
- d) Distorted images of God

Main Conclusions

Prayer and Worship

Two further issues

Postscript

Appendix

References

Recommendations

Resolution

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Language is a precious gift of God. We need, however, to be vigilant in case our understanding is distorted or impoverished by language that is inappropriate. Ill chosen language may both express and encourage attitudes which are unworthy or beliefs which are inadequate or false. When we 'name' reality we can so easily define it on our own terms. Much attention has recently been given to the way in which the use of 'male' words may leave women feeling marginalized and so fail to express our conviction that male and female are both made in the image of God. A commitment to 'inclusive language' when speaking about ourselves draws attention to the imagery we use when speaking of God. Our tradition tends to use exclusively male imagery when it talks of God and also when it addresses God. This report argues that the rich resources of male imagery should continue to be used. It asks, however, if it is appropriate to balance and complement male imagery with female. It argues that it is appropriate. Such imagery is consistent with Scripture – and indeed Scripture gives significant examples. Such imagery expresses the conviction that God is neither male nor female, whilst male and female are together made in the divine image. It argues that our understanding of God has been in some respects impoverished by the exclusive use of male imagery, and that in the balance and tension between male and female imagery a richer vision of God is given.

The report now presented to the Methodist Conference by the Faith and Order Committee has been written by a working party set up by the Committee in response to various motions presented to the Conference. The working party consisted of: the Revd Anne E. Gibson, Dr. Judith Lieu, the Revd Judith I. Maizel,

Mrs Janice Sutch Pickard, the Revd Neil G. Richardson, the Revd Rosemary Wakelin, with the Revd Dr. John A. Harrod acting as convener.

INTRODUCTION

(1-6) The general debate about inclusive language

1) As recently as fifteen years ago so called 'exclusive language' was very widely used in Britain and only rarely questioned. By 'exclusive' language we mean 'male' words such as 'man', 'men', 'mankind', 'forefathers', used to refer to both males and females. In *The Methodist Service Book*, published in 1975, such language is used throughout. There are prayers for 'all men' even though we intend to include women and children. We declare that 'man' is made in God's image, even though the divine image is seen equally in women; we confess that we have sinned against our 'fellow men' even though we sin at least as much against women and children. ⁽¹⁾ Women may thus become 'linguistically invisible'. ⁽²⁾ Children likewise may become 'invisible' through the use of this language.

2) It is sometimes argued that objections to such language rest on a failure to see that words such as 'man' have two meanings. 'Man' may be used to refer to a male human being, and also to all human beings in general. There is a measure of truth in this objection, but it still misses the main points. One significant reason why 'male' words have been so used in our language has been the widely held belief that the male is the norm of the human. ⁽³⁾ Furthermore, apart from this consideration, this usage is increasingly heard as being exclusive, and when this is so it is inadequate simply to refer people to a dictionary. After all language develops and meanings change. This remains true even though 'exclusive' language is often both used and heard quite innocently by those who understand it to refer to both women and men. The universal reference, without any 'sexist' connotations, is immediately understood. For many who believe in the equality and full humanity of male and female, however, the continued use of exclusive male language is an anachronism which fails to express their belief. Finally, even if the word 'man' may be understood as referring to both women and men this is not so readily the case with words such as 'brotherhood', 'forefathers', and also the plural 'men'.

3) It is thus increasingly recognized that such language often has the effect of making women feel marginalized and men feel embarrassed. These feelings need to be taken seriously, but the issue, as suggested in the above paragraph, is not primarily one concerning the feelings of what may still be only a minority. The fundamental issue is not our response to current trends and pressures but rather the nature of the gospel and our Christian conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God. This places upon us the obligation to express that conviction in our language. Hidden signals are implicit in all the language we use. Language moulds as well as expresses our thinking and feeling. Because of this, 'exclusive' language may reinforce the idea that the male is normative and the female in some way or other inferior. Critics of exclusive language seek to correct a flaw deeply embedded in our thinking, theology and culture, a flaw which has distorted our thinking of God and of humanity.

4) Since we share the conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God this report welcomes and wishes strongly to encourage the practice of speaking 'inclusively'. We may speak of 'humankind' or 'everyone' rather than of 'mankind', of 'people' or 'everyone' rather than of 'men', and of our 'mothers and

fathers before us' instead of our 'forefathers'. Sisters should be specified and not simply assumed to be included with the brethren. Some such changes in our *Methodist Service Book* have already been authorized by the Conference. The word 'humankind' is not an ugly modernism. It has been part of our language at least since the seventeenth century. It is used, for example, in Dryden's translation of the hymn 'Creator Spirit by whose aid'.⁽⁴⁾ Sentences may often be rendered inclusive by a simple change from the singular to the plural. Thus instead of saying: 'when a man grows older he . . .' we can say 'when people grow older they . . .' Some have also proposed a wider use of the words 'they' and 'their' as a way of making a singular subject universal. Miller and Swift give examples – for instance 'Nobody prevents you, do they?' (Thackeray), and 'It is enough to drive anyone out of their senses' (Shaw).⁽⁵⁾ It is usually not difficult to adopt such an inclusive style of speech – although it requires effort and commitment to overcome the habits of a lifetime. Even so, thought and sensitivity are required – as for example when references to 'men and women' appear to exclude children. Occasionally an inclusive equivalent – especially one that does not lead to clumsy or ugly expressions – is not easy to find. Generally, however, inclusive language may be just as elegant and pleasing to the ear.

5) Attempts have been made to make the language of traditional hymns and prayers less exclusive, and we believe this should be encouraged. Rupert Davies' skilful paraphrase of the fourth verse of Luther's classic 'A safe stronghold our God is still' is an example.⁽⁶⁾ A hymn sung at Methodist ordinations has the 'men' of *The Methodist Service Book* replaced by 'us' in *Hymns & Psalms*.⁽⁷⁾ Hymns have from time to time been altered for various reasons, so when hymns are changed to make language more inclusive we are doing nothing new. It may not, however, be possible to alter all traditional texts. Some alterations, based on the belief that all language must be fully inclusive, appear forced. Some valued hymns and traditional prayers may stubbornly resist attempts to make their language inclusive. Again, there needs to be a proper respect for the literary quality and integrity of the material. Sometimes we have to accept that our literary heritage cannot always be made to share our sensitivities. *The United Methodist Hymnal* of the American United Methodist Church amends the line of a Wesley carol 'Pleased as man with men to dwell' to 'Pleased with us in flesh to dwell'⁽⁸⁾, but for reasons such as these, and sometimes for theological considerations as well, not everyone agrees with this change. The obligation to use language as inclusive as possible, however, remains; and especially for the writing of new hymns and liturgy.

6) These issues are relevant to all kinds of speech but never more relevant than when we are considering the language of worship. Special care should be given to such language because our language in worship not only expresses but also moulds our theology during an activity when our minds and emotions should be fully alert. In worship, as on other occasions, we transmit values through language. 'Christians are formed by the way in which they pray, and the way they choose to pray expresses what they are.'⁽⁹⁾ It is imperative that the church should reflect critically about the language it uses. Those who lead worship should remember how alienating to some can be the constant use of words such as 'men', 'mankind', 'brethren', 'forefathers' etc. Such language can also reinforce beliefs about the normative character of the male.

LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ABOUT GOD

(7-13) Whilst much imagery about God has no gender much is nonetheless explicitly male. We need the rich resources of such imagery, but it needs to be balanced with female imagery, thus correcting distortions and giving us a richer and more adequate way of speaking of God.

7) We believe that a commitment to 'inclusive' language is rooted in our understanding of the gospel – in particular in our conviction that women and men are together made in the image of God. We need further to ask – and this is the theme of this report – if the language and imagery we use about God adequately expresses this conviction. Indeed, even if talk, for example, about the human race as 'man' be allowed questions concerning the appropriateness of the language we use when speaking of God remain. In recent years a commitment to inclusive language has directed attention to our language about God. But the latter is only related to and is not dependent upon the former. Of course the words we use when speaking of God often have no gender. God may be described as creator, almighty, eternal, loving, gracious, judge, merciful, deliverer, disturber, healer, lover, beloved, comforter, sustainer, enabler, saviour, redeemer, and in many other ways that have no particular gender connotation. Many of these descriptions are found in the Bible. Whilst it may be felt that words such as 'almighty' have (however loosely) a certain 'masculine' feel about them, others may be heard as having a more 'feminine' dimension.

8) Again, Christians have almost always insisted that God, being neither male nor female, is beyond human gender; although our experience of being male and female may give us some insight into the nature of God in whose image we are made. This is important because there is evidence that some people think of God as being in some sense 'male'. Perhaps this is in part due to the influence of male imagery that we widely use; and in part due to the belief that God was incarnate in the male Christ. The belief that God is in some sense male lacks coherence – since it is unclear what might be *meant* by speaking of God as male. After all, God has no physical body. Despite its incoherence in some quarters this belief remains strong.

9) The rich resources of gender-neutral imagery need to be fully used. Such imagery helps to avoid the distortion caused by an overuse of explicitly male imagery. Wesley's hymns 'What shall I do my God to love' and 'Thy ceaseless unexhausted love' are hymns not untypical of Wesley in their lack of gender imagery.

10) It remains true, however, that much of the language about God most widely used by Christians does have a gender; and this is almost invariably male. Sometimes it appears almost strident in its maleness. This is the case even though, as will be indicated shortly, this usage does not accord fully with either the Bible or strands of the later Christian tradition. Certainly in general 'church-speak' God is described as 'Lord', 'King' and 'Father', more frequently than in most other ways; and added to this of course is the use of the personal pronoun 'He'.

11) We need to note certain distinctions. There is a distinction between EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (when 'male' words are used to refer to both men and women) and MALE IMAGERY when speaking of God – as when we speak of God as 'Father', 'King' or 'Lord'. It is also important to make a distinction between the concepts MALE and FEMALE on the one hand and the concepts MASCULINE and FEMININE on the other. The former pair simply refer to gender. Images such

as 'king', 'father', and 'brother', are MALE images because only males can be kings, fathers and brothers. Similarly, 'queen', 'mother' and 'sister', are female images because only females can be queens, mothers and sisters. The concepts MASCULINE and FEMININE are more elusive. They refer to qualities and characteristics – called 'masculine' or 'feminine' because of a rough (but only rough) correspondence perceived to exist between them and gender. It might be claimed that in some cases this correspondence is inherent to a particular gender. More usually, however, it is argued that these qualities and characteristics derive largely from stereotype, culture's expectations, and the way in which people are brought up. Later in the report we will give examples of the way in which our culture tends to think of certain qualities as masculine and of others as feminine.

12) It follows that an image might be gender neutral in the strict sense – but still have 'masculine' or 'feminine' overtones. If we speak of God as 'almighty sovereign over all' we are using a gender neutral image, but many would argue the image is still largely MASCULINE since in our culture masculinity tends to be associated with dominance and control. Likewise if we speak of God patiently nurturing us, again the image is gender neutral, but some would argue it is a largely FEMININE image since in our culture the willing ability patiently to nurture the young tends to be thought of as a more feminine quality. The whole area bristles with difficulties. We cannot be precise about culture's expectations; and neither women nor men conform to their stereotypes – people of both sexes giving ample evidence of having both 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics (as our culture deems them to be). It is nonetheless difficult to deny that our understanding of God has been significantly influenced by the dominance of male and masculine imagery. Sometimes our culture's male stereotypes have been projected onto God. Imagery that is gender neutral may still be largely 'masculine' in its overtones. We do not address adequately the problem of the dominance of male/masculine imagery simply by addressing the problem of imagery's gender.

13) In this report, therefore, we ask if our understanding of God has been distorted and impoverished by an almost exclusive use of male imagery. We ask also if it is appropriate to use female imagery, alongside the male, when we seek to put into words our understanding of God; and also when we address God in prayer and worship. We are convinced that it is appropriate and we wish now to offer four major considerations which amplify and give weight to this conviction.

a) THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE AND THE LATER TRADITION

(14-28) It is pointed out that Scripture uses a very wide range of images when speaking of God, including significant examples of female ones. It is argued that when Scripture speaks of God as 'Father' it is the ideal parenthood and not the maleness of God that is meant. It is further suggested that Scripture itself engages in a constant search for a more adequate language with which to speak of the richness of God and invites us to engage in a similar search – although of course always guided by Scripture. It is claimed that a contemporary concern to find a feminine dimension to God has firmer roots in the Bible than is sometimes realised.

14) All Christians accept the authority of Scripture, even though they may differ in their understanding of the nature of this authority. They may also differ over how Scripture is to be interpreted and used. We begin by asking about the witness of Scripture concerning our theme.

15) First we note that the Bible does speak of God in terms of female imagery. Isaiah uses a woman's experience of nurturing her children as a metaphor of the divine care (Isaiah 46, 3-4) A similar image is used in Deuteronomy 32, 18:

'You forsook the creator who begot you and ceased to care for God who brought you to birth.'

In Isaiah 42, 14 God is also compared to a woman who cries in labour:

'Now I groan like a woman in labour panting and gasping'

Elsewhere we read in Isaiah:

'As a mother comforts her son so shall I myself comfort you' (66, 13)

Another verse in Isaiah does not speak directly of God by using female imagery. It is nonetheless worth quoting as an example of the prophet's willingness to compare and contrast the care of God with that of a mother for her child:

'Can a woman forget the infant at her breast, or a mother the child of her womb? But should even these forget, I shall never forget you.' (49, 15)

The Psalmist speaks of our relationship to God as being:

'like a weaned child clinging to its mother' (Psalm 131, 2)

Likewise, in Psalm 22, 9 God is spoken of in terms of the image of a midwife. Another Psalm – number 139 – speaks of the awareness of God being like the knowledge a mother has of the child in her womb; a special experience enjoyed only by women. Jesus once compared his own experience to that of a hen gathering her brood under her wings (Matthew 23, 37 and Luke 13, 34) and in John 16, 21 Jesus appeals to the image of the woman in labour. It is important to look at the biblical material as a whole and not simply at those parts that have been highlighted by a largely 'male centred' culture.

16) In spite of these examples the Bible usually speaks of God in male terms. This may be partly because of assumptions about the priority of the male, and partly in order to maintain a sense of separateness from their religious contemporaries who sometimes worshipped female gods. The way in which God is usually spoken of in Scripture has led some Christians to believe that the biblical imagery about God is invariably, inescapably and normatively, male. It follows that the introduction of female imagery involves a radical departure from the norm of Scripture. Christians are prevented by this norm from using female imagery. Such an understanding of Scripture is also held by those feminists who have become alienated from it. They claim the Bible is inherently 'male centred' (or 'patriarchal'). It makes God male and legitimizes patriarchal power and oppression. It is therefore irredeemably alien to those who insist upon the fundamental equality of women and men. Both of these positions, quite apart from other considerations, neglect the place that female imagery *does* have in Scripture.

17) Even though God is sometimes spoken of in Scripture in terms of female images, the image that is central in the New Testament (although it is sparingly used in the Old) is that of Father. We need, though, to ask what is meant by speaking of God as Father. The metaphor does not imply that God is male. Indeed, as was suggested earlier, it is not clear what might be meant by speaking of God as male. It is rather the parenthood of God that is implicit.

18) This claim may be illustrated. When the Bible speaks of God as 'Father' or compares God to a human father, it may be speaking of God as the SOURCE or ORIGIN of humankind (e.g. Isaiah 64, 8 and Ephesians 3, 14). It may be speaking of God's CHARACTER (e.g. Psalm 103, 13 and Matthew 5, 48), or of God's AUTHORITY (e.g. John 3, 35 and 10, 29). These and other characteristics of 'fatherhood' cannot be confined to a male parent. To produce, to nurture and to care, to shape and direct – these are, to say the least, just as much qualities we cherish in the good mother as in the good father. Within the culture of Biblical times the image of Father, rather than the image of Mother, was almost inevitable for speaking of, for example, the authority of God (although not necessarily all aspects of God's nature) but it remains the case that what is meant by the fatherhood of God is not intrinsically male.

19) Our discussion of the metaphor 'Father' leads to a second point (although the argument of this report does not rely on it). There is nothing necessarily unchanging or unchangeable about the Bible's language and imagery. The biblical writers themselves often regard their language as only provisional. They are constantly searching for more adequate ways of speaking of the unfathomable richness of God. Human crafted words and images are always inadequate. This implies that we are not bound in our interpretation of biblical texts to retain at every point the biblical language. It is therefore not surprising that in its language about God the Bible uses an astonishingly wide range of images. Faithfulness to Scripture does not tie us at all points to the language of the biblical text. It does involve a continuation of that search for the most appropriate way of expressing God's revelation. Thus, on biblical grounds, we sometimes may go beyond the Bible's own language and imagery.

20) This remains true even though there is continuity as well as fluidity in biblical language about God. In the New Testament usage 'Father' is a constant image and form of address even if it is more common in some books (e.g. John's Gospel) than in others (e.g. Hebrews). Faithfulness to the biblical witness involves a continued use of this central image. The image 'father' may indeed be primary to the tradition in which we stand, and it remains so in contexts in which the church wants to emphasise its continuity with the tradition. These considerations, however, do not preclude the use of other images alongside it in contemporary usage.

21) The biblical writings themselves, then, do not encourage the making of their own texts into an idol, but rather point beyond the text to God who is greater. Isaiah insists that nothing can be likened to God (40, 19ff). God is one 'whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and ways higher than our ways'. This does not prevent the prophet from using a rich range of images – but they are all inadequate and subject to being superseded, or corrected and balanced, by others.

22) It is, therefore, not surprising to discover within the language the biblical writers use to speak of God a process of selection, refinement and innovation. In the New Testament we find evidence of a selective use of traditional language in Paul's tendency to avoid 'Israel centred' expressions, such as 'the God of Jacob'. In Matthew's gospel the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' is frequently, but not always, substituted for 'Kingdom of God' – the expression commonly used in Mark and Luke. John and Paul both explore bold new imagery – those of the 'Word' and the 'Last Adam' being examples. The second Isaiah gives a striking new dimension to the image of the 'exodus'. Within the Bible itself therefore, there is evidence that language about God was subject to re-evaluation. It was not fixed for all time.

Because the Bible gives examples of the attempt to find new imagery, in our contemporary attempt to find appropriate female imagery for our speaking about God we are but following Scripture's invitation to engage in a continued search for the most adequate language with which to express our conviction about God.

23) We must conclude that the Bible gives no support for the kind of Biblicism which rejects any departure from, or development of, biblical language and imagery. Christians often use words not in the Bible – for example words such as 'Incarnation' and 'Trinity'. By so doing, however, they are not necessarily departing from the biblical witness. We believe it is incumbent upon us to explore the nature of God to which the Bible bears witness by using female as well as male imagery. We are encouraged in this by the fact that the Bible speaks of God by appealing to a great variety of images. This includes some significant female imagery. The biblical writers implicitly invite their readers to do the same.

24) We move now to a new point. The issue concerns not simply the language Scripture uses about God. It concerns also the 'male centred' assumptions this language sometimes expresses. Such assumptions do underlie some of the biblical writing – but they are challenged and superseded elsewhere in Scripture. Indeed, we must not exaggerate the 'male centredness' of the Bible. In Genesis it is declared that men and women are both made in the divine image (Genesis 1, 28) and in Galatians it is declared that in Christ there is neither male nor female. (Galatians 3, 28) There is much in the ministry and teaching of Jesus which affirms women. Ephesians 5, 21ff., often quoted to support the 'headship' of men over women, is perhaps better seen as an example of an early Christian writer struggling to reassess the man-woman relationship in the light of our new life in Christ. What is impressive about the passage is not the way it confirms 'male centred' beliefs. It is rather the extent to which it manages to break free from them. This is through its stress on mutuality and the obligation of the husband to love and cherish his wife. 1 Corinthians 11 is a further example of a passage which illustrates the tension between the new and the old as Paul struggles to bring out the innovative implications of the gospel within the confines of an inherited understanding. It is untrue to say that the Bible is unqualifiedly 'male centred' in its assumptions. It rather contains a tension, often implicit, sometimes explicit, between 'male centred' structures and assumptions and the insight that in Christ there is 'neither male nor female'. (Galatians 3, 28)

25) We propose, therefore, that we are not for ever bound by the 'male centred' assumptions and expressions of parts of Scripture. In making this proposal we are using Scripture in a way illustrated by Scripture itself. In other words we are engaging in dialogue with our own tradition. Part of our gospel proclamation is that we are released from the inhibiting effects of static tradition. The Spirit may sometimes lead us to that which is new, draw out that which before has been only implicit, or remind us of that which has been forgotten. The biblical texts bear witness to a tradition which carries within itself the principle of self criticism; refining, further exploring, reapplying, correcting. The book of Job and many of the Psalms reflect critically upon the theology of history presupposed in, say, the books of Kings. The books of Ruth and Jonah offer a critique of the kind of theology found in Ezra and Nehemiah. James 1, 13 seems to be an early attempt to correct possible misunderstandings of the Lord's Prayer, and James 2, 14ff. and 2 Peter 3, 15ff. both offer critical comments of some themes (or misunderstandings of themes) in Paul's letters. God in graciousness and patience allows revelation to be mediated

through inadequate human channels. It is therefore only to be expected that the biblical writings will be characterized by self-criticism and innovation.

26) We conclude that the use of female imagery is compatible with faithfulness to Scripture – indeed that Scripture itself points in this direction, and also gives us examples of such imagery. In other words there is no incompatibility between language about God which is both ‘catholic’, in the sense of appealing to all and embracing all, including male and female, and ‘apostolic’, in the sense of keeping faith with its origins.

27) It is important to note (although we are not offering an ‘argument from tradition’) that female imagery is not absent from post-biblical Christian traditions. In speaking of Christ as ‘begotten’ of the Father, early Christian thought uses an image which embraces both male and female functions, even though the extent of the female contribution to procreation was not then understood. The use of this image even led the eleventh Council of Toledo in 675 to declare that Christ was begotten out of the Father’s womb (*de utero Patris*)⁽¹⁰⁾, Anselm and Julian of Norwich speak of Christ as our Mother, and there is a tradition using maternal imagery for God in twelfth century Cistercian monasticism.⁽¹¹⁾ It is true that the examples that can be found of such imagery prior to our own century are relatively few in number – although it remains possible, as some feminist scholars surmise, that some evidence has been lost, having been ‘edited out’ by historians influenced by the assumptions of a male centred culture.

28) Perhaps the most significant example of female imagery in the church’s history is to be found in talk about the Holy Spirit in female terms. Alwyn Marriage is one of a number of writers who have documented this.⁽¹²⁾ She herself suggests the third person of the Trinity may appropriately be spoken of in female terms since the imagery used of the first and second is, through the weight of tradition and common usage, predominantly male. Furthermore, much of the activity of the Spirit – nurturing, sheltering, guiding, loving – is an activity which lends itself to female imagery. Marriage insists that the third person is coequal with the second and the first – otherwise Trinitarian theology simply reinforces the subordination of women to men. She also insists that God the Father is NOT ‘male’; neither is God the Spirit ‘female’. God transcends the divisions of our gender. God the Father may also be spoken of as Mother, and the Son is no less an exemplar of feminine virtues as masculine ones. Marriage argues, however, for the reasons stated, that there is a certain appropriateness about concentrating female imagery in our speaking of God the Spirit.

**b) ‘TO WHOM THEN WILL YOU LIKEN GOD?’ (ISAIAH 40, 18):
THE METAPHORICAL CHARACTER OF LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD**

(29-35) All human words are inadequate to speak of the unfathomable richness of God. They are but images that point to, whilst never capturing completely, the full truth of God. We need a variety of images which together give us a balanced picture. Some are indeed more significant than others, but those drawn from the human male need to be complemented by those drawn from the human female – as well as from other aspects of God’s creation.

29) The second reason why we support the use of female imagery when speaking of God is because all language about God is ‘metaphorical’ or ‘analogical’ in character. By this we mean that words coined primarily to describe things within this world are never wholly satisfactory when used to speak of the richness of God.

Our human words are but 'images', 'models', 'similes', 'metaphors' and 'analogies'. They point in the direction of truth about God but never capture the fullness of divine truth completely. It follows that if we speak of God as, for example, Father, we mean that God is LIKE a human father in many significant respects. But it also follows that in significant respects God is UNLIKE a human father. One respect in which God is unlike a human father is that God is NOT male.

30) It is consistent with this that there is nothing inherently more appropriate about male as opposed to female imagery in our speaking of God. Our images of God must not become idols. If it is allowed that the father image is but an image, and if God is not male, then it is hardly consistent to insist that God must be spoken of in only male terms and in terms drawn only from the experience and role of MEN.

31) Reference was made in a previous paragraph to both similes and metaphors. Similes compare, whilst metaphors are applied directly. If we say God is 'like' a father, or acts towards us 'as' a father, we are using similes. If, by contrast, we say God 'is' our father we are using a metaphor. The distinction between simile and metaphor in language about God is largely a matter of grammar since the claim that God 'is' our father (metaphor) is but a shorthand way of saying God is 'like' a father (simile). The distinction has theological significance only insofar as we tend to use metaphors for the main images. Similes are more often used for the less significant ones. The fact remains, God is greater than any image and is never fully captured by any of them; although some of course may be central and others more peripheral. We need to use the rich resources of both metaphor and simile. Similes have the advantage of reminding us explicitly that God is greater than any image.

32) These conclusions are not affected by the fact that the word 'Father' often functions as a name for God. It is not, however, God's one and only 'proper name'. It is a name in the sense that it is a form of address – and for good reasons a fundamental one – but it is not the only form of address and thus not the only name.

33) If all our language about God is the language of metaphor and analogy we need a rich variety of images, which, qualifying one another, together give us a more adequate understanding of God than could possibly be given by one image, or a few images, alone. Scripture itself, as has been noted, speaks of God in an astonishingly rich and varied vocabulary. A similar richness is found in the hymns of Wesley. The more it is stressed that our language about God is the language of model and metaphor the more we imply that there is nothing intrinsically appropriate or necessary about our choice of MALE imagery. We then open the way for the use of female imagery by way of complement or corrective. Language is a human creation. Especially when speaking of God it is inadequate for its subject matter. It is fallible, and subject to correction when new insights arise or meanings change.

34) If all images are inadequate we need to be sensitive to the way in which some images might become less adequate with the passage of time. They may change their meaning as culture changes; they may even become lifeless. Images may die when they fail to evoke a response, or if they limit or hinder our experience of God. Whilst there can be no question that we should continue to make sensitive use of male images such as 'father' we believe our understanding of all language about God as analogical encourages the sensitive use of female imagery alongside this. An increasing number find themselves alienated by the dominant maleness of much traditional 'God-talk', and we believe this feeling is grounded in our quest for truth and in the stirrings of the Spirit.

35) If all the images we use to describe God are inadequate, and if the most adequate understanding is gained through allowing a large number of images to tumble over one another, it is not surprising to discover that some biblical imagery for God is derived from the non-human. Whilst the personal imagery is of course central, it may nonetheless still be said that God descends on Israel like a lion, panther or bear (Hosea 5:14). God's voice is like a mighty torrent (Ezekiel 43:2). God is a sun (Psalm 84:11; cf. Revelation 1:16). The practice of using imagery derived from the natural and animal world has, of course, continued in the history of Christian devotion and hymnody. If the use of female imagery is disallowed we are in effect saying that God may in principle be imaged in terms of every aspect of creation – except the human female; this position we believe to be intolerable.

c) 'MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM'

(36-42)The biblical claim is that male and female are both made in God's image. If this is so it is appropriate to speak of God in terms of images drawn from both male and female life and experience – that is in terms of the whole of humankind created in God's image and not just half of it.

36) A third reason for our claim derives from the insight expressed in Genesis that male and female are both made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). It follows that our human nature should give us some clue as to the divine nature in whose image we are made. This is true even though that image has been gravely distorted. Furthermore, our language about God is often meaningful only because that which we attribute to God is found also, if imperfectly, in our own nature and experience. Indeed, if we had no HUMAN experience of these qualities the meaning of our language about God would be difficult to make clear. When Feuerbach glibed that Christians make God in their own image⁽¹³⁾ he was offering a salutary warning against the kind of complacency which presumes to speak of God but which in fact speaks only of ourselves 'in a loud voice'. The fact remains, if God is personal we cannot but speak of God in terms of our own image since our experience of ourselves is the only experience we have of what it is like to be personal.

37) Appeal has been made throughout this report to insight gained into the nature of God through our human experience. Because we are made in God's image it is proper to seek insight concerning God in the nature, reflection and experience, of those who are made in that image. The term 'experience' is admittedly somewhat vague, but it is difficult to find a better one to describe that awareness of truth about God filtered through our living – our thinking, feeling, doing and knowing.

38) It might be objected, however, that our knowledge of God comes not from our experience but rather from God's 'revelation'. It is not clear, though, that experience and revelation are opposed. The notion of revelation is valuable. It preserves the insight that God is not an inert object waiting to be discovered, but rather one who takes the initiative in making revelation to us. It is, further, a concept which enables us to highlight certain disclosures as having central significance. Revelation, however, has to be apprehended and understood – and that is through our experience. 'Experience' and 'revelation' are thus complementary. Even the revelation contained in Scripture had still to be apprehended through the experience and understanding of the biblical writers. Most Christians would agree that the biblical revelation may be confirmed and clarified in our own experience – although Christians may differ as to whether the mode of

revelation seen in Scripture is in some radical sense 'different in kind' from that through our experience in the here and now.

39) Christian theology then lives with a tension. On the one hand the image of God within us has been distorted, and so there are no grounds for claiming that every human trait or experience is a clue to the nature of God. We are capable of hatred and selfishness, but in God there is pure love. On the other hand the image has not been completely obliterated and so we may believe that what manifest themselves as the worthier human experiences and capacities may give us some insight into the nature of God. We speak of the love and mercy of God and our language is meaningful because we know what it is like as human beings to love and be loved, to show and to receive mercy. Of course there are areas of uncertainty; but the uncertainty does not prevent this from being a legitimate area of theological exploration.

40) Our experience of being human gives us some clue as to the nature of God. Our language about God makes sense because that which we attribute to God (e.g. mercy, love, etc.) often has echoes in our own experience. It follows that we should feel encouraged to take into account all human experience; and that means female as well as male. Furthermore, we need constantly to be aware of the extent to which the image of God in ourselves has been distorted. We must ask, therefore, if when MAN has made God in HIS own image it has been in terms of the distorted male image rather than in the richer image seen in women and men together. We believe that our finding in what it is like to be human some clue as to the nature of God will be more fruitful if we take into account the experience of both women and men – allowing the one to qualify, balance and scrutinize the other.

41) Talk of 'Men's experience' and 'Women's experience' is of course contentious and controversial. Are there 'inherent' differences between the sexes beyond the obvious biological ones? Or do the differences derive from culture? It is not necessary for us here to enter into this debate. Our western society has had and still may have expectations about what men should be and do. Insofar as this is so there is the danger that if God be spoken of exclusively in male terms we will project uncritically onto God our male stereotypes. As a result our image of God will be distorted. Maybe the sensitive use of more feminine imagery will help counteract this and so give a more balanced, and, it may be hoped, a more accurate understanding of God.

42) This is important, not only for our understanding of God, but also for our understanding of ourselves. Reflection upon the notions 'masculine' and 'feminine' (culturally relative maybe but no less real for that) helps to release both women and men from the constraints of sex stereotypes and culture's often cruel expectations of what a 'man' or a 'woman' ought to be and do.

d) DISTORTED IMAGES OF GOD

(43-49) If male imagery alone is used when speaking of God a distorted picture may result since we fail to balance, complement and correct, it by the use of female imagery. Illustrations of possible distortions are offered – together with illustrations of how understanding of God may be enriched by drawing upon our understanding of the female and feminine which is also made in God's image.

43) A fourth reason why we should use female imagery follows from the claim – hinted at in the above paragraphs – that the exclusive use of male imagery may give us a distorted picture of God. It is not that such male imagery has no place; we have argued it has. It is rather that a distorted picture may result if only male imagery is used. Male imagery needs to be qualified and balanced by the use of gender neutral and female imagery. For one thing, as we said earlier, an exclusive use of male imagery can give the impression that God is male, even though it is unclear what might be meant by claiming this of God.

44) There are other ways in which a near exclusive use of male imagery may distort our understanding of God; here we concentrate on but three examples. There is, first, the expectation widely held in the past in our western culture that the MALE is the one who controls and dominates. Masculinity has often been associated with toughness and having power over others. Now it is not suggested that all men are masculine in this sense; that this is an inherent male characteristic; or that women never act in this ‘masculine’ way. But it is true that this is the expectation of men often accepted in our culture; in the past at least, even if, happily, it is less so today. Now a problem with imagery about God which is exclusively male is that God will be readily portrayed in terms of this cultural expectation of what a male is expected to be. The patriarchal God will be one who behaves like the patriarchal male – relating to creation by command and decree and demanding a response of servile obedience. Alas, this caricature is uncomfortably close to how God has sometimes been represented in the Christian tradition, even though there is little support for it in the meaning the New Testament writers attach to the word ‘Father’ when applied to God. God is thought of as ‘high and mighty King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes’ who beholds us from a divine ‘throne’.⁽¹⁴⁾ Such language has often been interpreted patriarchally, even though this is a misunderstanding of the way in which this imagery is often used in the Bible.

45) Such imagery indeed points to part of the truth. We must continue to speak of God as ‘Almighty’ and to listen to unedited versions of Handel’s MESSIAH. Indeed the gentleness of God is significant only because it is the gentleness of one who is supremely strong. A weakling has no alternative but to be gentle and vulnerable. Part of the Christian gospel is that the sovereign God chooses to be gracious. There is therefore another side to the truth – that God in patience and humility steps back from creation, and ‘lets be’. God respects the autonomy of creation, and acts less like a dictator, however benevolent, and more through the evocative power of a love which awaits a free response. God’s sovereignty is more a sovereignty of love than of controlling power. The monarchical king is after all seen supremely in the one who consented to be the suffering servant who was crucified. The exclusive use of male imagery has sometimes encouraged the kind of distortion which results from projecting male stereotypes onto God.

46) Secondly, many Christian thinkers have thought of God as being ‘impassible’. This means, strictly, that God is ‘without passion’ and it follows God cannot share in the suffering and anguish of the world. Our western culture – in its more recent English form at least – does tend to conceive of impassibility as a masculine ideal. The male must never show emotional vulnerability or be moved to tears! Of course this is only a tendency and one increasingly challenged – but a tendency nonetheless. Whilst the notion of God’s impassibility has many roots it seems probable that it has received some reinforcement from the projection onto God of this male ideal. Our culture’s expectation of the male is attributed to God imaged in

male terms. Some recent theology has widely questioned the idea of an unqualified divine impassibility. If God is love, so it is argued, then God must anguish over and share in the suffering of the world. Of course, God shares in the world's sufferings as God not as a human. God's perfect vision enables the divine suffering to be within the context of a divine serenity which sees things in proper perspective and is assured of the eventual fulfilment of the divine purpose. Our culture tends to think of the capacity to share in the anguish of the sufferer as being a feminine more than a masculine quality so here is an example of how feminine imagery may enrich our understanding of God and qualify an exclusive use of the masculine. In a similar way, women experience powerlessness and vulnerability often more acutely and more frequently than do men, or at least men who write books and influence thinking. Perhaps in the act of creation and in giving freedom and relative independence to creation God has chosen to curtail something of the divine sovereignty; and in the act of loving and caring God chooses to be involved in the fortunes of creation, and thus willingly to become vulnerable. Maybe women's experience and female imagery can speak to us of the powerlessness and vulnerability of God.

47) Thirdly, our western culture has often in the past tended to limit a man's role in procreation to the single act of sexual intercourse, whilst the woman's role as mother has been much more dominantly the one who carries, cares for and nurtures, the child after birth. Furthermore, because it is the mother who bears the child, there is a close affinity between mother and child. Maybe female imagery here can enrich our understanding and speaking of God. Creation for God is not the MALE once and for all act. It is more like the carrying, giving birth, feeding, caring and nurture, that we associate with the female. God's mother love gives life and continues to care for it. Creation continues to be dependent upon and cared for by God. Again, if God as Mother gives birth to creation, then a more intimate link between God and creation is suggested than by the image of God who sculpts the world or creates it by Word. The creation is not alien to God because it is God who has brought it to birth. Moreover, the image of God as mother of creation draws attention to the interrelatedness of all life perhaps more powerfully than the Father image, especially when this image is interpreted patriarchally rather than parentally; certainly more powerfully than models of creation based on the work of the craftsman or the decree of Word. These more readily encourage a hierarchical understanding of things. The image of God as Mother giving birth to creation is but one image. It should be placed alongside rather than replace other images. In particular, the continued use of the image of 'creator' preserves the insight that, although related, creator and creation are radically different modes of being. This may not be preserved so readily by the image of 'mother'. The image needs to be balanced with other images. Its theological resources remain, however, considerable.⁽¹⁵⁾

48) A difference was noted earlier between the male/female distinction and the masculine/feminine distinction. It is important that the difference is not forgotten, even though we have not always found it necessary to draw on it. Whilst the gender distinction between male and female is irreducible, the distinction between masculine and feminine derives largely from convention. It is not always obvious at what point the male becomes masculine and the female becomes feminine. In our discussion of the mother image, what is biologically given as that which only females can do slides imperceptibly in the above paragraph into what our culture has often perceived to be the feminine role.

49) In speaking of God in terms of what our culture perceives to be 'feminine' we must be careful lest we project onto God (and thereby perpetuate and legitimize) our cultural stereotypes of the feminine. This is precisely what often happens when the imagery is exclusively male. Whilst in the above paragraphs we have been forced to note that God has often been thought of in terms of our culture's stereotype of the 'masculine' we have for this reason been reluctant to speak in an unqualified way of 'feminine' characteristics. We can use female imagery, and even draw insight from what culture might speak of as 'feminine', without supporting feminine stereotypes. Resistance to the ordination of women sometimes appeals to stereotypes of the male as the one who takes the initiative, and to the female as the one who responds.⁽¹⁶⁾ Stereotypes can be cruelly restricting, preventing people from realising that full and equivalent personhood which we possess as male and female. Just as women are able to reason as well as men, so there is no evidence that men are inherently less caring or gentle than women. Sex stereotypes are often highly partisan with regard to a particular sex. Males have often been none too complimentary in their characterizations of the 'feminine'; and feminist thinkers have likewise tended sometimes to characterize those qualities they disapprove of as 'masculine'! The fact remains, stereotypes and cultural expectations have a profound influence on how people think and behave and upon how the young are nurtured. There is no doubt that stereotypes of the ideal male have affected how people think of God. We need to be aware of this, and to ask what insight and what falsehood there is in such stereotypes. Without falling into the danger of accepting and perpetuating female stereotypes we need to ask how the distortion caused by the exclusive or dominant use of male imagery may be corrected by use of the female.

MAIN CONCLUSION

(50-59)

50) Until recently the dominance of male imagery when speaking of God has been unconsciously accepted by most Christians. This usage has, however, three related consequences which should be seriously questioned.

51) The first consequence is that which has just been illustrated. Our understanding of God has been impoverished by exclusive use of male imagery. A second is that an increasing number within the church find that God-talk which is male, but never female, in its imagery is becoming for them more and more alien. Language that may raise no questions for one generation may nonetheless fail to speak, or may speak falsely, to another. When a significant portion of the Christian community no longer feels itself to be addressed by specific terms and phrases, or indeed feels excluded by them, Christian love demands that the matter should receive the urgent attention of the Christian community as a whole.

52) The third consequence is that a theology which has thought of God in terms of paradigm and central images that are MALE has reinforced, if sometimes only unintentionally, the subordination of women. There is truth, if also exaggeration, in Mary Daly's dictum that if God is male, then male is God.⁽¹⁷⁾ Of course, Christianity has never claimed that God is male; God is beyond gender. The fact remains, in the traditional picture God is 'Father'. Then 'He' sends the 'Son' who is prefigured by patriarchs and prophets, most of whom were men, and represented in many traditions still by an all male priesthood. The picture can so easily look oppressive to women and be taken as reinforcing their subordination and marginalization. This may still be so even in churches which ordain women on the

same terms as men. Much traditional God-talk can easily be seen as legitimizing and perpetuating the power and the privilege of males. It is after all the case that the church which has used male language about God has also been, and still largely is, patriarchal (i.e. male centred) in its structures and practice. Women have usually been given in the church roles and positions subordinate to men. For those who feel the force of these criticisms things can never be quite the same again.

53) If these three consequences of the dominant use of male imagery in our talk about God are indeed regretted, at least three responses are possible. One is to cease to use male imagery and to use female imagery in its place. In individual prayers this can be appropriate and moving. As a comprehensive programme, however, it merely replaces one type of exclusive language with another. We therefore reject this response. A second response tries to avoid offence by eliminating all imagery that has gender. The resources of gender-neutral imagery are rich indeed. If, however, we eliminate all gender imagery, our language about God is deeply impoverished. Furthermore, in some contexts, although by no means all, imagery that is studiously gender neutral can appear impersonal and cold.

54) It is the third response which this report supports. In this response we continue to use male imagery. Of course we continue to address God as 'Father' – in the Lord's Prayer and at other times. But alongside the male imagery, we use the female. Equal value is given to images from both genders. The male and female images, however, are not just added together in a simple juxtaposition. There is rather a balance and tension between the two – and in this balance and tension we are pointed to God who transcends all human imagination.

55) But what female imagery is appropriate in our speaking of God? The answer must be that female imagery may be appropriate for the same reason that male imagery may be appropriate; if it helps us to speak the truth as we apprehend it; if it draws on those experiences of women which give us insight into the nature of God, and if it expresses the conviction that women and men are alike made in the divine image. The example given earlier of speaking of God's act of creation in terms of God 'bringing creation to birth' leads to the claim that if God is like a father, then it is equally appropriate to speak of God being like a mother. The term 'mother' is indeed not necessarily more positive than the term 'father'. Mothers, like fathers, can be oppressive, domineering, uncaring, and thoughtless. If the image 'father' alienates some, so also may the image 'mother'; every image has its limitations. God is greater than all of them. The point is, however, if we may use the image of God as 'father' – with all its problems and defects – in order to affirm that God is like the ideal parent – then it is also appropriate to speak of God as 'mother'. Objections to the use of the mother image are of the kind that may be made against any image – including that of father. One significant advantage of using both images is that we benefit from the resources of both, and in balancing each other – and being balanced against others – we are reminded that they are but images. If we exclude other metaphors the metaphor of father may become idolatrous, for it comes to be seen as a fully adequate description of God. But God is unlike as well as like our metaphors.⁽¹⁸⁾

56) Women who have themselves experienced motherhood – the giving birth, the nurturing, the delighting in and the self giving love for an infant too young to return that love – sometimes testify that their own experience gives them a very special insight into God's relationship with us. The image of God (and of Christ) as Mother was powerfully exploited by Anselm in the eleventh century, and by Julian

of Norwich some three centuries later. It enabled them to speak movingly of the divine tenderness, nurture and protection. Furthermore, as we owe our being to our earthly mothers, so do we also to our heavenly mother. Again, the willingness of the mother to suffer the pain of labour for her children – and the demands of caring after labour – was used as an image of the willingness of Christ to suffer for us.⁽¹⁹⁾

57) The mother image is not, however, the only female image that may be used. Indeed a concentration upon the mother image may have the effect of perpetuating a culture's expectation that women be first and foremost 'mothers'. This expectation may severely limit a woman's life and aspirations.⁽²⁰⁾ We are aware that female images often derive from family roles. These may of course be illuminating, but we need to explore female imagery which does not unreflectingly reinforce society's stereotypes of women. The biblical image of the midwife is one such female image from outside the family. (Psalm 22, 9) Another female image is used in Brian Wren's poem addressed to 'Dear Sister God'.⁽²¹⁾ Some find this mode of address speaks powerfully of God's solidarity with, and faithfulness to, us. Admittedly this image may fail to convey much of what we want to say about God, but this is the case with all images. Not every aspect of our understanding of God needs to be conveyed in every image.

58) We must not lose sight of the fact that female and male imagery need to be used together – and not just in a simple juxtaposition. The two sets of images balance and qualify each other – pointing to a God who transcends all human imagination. Furthermore, we are concerned here with more than sexual differences, narrowly defined. This is because many words have 'male' or 'female' associations. The tendency has been to pick up male-associated neutral words and use these to speak of God, whilst omitting female associated words as being unworthy of God. If we now believe that we have been using only some of the appropriate imagery we need to make a radical restart. Changing to inclusive language may trigger new thought by raising awareness. As we are made in the image of God the descriptive, though genderless, words associated with either sex may be used to enrich our understanding of God. Very often these words convey complementary meaning. When used of God they confront us with the paradox of God who is both active and passive, omnipotent and vulnerable, initiating and receptive, aggressive and submissive, forceful and gentle, and so on. Perhaps we best apprehend the mystery of God when we seek divine truth in the heart of the paradox where the two extremes are held in tension. To prefer one extreme, as has often been done, is to tamper with the truth and produce a distorted understanding.

59) In spite of the emphasis often being on the image of power there have always been those who, like Paul in the first two chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians, have wrestled with the paradox of a God whose strength is sometimes displayed in weakness. Isaac Watts asks if thorns ever composed 'so rich a crown'; Charles Wesley speaks of the 'Victim Divine', and of the 'glorious scars'. More recently, Brian Wren notes how we strain to glimpse the powerful image of Christ on the judgment seat, only to find him 'kneeling at our feet'. Alan Gaunt comments: 'and there in helplessness arrayed, God's power was perfectly displayed.' Timothy Dudley-Smith speaks of 'the Lord by right of the lords of earth' coming in a 'child of the stable's secret birth'.⁽²²⁾ Maybe in struggling to find the truth in the paradox at the heart of the mystery we will allow ourselves to be brought closer to understanding what God is like.

PRAYER AND WORSHIP

(60-66)

60) There is a difference between the language of theology and the language of worship and devotion. Some who are willing to use female imagery when doing theology are nonetheless reluctant to use such images in prayer and worship. They may balk even more at referring to God as 'She' or addressing God as 'Mother'. Metaphors, after all, often appear stronger than similes. It is one thing to say God is 'like' a mother, but another to address God as 'Mother', although the thrust of our argument is that a dual address may often be appropriate – God being addressed as 'Father and Mother'. There may even be in the background the fear of worshipping a 'Goddess' even though this report has insisted that God is beyond gender. The difficulty may be in part intellectual, but also in part emotional. The material of this report relates not only to the intellect but also to deep seated feelings and emotions. It is important that this be recognized and that those who lead worship be sensitive to the feelings of those whom they lead. This is but one aspect of this question which as a church we have only begun to explore – and the way forward must be at a pace which carries people rather than leaves them behind.

61) We have argued there are no theological objections to addressing God as Mother, and many good reasons for doing so. We therefore affirm those who explore the sensitive use of this image in prayer and worship. In no way, however, do we wish to bully those who cannot bring themselves to using such language. Again, some may prefer to explore these possibilities in private devotion before they do so in public worship. Pastoral sensitivity and respect for those who differ from us are obligations on this issue as on others. On the other hand our unreflecting feelings should not be allowed a veto against change when we believe that change is called for by the Spirit of God leading the church into richer understanding. Furthermore, part of Christian discipleship involves the willingness to subject our feelings as well as our ideas to critical scrutiny.

62) An appendix is added to this report which includes examples of prayers using female imagery. It is hoped that this appendix shows that the arguments of this report may bear fruit in prayers which move people and which they feel able to pray. Furthermore, although the main concern of this report is our language and imagery about God, it is important to remember that female imagery may be used throughout the language of theology and devotion – thus drawing upon women's experience, reminding us of the contribution of women to our biblical and Christian tradition, and expressing our belief in our fundamental equality as being together the people of God.

63) The public worship of Methodism draws from two sources. First from the authorized liturgy in *The Methodist Service Book*, and, secondly, from the wider tradition of devotion which may feed extempore prayer or which may yield prayers selected by the leader of worship for use. The above paragraphs (numbers 60-61) address more this second source. But what about the authorized liturgy of the church? Are we to recommend that the revision of our service book should include examples of female imagery when addressing God? We recommend that those who revise our authorized liturgies should take into account the argument of this report, and point to the appendix which illustrates how a sensitive use of female alongside male imagery may enrich our devotion. When a new service book is published the church will have to decide what is an appropriate balance of male and female imagery; and what are appropriate examples of each. It is worth noting that in

Hymns & Psalms God is spoken of as acting 'like a mother'.⁽²³⁾ Furthermore, the experience of other churches may guide us. For example God is addressed as 'Father and Mother of us all' in a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer by J. Cotter and is printed in the official prayer book of the Anglican Church in New Zealand.⁽²⁴⁾

64) A particular difficulty is found with the pronoun when applied to God. In the English language there are only three pronouns: He, She and It. We cannot refer to God as 'it' because we believe God is personal. Unless we invent a pronoun that is both PERSONAL and GENDER NEUTRAL we are bound to refer to God as either 'He' or 'She'. English does not have the facility enjoyed by some languages (e.g. Bantu) of a pronoun that is both personal and gender neutral. The male pronoun has been used in the past when speaking of God but it must be said with emphasis that in referring to God as 'He' Christians have almost invariably intended to affirm the personality and NOT the maleness of God. But if the personality of God is affirmed by referring to God as 'He' it may just as well be affirmed by referring to God as 'She'. We see, therefore, no objection to referring to God sometimes as 'He' and sometimes as 'She'. Indeed this has a certain appropriateness because the use of both pronouns reminds us that God is beyond male and female and even though our experience of being male or female, made as we are in the image of God, gives us some insight into God's nature.

65) Some, however, may feel this dual usage involves inconsistency and may consequently propose that the pronoun be used less. Instead of referring to 'Him' or 'Her' the name 'God' will be used. Given the limitations of our language it is difficult to see any ideal solution to this dilemma; but the least satisfactory solution is the continued use of the male pronoun alone. One possible way forward is that implied by paragraph 28 above – i.e. that of referring to the Spirit as 'She', a usage that has precedent in our tradition. In this report no pronoun has been used to refer to God, except in quotations – the name of 'God' always being used instead. This, however, is offered simply as an exercise by way of interest; not as a norm for all writing about God. It needs also to be remembered that the avoidance of the pronoun may have the unfortunate effect of reducing emphasis on the personality of God. This question, like many raised in this report, needs to be debated thoroughly, and experimentation needs to be undertaken.

66) We should of course use the gender pronoun 'he' when referring to Jesus Christ since Christ was a man. We are unconvinced, however, by those who maintain that the MALENESS of Christ has theological significance – for example, for our understandings of priesthood and of the nature of authority within the Christian community. It is the full and perfect HUMANITY of Christ that is significant, and we believe that language about Christ should give emphasis to this, rather than to his maleness. The New Testament notion of Christ as the 'Last Adam' reinforces this claim. The maleness of Jesus is not a statement of the priority of the male in the will and purpose of God. It is important, however, to recognize how Christ, a male, behaved; challenging some current stereotypes of, and thus redefining, maleness and power.

TWO FURTHER ISSUES

(67-70)

a) The Doctrine of the Trinity

67) Reference has already been made to the doctrine of the Trinity, and to the use of Trinitarian language. This issue needs some further attention. There are a number of different traditions of thought concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. One claims that within one God there are three distinct although equal 'persons'. Another fears that this approach verges on 'tritheism' – that is the belief in three Gods. It may also object that it fails to establish what it means to claim God is both one and yet also three 'persons'. It therefore offers as an alternative understanding of the doctrine the claim that the one God is manifested in three basic ways – as creator, as redeemer in Christ, and as present and active in the world. Others are unhappy with this kind of threefold division and speak simply of the one God as Spirit – creating, redeeming, sustaining, acting, judging, forgiving, sanctifying, etc. They may nonetheless acknowledge that Trinitarian theology has in the past preserved many important insights; for example that it is GOD (and not some distant emanation or representative) who is in Christ, and present and active among us. It bears further witness to the belief that the God who is creator, the God who is present in Jesus, and the God who is active in the world, are one and the same God.

68) Our approach to the doctrine of the Trinity will affect the language we use when speaking of the Trinity. Those who support the first kind of approach are likely to be more firmly tied to the traditional language than those who adopt another. Some Christians believe strongly that in, for example, the Baptismal formula – the traditional Trinitarian reference should be preserved. We have no wish to resist this insistence. Just as we have argued that we should listen to those who are offended by the use of 'exclusive' language, so we believe we should listen to those for whom traditional Trinitarian language is very precious. The whole thrust of this report is in favour of a plurality of images which as a complex point to the richness of God. Within this plurality of images the traditional Trinitarian formula must have a place. Indeed, implicit in the argument of this report is the claim that traditional Trinitarian theology may accommodate the imagery of Mother as well as Father when speaking of the first person; and there is also no reason why female imagery may not be used when speaking of the third – as it has been in the past.⁽²⁵⁾ Furthermore, alongside the preservation of traditional language about the Trinity we see no objection to the use of complementary images. As we have argued, 'Father' is not God's only appropriate 'name'. Thus God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may be spoken of ALSO as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We must, however, be aware of the dangers that attend such language. It might be taken as failing to express the insight that the work of each 'person' of the Trinity is at the same time the work of the one God. We need also to be wary of appearing to restrict the activity of God by implying it is summed up in three simple descriptions. Why, for example, should the Holy Spirit be spoken of as 'sustainer' rather than as, say, 'disturber', 'enabler', 'sanctifier' or in some other way?

69) Most traditions of Trinitarian theology point to the profound mystery and otherness of God's being. The more this is recognized the more it should also be recognized that the human male is but one of a number of aspects of God's creation in terms of which God may be imaged. Trinitarian doctrines, then, contain, if only implicitly, a critique of the exclusive use of male imagery in God-talk. It may further be noted that some have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity prompts a

rejection of hierarchical (and hence patriarchal) ordering of human society since if human society is to be modelled upon the life of the Trinity it should be equalitarian and cooperative rather than authoritarian and hierarchical – reflecting the inner life of the Trinity which is a loving sharing of co-equal persons.⁽²⁶⁾

b) Mary

70) It is sometimes argued that devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary provides a feminine focus in the Christian faith, thus absolving us of the need to use female imagery when talking about God. The place, however, of a feminine focus in devotion to Mary is no reason for denying female imagery has a proper place also in our speaking about God. On the contrary, if female imagery finds its place in devotion to Mary, but not in our language about God, the subordination of women to men is simply reinforced since the woman Mary is subordinate to God, who, without being male, is spoken of only in male terms. Furthermore, the arguments we have advanced in favour of using female imagery when thinking and speaking of God are not met when such imagery is found only in talk about Mary. The fundamental issue is not what Mary has been called but rather what language is appropriate when we speak of God.

POSTSCRIPT

(71-72)

71) There are both men and women who oppose the use of inclusive language and of female imagery when speaking of God. There are also both men and women who deny the issue is of any consequence. We ask such men if they are not thereby contributing to the perpetuation of male dominance over women – a dominance which our language both expresses and reinforces. It is, after all, largely men who benefit from speaking of God in exclusively male terms. God-talk in terms of images that are largely male helps to legitimize and maintain male dominance in society, and the consequent devaluing of women. Why, it may be asked, should Christians be complacent about hearing constantly of the fatherly, but never of the motherly, love of God? Likewise, we ask women who adopt a similar attitude to consider if they do not thereby acquiesce in the devaluing and subordination of their own sex. The position of this report is that patriarchy (i.e. ‘male centred’ society) is not the will and the gift of God – as some traditions of theology affirm – but a deep sin of our own creating.

72) We are only at the beginning of our quest into what the issues raised in this report might mean for our understanding and speaking of God, and we are only at the beginning of discovering the implications of the fact that Christian theology has been largely the product of MALES. We need both female and male images and insights if we are to speak of the divine wholeness, and in order to express our conviction that women and men are made equal, to live for one another in equality and in a mutual sharing, as together made in the image of God.

APPENDIX

We give below examples of prayers and meditations which we hope will move people and which they will feel able to use. Some employ female imagery in speaking of God and addressing God. Others give an emphasis to what some sections of our culture may speak of as ‘feminine’ qualities. Others draw attention

to the contribution of women to our religious heritage. It will be noted that by no means all come from our present century.

1. EXAMPLES FROM CONTEMPORARY PRAYERS.

‘The blessing of the God of Sarah and Hagar,
as of Abraham,
the blessing of the son,
born of the woman Mary,
and the blessing of the Holy Spirit
who broods over us all as a mother her children,
be with you all.’⁽²⁷⁾

‘Eternal Spirit,
Life-giver, pain-bearer, love-maker,
Source of all that is and shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God in whom is heaven . . .’⁽²⁸⁾

‘Holy Spirit,
mighty wind of God,
inhabit our darkness
brood over our abyss
and speak to our chaos;
that we may breathe with your life
and share your creation
in the power of Jesus Christ. Amen.’⁽²⁹⁾

O God the source of all insight,
whose coming was revealed to the nations
not among men of power
but on a woman’s lap;
give us grace to seek you
where you may be found,
that the wisdom of this world may be humbled
and discover your unexpected joy,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.’⁽³⁰⁾

God our mother,
you hold our life within you;
nourish us at your breast,
and teach us to walk alone.
Help us to receive your tenderness
and to respond to your challenge
that others may draw life from us,
in your name, Amen.’⁽³¹⁾

'Christ, whose bitter agony
was watched from afar by women,
enable us to follow the example
of their persistent love;
that, being steadfast in the face of horror,
we may also know the place of resurrection,
in your name, Amen.' ⁽³²⁾

'O God, the power of the powerless,
you have chosen as your witness
those whose voice is not heard.
Grant that, as women first announced
the resurrection
though they were not believed
we too may have courage
to persist in proclaiming your word,
in the power of Jesus Christ, Amen.' ⁽³³⁾

'Christ our true mother,
you carried us within you,
laboured with us,
and brought us forth to bliss.
Enclose us in your care,
that in stumbling we may not fall,
nor be overcome by evil,
but know that all shall be well.' ⁽³⁴⁾

'O God our deliverer,
you cast down the mighty,
and lift up those of no account;
as Elizabeth and Mary embraced with songs of liberation,
so may we also be pregnant with your spirit,
and affirm one another in hope for the world,
through Jesus Christ. Amen' ⁽³⁵⁾

'In the beginning was God
In the beginning, the source of all that is
In the beginning, God yearning
God, moaning
God, labouring
God, giving birth
God, rejoicing
and God loving what she had made
And God said: "It is good"
Then God, knowing that all that is good is shared
held the earth tenderly in her arms
God yearning for relationship
God longed to share the good earth
And humanity was born in the yearning of God

We were born to share the earth . . .
God said, You are my people
My friends,
My lovers,
My sisters,
And brothers . . .’ ⁽³⁶⁾

‘Eternal God, as you created
humankind in your image, women and men, male and
female, renew us in that image;
God the Holy Spirit, by your strength and love comfort us
as those whom a mother comforts;
Lord Jesus Christ, by your death and resurrection, give us
the joy of those for whom pain and suffering become,
in hope, the fruitful agony of travail;
God, the Holy Trinity, grant that we may together enter
into new life, your promised rest of achievement and
fulfilment – world without end.’ ⁽³⁷⁾

‘Tender God, touch us.
Be touched by us;
make us lovers of humanity,
compassionate friends of all creation.
Gracious God, hear us into speech;
speak us into acting;
and through us recreate the world. Amen.’ ⁽³⁸⁾

‘O living God, we pray for your holy people, the church,
We ask that every member may be freed
to serve you in truth and grace.
We remember our foremothers. We remember all women who
have recognised that to be a person of faith is to respond
in action,
We give thanks:
For Miriam, poetess of the Exodus, leader through the wilderness;
For Deborah, a mother and judge in Israel;
For Rachel, traveller with Jacob;
For the woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears;
For Mary Magdalene, first apostle of the Resurrection.’ ⁽³⁹⁾

‘God, you are Love, and reveal yourself through loving relationships,
You make women and men in your own image
and invite them to bear your likeness.
In motherly love you bring us to birth,
nourishing and sustaining us before we comprehend.
So you teach us the depth and strength of love.
From the protection of fatherly love
You teach us to use the amazing gift of life,
and we learn that power is for caring.
In sisters and brothers you are beside us
in all our explorations.

As dearest friend you are our companion through laughter and tears.
In our little ones you reveal your vulnerability.
You are there in the face of the stranger
outcast by our indifference and rejection.
You seek us as lover asking our answering love.
You are wounded to death at our estrangement.
When we return you meet us with outstretched arms.
These risks you take for love.
Accept our wonder.
Forgive our slowness to understand.
Deepen our longing to be at home with you.’⁽⁴⁰⁾

2. EXAMPLES FROM HISTORY

‘And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not the mother who like a hen,
gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
for both they who labour
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.’
(St. Anselm)⁽⁴¹⁾

‘And you, my soul, dead in yourself,
run under the wings of Jesus your mother
and lament your griefs under his feathers.
Ask that your wounds may be healed
and that comforted, you may live again.’
(St. Anselm)⁽⁴²⁾

And Thou Jesus, sweet Lord, art thou not also a mother?
Truly thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers,
who tamed death in thy desire to give life to thy children.’
(St. Anselm)⁽⁴³⁾

‘So when he made us God almighty was our kindly father,
and God all-wise our kindly mother,
and the Holy Spirit their love and goodness; all one God,
one Lord,
. . . By the skill and wisdom of the Second Person
we are sustained, restored, and saved . . . for he is our
mother, brother and saviour.’
(Julian of Norwich)⁽⁴⁴⁾

‘Thus in our Father, God almighty, we have our being. In our merciful Mother
we have reformation and renewal . . . Our essence is in our Father, God
almighty, and in our Mother, God all-wise, and in our Lord the Holy Spirit,
God all good.’
(Julian of Norwich)⁽⁴⁵⁾

‘So Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him – and this is the essence of motherhood! – and all the delightful, loving protection which ever follows. God is really our Mother as he is our Father. He showed this throughout, and particularly when he said . . .
 “It is I who am the strength and goodness of Fatherhood; I who am the wisdom of Motherhood; I who am light and grace and blessed love; I who am Trinity; I who am unity; I who am the sovereign goodness of every single thing; I who enable you to love.”
 (Julian of Norwich)⁽⁴⁶⁾

‘The human mother will suckle her child with her own milk, but our beloved mother Jesus, feeds us with himself.’
 (Julian of Norwich)⁽⁴⁷⁾

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- 2) The notion of ‘linguistic invisibility’ derives from Susan Thistlethwaite – according to Brian Wren in WHAT LANGUAGE SHALL I BORROW London, SCM (1989) p. 241
- 3) Spender, D. MAN MADE LANGUAGE London, R.K.P. (1980)
 Okin, S. M. WOMEN IN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT Harvard, Harvard University Press (1979)
- 4) HYMNS & PSALMS London, Methodist Publishing House (1983) 285
- 5) Miller, C. and Swift, K. THE HANDBOOK OF NON-SEXIST WRITINGS London, The Women’s Press (1981)
- 6) HYMNS & PSALMS London, Methodist Publishing House (1983), 661
 An *ad hoc* group presented to the committee compiling HYMNS & PSALMS arguments for the use of inclusive language and suggested emendations
- 7) METHODIST SERVICE BOOK London, Methodist Publishing House (1974) p. G1
 HYMNS & PSALMS London, Methodist Publishing House (1983) 211
- 8) THE UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL Nashville, Tennessee, The United Methodist Publishing House (1989) 240
 We owe this reference to the Revd. Cynthia Park
- 9) THE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE BOOK Cambridge, Colchester and London, Cambridge University Press, Clowes and SPCK (1980) p. 10
- 10) Neuner, J. and Dupuis, J., THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE DOCTRINAL DOCUMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH London, Collins (1983) p. 103
- 11) For these and other references see Lewis, A. E. (ed) THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press (1984) Chapter 7, also Loades, A. SEARCHING FOR LOST COINS London, SPCK (1987) Chapters 1-3

- 12) Marriage, A. LIFE GIVING SPIRIT London, SPCK (1989)
- 13) Feuerbach, L. THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY (Tr. by Eliot, G.) New York, Harper (1957) pp. 13ff.
- 14) BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, The Order for Morning Prayer
- 15) For the development of ideas in this paragraph see McFague, S. MODELS OF GOD London, SCM (1987) chapters 3 and 4. It is of interest to note that Countryman suggests James 1:18 is best translated as speaking of God as one who 'of free will has given birth to us.' (Countryman, L.W. DIRT, GREED AND SEX London, SCM (1989) p.223)
- 16) Leonard, G. "The Ordination of Women" EPWORTH REVIEW Vol. 11(1) (1984) p. 42ff.
- 17) Daly, M. BEYOND GOD THE FATHER London, The Women's Press (1985) p. 19
- 18) McFague, S. Op. Cit. p.97
- 19) See THE PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS OF SAINT ANSELM Translated by Ward, B. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books (1973) pp.152ff. Also Julian of Norwich, REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE Translated by Walters, C. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books (1966) Chapters 57-64
- 20) King, U. "The Divine as Mother" in CONCILIUM 206 (1989) p. 136
- 21) Wren P. Op. Cit. p.164
- 22) HYMNS & PSALMS London, Methodist Publishing House (1983) 180, 629, 241, 500, 532 and 124
- 23) HYMNS & PSALMS London, Methodist Publishing House (1983) 16
- 24) See the prayer beginning 'Eternal Spirit, Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer . . .' in the Appendix. This is used in A NEW ZEALAND PRAYER BOOK Auckland Collins (1989) p. 181
- 25) See above – paragraph 28
- 26) see J. Moltmann THE TRINITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD London SCM (1981) p. 70

APPENDIX

- 27) Wilson, L. Printed in Morley, J. and Ward, H. (ed) CELEBRATING WOMEN London. Published by Women in Theology and Movement for THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN (1968) p. 39
- 28) Cotter, J. PRAYER AT NIGHT Exeter, Cairns Publications (1988) p.42
- 29) Morley, J. ALL DESIRES KNOWN London, Movement for the ORDINATION OF WOMEN (1988) p. 8
- 30) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.11
- 31) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.14

- 32) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.16
- 33) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.17
- 34) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.25
- 35) Morley, J. Op. Cit. p.26
- 36) Heywood, C. Printed in Morley, J. and Ward, H. Op. Cit. p. 32
- 37) World Council of Churches Community of Women and Men Sheffield, 1981.
In Morley, J. and Ward, H. Op. Cit. p.39
- 38) Heywood, C. Printed in Morley, J. and Ward, H. Op. Cit. p. 39
- 39) Southwark Women seeking Ordination, Printed in Morley, J. and Ward, H.
Op. Cit. p.42
- 40) Rosemary Wakelin
- 41) St. Anselm Op. Cit. p.153
- 42) St. Anselm Op. Cit. p.155
- 43) St. Anselm Quoted in Robins, W. S. THROUGH THE EYES OF A
WOMAN London, YWCA, (1986) p.160
- 44) Julian of Norwich Op. Cit. Chapter 58
- 45) *ibid.*
- 46) Julian of Norwich Op. Cit. Chapter 59
- 47) Julian of Norwich Op. Cit. Chapter 60

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that . . .

- 1) the use of 'inclusive language' and the exploration of female imagery in our speaking of God should be strongly encouraged in order that:
 - we seek a more balanced understanding of God, and manner of speaking of God, in whose image both male and female are made.
 - we avoid encouraging by our language the idea that the male is the norm of the human,
 - we avoid the marginalization of women through the use of 'exclusive' language and the dominant use of male imagery,
- 2) preachers and leaders of worship should remember how language helps to mould our thinking and attitudes and that we should, therefore, seek to avoid the use of 'exclusive' language which reinforces ideas and attitudes incompatible with Christian belief in the equal standing of women and men,
- 3) the use of inclusive language should be strongly encouraged in all official Methodist publications, and that the practice of using such language in all new Standing Orders should be continued, so that eventually S.O. 008(ii) and 008(iii) become redundant,

- 4) ways should be explored of raising awareness of the issues discussed in this report throughout the church – e.g. through questions on official agendas, through ‘language workshops’, etc.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report and commends it for study.

(Agenda 1992, pp.80-107)

8 MISCELLANEOUS

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GUIDANCE TO METHODISTS ON FREEMASONRY (1985)

1. The Conference of 1984 directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on Freemasonry in order that the Methodist people might be guided as to the advisability of membership.
2. After the Conference the United Grand Lodge of England, the controlling body of Craft Freemasonry in England and Wales, approached the President and offered to provide information to assist the Committee in its work. In subsequent correspondence with the Convener of the Faith and Order Committee, the Secretary of Grand Lodge suggested a meeting between the Convener and a Freemason's Lodge Chaplain. This offer was accepted in November, 1984. At the same time, the Secretary was invited to offer comments on the draft report when it was ready, particularly to correct any errors of fact. Grand Lodge was also asked to arrange if possible a meeting with a Methodist minister Freemason who carried the confidence of Grand Lodge. No reply was received. A draft of this report was sent to Grand Lodge after the January meeting of the Faith and Order Committee, and it was indicated that meetings with a chaplain and a Methodist minister Freemason were still wanted. In February 1985 the Secretary of Grand Lodge replied with detailed comments on the draft report. He supplied the name of a Methodist minister Freemason who also commented on the draft. The same minister was present at a meeting between two members of the Committee and Provincial masonic officers, which was also attended by an Anglican clergyman mason. Comments on the draft report were also received from a former Vice-President of the Conference who is a Freemason.
3. The Committee gratefully acknowledges the help it has received from Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons. It has received many documents, including copies of reports on Freemasonry by other churches, and has benefited from the presence of an observer from the United Reformed Church. Among the documents made available to the Committee is a copy of a leaflet entitled 'What is Freemasonry', published by the United Grand Lodge for Freemasons. Quotations in this report are from that leaflet.
4. Freemasonry describes itself as 'one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies' and claims to be 'concerned with moral and spiritual values'. In basic, or Craft, Freemasonry there are three levels of membership, known as degrees, through which the member may progress. Almost all members progress through all three degrees. On reaching the third degree, the highest of the three, masons may be invited to take up other forms of Freemasonry. One of these, known as the Holy Royal Arch, is described as the completion of the third degree, though many Freemasons do not take it up. The other forms of Freemasonry draw their members from Craft Freemasonry, but have their own governing bodies distinct from the United Grand Lodge. Some of the other forms of Freemasonry are specifically Christian in intention. Most Freemasons know little about forms other than Craft Freemasonry.

5. Membership of the society 'is open to men of any race or religion' who have 'a belief in a Supreme Being' and 'are of good repute'. (Organisations of women Freemasons exist, but are not recognised by Grand Lodge and are not considered in this report). Each mason is a member of a Lodge and is expected to attend its meetings. Part of the business of a Lodge is the teaching of the precepts of Freemasonry through ritual dramas, which include an initiation rite for the first degree and rites of passage between degrees. Underlying all the rites is a legend loosely connected with the Biblical story of the building of King Solomon's Temple.

The rituals of Freemasonry were originally passed on orally, and although printed versions are now available, there are differences of detail from place to place. In preparing this report we have used printed copies of the most widely used versions of the rituals of Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry. These are found in two books, listed in the Appendix; copies of the books were bought openly by a non-mason at a shop specialising in masonic regalia. The printed rituals contain many instances of words replaced by their initial letters or by abbreviations, for example 'light' appears as l and 'obligation' as obl; other words are omitted and replaced by rows of dots. Many of the hidden words are numbered among the secrets of Freemasonry which masons are sworn to conceal, and are supplied in Freemasonry by oral tradition. We have made use of the full versions of the rituals published by Walton Hannah in the books listed in the Appendix. The accuracy of Mr Hannah's versions has never been challenged, and has been publicly attested by some Freemasons.

6. Freemasonry claims to follow three great principles: brotherly love, including tolerance and respect for the opinions of others; relief, including the practice of charity to the community as a whole; and truth, including striving for high moral standards. It is beyond question that the society encourages high moral standards, and that masonic charitable giving is generous and includes masonic and non-masonic charities.
7. Among the demands made of the mason is 'a respect for the laws of the country in which a man works and lives'. The mason's 'duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons'. Similarly, 'The use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests is condemned, and is contrary to the conditions on which he seeks admission to Freemasonry'.
8. Despite these official statements, some Freemasons feel obliged to promote the interests of other Freemasons, other things being equal, as part of the duty of brotherly love. It is frequently alleged that this practice leads to unfair treatment of non-masons, and for some such allegations we have been offered evidence which in the nature of the case cannot be tested. Christians will not be surprised to find that some men fail to live up to the high standards demanded of them, but abuse of membership by some is not peculiar to Freemasonry, and the society cannot be condemned because of the conduct of some of its members.
9. Freemasonry is condemned by some on the grounds that it is discriminatory. Membership is restricted to men, who must be of good repute, and has financial implications which cannot be met by all. Other forms of discrimination are alleged, for example discrimination against the handicapped. Only the

restrictions mentioned above are found in the society's constitution and regulations, and we have been given evidence of Lodges which include handicapped members and men of different races and religions.

10. It is natural that those who meet together in a fraternal society will discuss matters of mutual interest. It has been alleged that some church business, including that relating to the stationing of ministers, has been discussed and decided informally at Lodge meetings. Such practices, if they occur, are to be condemned. The business of the church must be done in the duly elected committees of the church, by those involved, and should not be settled, however informally, anywhere else.
11. Suspicions about Freemasonry are encouraged by the excessive secrecy practised by the society. While officially the secrecy applies only to the recognition signs of the society, and so may appear reasonable, in practice it is applied to most aspects of the society, including avowal of membership. The secret signs enable masons to recognise one another instantly and secretly but it is difficult for non-masons to discover whether or not someone is a Freemason. There are no public lists of Freemasons or Lodges. The society thus encourages suspicion and lays itself open to charges of corrupt practice which can be neither proved nor disproved.
12. For Christians the secrecy practised by Freemasons poses a problem in that secrecy of any kind is destructive of fellowship. The Christian community is an open fellowship. Within it there will inevitably be some secrecy, for example pastoral confidentiality, which is entirely proper; but secrecy should be kept to the minimum necessary, and must be capable of careful and public justification. Freemasonry does not publicly justify its secrecy, and it is hard to see what reasonable justification might be offered, particularly of secrecy with respect to membership.
13. The Secrecy of Freemasonry is protected by the oaths sworn by members at different stages. These oaths are of an extravagant nature and include blood-curdling penalties for those who break their oaths. For some Christians the swearing of any oath is forbidden. For most, swearing an oath in, for example, a court of law is acceptable. However the masonic oaths are so extravagant that they cannot be taken at face value, as most masons agree. Freemasons admit that the penalties have never been inflicted, and most agree that they never could be inflicted. It is claimed that the true penalty of breaking one's oath is that of being known as a wilfully perjured individual, and the oath in the first degree refers to this penalty. A so-called 'permissive' alternative form of the oath was approved by Grand Lodge in 1964 in response to masonic concern about the oaths; in it the candidate swears only to bear in mind the traditional penalties. The permissive form has not been widely adopted, and most masons still swear the traditional oaths including the traditional penalties 'without evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind' (words from the rituals, quoted in many places). The swearing of such oaths thus devalues the use of oaths or solemn words. Methodists might look to the Covenant service for an example of the proper use of solemn words. Certainly oaths should never contain extravagant words just to add colour, nor should they refer to penalties which cannot be enforced.

14. A further problem with the oaths of Freemasonry, and with much of the ritual of the society, is that the candidate at any stage is not supposed to know in advance the full content of the ritual to be followed or the oath he will be required to swear. While the candidate will doubtless trust those whom he knows who have been through the ritual before him, entry into rituals and obligations whose content is unknown and whose implications are shrouded in secrecy as far as the candidate is concerned cannot be commended as a course of action for Christians.
15. Freemasons are bound by their oaths to an allegiance to one another. Some critics claim that this allegiance takes precedence over all other commitments. Freemasonry explicitly denies the claim: 'a Freemason is encouraged to do his duty first to his God'. Christians recognise an allegiance to God in Christ which takes precedence over all other commitments, and there are commitments to family, society, church, and so on which are of great importance. As with all commitments, priorities must be weighed carefully: if membership of Freemasonry takes precedence over Christian commitments, such membership is unacceptable to Methodists.
16. Freemasons are required to believe in a Supreme Being, sometimes called the Great Architect of the Universe. At various points in masonic rituals prayer is offered to this Being. Freemasonry claims to draw together those of different religions and Freemasons are required to respect one another's religious beliefs, and this is reflected in the prayers offered. However, the worship included in masonic ritual seems to be an attenuated form unsatisfactory in any religious tradition. Christians must be concerned that the Supreme Being is not equated by all with God as Christians acknowledge Him, and prayer in craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry is never offered in the name of Jesus Christ. There are documented cases of masonic services in Christian churches in which Christian prayers have been altered to remove the name of Christ.
17. Another difficulty about Freemasonry for Christians is the allegation that masonic practices imply salvation by works, through charitable giving and mutual aid. Again, while these elements of Freemasonry can become dominant for an individual, the masonic rituals do not contain any such doctrine.
18. The case is rather different with the fear that Freemasonry offers salvation by secret knowledge. The suggestion of secret knowledge becomes stronger as one proceeds through the degrees of the society, and becomes explicit in the exaltation rites for the Royal Arch degree. The rites here include a dramatic enactment of the re-discovery of secrets claimed to have been lost. The references to these secrets carry clear implications of a secret knowledge whose possession helps one to obtain immortal life, but there is no explicit reference to salvation and no claim that this is the only way to immortality. Christians believe that the knowledge of the sure way to salvation which includes eternal life, should be freely available to all and must be offered to all.
19. The rites of Freemasonry raise further questions for Christians and the questions are made more difficult by the different interpretations of the rituals offered by Freemasons themselves. Freemasonry concerns itself with spiritual values and many masons regard their progress in the society as a spiritual journey marked by the various rites. In the rite of initiation for the first degree the candidate is

blindfolded, and is required to ask for the restoration of light. The explicit reference is to material light, but the context of the ritual, and the accompanying charge to the candidate suggest strongly a spiritual passage from darkness to light as well. During the exaltation ceremony for the Royal Arch, the candidate is blindfolded and required to ask for light; this time there is no reference to material light and the candidate is congratulated on being admitted to the light of the Order. The rite of raising to the third degree includes the symbolic death of the candidate and a raising from this figurative death by ritual means. In Christianity the symbolic rite of passing from death to life is the rite of baptism in the name of Father, Son and Spirit; and the passage from darkness to light is through faith in Jesus Christ. Freemasonry thus provides ceremonies which on some masonic interpretations are equivalent to essential parts of Christian practice and offer alternatives to important elements of Christian faith.

20. The most serious theological objection to Freemasonry for Christians lies in the name given to the Supreme Being in the rituals of the Royal Arch degree. One of the secrets revealed in this degree is that the name of the Supreme Being is JAHBULON. It has been suggested to us that this word is a description of God, but the ritual refers to the word as a name of God. The name is a composite, as the ritual explicitly states. The explanation given of the name in the ritual is acknowledged to be inaccurate, but is preserved to bring out the traditional meaning for Freemasonry of the word. The best explanation of the derivation of this word seems to be that two of the three parts, JAH and BUL, are the names of gods in different religions, while the third syllable ON was thought by the composers of the ritual to be the name of a god in yet another religion; modern scholarship suggests they were wrong. In any case, it is clear that each of the three syllables is intended to be the name of a divinity in a particular religion. The whole word is thus an example of syncretism, an attempt to unite different religions in one, which Christians cannot accept. We note that some Christians who are Freemasons withdraw from any ceremonies in which this word is to be used.
21. Our study has shown that many of the complaints directed against Freemasonry can be directed against other societies, and arise from abuses which the society itself condemns, but which are compounded by its own secrecy. Nevertheless on the most generous reading of the evidence there remain serious questions for Christians about Freemasonry, especially theological questions relating to syncretism and the replacement of Christian essentials. Although Freemasonry claims not to be a religion or a religious movement, its rituals contain religious practices and carry religious overtones. It is clear that Freemasonry may compete strongly with Christianity. There is a great danger that the Christian who becomes a Freemason will find himself compromising his Christian beliefs or his allegiance to Christ, perhaps without realising what he is doing.
22. Consequently our guidance to the Methodist people is that Methodists should not become Freemasons.
23. We recognise that there are many loyal and sincere Methodists who are Freemasons, whose commitment to Christ is unquestionable and who see no incompatibility in their membership of the Methodist Church and of Freemasonry. We urge all Methodists who are already Freemasons to study this report and consider carefully the questions raised here. We recommend that

Methodists who think it right to remain Freemasons, might consider whether they should, on appropriate occasions, declare their membership in order to remove suspicion and mistrust.

24. In the light of this report, questions arise about the use of Methodist premises by Freemasons. A Standing Order referring to masonic services was revoked by the Conference of 1981, on the grounds that the position is covered by paragraph 14 of the Model Trusts and S.O. 910. This is still the case, but in the light of this report and the evidence it has received, the Committee believes it wise to make explicit the position with regard to Freemasons' meetings. It therefore proposes the following Standing Order:

919 Masonic Services and Meetings.

- (1) Meetings of Freemasons' Lodges or other meetings for masonic purposes may not be held on Methodist premises.
- (2) Services exclusively for Freemasons may not be held on Methodist premises.
- (3) If a Freemasons' Lodge requests that a service be held on Methodist premises, the trustees may at their discretion either withhold permission or grant permission on the following conditions:
 - (i) the service shall be one of public Christian worship held in accordance with Methodist practice and complying with the Model Trusts;
 - (ii) the contents of the service shall first be seen and approved by the Superintendent;
 - (iii) it shall be conducted by a person appointed by the Superintendent.

Appendix

Books used in the preparation of this report include:

Emulation Ritual	Lewis Masonic, 1980 (6 th ed.)
The Aldersgate Royal Arch Ritual	Lewis Masonic, 1983 (9 th ed.)
United Grand Lodge of England Constitution	United Grand Lodge, 1984
Harry Carr	The Freemason at Work
Walton Hannah	Darkness Visible
Walton Hannah	Christians by Degrees
W. L. Wilmshurst	The Masonic Initiation

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Freemasonry and direct that it be printed in the **Minutes of Conference**.

(Agenda 1985, pp.628-635)

The Conference adopted not only the above resolution, but also the Standing Order proposed in paragraph 24.

FREEMASONRY (1996)

Preamble

At the 1993 Conference a number of Memorials were received requesting the Conference 'to reconsider the recommendations made in the 1985 report on Freemasonry, in the light of the changed practices of that Order and in view of the discrimination felt by some Freemasons who are Methodists'. Another Memorial requested the Conference 'not to reconsider the recommendations made in the 1985 report on Freemasonry'. The Conference referred all these Memorials to the Faith and Order Committee for report in 1994.

The Faith and Order Committee reported that it had not received from the circuits sending memorials, after an invitation to do so, evidence of changed masonic practice and of discrimination against Freemasons. It had, however, received (1) a submission from the Association of Methodist Freemasons, 'A Review of Information about the Effects of the 1985 Conference Report about Freemasonry'; (2) leaflets, videos and evidence of changed practices from the United Grand Lodge of England; (3) over 350 letters from individual Freemasons, mostly Methodist, expressing their dismay at the recommendations of the 1985 report and claiming that Freemasonry and church membership were compatible and indeed mutually supportive.

The Committee reported that the evidence submitted left no room for doubt that, though discrimination against Methodist Freemasons has not been widespread, a number of cases have occurred. Any such discrimination was deplorable, unworthy of the Church, and entirely unjustified. Nothing in the 1985 report supported such attitudes and behaviour. On the grounds of discrimination the Committee could not recommend a review of the report. On the issue of inaccuracies in the report, alleged by some correspondents, the Committee recognised that some statements in the 1985 report were no longer accurate because of changes in Freemasonry practice. It recommended the Conference to direct the Faith and Order Committee to review the 1985 report in the light of the information which is now available. The Conference directed the Committee 'to reconsider the 1985 report . . . and to report to the Conference of 1996'.

The Committee offers to the Conference the following :

Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry (1996)

- 1 The Conference of 1984 directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on Freemasonry in order that the Methodist people might be guided as to the advisability of membership. After consultation with Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons a report was presented and adopted by the 1985 Conference. A number of Memorials received in 1993 were referred to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report. In 1994 the Conference, on the recommendation of that committee, directed the Faith and Order Committee to reconsider the 1985 report 'Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry' and report to the Conference of 1996.

2The Committee gratefully acknowledges the help it has received from Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons. It has received many documents, including copies of reports on Freemasonry by other Churches.

3 Freemasonry describes itself as “one of the world’s oldest secular fraternal societies” and “concerned with moral and spiritual values”. In Basic, or ‘Craft’, Freemasonry there are three levels of membership, known as degrees, through which the member may progress. Almost all members progress through all three degrees. On reaching the third degree, the highest of the three, Freemasons may be invited to take up other forms of Freemasonry. One of these, known as the Royal Arch, is described as the completion of the third degree, though many Freemasons do not take it up. Other orders, some drawing their membership largely from particular groups, have independent governing bodies, but all draw their members from Craft Freemasonry. Many Freemasons do not extend their involvement in Freemasonry beyond the Craft degrees; though all are likely to know about the Royal Arch.

4 Membership of Freemasonry “is open to men of any race or religion” who have “a belief in a Supreme Being” and “are of good repute”. (Organisations of women Freemasons exist, but are not recognised by Grand Lodge and are not considered in this report.) Each Freemason is a member of a Lodge and is expected to attend its meetings. Part of the business of a Lodge is the teaching of the precepts of Freemasonry through ritual dramas, which include an initiation rite for the first degree and rites that mark the process of progression through the degrees. A legend loosely connected with both the biblical story of the building of King Solomon’s Temple and the early medieval craft of stonemasonry underlie all the rites.

5 The rituals of Freemasonry were originally passed on orally, and although printed versions are now available, there are differences of detail from place to place. In preparing this report the Committee has used printed copies of the most widely used versions of the rituals of Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry. These are found in two books, listed in the Appendix; copies of the books can be bought openly by non-Freemasons at Freemason’s Hall in London. The printed rituals contain many instances of words replaced by their initial letters or by abbreviations, for example “light” appears as “l” and “Obligation” as “obl”; other words are omitted and replaced by rows of dots. Many of the hidden words are numbered among the secrets of Freemasonry which Freemasons are sworn to keep secret, and are supplied in Freemasonry by oral tradition. Texts of the rituals up to the revisions of the late 1980s were published by Walton Hannah in the books listed in the Appendix, the accuracy of which has not been challenged and has been publicly attested by some Freemasons.

6 Freemasonry follows three great principles: brotherly love, including tolerance and respect for the opinions of others; relief, including the practice of charity to the community as a whole; and truth, including striving for high moral standards. It is beyond question that Freemasonry encourages high moral standards, and that masonic charitable giving is generous and includes masonic and non-masonic charities.

- 7 Among the demands made of the Freemason is “a respect for the laws of the country in which a man works and lives”. The Freemason’s “duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons”. Similarly, “The use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his own or anyone else’s business, professional or personal interests is condemned, and is contrary to the conditions on which he seeks admission to Freemasonry”.
- 8 Despite these official statements, the view is widely held by critics of Freemasonry that some Freemasons feel obliged to promote the interests of other Freemasons, other things being equal, as part of the duty of brotherly love. It is also alleged that this practice leads to unfair treatment of non-masons, and for some such allegations the Committee has been offered evidence which in the nature of the case cannot be tested. There is evidence that on occasions Freemasonry is made a ‘scapegoat’ by those who feel aggrieved about a decision which affects them. Christians will not be surprised to find that some people fail to live up to the high standards demanded of them. Abuse of standards of membership is not peculiar to Freemasons. No society can be condemned because of the conduct of some of its members. In fairness it should be reported that since 1986 seventeen enquiries have been made by the Local Authority Ombudsman into allegations of misuse of Freemasonry membership. In only one case was his report critical of Freemasons. This referred to a failure by councillors to declare a relationship through Freemasonry with an applicant in a planning application. Representatives of Grand Lodge have assured the Committee that each year a number of Freemasons have been expelled from their Lodges for using improper influence.
- 9 Freemasonry is criticised or condemned by some on the grounds that it exercises unfair discrimination. Membership is restricted to men. It has financial obligations which not every man can meet. It is sometimes alleged that there is discrimination against the disabled, but the Committee has been assured that some Lodges include handicapped members. It is also evident that some Lodges include men of different races and religions. It is now widely recognised that other institutions, including the Church, have been, innocently or culpably, discriminatory and must seek to eliminate such attitudes and practices. The Methodist Church has sought to eliminate unfair discrimination in its own life and encourages other institutions to do the same.
- 10 It is natural that those who meet together in a fraternal society will discuss matters of mutual interest. However, Lodges of people from the same profession or occupation or religious group will always be vulnerable to accusations of preference. In recent years such suspicions have been expressed concerning particular Lodges, e.g. those that appear to have as members a large number of policemen or members of the legal profession. The practice of preference must be condemned, as it is in clear statements on behalf of Grand Lodge when it occurs among Freemasons.
- 11 In a report such as this the Methodist Church must speak directly to those Lodges that bear a Methodist, or related, name; which are the Epworth Lodges in Manchester, Liverpool and London and Lodges for the old boys of Methodist schools, such as Kingswood. A Methodist Freemason made a personal enquiry of the Epworth Lodges and found that they now include only

a minority of Methodists. Nevertheless it has been alleged that some church business, including that relating to the stationing of ministers, has been discussed and decided informally at the time of Lodge meetings. The business of the Church must be settled in the duly elected committees of the Church, by those involved, and should not be decided, however informally, anywhere else.

- 12 Much negative feeling towards Freemasonry is engendered by what is perceived to be excessive secrecy practised by Freemasons. They prefer to speak of an “inclination to privacy, which may in some cases be taken too far”. Secrecy applies only to the passwords and the signs of recognition that are conveyed orally – the rites and rituals are published by the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter. Other aspects of Freemasonry are no more than private. Its constitutions and rules are available to the public. There is no secret about any of its aims and principles. All members are free to acknowledge their membership. Nevertheless, many people perceive in Freemasonry a culture of secrecy, passed on from one generation to another, as evidenced in the cryptic nature of the published rituals.
- 13 It is recognised that secrecy may sometimes be required of an organisation. This has been the case of the Church in periods of persecution. It is also the case that bonds between members of an organisation can be increased by a shared knowledge that marks one barrier between themselves and everyone else. However, the Christian community aims to be an open fellowship. It may fail and appear to others as sectarian. The Methodist Church has no published lists of church members but it is not difficult to find whether a person is a Methodist or not. There is no intention to keep the fact secret. Some Freemasons want it to be more frequently the case that there is openness about membership of the Craft. In all social groups confidentiality applies to some matters and, in relation to pastoral work, this has been the subject of a report to the Conference in 1993. However, secrecy seems to be more of the essence of Freemasonry than of most other institutions, including the Church.
- 14 The ‘secrets’ of Freemasonry are protected by the oaths (or what Freemasons normally refer to as obligations) sworn by members at different stages. Since 1985 the rites (Emulation Ritual 1991 and Aldersgate Royal Arch Ritual 1993) have been changed and no longer connect the oaths with ‘penalties’ - though reference is made to the penalties that were to be found in traditional masonic ritual for many years, including words of an extravagant and even blood-curdling nature. These changes have been made by edict of the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter, requiring each Lodge and Chapter to comply. We are informed that the changes have been implemented by every Lodge and Chapter. Note was made that one Lodge refused to accept the changes and was suspended until willingness to conform was accepted. It is generally the case that Grand Lodge chooses, in matters of ritual, to recommend rather than legislate and sees the ceremonies as the prerogative of each individual Lodge. However, on the matter of obligations and penalties Grand Lodge had the right to rule and did so.
- 15 Freemasons believe that the true penalty of breaking one’s oath is that of being known as a wilfully perjured individual. Some Christians regard the swearing of any oath as forbidden. For most, swearing an oath in, for example, a court of law is acceptable. Masonry has required oaths to be made “without

evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind". As people who are under obligation to be truthful they should only make oaths in the simplest terms. It is not satisfactory that obligations, even expressed in the simplest terms, should be associated in the rites with the previous tradition of extravagant and offensive language. Christians might look to baptismal, marriage and ordination services (and Methodists to the Covenant Service in particular) for standards in the proper use of solemn words and obligations.

- 16 It has been the case that the candidate was not supposed to know in advance the full content of the ritual to be followed or the oath he would be required to swear. While the candidate would doubtless trust those whom he knows who have been through the ritual before him, entry into rituals and obligations whose content and implications are unknown cannot be commended as a course of action for Christians. Formally it is clear that the nature of the rites can be known by reading the published books. It still may be the case that the earlier view is retained: that pre-knowledge lessens the impact of the ceremony on the candidate and he is encouraged not to seek prior knowledge. If Christians are not given pre-knowledge of what is involved in the rituals and the oaths that are to be taken, it would be proper for them to refuse to take part. A practice of denying or not encouraging full knowledge of the content is at variance with Methodist custom in that the wording, content and implications of all rituals are known in advance by all adult participants.
- 17 It is widely believed that Freemasons are bound by their oaths to an allegiance to one another. Some critics claim that this allegiance takes precedence over all other commitments. Freemasonry explicitly denies the claim: "a Freemason is encouraged to do his duty first to his God". Christians recognise a fundamental allegiance to God in Christ from which derives many other commitments, such as those to family, society, Church. Working out priorities is a relentless and sometimes difficult duty.
- 18 Freemasons are required to believe in a Supreme Being, sometimes called the Great Architect of the Universe. At various points in masonic rituals prayer is offered to this Being. Freemasons of different religions come into the Craft and are required to respect one another's religious beliefs, and this is reflected in the prayers offered. Prayer in Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry is never offered in the name of Jesus Christ. The concern of Freemasons to bring together men of different religious traditions and not offend their religious sensitivities is praiseworthy. Recent inter-faith dialogue suggests a variety of different approaches to this situation. For example, a strong case can be made for prayers taken from the religious traditions represented in a mixed-faith group which can be respected by all, so that in an undiluted form, each, in their turn, can offer prayer in the context of the group. Clearly for Christians there is a danger that inter-faith relations in Freemasonry are obtained at too low a cost, namely by ignoring real differences. Ruling out all reference to Christ when prayer is being made will be a problem for some Christians. They do not approach prayer as something that is addressed to an unspecified God. This may be uncomfortable or unacceptable to Christians who retain their membership of Freemasonry. Sensitivities will vary, as do opinions, within Methodism on these matters. The same problems may apply to men of other Faiths who are Freemasons.

- 19 What happens within a Lodge meeting is the responsibility of the Freemasons involved; what happens if Freemasons want to hold public Christian worship in a Methodist Church is determined by the requirements of S.O.928(3), which reads: 'If a Freemasons' Lodge requests that a service be held on Methodist premises, the trustees may at their discretion either withhold permission or grant permission on the following conditions:
- (i) the service shall be one of public Christian worship held in accordance with Methodist practice and complying with the Model Trusts;
 - (ii) the contents of the service shall first be seen and approved by the Superintendent;
 - (iii) it shall be conducted by a person appointed by the Superintendent.
- 20 Freemasonry maintains that it is in no way a religion offering salvation of any kind. It encourages men to do good and continue in their faith. However, Christians within Freemasonry will be aware of the temptation faced by people across the years to settle simply for a programme of morality. The pilgrimage of faith is a more subtle and deeper approach to the responsibilities of Christian living.
- 21 There are potential dangers in a society with a tradition of secrecy and private rituals. This has also been a problem in the Christian tradition and the Church has rejected the notion that salvation can be achieved by special knowledge. The exaltation rites for the Royal Arch include a dramatic enactment of the re-discovery of secrets claimed to have been lost. Such a rite has no meaning unless it is believed that the recovery of the lost knowledge is valuable to the one initiated. No explicit claim may be made that salvation comes through that knowledge. But a Freemason could be tempted to believe that he possesses something of value denied to the uninitiated. The Christian knows that the mysteries of life have been made an open secret through Christ and this is available to all.
- 22 There is a deep human need for ritual and some may find this met in a group practising special rituals. The rites of Freemasonry have such ambiguous features that they lead to misunderstanding and a variety of interpretations among both Freemasons and non-Freemasons. Either the rites are innocent play-acting or they have some degree of symbolic significance. If it is the former, Freemasons must accept that outside observers may not take their rites seriously. If it is the latter, their relationship to similar rituals of specifically religious groups may properly be considered. The 1985 report pointed to parallels in Christian symbolism of the restoration of light to a blindfolded candidate for the first degree and the symbolic death and rebirth of a candidate for the third degree. Such interpretations have been disputed. However, ritual has no purpose if it has no deep symbolic content.
- 23 The use of JAHBULON for the Supreme Being in the rituals of the Royal Arch degree has been a matter of considerable dispute. The 1985 report believed it to be intended that each of the three syllables be the name of a divinity in a particular religion and thus, when put together, the word formed an example of syncretism – an attempt to unite different religions in one, which Christians cannot accept. It was understood that some Christians who are Freemasons withdrew from any ceremonies in which the word was used.

Since 1985 the governing body of the Royal Arch has removed all references to the word from its rituals. This change is welcome as an avoidance of unnecessary offence, but more importantly because, as has been pointed out earlier, developments in inter-faith dialogue reveal more fruitful avenues for development than that of syncretism. Simply to use the word 'God', without recourse to any other title or metaphor, might be a more straightforward and acceptable practice for use in an inter-religious group.

- 24 It has been the tradition of Methodism not to set conditions on becoming or remaining members. The Deed of Union states: 'All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as full members of the Methodist Church' (Clause 8(a)). However, at every Conference resolutions are adopted that offer guidance to Methodists about what is involved for service in the life of the Church and the world; but this is guidance and not rule. The Deed of Union also states: 'It is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves of the two sacraments, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper. As membership of the Methodist Church also involves fellowship it is the duty of all members of the Methodist Church to seek to cultivate this in every possible way' (Clause 9). So if a person fails in the duty to cultivate fellowship – perhaps by sustained neglect (see Deed of Union, Clause 10) or by some 'breach of discipline' (S.O.021 (1)) – he or she may cease to be a full member of the Methodist Church. The Faith and Order Committee understands that there were those who interpreted the 1985 report to mean that Freemasons could no longer be members of the Methodist Church. This was, and is, not the case.
- 25 The present report, as its predecessor, offers guidance to Methodists on which they must make their own judgement. People are not excluded from Methodism except for the reasons stated. They may exclude themselves because they do not like a particular view being taken by the Conference and they take responsibility for their action. If Freemasons have been excluded from church membership, for that cause only, the fault should be rectified. If pressure has been placed on them this is improper and should not be condoned. There has been evidence of attempts to limit the ministry of Methodist local preachers who are Freemasons, by indicating their unacceptability in a particular church or churches, other than on the grounds of failing 'to preach nothing at variance with our doctrines' (S.O.568 (2)(ii)). A Superintendent, who has final responsibility for preaching within the circuit, is at fault if he or she gives way to such pressure. If an office holder has been excluded on the basis, only, of being a Freemason, this is unacceptable. In the 'Selection Criteria' for candidates for the ministry (adopted by the Conference of 1986), those responsible are not given conditions to determine the selection, but are encouraged to consider all things about the candidates that may indicate their suitability for recommendation to the Conference.
- 26 We have indicated elements in Freemasonry about which we have varying misgivings. We also recognise that many organisations could be written about with both similar and different misgivings. There are positive things to be said. Along with other organisations Freemasonry serves as a friendly society; in this country it offers male friendship; it expresses many sound and socially acceptable values; it engages in charitable work; it may enable upward social

mobility among its members. However, it has what may be described as a secrecy culture; greater, in the Committee's judgement, than comparable organisations. In modern society Freemasonry, with other organisations, is expected to be accountable to society in general; not least when its secrecy inhibits open consideration of how influence is used. The suspicion, widely held, that Freemasonry enables people to be promoted, win business or gain advantage generally can be removed only by greater openness. Similarly suspicions also arise relating to the religious aspect of Freemasonry which can be removed only as non-Freemasons examine the current rituals. Only then can these matters be debated openly and judgements made.

- 27 It is recognised that there are many loyal and sincere Methodists who are Freemasons, whose commitment to Christ is unquestionable and who see no incompatibility in their membership of the Methodist Church and of Freemasonry. The Faith and Order Committee has received testimony from Methodists who state that they see their membership of both Methodism and Freemasonry as not only compatible but mutually enhancing. There will be Methodists who find this difficult to accept, but the testimony needs to be heard. But the Committee urges all Methodists who are already Freemasons, or considering membership, to study this report and consider carefully the questions raised here. As the Church is always in need of reformation so are all institutions made up of fallible people. The Committee welcomes signs of greater openness among Freemasons and changes of practice have already met some of the points made in the previous report. Methodists who choose to remain Freemasons should exercise their influence within the Lodges to foster change in the ways that have been suggested. It would be helpful if they were confident enough about their Freemasonry to be open about their being Freemasons, particularly within the fellowship of the Methodist Church. Such Freemasons would need to be assured of the loving concern Methodism aims to give to all its members, but also recognise that there are those who are deeply opposed to Freemasonry. Our hope is that differences could be expressed in informed and charitable debate of the issues involved.
- 28 Its consideration of Freemasonry has led the Faith and Order Committee to recognise that Methodism needs to care more fully for men within its fellowship, whilst preserving a culture of inclusiveness. Similarly the Committee has seen how responsive to rituals men can be and this leads it to ask whether Methodism involves both men and women adequately in the Church's worship.
- 29 The recommendation of the 1985 report relating to the use of Methodist premises by Freemasons is now a Standing Order (928) and needs no longer to be part of this report.
- 30 In the period following the 1985 report there was sufficient evidence of how easily religious people allow charitableness to be the victim of conviction and how easy it is to bruise people who see things differently from themselves. Methodists must be self-critical concerning all the accusations they make of others. Right belief is important. So also is right loving. The good faith of others must not easily be denied. The inclusive quality of our fellowship must be carefully guarded.

31 The 1985 report gave guidance to the Methodist people 'that Methodists should not become Freemasons'. The reconsideration of that report, required by the 1994 Conference, was to be based on the charges of inaccuracies in the report and changed practices in Freemasonry since 1985. Having engaged in such a reconsideration, we arrive at the following conclusions:

(1) Whereas several changes of note have been made to the nature of Freemasonry since our previous report in 1985, many of them most welcome, this report makes clear that the fundamental convictions of the 1985 report remain.

(2) We urge Freemasons who are Methodists to give careful consideration to this report and the points where we have expressed unease. These include our concerns:

- (a) about the secrecy culture that pervades Freemasonry, only to a limited extent eased by recent changes;
- (b) about the ambiguity in those rituals that have echoes of specific religious imagery and the use of prayers, while denying any religious status to them;
- (c) about references to God that aim to avoid offence to people of varied beliefs but end up with too great an element of ambiguity;
- (d) about the strong emphasis on doing good that can lead to men believing that this is all their Creator requires of them.

We have indicated that being a Freemason does not disqualify a person from membership, or the holding of office, within the Methodist Church. Nevertheless, in the light of this report, Methodist Freemasons must take responsibility for the judgements they make about the compatibility of membership of both bodies.

(3) We urge Methodists who are considering becoming Freemasons to give careful thought to our hesitations about the wisdom of joining such a society.

(4) We recognise positive changes that have taken place within Freemasonry in recent years, but encourage the United Lodge to become ever more open to scrutiny, so that trust may have the chance to grow and causes of suspicion be diminished. In addition, there remain some doctrinal issues, such as the nature of God, salvation, prayer, religion and rituals, that have not been satisfactorily resolved.

(5) We urge Methodists who wish to continue as Freemasons to give serious consideration to the following:

- (a) They should be aware that some fellow Freemasons might hold interpretations of masonic practice that are incompatible with belonging to the Methodist Church.
- (b) They should be aware that some Methodists might hold interpretations of masonic practice that they see as incompatible with belonging to the Methodist Church.

- (c) They should support those aspects of Freemasonry which endorse their Christian discipleship.
- (d) They should resist any tendency to turn Freemasonry into a religion.
- (e) They should, with their fellow Methodists, seek to prevent their allegiance to Freemasonry from becoming a cause of division within their local church.
- (f) They should be open about their membership of Freemasonry.
- (g) Members of 'Methodist' Lodges should take to heart particularly the conclusions reached in paragraph 11.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Report.

(Agenda 1996, pp.179-188)

MORMON USE OF METHODIST ARCHIVES (1988)

In recent months considerable anxiety has been caused in a number of areas across the country as a result of requests made by the Genealogical Society of Utah to microfilm Methodist Registers and Records. Pressure has been brought to bear on local Superintendent Ministers by City Archivists to allow this to happen in the interests of preventing the deterioration of the registers as a result of constant handling. The Genealogical Society of Utah is prepared to provide County Records Offices with free copies of registers up to about 1900, a programme of microfilming which local offices are not able to undertake themselves because of the enormous costs involved. It is recognised by the County Archivists who themselves claim to be interested merely in the long-term preservation of valuable archive material that the Genealogical Society of Utah wants to undertake this work in pursuance of the religious objectives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

It has to be acknowledged that refusal of permission to microfilm Methodist registers will not prevent members of the Genealogical Society of Utah from seeing Methodist records and using them for their own purposes, since they have the same right of access as any member of the public. The Connexional Law and Polity Committee was consulted about this matter and the conclusion reached was that it is for the Managing Trustees of the local church in each case to decide whether to permit their records in County Archives to be copied. The Faith & Order Committee was asked to advise on the theological issues involved with a view to offering guidelines for Superintendent Ministers and Managing Trustees.

The genealogical data in Methodist records is clearly of great benefit in tracing family trees, an enterprise sometimes engaged in out of curiosity concerning family history, sometimes out of a desire to find family roots. Such activity cannot be considered in any way sinister. However, the purposes for which the Mormons gather genealogical data are more specifically related to their beliefs and practices. The first concerns their understanding of baptism and the second their teaching concerning marriage.

According to Mormon teaching baptism is always by total immersion for the remission of sins. Infants and small children are not capable of repentance because they have not reached the years of accountability before God. The age of accountability is eight years. Baptism is a prerequisite of salvation. Accordingly, in the Gospel God in his goodness has made provision for the news of salvation to be preached not only to the living during their life-time but also to those in the grave. He has given to his priests who have died, i.e. deceased male Mormons, the task of preaching to the dead, who may be baptised by proxy. The living are baptised in the temples of the Latter Day Saints on behalf of the dead who accept the Gospel in the spirit world.

In relation to marriage it is claimed that God's intention is that marriage should be for all time and for all eternity. Marriage 'until death us do part' is said to be a human convention. Therefore all those who have not been 'sealed' to each other for ever by the power of the priesthood have no claim upon each other or upon their children after death, because they have not made a covenant of eternal marriage. Hence, in order that God's purpose may not be thwarted, power has been given to his priests in these latter days to marry living children vicariously for their dead parents.

There is in these passages an appeal to a retroactive kind of universalism. It is based on the claim to know what God must do and what his justice requires. It is founded in scriptural terms on the single reference in 1 Cor. 15:29, although Joseph Smith did not claim to find his teaching concerning baptism for the dead in the scriptures. He claimed to have received it by special revelation and not by reading the Bible. Since the salvation of those who have already died depends on the activity of the living on their behalf, it follows that baptism by proxy is a central tenet of Mormon teaching. The benefits, however, are reciprocal, for neglect of the responsibility laid upon 'the saints' to ensure that their deceased relatives receive vicariously the riches of the gospel may imperil their own salvation. The Mormon passion for collecting genealogical data is the natural corollary of this belief. Accurate information is necessary for the correct performance of this task.

Mormon teaching concerning baptism for the dead and the sealing of the eternal covenant of marriage on behalf of the dead is promulgated on the basis of the claim to special revelation. It is supported by an exegesis of the text of the canonical scriptures which is only possible by reason of a prior understanding of what the text means. The report (in 1 Cor. 15:29) of the practice by some people 'of being baptised on behalf of the dead' is read as legitimising the practice by the Mormons.

It is one of the functions of the canon of scripture to provide a yardstick to guard against unwarranted addition to (or subtraction from) what may properly be regarded as Christian. Examined in the light of Scripture the teachings of the Book of Mormon can only be adjudged to go beyond what is necessary for salvation. The Mormon dismissal of centuries of Church history as deviation from the true Church of Jesus Christ, with the implication that their own way is the only right one, removes another Christian reference point. The Tradition is discounted except at those points where wisps of support may be found for Mormon positions.

It is an Article of Faith (No. 11) of the Latter Day Saints that 'We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may'. This profession of tolerance of the beliefs of others is not maintained with regard to the beliefs of the departed, the integrity of whose beliefs is shown scant respect, since they appear to be willy-nilly the targets of Mormon ordinances. People whose religious beliefs were held with conviction are made the objects of ceremonies of which they could in their own life-time only have heartily disapproved. There also appears to be little concern for the sensitivities of the non-Mormon relatives of the deceased to whom the unsolicited activity of the Latter Day Saints is profoundly disturbing and offensive and who with regard to the departed prefer to commit them into God's merciful care and keeping.

It is the judgement of the Faith & Order Committee none the less that there is positive value in having records microfilmed and that the Methodist Church should not want to exercise a censorship role in relation to what are after all public documents. The Faith & Order Committee, however, concurs with the conclusion reached by the Law & Polity Committee, that it is the responsibility of the Managing Trustees of the local church in each case to decide whether to permit their records in County Archives to be copied or not, in the light of the theological issues outlined above and with due consideration of the effect of granting permission on any descendants of those to whom the records refer.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report.

(Agenda 1988, pp.817-819)

THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN HUMAN (1990)

A) THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN HUMAN

Membership of the Working Party

The Revd Dr Kenneth Wilson	Principal of Westminster College, Oxford, and Chairman of the Working Party
Mrs Jill Baker	Theology graduate, housewife and mother
The Revd Kathleen Bowe	Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Cliff College
The Revd Jill Bryant	Circuit Methodist minister, and Convener of the Working Party
The Revd Brian Duckworth	General Secretary of the Division of Social Responsibility
The Revd Dr David Hardy	Methodist minister, formerly Research Associate in the University of Birmingham
Dr David Hutton	Senior Lecturer, Honorary Consultant in Haematology, Cardiff Royal Infirmary
Professor Ian Leck	Head of the Department of Public Health and Epidemiology, University of Manchester
Mrs Sheila Russell	Librarian at Queen's College, Birmingham and mother
Dr Jim Seakins	Research Biochemist, Institute of Child Health, University of London: Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street
Dr Mary Groves	General Practitioner. Member of the Working Party from 1987 to 1988 when unfortunately demands on her time led to her resignation

We are very grateful to Elisabeth Sabey for her secretarial support.

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Chapter 1 CONTEXT OF THE METHODIST STATEMENT ON ABORTION (1976)

- 1.1 Background to the 1967 Act
- 1.2 Post 1967
- 1.3 The 1976 Methodist Statement

Chapter 2 THE SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Basic Biology – The Normal Process
 - 2.1.1 The pre-embryonic period
 - 2.1.2 The embryonic period
- 2.2 Some Common Abnormalities
 - 2.2.1 Infertility
 - 2.2.2 Spontaneous pre-natal death
 - 2.2.3 Congenital defect
- 2.3 Infertility Treatment
 - 2.3.1 I.V.F.
 - 2.3.2 GIFT
 - 2.3.3 Gamete and pre-embryo storage
 - 2.3.4 Gamete and pre-embryo donation
 - 2.3.5 Fetal reduction
- 2.4 Pre-natal Diagnosis
- 2.5 Fetal Transplants
- 2.6 Experiments on Embryos
 - 2.6.1 Experiments on fetal material
 - 2.6.2 Experiments on pre-embryos
- 2.7 Post-coital Contraception and Abortion
- 2.8 Conclusion

Chapter 3 MORAL THEORIES AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE STATUS OF UNBORN HUMANS

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Moral Theories
- 3.2 Rights
- 3.3 The Relationship between moral status and biological development
 - 3.3.1 At fertilisation
 - 3.3.2 At individualisation
 - 3.3.3 At attainment of sentience
 - 3.3.4 At attainment of viability

- 3.3.5 At birth
- 3.3.6 At attainment of personhood

3.4. Conclusion

Chapter 4 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Creation
- 4.2 The Human Situation
- 4.3 The Christian Hope
- 4.4 Human Response
- 4.5 Making Decisions
- 4.6 Conclusion

Chapter 5 HOW SHOULD THE UNBORN HUMAN BE REGARDED?

- 5.1 An attempt to grapple with the moral situation
- 5.2 How should the unborn human be regarded?
 - 5.2.1 The significance of becoming a person
 - 5.2.2 The significance of being human

Chapter 6 WHAT THIS DISTINCTION MAY MEAN FOR SOME REAL LIFE SITUATIONS

- 6.0 Introduction
- 6.1 Issues associated with abortion
 - 6.1.1 Introduction
 - 6.1.2 Abortion if the mother's physical health is threatened by continuing the pregnancy
 - 6.1.3 Abortion for social reasons
 - 6.1.4 Abortion if the fetus is abnormal
 - 6.1.5 Post-coital intervention
- 6.2 Issues associated with infertility
 - 6.2.1 I.V.F. for married couples
 - 6.2.2 Fetal Reduction
 - 6.2.3 'Spare' fertilised eggs
- 6.3 Research on human embryos and fetuses
 - 6.3.1 Production of human embryos for research purposes
 - 6.3.2 Experiments on 'spare' embryos
 - 6.3.3 Human fetuses and fetal material in research and treatment
 - 6.3.4 Other issues
- 6.4 Conclusion

Chapter 7 IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE AND PUBLIC POLICY

- 7.1 The Church
 - 7.1.1 The Church in the nation
 - 7.1.2 The local Church
 - 7.1.3 Language concerning status
- 7.2 Counselling
 - 7.2.1 Abortion counselling
 - 7.2.2 Antenatal screening
 - 7.2.3 Infertility
- 7.3 Education
 - 7.3.1 National Curriculum
 - 7.3.2 The media
 - 7.3.3 Education and professional bodies
 - 7.3.4 Parent-teacher relationships
 - 7.3.5 Education for parenthood
 - 7.3.6 Ethical education in medicine and medical sciences
- 7.4 Conclusion

SUMMARY

APPENDICES

- I – The Law of England relating to Abortion
- II – The Methodist Statement 1976
- III – Statistical Information

THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN HUMAN

PREFACE

This report is offered to the Methodist people and the wider public as a contribution to the growth in understanding of the “unborn human”⁽¹⁾. It is not intended to be a firm statement of Methodist belief. The hope is that it will clarify the issues involved and make us more aware of the status of the unborn human before God and within the human family.

Christianity claims that God created humanity in his own image, and revealed himself in human form. Consequently, questions about the status of the human and the value to be attached to each human are matters of crucial importance, and are now raised in new ways regarding the status of the unborn human.

This report originates in advances in medical technology regarding the unborn human and the consequent need for society and individuals to decide what is the significance of the stages of human development from fertilisation to birth both before God and in human society. New techniques open exciting possibilities for understanding and treating disease and for overcoming infertility. But frequently they require difficult ethical decisions because they require the manipulation and possibly the destruction of what is clearly human material. The question is: what is the theological and ethical status of that material?

The number of people who may find themselves facing such decisions constantly widens. Parents, teenagers, clergy, doctors and nurses, couples seeking fertility treatment, research workers, lawyers, patients who might be offered treatment with fetal tissue, may all find themselves called upon to make decisions in this area. For many there is anguish in the process of arriving at the answer, in the decision itself and in living with the consequences of the decision. Part of the anguish is the uncertainty regarding the status of the entity about which decisions are to be made. Is it a human being, or human material only? Is it a powerless and voiceless individual entirely dependent on the goodwill of others, or is it a powerful entity – unable to exercise responsibilities but fully able to take all that it needs for its own development?

Both Christian faith and scientific enquiry stress the essential integration of all components of the universe. Every action in some way affects the whole. Actions taken in relation to the unborn human will have an effect on society for better or for worse. Given the possibility of “test-tube babies”, surrogacy, artificial insemination by donor (A.I.D.), abortion, genetic research and embryonic and fetal tissue transplants, decisions must be made but they are not purely private decisions; the well-being of human society and of creation are also involved.

The Methodist Conference of 1986, in response to a memorial from the Warrington Circuit recognising this situation, instructed the Faith and Order Committee, in consultation with the Division of Social Responsibility, to set up a working party to prepare a report on “the status of the unborn child”.⁽²⁾ After discussion with the Warrington Social Responsibility Representative it was clear that the phrase “unborn child” was not meant to prejudge the outcome of the discussion. Consequently it was accepted that “unborn human” was a less contentious phrase; it is therefore used throughout the report.

This report seeks to address the following questions:

What is the present ethical, medical and legal situation concerning the unborn human?

What is the status of the unborn human before God and how do we as Christians understand and act on this?

How can parents, research workers, medical personnel and others involved in making decisions about the future of unborn humans, be assisted, counselled and supported in the choices they have to make?

To what extent is the fate of each unborn human the responsibility of the wider society as well as the individual parents and how should that responsibility be exercised?

There have been several significant studies and reports in this field in the last decade. Work of a closely related kind is being undertaken at the present time by the Conference Commission on Sexuality, and in a Church-wide study of a draft Conference Statement on The Family, The Single and The Married. The issues dealt with in those reports are not repeated here.

Notes

1. The term “unborn human” is used throughout this report to cover all stages from fertilisation to birth.

2. Memorial 102

The Warrington Circuit Meeting (Present: 22. Vote: unanimous) expresses its concern at the absence of any recent official statement concerning the status of the unborn child (i.e. the status from the moment of fertilisation to the moment of birth). In view of the major developments which have taken place in the last ten years in the field of medicine, we feel the existing statement on this matter in the 1976 Statement on Abortion is no longer adequate to meet the needs of research workers, doctors, nurses and the general public who seek Christian guidance for their work, nor does it meet the need for the Church to speak truth to those who would exploit the new advances for personal gain.

The Circuit Meeting therefore asks the Conference to direct the appropriate Connexional Committees to prepare a report on the status of the unborn child for consideration at Conference 1987.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT OF THE METHODIST STATEMENT ON ABORTION (1976)

1.1 Background to the 1967 Act

1.1.1. During the Sixties there was a widespread debate in society and in the Churches, on the advisability of reforming the law on abortion. Previously abortion was almost universally condemned, as it was in the Methodist Declaration of 1961. Attempts were made to change the law in the period immediately before and after World War II. The arguments in favour of reform varied:

- The uncertainty of the existing law discouraged women in need from seeking medical advice.
- The high incidence of back-street abortion, frequently resulting in severe medical and psychological complications and sometimes death for the mother.
- The argument on the grounds of equality. There seemed to be “one law for the rich, another law for the poor”.

1.1.2. In 1965 a committee of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England published *ABORTION: an ethical discussion*. The committee rejected the absolutist position and discussed abortion in terms of a conflict of rights, as between those of the mother and of the fetus. The authors illustrated their approach by reference to three particular cases:

- in which the pregnancy constitutes a grave threat to the mother’s life or health,
- in which there is a **calculable** risk of the birth of a deformed or defective child (this was written before pre-natal diagnosis had become a reliable and acceptable technique, see Appendix III)
- in which the child has been conceived as a result of rape or some other criminal offence.

Rather than produce their own Bill, the committee amended one already before the House of Lords prepared by Lord Silkin (1965).

1.1.3. Lord Silkin's Bill, while retaining the principle of the illegality of abortion, allowed termination on one of four grounds:

- grave risk to life or physical or mental health of the mother,
- grave risk of the birth of a defective child,
- adverse health or social conditions (including the existing family) which would make the mother unsuitable to care for the child,
- pregnancy resulting from a criminal offence.

There would be an upper limit of 16 weeks of pregnancy (see Appendix III) for the latter two grounds.

1.1.4. The Anglican committee expressed their acceptance of abortion only on the following grounds :

when “. . . if the pregnancy were allowed to continue there would be grave risk of the patient's death or of serious injury to her health or physical or mental wellbeing.”

They also accepted that “account may be taken of the patient's **total environment, actual or reasonably foreseeable**”. No upper time limit was given. These recommendations differed significantly from Lord Silkin's in that rape and fetal abnormality were not grounds for abortion, except in as far as they affected the woman's wellbeing.

1.1.5. Subsequently Mr David Steel tabled a Bill which contained elements of Lord Silkin's Bill in that specific grounds for abortion were laid down. In addition the mother's social environment could be taken into account, as proposed in the Anglican report. In an attempt to restrict the number of abortions, the phrase “greater than if the pregnancy were terminated” was added in the House of Lords to the Bill's definition of the risks to mothers and their existing children which were to become valid grounds for abortion. Since early abortion poses less risk to a mother than continuing a pregnancy to term, this had the unintended effect of permitting doctors to authorise abortion, in effect, on demand. The amended Bill became the Abortion Act of 1967 (Appendix I).

1.1.6. In 1966 the Methodist Conference had vigorously debated the subject of abortion, and passed a motion which contained and approved of key concepts similar to Mr David Steel's Bill.

1.2 Post 1967

1.2.1. The steady rise in the number of abortions, particularly on women from overseas, led to growing concern about the way the Act was being interpreted. (Abortions on women from abroad comprised about one third of the number in England and Wales in 1974. Changes in the laws in Western Europe and in the USA in the late 70s and early 80s have significantly reduced the number of foreign women seeking abortion in Great Britain.) In 1971 a Government Committee of Enquiry on the working, but not the basis, of the Act was set up (The Lane Committee), to which the Methodist Church gave written and oral evidence, and which reported in 1974. Their Report has never been debated in Parliament, although many of the administrative recommendations have been implemented.

1.2.2. The Committee concluded that the passing of the Act had exposed many personal problems in the lives of contemporary women. But by facilitating a greatly increased number of abortions, its passing had relieved a vast amount of individual suffering. The Act had focussed attention on the paramount need for preventive action, for more education in sexual life and its responsibilities, and for the widespread provision of contraceptive advice and facilities.

1.2.3. The Committee was against “Abortion on Demand” but it was also against tightening the criteria for abortion in the Act. It therefore required that the consent of the woman’s medical advisers should continue to be obligatory before an abortion could be legally performed. The Committee urged that appropriate counselling should be available for all patients and adequate after-care for all women who had an abortion.

1.2.4. In the twenty one years since the passing of the Act in 1967 there have been fifteen unsuccessful attempts to change it; three of them involved major parliamentary debates. As far as opinion polls can be relied upon, the public are broadly in favour of the present position.

1.2.5. In 1970 a Roman Catholic layman and ethicist, Dr Daniel Callahan, published *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality*. This careful and extensively researched book began life as an attempt to defend the traditional Roman Catholic position. In the course of writing it became a powerful attack on that position. His approach is summarised in the following quotation, “Abortion is at once a moral, legal, sociological, philosophical, demographic and psychological problem, not readily amenable to one-dimensional thinking”. This book had a significant influence on the joint Anglican-Methodist and Methodist groups mentioned below, and the second paragraph of the Methodist Statement (see below) reflects the above quotation from Callahan.

1.3 **The 1976 Statement on Abortion** (See Appendix II)

1.3.1. Late in 1975 the Division of Social Responsibility produced a consultative document, *Abortion: the issues involved*, which was widely studied throughout the Connexion. The document was based on an unpublished joint Anglican-Methodist study. There was overwhelming support for the provisional judgments expressed in the consultative document. These formed the basis for the *Statement on Abortion* which was approved by the Family Life Committee, the Executive Committee and the Board of the Division of Social Responsibility. The 1976 Conference, consisting of 576 representatives, adopted the Statement with only five dissentient votes. Later that year, the Division published *Abortion Reconsidered: The Methodist Statement and its background*. This document has no official status.

1.3.2. The Statement argues that, from conception, the unborn human never totally lacks human significance, but that its significance manifestly increases; abortion therefore becomes more unacceptable as pregnancy proceeds but is not thereby ruled out.

1.3.3. The Statement then considers when and on what grounds a pregnancy might be terminated.

- “No pregnancy should be terminated after an aborted fetus would be viable”

- With two exceptions, all abortions would be best restricted to the first twenty weeks of pregnancy. Furthermore there are strong arguments on physical, psychological and practical grounds for carrying out the termination in the first three months of the pregnancy.
- The exceptions are where there is a direct physical threat to the life of the mother, and when information about a serious abnormality in the fetus becomes available after the twentieth week.
- Environmental factors may be taken into account, though only when a termination is envisaged during the first twenty weeks of the pregnancy.

1.3.4. The Board of the D.S.R. endorsed the use of the Statement as the basis of its responses to the various private members' bills, in the preparation of a leaflet, *Counselling Families with Genetic Disease*, and in its responses to the Warnock Report and related issues.

1.4. Until the 1970's the status of the unborn human was largely discussed in terms of abortion. Since then the rapid developments in genetics and in techniques for treating infertility and genetic disease have shifted the focus of discussion so that, for additional and pressing reasons, the whole question of the status of the unborn becomes impossible to avoid, even during the earliest stages of life. To these we now turn.

CHAPTER 2

THE SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

2.0. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that the birth of the first "test tube" baby, Louise Brown, in 1978 heralded the dawn of a new era in human reproduction. There has also been much greater public awareness of these developments, due to greatly increased publicity, and also much public concern about the ethical issues involved (see Chapter 3). In this chapter are outlined some of the scientific and technological developments in this field, the moral and ethical questions they raise and the present guidelines and procedures for monitoring these developments.

2.1. Basic Biology – The Normal Process

The time from fertilisation to birth (about 38 weeks on average) can be divided into pre-embryonic, embryonic and fetal periods. The term "pre-embryo" is often used to refer, during the first 14 days after fertilisation, to the entity brought about through the fusion of egg and sperm. The term "conceptus" is also used of this entity, but its use is not restricted to the first 14 days. The embryonic period lasts from 14 days to eight weeks after fertilisation. During this period, the part of the conceptus which eventually becomes the child (as opposed to the part from which the placenta and membranes develop) is known as the embryo. Before 14 days this part cannot be distinguished from the rest of the conceptus; after eight weeks its form is recognisably human and it is termed a fetus. The term embryo is often used more loosely, to cover not only the future child between 14 days and eight weeks after fertilisation but also the whole conceptus before 14 days; but as the latter gives

rise to placenta and membranes as well as child it seems less confusing to refer to it by the distinctive term pre-embryo, which is therefore used throughout this report.

2.1.1. The Pre-embryonic Period

It is usual to think of human life as beginning at the moment of fertilisation, by which we mean the penetration of the outermost part of an egg (ovum) by a sperm. Very shortly before this happens (and typically about halfway through a menstrual cycle), the ovum concerned will have become detached from the ovary in which it has developed and then been sucked into one of the two Fallopian tubes which lead from the ovaries to the uterus. This tube, which sperm reach via the uterus, is the site of fertilisation. Tube, ovary and uterus are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1, as is the development of the pre-embryo.

Ova and sperm normally contain about half as much genetic information each as other human cells do – i.e. 23 chromosomes instead of 46. After the sperm has penetrated the outer part of the ovum, it takes about 24 hours for the two sets of 23 chromosomes to come together. When they do, the fertilised ovum immediately divides into two in the same way that other living cells do – i.e. each of the 46 chromosomes splits into two, and the two sets of chromosomes then move apart before the cell itself divides so that each daughter cell also has a set of 46. This first cell division is followed by many others. By about four days after fertilisation the pre-embryo has become a hollow ball of 50 – 60 cells, about 10 of which form an **inner cell mass** bulging into the central cavity of the ball. Four or five days later another cavity (the amniotic cavity) opens up like a blister between the inner cell mass (now known as the embryonic disc) and that part of the outside of the ball to which it has hitherto been attached. This leaves the embryonic disc (the future embryo) joined only round its edge to the outer ball of cells.

While the inner cell mass and the amniotic cavity have been developing in the pre-embryo, the pre-embryo as a whole will have travelled down the Fallopian tube and arrived in the uterus, becoming attached to the uterine wall by about 6 days after fertilisation and fully embedded (implanted) within it during the second week. From the outer ball of cells of the pre-embryo, branching projections (chorionic villi) then grow out into the uterine wall, where some of them will eventually form part of the placenta. Through them the unborn human is fed with the oxygen and nutrients it needs to grow and develop. The outer ball of cells is also destined to form the wall of the **amniotic sac** – the fluid filled bag which the amniotic cavity becomes, and which cradles the unborn human in the uterus until the end of pregnancy.

2.1.2. The Embryonic Period

At the time of implantation, the embryonic disc is a featureless flat plate, but at the end of the second week a ridge (the primitive streak) appears on this plate, close to its edge and pointing towards its centre. This change marks the beginning of the embryonic period. Until then, one cannot be sure that the pre-embryo will not give rise to more than one embryo (in which case more than one primitive streak will appear). The streak shows where the bottom end of the embryo will develop. Its appearance is quickly followed by numerous other changes, which over the next six weeks transform the featureless embryonic disc into the recognisable shape of a tiny human being.

Figures 1 & 2

One of the first of these changes is the appearance of the **neural plate**, a raised area on the embryonic disc which can be distinguished from about 18 days after fertilisation. This will eventually form the nervous system (brain, spinal cord and nerves). It normally develops into a tube and becomes covered by other tissues during the fourth week; the main nerves start to grow out from it early in the fifth week; and it seems that these nerves must begin to function within the next few days since some simple reflex actions – involuntary movements in response to touch – have been described as early as the sixth week.

2.1.3. The Fetal Period

The fetal period begins about 8 weeks after fertilisation and 10 weeks after the onset of the mother's last menstrual period (from which the length of gestation is conventionally measured), by which time the unborn human has developed enough to have the form of a tiny baby. During the remaining weeks of pregnancy (30 on average), the fetus can expect to grow from about 4 cm to 50 cm in length and the tissues of its constituent parts will be equipped by progressive changes in their microscopic structure and behaviour to carry out the functions required of them after birth. These changes will include the beginning of electrical activity in the cerebral cortex – a phenomenon which seems from observations in later life to be essential to consciousness, and which has not been reported before the third month of the fetal period. About 14 weeks into the fetal period (ie at 24 weeks gestation or 22 weeks from fertilisation) the tissues will have developed enough for the fetus to have a chance of surviving if born prematurely and given modern neonatal intensive care.

The relationship in time of all these events is depicted in Figure 2.

2.2. Some Common Abnormalities

2.2.1. Infertility

At least one tenth of all women who wish to conceive have not done so after trying for two years. If treated by methods other than Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID), Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer (GIFT) and *In vitro* Fertilisation (IVF), about half these women are likely to conceive; a quarter are likely to fail to do so because of defective sperm function, in which case IVF, GIFT or AID may be offered; and most of the rest will have damaged Fallopian tubes or unexplained infertility, for which IVF and GIFT respectively are particularly recommended. However, success rates with IVF and GIFT are still quite low: see Chapter 2.3.1. and 2.3.2.

2.2.2. Spontaneous Prenatal Death

Approximately 15% of pregnancies that progress far enough to be recognised clinically, end in miscarriage (ie spontaneous abortion) and another 0.5% in stillbirth. (The distinction between miscarriage and stillbirth is legal rather than biological: the birth of a dead fetus is classified as a stillbirth if it occurs after at least 28 weeks gestation, which the law regards as the lower limit of viability, and otherwise as a miscarriage). However, studies of pre-embryos (eg. from Fallopian tubes and uteri removed at hysterectomy) suggest that at least 40% and perhaps more than half of these are too abnormal to survive, in which case the number failing to implant or succumbing too quickly after implantation to produce clear

signs of pregnancy must be greater than the number in which later miscarriage or stillbirth occurs. Some of these cases are so abnormal that even the word “pre-embryo” is a misnomer, since all that develops from the ovum is a hollow ball with no embryonic disc. Although most such hollow sacs succumb quickly, occasionally one will develop into a hydatidiform mole – a kind of tumour.

2.2.3. Congenital Defect

Although prenatal death is the usual outcome when the unborn human is affected by a major abnormality, a small proportion survive pregnancy: about one in 40 liveborn children have malformations which cause death or substantial handicap either inevitably, or if untreated. About one fifth of these cases can be blamed on specific causes, of which there are three main kinds – (a) abnormality of the chromosomes affecting the amount of genetic information in each cell (eg Down’s syndrome); (b) a defect in one or two genes – individual items of genetic information, of which there are thousands on the average chromosome; (c) exposure in early pregnancy to one of several harmful agents, which include a few infections (eg German measles), a few chemicals (eg. Thalidomide), and intense atomic radiation. Most of the other four fifths of malformations are thought to be caused by the cumulative effects of a variety of factors, genes and features of the pre-natal environment, on the developing embryo.

Among the legal abortions carried out because of a risk that the unborn human is severely handicapped, chromosomal abnormality is reported as the main problem in 15%, other genetic defect in 4%, exposure to harmful agents in pregnancy in 23%, and malformation of the central nervous system (attributed in most cases to multiple factors) in 27%. Most of the pregnancies in which exposure to harmful agents in pregnancy is reported, and some in which genetic defects other than chromosomal abnormalities are feared, are probably terminated because of evidence that the risk of handicap is high, rather than because a handicap has been diagnosed. However, most of the central nervous system defects and chromosomal abnormalities and some of the other genetic defects reported will have been firmly diagnosed by one or more of the tests mentioned in Section 2.4 – mainly ultrasound and amniocentesis, the latter often prompted by an abnormal blood test result.

2.3. Infertility Treatment

The most dramatic developments in the field of infertility treatment involve procedures carried out with gametes (eggs and sperms) outside the bodies of the would-be parents. The best-known of these procedures is fertilisation “*in vitro*” followed by insertion of the pre-embryo in the Fallopian tube or uterus, but transfer of unfertilised eggs and semen to the Fallopian tubes is also practised. The storage and donation of gametes and pre-embryos are other procedures to which success in manipulating eggs outside the body has opened the way.

2.3.1. *In vitro* Fertilisation (IVF)

This is the so called “test tube baby” technique. The woman’s ovaries are stimulated by hormones to produce several eggs which are removed surgically from her body and mixed with sperm from the husband in a special fluid in a dish or test tube. By microscopic examination of the mixture of the eggs and sperm it is possible to see whether the eggs have been fertilised. Those which have may either be placed in the woman’s uterus or womb (the usual procedure) or be inserted in the

Fallopian tube so that they can travel to the uterus by the natural route. If the pre-embryo successfully implants in the wall of the uterus, then pregnancy is established and subject to any mishap, will continue normally to the birth of a baby.

This technique is now well established and has been performed many thousands of times. However despite the wide publicity given to it, only a minority of couples are suitable for attempted IVF treatment and even among these, the success rate is still quite low: in the main British units, about seven attempts at I.V.F. were made for every live birth which resulted in 1987 (see Appendix III).

A refinement of IVF for which techniques are now being developed experimentally, is the micro-injection of a single sperm into the egg while it is outside the body. Such a procedure could provide some hope for many couples whose infertility is caused by defective sperm function. When there are few sperm, or their mobility is subnormal, they are unable to penetrate the outer surface of the egg, the zona pellucida, so that fertilisation does not take place.

Zygotes produced by micro-injection might, however, be expected to be at increased risk of abnormality – firstly because the element of competition between sperms, which is present in normal fertilisation and which may select out sperms with various defects, is removed, and secondly, because micro-injection might damage the egg and so affect the cell divisions which follow fertilisation. As there are no tests for either of these risks, the dangers inherent in this technique can only be evaluated retrospectively.

2.3.2. Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer [GIFT]

This method of attempting to treat infertility has become popular since the Warnock Committee reported in 1984. It has also been referred to as T-SET (Tube Sperm-Egg Transfer). In this procedure, the eggs are collected as for IVF and a number of these eggs are then mixed with the sperm and introduced into one or both Fallopian tubes through a cannula (or fine tube) in the hope that fertilisation will take place in the Fallopian tube itself and that the resulting pre-embryo will travel down the tube to the uterus.

The advantage of this method is that it allows fertilisation to occur in its natural environment where the secretions of the Fallopian tube may aid the process and the subsequent implantation in the wall of the uterus. An additional advantage is that it is simpler to perform than IVF, and cheaper. However it can only succeed in women who have at least one Fallopian tube present and functioning. This therefore rules out a substantial proportion of infertile women. Also this method may lead to the dangerous condition of an ectopic pregnancy (i.e. one within the tube itself) if a blocked tube is inadvertently used.

A further disadvantage of the GIFT technique is that it provides no proof that fertilisation is possible for a particular couple unless a pregnancy occurs. Therefore IVF may be performed first, and GIFT used where fertilisation occurs but a pregnancy fails to ensue. The procedure is now well established and is offered under the NHS to suitable couples. Its success rate is similar to that of IVF or rather higher.

2.3.3. Gamete and Pre-embryo Storage

Both pre-embryos and sperms can remain viable if frozen and thawed under suitable conditions, and the search is on for a satisfactory method of freezing and thawing unfertilised human eggs. Opportunities to treat pre-embryos and eggs in this way arise because the hormone treatment given before IVF or GIFT is attempted generally leads to more eggs being produced than are needed immediately. When IVF is attempted all these eggs may be mixed with sperm to maximise the chance that some will be fertilised. However it is usual not to implant more than three or four pre-embryos because of the risk posed by a pregnancy with several embryos, both for them and for the mother. The surplus pre-embryos may then be frozen to very low temperatures in liquid nitrogen and, at a later date, be thawed out and implanted in the uterus if the pre-embryos already implanted fail to develop, or if the parents want further children. Decisions about the “ownership” of the pre-embryos, disposal of unwanted ones, and their possible use for experimentation, all raise contentious moral questions.

The idea of freezing unfertilised eggs and disposing of those no longer needed is less controversial ethically than the freezing and possible destruction of pre-embryos. This is because eggs do not have a complete set of human genes and are not therefore, on their own, potential human beings. However, human eggs have so far proved difficult to freeze and thaw, and might be at high risk of producing abnormal embryos if fertilised after such treatment. Investigating this possibility would involve *in vitro* fertilisation of eggs which had been frozen and thawed, and testing the resulting pre-embryos for abnormalities. This is an example of the deliberate production of human pre-embryos in order to experiment on them – a source of ethical problems to which we return in Chapter 6.2.3. If, however, human eggs could be frozen, thawed and fertilised safely, surplus ones obtained in the course of IVF and GIFT treatment could be kept in an unfertilised state for later use if required.

Egg storage could also be useful for fertile couples in cases where they might wish to delay having children without the increased risks of chromosomal abnormalities which eggs produced by older women have, or where a woman was about to undergo a treatment such as radiotherapy, which might damage her ovaries or her eggs.

The storage of frozen semen (for possible use in artificial insemination) is not a new technique. However, awareness of the risks of transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the ‘AIDS’ virus), and the hepatitis B virus, has increased the demand for donors to be screened for these and other sexually transmissible infections. Some countries now insist that all donor semen should be stored frozen for three or six months and only used if the results of the serological screening remain negative during this period. The questioning of donors about any heritable disorders among their relatives, and a check for any possible chromosome abnormalities, are other safeguards against the creation of damaged embryos.

2.3.4. Gamete and Pre-embryo Donation

If one or both of a couple are incapable of becoming genetic parents, the ways in which they can become social parents are essentially the same as they have always been [c.f. Genesis 16:2; 30:3; 38:8]. If the man is infertile, a situation far more common than is usually admitted, the female partner can bear a child by another

man. If it is the woman that is infertile, the man's sperm may be used to fertilise the egg of another woman. In both cases it would be the original couple that reared the child. Where both are infertile it is possible to rear a child of other parents, the usual situation in adoption. The introduction of gamete and pre-embryo donation has however, provided new techniques for people to become 'social parents' in each of these ways.

The first of these techniques to be introduced was artificial insemination, which made it possible for a woman with a sterile partner to become the genetic parent of a child without the necessity of sexual intercourse outside the partnership. Conversely, if the woman is unable to produce her own eggs, it is now possible to employ GIFT or IVF using eggs from a donor. These may be fertilised by her partner's sperm. These procedures allow the woman to bear, as well as to rear, a child fathered by her partner, of which she is not the genetic mother.

In pre-embryo donation a woman receives a pre-embryo of which neither she, nor her partner, are the genetic parents. If the couple keeps the child, the genetic situation is the same as in adoption, but the child will have developed within the partnership before, as well as after, birth. An alternative possibility is that the genetic parents of the pre-embryo might arrange for it to be implanted in a surrogate mother because the genetic mother was unfit or unwilling to carry the baby to term, with a view to the child being returned to them after birth for rearing.

None of the methods discussed in this section is a 'treatment' of infertility. What each does is to get round the problem by using gametes from fertile donors. Very few people have begun to work out the pastoral, psychological and social implications of these techniques. However there are some important exceptions, especially Robert Snowden who has done research into families where a child has been born by AID.

All these methods raise moral questions. There is the issue, in gamete donation, of the genetic parents not being married to each other. In surrogacy there is the question of the rightness of one woman being asked to carry a child for another. These procedures raise other ethical questions, such as whether sperm donation to a single woman or lesbian couples should be sanctioned; whether close relatives of would-be social parents should be acceptable as donors of gametes or pre-embryos; whether a donor's identity should always be concealed, or his or her genetic child have the right to that information. In addition, what view should be taken of the use of frozen gametes from deceased people, or of people wishing their children to be particularly gifted and so choosing frozen gametes from donors with outstanding physical or intellectual attributes?

2.3.5. Fetal Reduction

It has already been noted that several eggs are commonly transferred in GIFT, and multiple pre-embryos are introduced in IVF. This is done to increase the chances of a successful pregnancy since each individual egg or pre-embryo has only a relatively small chance of surviving. It is also usual for a woman's ovaries to produce several eggs simultaneously when she is successfully treated for infertility by hormones alone. In all these cases, if more than one egg is fertilised and develops normally, the result is, of course, a 'multiple pregnancy' ending in the

birth of two or more children. This is a relatively common event after infertility treatment.

The risks of maternal complications and of fetal and infant death and handicap increase with the number of fetuses in a pregnancy. For this reason the number of surviving fetuses in a multiple pregnancy (usually but not always one due to treatment for infertility) is sometimes deliberately reduced to one or two, by for example injecting the remainder with heart-stopping doses of potassium chloride by a needle passed through the wall of the abdomen and uterus. Because of the risks involved with pregnancies with several fetuses, and the moral and possible psychological problems associated with 'fetal reduction', the Interim Licensing Authority for *In Vitro Fertilisation* now recommends transferring no more than three eggs or pre-embryos (or in exceptional circumstances, four) at any one time.

2.4. Prenatal Diagnosis

It is a generally accepted part of modern obstetric practice to test whether certain life-threatening or severely handicapping disorders are present in fetuses believed to be at significant risk of these conditions, and to offer to induce abortion when such tests are positive. The list of conditions for which it is possible to test is rapidly growing, and could conceivably come to include all genetically determined attributes, normal as well as abnormal, if the current international project to analyse every human gene is brought to fruition. The most widely used tests are ultrasound and amniocentesis.

Ultrasound, which produces an X-ray-like picture of the fetus, is now employed very widely to monitor fetal growth. To detect many abnormalities by this method one has to wait till 18 – 20 weeks gestation or later, and to use the most sensitive equipment and skilled operators; but some major defects can be detected earlier and under less rigorous conditions.

Amniocentesis, the removal of a sample of the amniotic fluid which surrounds the fetus within the uterus, can be done from 15 weeks gestation onwards, but causes about one in 250 women to miscarry. The fluid contains dissolved substances such as alpha-fetoprotein (AFP), and cells which are genetically identical to those of the fetus. The level of AFP is abnormally high in most cases of neural tube defects (the most important group of defects of the central nervous system, which includes spina bifida). The cells can be examined for chromosomal abnormalities (e.g. Down's syndrome) and an increasing number of other genetic defects (e.g. Duchenne muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis), but must first be cultured for 2-3 weeks to allow the cells to multiply.

Two less widely used methods of obtaining cells for chromosomal and genetic studies are:

Fetoscopy (inspection of the fetus and often removal of a sample of fetal tissue through a fine fibre-optic tube, generally at 17-18 weeks), and

Chorionic Villus Biopsy (when a chorionic villus in the placenta is sampled, generally at 9-12 weeks).

Tissues obtained by fetoscopy can also be tested for German measles infection. Fetoscopy is about ten times more likely than amniocentesis to cause miscarriage,

but chorionic villus biopsy seems likely to become about as safe as amniocentesis, and is beginning to replace this for chromosomal and genetic studies. It enables such studies to be completed much earlier in pregnancy, not only because of the earlier time of sampling, but also because the sample does not have to be cultured for 2-3 weeks before examination.

The possibility of detecting chromosomal and genetic abnormalities even earlier in pregnancy has been opened up by the demonstration that the development of pre-embryos produced by *in vitro* fertilisation can be stopped by freezing, and started again by thawing them. This has prompted research into the feasibility of taking a pre-embryo at its eight-cell or 16-cell stage, removing and culturing one of its cells and examining its chromosomes and/or selected genes whilst freezing the rest of the pre-embryo (which remains capable of developing into all of the structures that form from the pre-embryo – embryo, placenta etc.). The pre-embryo would only be thawed and replaced in its mother's uterus if no chromosomal or genetic abnormality was found.

Except for ultrasound it is unlikely that any of the above tests for abnormalities will be offered in all pregnancies in the foreseeable future. At the present time amniocentesis (followed by the offer of an abortion if the fetus is found to be abnormal) is commonly recommended to three main groups of pregnant women:

- those whose family history indicates that their children are at high risk of one of a growing list of genetic disorders;
- those in their late 30s or 40s (since the risk of certain chromosomal abnormalities such as Down's syndrome increases with maternal age);
- those whose blood contains an unusually high level of AFP (as it generally does when the fetus has a neural tube defect).

Many hospitals routinely measure the level of AFP in the blood of pregnant women. Those in whom this level is high are then invited to undergo amniocentesis and amniotic fluid AFP measurement as a test for neural tube defect. In conjunction with maternal age, the measurements of AFP and other compounds in the blood are also being used increasingly to identify fetuses whose cells should be examined for evidence of Down's syndrome (in which the AFP level in the blood tends to be **below** average). Neural tube defects cannot be detected by examining cells in the way that chromosomal and genetic defects can, so there is no immediate prospect of the time at which they can be diagnosed being reduced much below 17-18 weeks gestation (when the AFP tests are most accurate).

Although policies of testing fetuses for abnormalities and offering abortion if the tests are positive have been widely accepted, some condemn this practice on ethical grounds. There is more general anxiety lest the practice be extended to allow even normal fetuses to be eliminated if tests showed that their gender or other characteristics did not match their parents' wishes. The idea of isolating and culturing cells from pre-embryos (cells from each of which a complete individual might develop if conditions were right), raises a further ethical problem: is this not essentially the same as cloning, the production of more than one individual from one pre-embryo?

Although cloning happens naturally when identical twins occur, doing it artificially would arouse strong criticism, not least because of the practical and psychological effects on all concerned. People would appear to become units of mass-production.

2.5. Fetal Transplants

Normal fetuses from induced abortions, and fetuses in whom defects which make early death inevitable have been diagnosed prenatally, are both potential sources of organ and tissue transplants. Most of the fetuses in the latter group have anencephaly – absence of most of the brain (including the cerebral cortex, which seems to be essential for conscious thought) and of the part of the skull which overlies it.

The types of transplants generally obtained from these two groups of fetuses are rather different. Recent interest in the aborted normal fetus as a source of transplants has focussed mainly on the possibility that if early fetal brain cells were transplanted under the right conditions to the brains of sufferers from disorders such as Parkinson's disease, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease and epilepsy, these cells might bring relief by carrying out correctly functions in which the sufferers' own brain cells are failing. Fragments of brain tissue from aborted fetuses have already been transplanted to patients with Parkinson's disease, but whether this does any good is still an open question. Anencephalics, on the other hand, are more likely to be used as sources of complete organs – kidneys, hearts, etc. Such an organ or organs from an anencephalic which is not too immature may be life-saving if implanted in an infant whose own organ(s) of the same kind cannot function properly.

Given parental consent, the practice of transplanting tissues and organs from fetuses and newborn infants who have no prospect of individual survival, in the hope of benefitting other human lives (and incidentally enabling part of the donor to go on living), has been warmly welcomed on ethical grounds as giving a positive aspect to such otherwise negative events as abortion and perinatal death. However, the use of aborted fetuses as donors has been condemned as condoning abortion by those who believe that abortion is never justified.

Other contentious issues are:

- whether it is permissible to improve a transplant's chance of surviving by removing it before the donor's death (which has been defined in this context as an irreversible loss of function of the organism as a whole);
- whether pregnancy should ever be initiated and then terminated in order to provide a fetal transplant;
- whether the prospect of obtaining a fetal transplant should be allowed to affect the clinical management of a pregnancy, e.g. by influencing the methods to be used in performing an abortion, or the choice between terminating an anencephalic pregnancy and allowing it to continue until the fetal organs are fit to transplant to a newborn recipient.

These three questions were answered in the negative in guidelines produced in 1988 by the British Medical Association, and in 1989 by the government-initiated Polkinghorne Committee on the Research Use of Fetuses and Fetal Material. Both

bodies also took the view that brain and other nervous tissue transplants should consist only of isolated cells or tissue fragments.

2.6. RESEARCH ON THE UNBORN

This includes experiments both on fetuses (from induced abortions, miscarriages and stillbirths) and on pre-embryos.

2.6.1. Experiments on Fetal Material

These have quite a long history: more than 50 examples were listed in 1972 in the Peel Report on the use of fetuses and fetal material in research. Many such studies only involve observing aspects of fetal physiology as pregnancy proceeds, examining the naked-eye and microscopical structure of dead fetuses, or culturing fetal cells. Most of this work is no different in kind from the research habitually carried out on other human subjects, although (as with young children), the person who must give consent before the work is done is not the one being investigated, but his or her mother.

There are however, at least three kinds of research on fetuses which appear to raise more specific ethical questions. The first is the transplanting of human fetal material to members of other species. This has been done with tissue from the brain in studies exploring the basis for transplanting brain tissue between humans (see 2.5) and arouses anxiety because the recipients can be regarded as partly human and partly not, at a cellular level.

Secondly, there is the carrying out of experiments on fetuses in the uterus that are already scheduled for abortion – experiments which would not be carried out on other fetuses because they might affect them adversely.

Thirdly, there is experimentation during the first few hours after abortion, on fetuses which are not yet viable, but can sometimes be kept alive for long enough for such experiments to be done. Although the Working Party knows of no examples of experimentation in anticipation of abortion, experiments on live fetuses have certainly been carried out after abortion, e.g. to explore the possibility of developing an artificial placenta to save the lives of very premature babies. Both these kinds of experiments are repugnant to many people, but others welcome them as saving the aborted fetus's life from being entirely wasted.

The Polkinghorne Committee (q.v. 2.5) recommended in 1989 that research and treatment which are carried out on living embryos and fetuses should from the time of implantation onwards be regulated by “principles broadly similar to those which apply to treatment and research conducted with children and adults.” Even for research on dead fetuses and fetal material the Committee laid down several conditions – notably that (a) the prospect of embryonic or fetal material being used in research should not influence the clinical care of any pregnancy, (b) the research should not involve those concerned with the case as carers, (c) the mother should have consented in writing without being offered any financial inducement, and (d) the local ethical committee⁽¹⁾ should also have sanctioned the work, after satisfying itself of the validity of the research, the lack of any other way of meeting its aims, and the adequacy of the investigators' facilities and skill. The Committee did not support the notion that “the act of inducing abortion is one of such moral reprehensibility that it taints beyond acceptability any possible beneficial use of

fetal material so obtained” but recognising that some do hold this view, it also decided that no doctor or nurse should be compelled against his or her conscience to participate in such research.

2.6.2. Experiments on Pre-Embryos

Like most major medical advances, IVF could not have been introduced without research first on experimental animals, and then on human material. For example, the only way to identify the conditions under which human fertilisation and development of the pre-embryo could occur outside the body was to see what happened when human eggs and sperm were brought together under different conditions. Similarly, continued experimentation is the approach most likely to lead to improvement of the successful pregnancy rate following IVF. Most current research involving pre-embryos is being done either to this end, or with a view to making it possible safely and accurately to examine pre-embryos for genetic defects, as envisaged in 2.4.

The pre-embryos used in these studies generally result from the fertilisation of eggs obtained from candidates for IVF or GIFT. Some of these pre-embryos are produced with a view to implanting them, and become available for research because successful IVF has occurred in more than the three or so eggs that need to be implanted. Others are brought into being either solely to enable them to be used in research of the above kinds, or in the course of experiments in which the effectiveness of a contraceptive vaccine is being assessed by observing how successfully it prevents IVF. The production of embryos in the course of research raises larger ethical questions than experimentation on surplus embryos. The latter may even be regarded as giving purpose to otherwise wasted lives, although some take the view (as Enoch Powell did in his Unborn Children [Protection] Bill), that it is abhorrent not only to produce but to use pre-embryos “other than to procure the birth of a normal human child”.

The Government-initiated Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology (The Warnock Committee), took the view in 1984 that experiments on human pre-embryos *in vitro* during the first 14 days after fertilisation should be permitted if approved by a statutory licensing authority. At the time of writing, the present session of Parliament is expected to choose by a free vote between this option and a ban on all experiments, even on pre-embryos. Meanwhile, all workers in this field are expected to have their programmes approved by the Voluntary Licensing Authority (now the Interim Licensing Authority) for Human *In vitro* Fertilisation and Embryology, which was set up in 1985 under the auspices of the Medical Research Council and The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

The Authority will not approve any work that involves modifying the genetic constitution of a human pre-embryo, placing one in the uterus of a member of another species, growing one beyond 14 days (excluding any time when development has been halted by freezing), or attempting to produce a genetic copy of an individual by substituting a nucleus from one of his or her body cells for the nucleus of an unfertilised egg. Other research on human pre-embryos, whether or not they have been produced for this purpose, is considered by the Authority on a project-by-project basis, and may be approved, provided the parents and local

ethical committee⁽¹⁾ agree and the information required cannot be obtained by work on other species.

The Authority regards studies of the penetration of animal eggs by human sperm (which may benefit the treatment of male subfertility) as acceptable, provided that development does not proceed beyond the first few cell divisions. It insists that a pre-embryo resulting from, or used in, research should not be transferred to the uterus (unless the aim of the research is to achieve the birth of a normal child to a particular individual), but should be disposed of by methods approved by the local ethical committee⁽¹⁾, and that frozen pre-embryos should not be stored for more than two years without review, or for more than ten years in all.

2.7. Post-coital Contraception and Abortion

The term “post-coital contraception” covers methods of birth control which act by causing the death of the pre-embryo or embryo but which are not usually regarded as methods of abortion since they are applied before pregnancy is known to exist. Intra-uterine contraceptive devices (IUDs) probably fall into this category, despite being usually inserted with the aim of ensuring that pregnancy will not result from future acts of coitus rather than from an act that has already taken place. Although some research suggests that such devices may prevent fertilisation, it is generally thought that they do not interfere with this process so much as with implantation of the pre-embryo.

IUDs which include some metallic copper are particularly effective and are sometimes inserted after coitus to prevent implantation. Alternatively, ‘morning-after pills’ may be taken at this stage. Like IUDs, these hormonal preparations make the wall of the uterus unreceptive to the pre-embryo and can be used rather later than their popular name suggests: the most widely recommended of them is meant to be taken within three days of coitus in two doses twelve hours apart. Preparations are also being developed which will interfere with the uterine wall’s ability to accommodate the pre-embryo, even if they are taken during the second week after coitus.

Another method of post-coital contraception is ‘menstrual regulation’ – the use of methods similar to those by which diagnosed pregnancies are terminated (e.g. suction through a narrow tube passed up into the uterus) to ‘restore menstruation’ in women in whom this is a few days overdue. However, intra-uterine suction carries a significant risk of infection and is widely held not to be justified when pregnancy has not been diagnosed.

For terminating known pregnancies, the use of suction during the first three months and of other approaches by way of the vagina and cervix (e.g. dilation of the cervical canal, often followed by extraction of the fetus by instruments) in later pregnancy has been popular throughout the period since abortion was legalised in this country; but injections with drugs (especially prostaglandins) which cause the uterus to expel the fetus have replaced surgical removal through the abdomen (as in Caesarian section) as the other commonly used method here. A further option now available through hospitals and selected clinics in France, although not yet in Britain, is the abortion pill “RU486”. If such a preparation became generally available, it might encourage a more trivial attitude to abortion by making this easier, especially in early pregnancy.

2.8. Conclusion

This brief review shows that new discussion is necessary. Furthermore, if solutions are to be found to the moral and ethical questions raised, the crucial question of what it is to be human must be explored. To that matter we now turn.

Note

1. There is normally one Local Ethical Committee for each District Health Authority. Its main functions include (a) adjudicating on the acceptability on ethical grounds of all proposals for research on humans which originate from staff of the Authority or local G.P.s., and (b) monitoring the projects it approves. The Department of Health recently recommended that such a committee should have between eight and twelve members, drawn from both sexes and a wide range of ages, and including hospital medical staff, nursing staff, general practitioner(s) and two or more lay members. Members are appointed by the Health Authority, which should first consult relevant professional bodies or (when selecting lay members) the Community Health Council. Committees are expected to seek expert advice when matters arise which are not covered by their own expertise.

It is not yet clear that Ethical Committees are acting consistently throughout the Health Service and some within them question the precision of their terms of reference.

CHAPTER 3

MORAL THEORIES AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE STATUS OF UNBORN HUMANS

3.0. Introduction

As humans we have a tendency to hope that the perplexing choices we sometimes have to face will be able to be resolved by turning to some simple standard of reference. The status of the unborn **human** has been the subject of such hopes. Some people have tried to develop one or other of the existing moral theories to provide such a standard, others have looked to the concept of human rights in the hope that here there would be a way of addressing the problem that would provide clear answers, yet others have hoped that careful understanding of the process of human development would provide a clear empirical point from which the status of the unborn human could be determined. In this chapter each of these approaches is examined; all are useful, all have something to add to our understanding but none is finally conclusive. In the end it has had to be recognised that individuals have to make choices based on the best evidence available, and that as individuals we have to take responsibility for the choices we make. The report therefore invites readers to recognise that we are not able to solve these problems by the application of abstract principle, but have to deal with real people and their needs.

3.1. Moral Theories

There are two main categories of moral theory. The first group asserts that answers to moral questions ultimately depend solely on the consequences of the action or proposed course of action. This category of moral theories is thus called **consequentialist**. The *Methodist Statement on Abortion (1976)* contains

consequentialist arguments (Para. 3 . . . In considering the matter of abortion the Christian asks what persons . . . are involved and how they will be affected by a decision to permit or forbid abortion. Para. 12 . . . It is right to consider the whole environment within which the mother is living or is **likely** to live.) The most important members of this consequentialist category are those which can be grouped under the heading of **utilitarianism**. In the utilitarian approach, morality is about maximising good and minimising evil. These are the criteria for judging the rightness and wrongness of actions or principles. The good to be maximised is generally “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Jeremy Bentham, 1748-1832, English philosopher), and consequently suffering is to be minimised.

The second group of theories derive from asking “what is my/our **duty** in this situation?”, and are known as **deontological** theories, from the greek **deon**, duty. The major religions require obedience to rules that may make no reference to consequences. The Ten Commandments are an example of this second approach. These religions attempt to justify their deontological requirements firstly by stating that God has commanded the people whom he has created to obey his laws, and thus those who would obey God have no option, and secondly by appealing to **Natural Law**, which, they say, undergirds what is said to be our duty.

There is an important objection to any deontological theory based on “obedience to God”: what if God is said to command cruelty, injustice and wanton destruction (examples of all of which may be found in the Old Testament)? Secondly, the appeal to Natural Law also runs into difficulties – the ambiguities of the term natural (what is natural to one person is not to another), and the difficulties of deducing an obligation from a state of affairs.

In practical applications, too, these theories run into problems. For example, if the fetus is to be regarded as inviolate, how do we respond when the life of the mother is threatened by the continuing pregnancy, or when the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, both of which are criminal offences? Many who take an otherwise absolutist position would make exceptions on these grounds, but once exceptions are made the attraction of an appeal to a simple injunction vanishes. An example of this process is seen in the famous case (1938) of Mr Alec Bourne, an obstetric surgeon. He had terminated the pregnancy of a girl who had been criminally assaulted when three months under the age of fifteen, and was charged under the Act of 1861. Mr Bourne was acquitted and the Judge decided that, in English law, “preserving the life of the woman” is not to be rigidly construed as “preserving the woman from death”.

In an attempt to provide a non-religious basis to moral theories based on absolute duty and an appeal to natural law, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1734-1809) maintained that rational agents (or persons) intrinsically possessed an absolute moral value (in contrast with inanimate objects and “beasts”), which rendered them members of what he called the kingdom of “ends in themselves”. It followed that no person should be treated without their free consent as a means to the happiness of others. For this reason, Kant would presumably have regarded the abortion of a fetus for the good of others as impermissible unless satisfied that the fetus failed the test of “rational being”. Kant’s moral philosophy has been criticised for being too austere, for being absolutist, for leaving no place for a positive duty to others, for over-emphasising individual rights at the expense of the community.

Although criticisms of deontological moral theories can be made, consequentialist theories are also open to objection. How are the consequences of the proposed course of action to be assessed? Thus, there is no doubt that the Abortion Act of 1967 relieved much suffering and virtually eliminated “back-street” abortions, but at the same time the annual abortion rate rose from 50,000 in 1969 to 150,000 in 1987.

Utilitarianism can lead to an over emphasis on the community or society at the expense of the individual, and no consideration at all for the fetus if its presence is an inconvenience to the parent(s). What is meant by “happiness” (or “satisfaction”) in the Benthamite phrase? Utilitarianism leaves little place for disinterested respect for each other as individuals, and for honesty, fairness and justice for their own sakes.

Despite these criticisms, both types of moral theory have much to be said for them. In an attempt to combine the insights from these two groups of theories and to overcome some of their inherent difficulties Gillon [Philosophical Medical Ethics, 1986] suggested four principles which could be used to aid the analysis of medical ethical problems. He proposed that those with responsibility in any given situation should:

- respect the autonomy of the other parties
- seek the good of the parties
- avoid doing harm
- attempt as just an outcome as possible.

By autonomy (from the Greek meaning self rule) is meant the capacity to think, decide and act on the basis of such thought and decision freely and independently.

Examination of these principles reveals that they are phrased in abstract form and yet can result in mutually contradictory conclusions. This is particularly so where one of the parties has great power over the other, as in the case of an unwanted pregnancy - where there is a clash of interests or rights. Hence the importance of considering human rights in this context.

3.2 Rights

The complexity of rights language can be baffling. It has been argued that there are inalienable rights, grounded in God and his relation with the world, or perhaps in nature itself and human responsibility for it. The claim is an intriguing one and there is a huge literature on the topic, much of it concerned with the resolution of apparent conflicts of rights. In the case in point, for example, both mother and child have rights; how are they related? And if both mother and child have rights, does the embryo have rights and how are they to be compared and contrasted with those of the mother?

A further basis of rights is justiciability, that is the basis of rights in law. A person or community has rights, but they are only the rights which are capable of being defended in law. Thus the state has the right to tax the citizen, and the citizen has the right to vote. The problem with this for deciding the status of the unborn human is that the cases where an unborn human has been able to bring an action in law are

few and far between, and none at all in the United Kingdom. The embryo has therefore in principle no justiciable rights.

Neither of these approaches reduces the need for a theological perspective. This report, indeed, claims that the fact of God's creation of the world, and of the human in his image, gives a unique status to all that is human (see Chapter 4). However, reference to rights language does not reduce the problem of the status of the unborn to simple terms, it merely sets one set of claims against others. In the light of the best information and clearest thinking, we have to learn to make decisions which take account of the less than ideal circumstances in which all concerned find themselves. A corollary of this is the full acceptance of the consequences of their decisions. It is this which constitutes the morality in decision-making and avoids the anarchy of mere convenience and self-deception which would lead to moral anarchy. See the reference to Gillon's four principles above.

3.3 The Relationship between Moral Status and Biological Development

Views on this issue can be classified according to the point in development from which they suggest that there is an absolute moral obligation not to kill the products of human conception. The main developments on which they focus are fertilisation; formation of the primitive streak ("individualisation"); attainment of the capacity to feel pain and/or pleasure ("sentience"); attainment of the capacity for life outside the uterus ("viability"); birth; and the acquisition of such attributes as self-awareness, thought, and rational behaviour ("personhood").

3.3.1. At Fertilisation

The view that the unborn human has from its very beginning as much right to life as an adult is particularly associated with the Roman Catholic Church, although by no means confined to it. Roman Catholic teaching declares that in principle this "right to life" applies to all humans who have souls; but there are long-standing differences among Roman Catholic theorists as to when ensoulment (also called hominisation) occurs, and Roman Catholics are taught to behave as if ensoulment and fertilisation coincided. This means not attempting to destroy any unborn human, even by using methods such as the intra-uterine device with a view to preventing implantation if fertilisation occurs.

As justification for this policy, the *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (1984) states that "From the time that the ovum is fertilised, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with its own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already." This is often taken to imply that what confers the right to life is membership of the human species, which includes newly fertilised egg and adult alike. A similar view is held by many Protestants. J. Foster writes: "I have said that the fetus is a human being and by this I mean that it is a human being right from conception, right from the time that the mother's egg is fertilised, when the egg and sperm combine to form a single cell." (J. Foster "Personhood and the Ethics of Abortion" in *Abortion and the Sanctity of Human Life*, ed. J.H. Chamier, Paternoster 1985.)

A rather different argument which leads to the same conclusion is that since the unborn human has the potential to be a human adult it should be treated as if it were an adult. It has been further argued, particularly in Roman Catholic circles, that because the unborn human has more potential than its mother (whose potential has

already been partially realised) and also because it is “innocent”, its life should be preserved even at the expense of its mother’s, if a choice has to be made between them.

This basing of the right to life on membership of the human species appears to offer a clear-cut solution to the many ethical problems associated with the unborn human. However, a possible serious flaw in this argument is that this concept fails to do justice to the biological and social realities of human development.

3.3.2. At Individualisation

One Roman Catholic scholar, Norman Ford, stated recently that for the first two weeks after fertilisation it seems “to be quite unreal to speak of the presence of a distinct human individual” in the mother’s uterus (“When did I begin?”, 1988). The grounds for this view are biological (see Chapter 2.1). In the early first-week pre-embryo, each cell is totipotent, i.e. it has the potentiality of developing into a separate and complete human individual if separated from the other cells. The pre-embryo as a whole has therefore the potentiality to give rise either to one individual (which usually happens) or to more than one (as when identical twins occur). Furthermore, only a minority of the pre-embryo’s cells will form the body of that individual or individuals: the majority will form the placenta through which the individual is nourished and the fluid-filled sac in which he or she is cradled.

The cells which are to form the body become identifiable during the second week, when they come to constitute the embryonic disc; but even this structure is at first a featureless flat plate from which one individual or two (identical twins) or even more can develop. The number of individuals to be formed only becomes apparent on about the fifteenth day with the appearance of the primitive streak (streaks, if there is to be more than one embryo), which is the first step in the laying down of the plan of the body and arguably the earliest point at which the products of conception can be said to include a distinct human being or beings, even though these products have always been human.

This was broadly the view taken in the Warnock Report, which concluded that the pre-embryo had not as strong a claim to life as the embryo and fetus and that therefore responsible experimentation (followed by destruction) should be permitted on the products of *in vitro* fertilisation during the pre-embryonic period (i.e. the two weeks before the primitive streak stage) but not subsequently.

It can of course be argued that to locate the beginning of individualisation at precisely two weeks is an over-simplification, since although primitive streak formation occurs around the fifteenth day it must both be somewhat variable in its timing and be preceded by biochemical changes which should also be regarded as part of individualisation. More fundamentally, some claim that the acquisition of human rights cannot be related to individualisation (or indeed to any later developmental milestone) because development is a continuum.

3.3.3. At Attainment of Sentience

The view that all sentient beings are morally equivalent was put forward by Bentham. He did not claim that all sentient beings had an inviolable right to life. Rather he claimed that the killing of such beings was justified if it satisfied the utilitarian maxim of “the greatest good of the greatest number” by improving the

overall balance between pleasure and pain among all those affected. One argument that has been advanced against the aborting of three-month-old fetuses is that they appear to be sentient. The basis for this belief is the movements seen in fetuses during abortion at this age, which have been interpreted as responses to pain.

It appears likely that these movements are no more than reflex actions – reactions to stimuli in which the part of the central nervous system which is related to consciousness and thus to sentience is not involved. Indeed, it seems that there can be no consciousness without electrical activity in the cerebral cortex, which has not been detected before the fifth month (Chapter 2.1.3). Older fetuses may of course be to some extent sentient; but it can be argued that this on its own makes no stronger a case for them having an absolute right to life than for all sentient animals having such a right. However, the need to avoid causing fetal pain should certainly be borne in mind whenever any fetus that may be sentient is aborted.

3.3.4. At Attainment of Viability

It is sometimes argued that the unborn human should have full human rights as soon as it acquires the capacity to live outside the uterus. Attainment of this capacity – viability – has therefore been widely supposed to confer a new status on the fetus. The Infant (Life Preservation) Act of 1929 embodied this view by prohibiting the killing before birth of “a child capable of being born alive” (i.e. a viable fetus) except when the mother’s life is at risk. The Act also established that evidence that a woman had been pregnant for 28 weeks or more was *prima facie* proof that her fetus was viable. This was widely assumed to mean that the Act did not apply before 28 weeks. However, this assumption was not upheld in a recent civil case where the court ruled that any fetus which could breathe and so live apart from its mother was covered by the Act.

The earliest time in pregnancy at which a child can be born and survive has, of course, been getting earlier, owing to the advance of medical technology – and this may be expected to confer viability on even more immature fetuses in the future. Viability, therefore, is not just an inherent biological property. The age at which it is attained is affected by the available expertise, so that the 26-week old fetus of a London executive would be considered viable, whereas that of an Ethiopian peasant would not. This suggests that the viability of any fetus at a particular point in time is an unsafe criterion to use in determining what our moral obligations to it should be.

3.3.5. At Birth

The view that the right to life is not fully acquired until birth is implicit in the position of many of those who press for “abortion on demand”. They argue that since the fetus depends totally on the mother for life, it has much the same status as any part of a woman’s body. The mother is thus seen to have the same right to determine what should happen to it as she can expect to exercise over the rest of her body, for example her appendix or a tumour.

A variant of this view regards the unborn human as part of the mother’s body over which she has rights up to a defined, although arbitrary, stage of pregnancy. This view is implicit in the laws of countries which allow abortion on demand below a certain stage of gestation – three months in West Germany and the United States, for example. Even the acceptance of post-coital contraception implies that so long

as a woman's offspring are only pre-embryos she has the right to determine whether they should live or die.

An important reason for not equating the unborn human with the other parts of its mother's body is its distinct genetic constitution and capacity to become a totally separate individual if allowed to develop. There are also the questions of the involvement of the father and of the doctor. The father of the unborn human must be considered to have some rights and responsibilities at least on moral grounds, even if these are not enshrined in law. Also, to exercise her "right to abortion" the woman needs medical help. Unless regarded merely as a technician, the doctor is entitled to have a say in what is to be done, just as in any other medical situation on which he or she is consulted.

3.3.6. At Attainment of Personhood

The Methodist Statement *Abortion Reconsidered* emphasised the importance of personhood. Based on the theological insights into our relationship to God as a "Person" the authors argued that "person has become the primary human category for moral reflection". With regard to the abortion debate, the question "Who are persons?" was stated as "What persons, or beings who are properly to be treated wholly or in part as persons, are involved, and how will they be affected by a decision to permit or forbid abortion?" The report went on to state that "any definition of a person must at least involve reference to an individual being, possessing independence and able to respond to relationships. The fetus progressively develops the potential to exhibit these qualities. To regard the fetus fully as a person at an early stage of the pregnancy, however, is to reject all normal meanings of the concept of a 'person'. Certainly, the early fetus will normally develop to viability and birth. The loss of a fetus is therefore never totally without significance, but such a loss in early pregnancy does not amount to the death of a person."

As is implied by the phrase "at least" in the list of criteria of personhood given in this quotation, these are by no means the only criteria which it has been suggested that a human must satisfy in order to be considered a person. The primacy that the Statement gives to personhood echoes Kant's view that persons are the category of beings to whom we owe moral obligations; but Kant's definition of a person was "a rational, willing agent." Earlier, John Locke (1632-1704) had defined a person as "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking being in different times and place; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable and as it seems to me essential to it." (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. J. W. Yolton, 1972, p. 280) Others suggest that one must be capable of making moral judgments, must know that conduct can be either good or bad, to be considered a person.

On such criteria, personhood is not acquired until after birth. As Gillon writes, "very young infants, and humans with severely damaged or severely defective brains, may be able neither to think nor to be self aware, and if the Kantian requirement of rational agency is to be met, many older children and some adults will fail to fall into the net of personhood." (*Philosophical Medical Ethics*, 1986) The view that persons are the only beings to whom we have moral obligations therefore suggests that infants and some older human beings as well as embryos and fetuses need not be treated as though they had an inviolable right to life, thus

opening the door to infanticide and euthanasia. Once on this “slippery slope”, it is argued, it may all too easily become a matter of political and economic expediency to deny human rights, including the right to life, to any who do not meet the expectations of those in power. The history of human society, infected as it is by human sin, provides many examples of how easily this can happen.

3.4. Conclusion

Each of these various attempts to get to grips with the question of the human raises many additional questions. In effect they all appear to want to solve the problem by reference to some external criteria which might be objectively determined, either by definition or enquiry. Whatever external authorities or criteria we choose to accept, we cannot escape the exercise of personal judgement and the acceptance of personal responsibility.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

4.0 Introduction

The biological and medical discoveries outlined in Chapter 2, and the developments in medicine and surgery that are made possible by them are like the discoveries of Copernicus and of modern psychology in that they face theology with a completely new situation. We do not believe that any of the absolutist positions outlined in the previous chapter do justice to the complexity of the situation with which we are faced: they overlook some facts and values whilst making other values absolute.

The complexity stems from, among other things, the sheer quantity of new knowledge, the variety of unborn human material, the difficulties of moral discernment, the conflicting views competing for our support, and the ambiguity of tradition and Scripture.

There is, in fact, little biblical material that bears explicitly on the specific issues involved, and traditional teaching can in some cases be shown to be based on inaccurate understanding (as, for example, that a woman is the passive recipient of the life-giving male seed). Isolated texts can be ambiguous and point in different directions. In this situation we have to turn to what is at the heart of our faith, to the doctrines of creation, redemption and resurrection. We shall not find in them a pre-determined theological system that will provide ready-made answers, but reflection on them will help to point the issues and reveal appropriate ways of exploring them.

4.1 Creation

Central to all Christian faith is the belief that God is love. Creation is an act of love in which God creates and sustains the objects of his love. He loves everything that he has made, but in creation humanity has a special place because only humanity is made in the image of God and to humanity is given dominion over the earth (Genesis 1.27f, Psalm 8.5-8). What creation in the image of God means, and whether the image is borne by humanity as a whole or by each individual, is not spelled out in the creation story in Genesis, but it has to do with reflecting the nature of God and thus must surely involve the ability to make choices and to live in relationship with God. Humanity has been given the freedom and responsibility to

know God, to learn of his will, and to choose whether to work with him towards that future which he has prepared for the whole of his creation (Romans 8.12-21).

Although it is only human beings who have the awareness and the creative freedom that belong to the image of God, some human beings have them at most in limited ways – infants and some severely handicapped people, for example – and others have in varying degrees lost them through accident or depravity (Romans 3.23); but they are all still part of the human community which is the special object of God's love and the bearer of his image. The limitations of individual human beings do not exclude them from the humanity that is "made little lower than God" (Psalm 8.5). Their value does not depend on their individual abilities or even their individual potential; it depends on their being created and procreated from and within the human community. The aborted fetus, the unviable embryo and the "spare" embryos produced *in vitro* are also created and procreated in the community; they are human material and they have a special relation to humanity. They are flesh of our flesh, the flesh taken by the incarnate Word (John 1.14, Romans 8.3, Hebrews 2.14-17). It is our conviction that the special place of humanity in creation requires a "high" view of this human material. This means that decisions about it are never trivial: they must be taken responsibly, but they are not, on the other hand, pre-determined.

Dominion over the creation, the other special gift to humanity, has to be understood in the light of Christ's authority. Although he is the One into whose hands the Father has given all things, he takes the form of a servant (John 13.3-14, cf. Philippians 2.5-11); when humanity, therefore, is given authority over the earth, it is firstly not absolute authority because the earth is the Lord's, and secondly it is authority not to exploit but to serve. Human beings should not make arbitrary choices, but follow the will of God. They are stewards, not owners.

4.2 The Human Situation

The gift of free choice enables humanity to become partners with God in creation. God uses the artist and the craftsman to create beauty and to make things for human use; he reveals new truth through the scholar and the scientist and in the act of procreation he uses woman and man to bring into being a person who would not otherwise have existed. By his loving and creative choice, God has given human beings responsibility and has thereby limited his own power over the world. While this is necessary if human beings are to be creative, it also makes it possible for them to make destructive choices, as the continuation of the story of Adam shows. In this story, which is a paradigm of the human situation, human beings seek a mastery that God has not given them and attempt to order things by values other than God's; this disobedience breaks their relationship with God, and distorts their relationships with each other and with the rest of the creation (Genesis 3.1-19).

Through the God-given ability to choose, humanity chooses what is destructive both of its own well-being and of that of other created beings, but even so the love of God is not changed in quality and because it is unchanged it is revealed in new ways (John 3.16, Romans 5.8). God continues to love and seeks to recall humanity to his way by taking on the pain of human existence (Hebrews 4.14f, 5.7-9). He himself becomes part of the human community, thereby showing the depth of his love for it and investing it with new value (Romans 8.17).

Sin, nevertheless, remains a reality within the human situation. Jesus is rejected and crucified, and the long history of the world since then shows both the acceptance of Jesus' values and the distortion and rejection of them. As in the Adam story human relationships with God, with each other and with creation are broken and twisted. No-one wholly escapes this entail; our decisions are made with warped judgement in sin-laden situations (Romans 1.18, 1 John 1-8).

4.3 The Christian Hope

The rejection and death of Jesus are not the end; death is followed by resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the whole act of God in Christ, which includes rejection and crucifixion, is resurrection, the giving of new life to those who were dead in sin (John 10.10); it is the act of a resurrection God who not only brings good out of evil, but also sets free and empowers his people to do the same. Even if no-one wholly escapes the entail of sin, those who are in Christ do not have to be completely bound by it. When people are responsive to the Spirit, guided by love, sensitive to the whole revelation of God recorded in the Bible, using their God-given reason and open to each other, to new truth and to God, they can make good decisions, and their wrong decisions can be met with forgiveness and the possibility of redemption.

The new knowledge given by modern biology is within the loving purposes of God and the guiding power of the Holy Spirit. The developments of modern science and medicine are instruments of God for human good (even if they can be misused); they are part of the answer to ages of prayer for healing and arise from God's gift to us of inquiring minds and the capacity for wonder. Even if we live in a sinful situation God lives in it with us. Our relationship with him may be distorted but it is not broken because he is still at work in creation and redemption. There is in every situation the possibility of good.

4.4 Human Response

Love, central to God's nature and his dealings with humanity, is also the heart of the human response to God (Mark 12.29-31 etc.). We love because he first loved us, and our duty to our neighbour is to love as God loves us (1 John 4.19-21, etc.). The principle of love enables us to make rules of behaviour, but it itself is not modified by any higher principle, even that of obedience to God, because love is obedience to God. We cannot avoid making decisions; that is the inescapable consequence of God's love and the gift of choice. All decisions about the human "material" must be made in the light of the centrality of love as defined by the nature and activity of God, but that does not mean that there are not difficult decisions to make, or that new knowledge may not make it necessary to change the everyday rules by which we live. It is not self-evident, for example, that the commandment "You shall not kill" applies to the fertilised ovum: to say that it does or does not is an ethical decision of the sort we are discussing. That other positions exist and are held by good people who are seeking to do the will of God should remind us that to take a particular stand is a matter of choice, whether the stand be "absolutist", liberal, radical or situational, whether it gives primacy to women's rights, the rights of the fetus or the just requirements of society.

4.5 Making Decisions

The recognition that the unborn human is of value to God does not therefore free us from having to make difficult and painful decisions where the values of two or more lives are in conflict. The knowledge that God loves the unborn human does not mean that that particular life has absolute priority over other individual lives, nor that the context of the whole of human society can be ignored. That there is a conflict between the right to life of different members of the human community is part of the tension of living in a fallen world. Any decision must be made in the knowledge that we are dealing with something which has special value to God. We have not been given any rules to follow, but the freedom and the ability to analyse sensitively new ethical situations, both in the light of our knowledge of God and his will for the world, and in the light of modern medical knowledge. Consequently we must aim to make these difficult judgements responsibly and humbly, relying on the mercy of God.

The Bible emphasises God's particular concern for the vulnerable and powerless in human society (Leviticus 19.9-14, 33-34, Ezekiel 34.16). Jesus himself has a special mission to the weak (Luke 4.18, cf Luke 1.52f). This is not because God loves the weak more than the strong, but because they have a special need of protection. The unborn are a very vulnerable part of the human community and are dependent on the community for protection, but they are not unique in this; sometimes the fetus dominates the situation and threatens the mother.

Biology now makes it very difficult to talk of a single moment when a new human life comes into existence, and theology has moved away from Greek thought, which saw human beings as souls inhabiting disposable bodies, to reflect the biblical teaching that our personhood is the totality of body, mind and spirit. This means that we cannot say that at x days the human fetus has no soul and so is of no more significance than, for example, the placenta, but at $x+1$ it has been ensouled and so is entitled to full human status.

Furthermore, the focusing of the debate on the existence of souls has resulted in a devaluation of the human body. Human bodies are important: God himself became human at the Incarnation and took a normal human body and the gospels record Jesus healing physical illness. Resurrection is not merely for souls, but for human beings clothed in a new resurrection body. Our body is to be "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 6.19).

The unbroken development that makes it difficult to say that any particular moment is the beginning of a new human life does not mean that there are not significant stages. This development is not simply biological; the relationship of the unborn to the human community is also developing and changing, not least because as it develops it arouses new emotions in people related to it.

The complexities of the problem of the status of the unborn should not be allowed to obscure the needs of other members of the human community, to whom there is an obligation of love. There is a great deal of biblical material that shows God's concern for the unborn, even for the as yet unconceived (Jeremiah 1.5), but in general it is there to emphasise the concern God has always had for the person addressed, who is now an adult. God is no less concerned for the born than for the unborn. The Annunciation shows God's concern for Mary as well as his will for

and foreknowledge of a child she is to bear (Luke 1.26-38, cf Matthew 1.18-23). The woman pregnant with an unwanted fetus has her own great needs, which are to be met with love. Love here involves deep concern for her well-being, which is to be shown in pastoral care and counselling which helps her to become more aware of what is involved in the decisions that face her. Such pastoral care is not less a part of our duty to the vulnerable than is our concern for the unborn, and it must not be overlooked or undervalued.

A proper concern for the whole human context, for the human community of which the unborn are part, must take many things into account, balance conflicting needs and accept the resulting tensions. There are many people with needs to be considered, for example the couples from whom the unborn material has come and the couples whose yearning for children new knowledge might satisfy, sufferers from dehumanising brain diseases who could benefit from the experimental use of unborn human material, people whose handicaps cause so much suffering that they and those who love them say that it would be better if they had not lived, and those who in their disability have enriched human life. We also have to take account of the way these matters are ordered in our society, the need to work for legislation that reflects what we believe to be the Christian attitude to these moral issues, and the experience of those who have to carry out society's requirements.

4.6 Conclusion

We have constantly referred in the foregoing to the decisions that have to be made concerning the unborn. There are decisions about matters of fact, decisions about principles and decisions about what action to take. We have concluded that the unborn is human in that it is part of the whole human community, but we have to wrestle with the question whether the image of God is borne by all human material or only by human beings individually. And we have to decide, for instance, whether we should treat all unborn human material as if it were fully personal, whether human material can be used as a means to an end, however good, whether it has the same status regardless of origin and state of development. We have also as members of society to ask what is the proper task of the law in these matters.

These are the sort of questions that face us. They do not admit easy answers but we are inquiring, responsible agents in a world in which we are entitled and, indeed, obliged to explore, to ask questions and to make moral judgements. Nothing can take this responsibility from us.

This chapter has looked at some of the theological considerations that must inform our decisions. We have spoken of the love of God in creation and redemption, of the responsibility given by God to humanity to share in the work of creative love, in Christ's servant ministry, his healing work and his protection of the weak. We have emphasised the possibility of resurrection, which enables humanity with God's help to learn from experience, to make new starts and to bring good out of evil. We have emphasised that love, love for all humanity, is also central to the human response. It is also the gift of God that humanity can learn new truth, and it is new truth that today faces us with new possibilities and the need for new decisions.

This report is written in the context of the Church which is a community of believers, with different gifts and abilities; they are responsible for each other and have to support each other in situations of suffering and the making of difficult

decisions. As scientists, doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, pastors, theologians, as church members, citizens and people involved in family relationships, we have responsibilities given us by God and we must grasp the opportunity of guiding the life of our community towards that future which God wills.

CHAPTER 5

HOW SHOULD THE UNBORN HUMAN BE REGARDED?

5.1 An attempt to grapple with the Moral Situation

It is clear from the arguments presented so far that human beings cannot escape the responsibility of exercising their free-will. Choices have to be made, and this requires thought and debate, and the realisation that, on occasions, wrong decisions may result. Attempts to find relief from the responsibility for making choices, such as by seeking to point to external authorities may seem attractive, but the result is often de-humanising.

Like others, Christians must accept the moral responsibility for their decisions, and not think that it can be avoided by reference to definition, moral theory, or personal convenience. The facts must be uncovered and the will of God sought. The Christian must be prepared to accept the implications of his or her judgement. Personal decision-making must not be seen as an isolated process. The whole Christian community, with its collective reflection and resources, is of immense importance. The entire process of decision-making, for the Christian, sets his moral thinking and choosing in the context of God's redemptive love.

5.2 How should the Unborn Human be regarded?

In considering the status of the unborn human two sets of facts must be affirmed: First, the product of the coming together of human sperm and ovum is obviously itself human. It is also distinct, in that it has the beginning of an existence independent of the parents contributing the gametes. It is thus, morally, in a different category from such body tissue of either parent as a blood cell, a finger, or a tumour.

Secondly, however, there is the undeniable fact that this combination of cells has to undergo very considerable biological development before it becomes even potentially capable of human consciousness and therefore of human identity. It is only after some 14 days that the appearance of the so-called primitive streak makes these developments possible.

The significance to the unborn human of being in a state of development – of becoming a person – and the significance of being human will be considered in this order.

5.2.1. The Significance of becoming a Person

It is difficult if not impossible to define exactly the beginning or ending of any stage of the human life cycle. It cannot be precisely stated when a person may be called "adult". There is sometimes a dilemma as to when a person may be considered to have died, as bodily functions can continue after brain death has occurred. Similarly, the beginning of human life cannot be pinpointed. However, significant

stages in the development of the unborn human are discernible, even if it is not possible to define them exactly.

Many of these stages have already been outlined and their relationship to moral status explored in Chapters 2.1 and 3.3 respectively. Significant from the point of view of making moral and legal decisions could be:

1. the penetration of the sperm through the outer layer of the egg (the zona pellucida)
2. the joining of the genetic material of sperm and egg (syngamy)
3. implantation of the fertilised egg into the wall of the uterus (which takes about seven days to complete)
4. the beginning of the laying down of the primitive streak at around 14 days, after which “twinning” is no longer possible (individualisation)
5. the beginnings of the development of the spinal cord and central nervous system
6. “quickening”, when the mother is first aware of the movement of the fetus. (This may not have any biological significance as far as the fetus is concerned, though previously it had moral and legal significance, but it can have profound emotional importance for the mother. Of comparable impact on the parents is the first glimpse of the fetus during the prenatal scan.)
7. the stage at which the fetus is viable if taken from the uterus
8. birth, when the fetus naturally becomes biologically independent of the mother.

In stating these it is not intended to imply that all the events have equal significance, but all have been used as “markers” by various people wrestling with the question of when human life begins.

It may be argued that it is even possible to go back one step further and to ask about the status of the human gametes. Certainly in Biblical times the semen was thought to have significance and its wastage condemned (Gen. 38, v 9). (It must be remembered that at that time the semen alone was thought to be the source of life, the woman only providing the environment in which the life could develop.) Modern science has shown that both the egg, when extruded from the ovaries, and the sperm are genetically distinct from the body or somatic cells of the woman and man.

However, both egg and sperm are primarily instructions for the making of a human being, rather than constituting a human being him or herself. The same may be said of the pre-embryo; but with the appearance of the beginning of the primitive streak, about fourteen days after fertilisation, a change of major significance occurs. At that stage it becomes certain whether any unborn human or humans, and if so how many, are being formed. At that point it becomes possible to speak of a biological entity capable of carrying human consciousness, conscience and identity.

The current understanding of the biological fact that fertilisation and development are a continuous process forces the conclusion that it is not possible to define the

moment when a new human person begins. This was emphasised in the statement found in Expression of Dissent B of the Warnock Report: “Public concern about the embryo which led to the establishment of this Inquiry is often expressed in the form of the question “When does life begin?”. This cannot be answered in a simple fashion. An ovum is a living cell as is a spermatozoon; both can be properly described as alive. The cluster of cells which is the embryo is likewise alive. But this is not what people are really asking. Their real question is: “When does the human person come into existence?”. This cannot be answered in a simple fashion either. The beginning of a person is not a question of fact but of a decision made in the light of moral principles. The question must be defined still further. It therefore becomes “At what stage of development should the status of a person be accorded to an embryo of the human species?”. Different people answer this question in different ways. Some say at fertilisation, others at implantation, yet others at a still later stage of development. Scientific observation and philosophical and theological reflection can illuminate the question but they cannot answer it.” (p.90, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology*; London: HMSO 1984).

5.2.2. The significance of being Human

There are many reported situations where people grieve over a natural miscarriage or induced abortion. There are also women who have developed a kind of “bonding” to their eggs fertilised *in vitro* and subsequently frozen. This awareness, experienced by parents, that there is “someone” to relate to even though the human is unborn, reinforces from an experiential viewpoint the Christian understanding of the value of the unborn human.

For any Christian group the theological understanding of the issues involved is crucial (see Chapter 4). When it comes to considering the value to God of the fertilised human egg, the fact that it is human must be of prime consideration. This is true whatever stage its development may have reached. The attempt to find a moment in the process of fertilisation and subsequent development after which the entity may rightly be considered human in the full sense of the word is to miss the point. Human material is involved throughout the whole process and for that reason, when dealing with ethical questions, human status must be afforded to it. This requires that the language of human relationship be applied to the discussion of the moral questions that arise. Thus, it is inappropriate to refer to even the earliest stages of human development as being a “blob of cells” and attaching to this description words like “mere” or “just” or “only” if it is thought that by so doing such structures are somehow shown to be non-human. A “blob of cells”, when it results from the union of male and female human gametes is a human blob of cells and that makes a difference. A human world of caring and concern includes human blobs of cells in a way that, for example, it does not include the buds of a camellia or the larvae of the cabbage white butterfly.

It is important here to remember the nature and complexity of the relationships surrounding the unborn human. The fertilised egg does not exist in isolation. The parents contribute the gametes, but they are part of a wider family and of society. Also in situations where medical intervention occurs, there are the relationships with the doctors, the scientists and the other professional people involved in caring for and supporting the parents. Christians emphasise that there also exist relationships with God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all.

This complex network of relationships is not static. All are changing, not only in relationship to one another, but also because the egg changes when it is fertilised and as it develops. Human beings must take responsibility for the differing valuations they give to these relationships and the way in which these affect their decision-making.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT THIS DISTINCTION MAY MEAN FOR SOME REAL LIFE SITUATIONS

6.0 Introduction

From what has been stated about the theological significance of the human unborn, this report might be expected to come down absolutely against abortion and any form of destructive treatment of the fertilised human egg. However, for the reasons outlined in Chapter 5, the Working Party could not themselves support such an 'absolutist position'. Although the human unborn always does have significance, the value of the unborn and its right to life has to be weighed with respect to the legitimate needs and rights of others, when confronting real ethical dilemmas in which there are conflicts of interest. One significant consequence of such a conclusion is that it is not possible, in the view of the Working Party, to offer simple criteria about what is right or wrong. Human beings are given moral responsibility by God. It is de-humanising to seek to rob people of their responsibility, even if the motives for doing so may appear to be good. However, people do not live in isolation, and all need guidance and loving support in any decision making process. This is especially true when dealing with what are often agonising moral choices concerning the future of the unborn human. How, then, is this to be worked out in practice? Examples are now discussed, which it is hoped will give some guidelines.

6.1 Issues associated with Abortion

6.1.1. Introduction

The Biblical principle 'Thou shalt not kill' is generally taken to be a guiding Christian ethic. However, even with adult human beings, there are circumstances where killing, although wrong, is seen to be the lesser of two evils. Because abortion involves the killing of an unborn human, most, if not all, Christians would argue that it is, in principle, wrong. However, unless a position is taken which states that abortion is wrong in every circumstance, without exception, difficult choices about the rightness or wrongness of a particular situation have to be worked out.

6.1.2. Abortion if the Mother's Physical Health is Threatened by Continuing the Pregnancy

If it can be clearly shown that to continue with the pregnancy is likely to cause the mother's death an abortion may in the circumstances be the right course of action. This is based on the assumption that the life of the adult woman is of greater significance than that of the unborn. Here judgements have to be made between the value of an adult person compared with the value of the unborn. Many thinking people would agree with this decision, even if they were against abortion in

principle. This case, which is relatively straightforward, is mentioned first to illustrate the point that, where there are conflicts of interest, judgements have to be made.

6.1.3. **Abortion for ‘Social Reasons’**

In a situation where the mother’s life or physical health are not directly threatened by the pregnancy could an abortion ever be right? Before making a decision a number of considerations need to be taken into account.

First, as many of the relevant facts as possible should be discovered. The views and welfare of the mother, the father, if known, and the wider family, as well as the interest of society at large, must all be borne in mind. The biological and psychological knowledge available should be discussed so that all are as fully aware as possible of the likely consequences of whatever decision is eventually taken. (The possibility of adoption of an unwanted baby is discussed in the Methodist Report on *The Family, the Single, and Marriage*.)

An unexpected pregnancy may highlight the existing social and environmental problems faced by parent(s) and existing children. The temptation to see the pregnancy as the problem and consequently not seek solutions to socially based worries which, if resolved, would make it possible for the pregnancy to proceed, must be resisted. It is important that all are aware of the fact that the fetus is a genetically unique human entity which, if allowed to develop normally, will eventually grow into an adult. Thus the choice to abort will involve the death of a potential human person and this fact must be faced.

However, this does not mean that abortion for ‘social reasons’ is always ‘wrong’. There are social circumstances where the death of the fetus is a lesser evil than the consequent suffering of those involved if it is allowed to be born. For example, a child conceived as a result of rape or incest may be utterly repugnant to the mother, thus making bonding impossible, or a child born with severe handicap may attract all the emotional energy of the mother, leaving siblings deprived, and if later institutional care is needed for the handicapped child, parents may experience great stress and sense of failure.

Secondly, it must be recognised that the decision has to be made – and within a time constraint – and that those making it have to accept responsibility for their action. God has given us moral responsibility from which we cannot escape. Being human means accepting this truth. No external authority can relieve us of this. The teaching of the Church and/or of the Bible can and must guide and inform Christians, but these cannot take the decision from us.

Thirdly, it must always be remembered that, although God does give us moral responsibility, He does not leave us to carry the awesome burden alone. Even if a decision is made which is later seen to be wrong (or right but for the wrong motives), it is vital to remember that God still loves us and offers His forgiveness. It is so important to remember this truth, for often the knowledge available at the time when the decision must be made is just not adequate to assess what the consequences will be. Christians believe that it is still possible to cope by trusting that God is also involved, by His Spirit, in our decision making and its consequences. His love and forgiveness are always at work and ultimately nothing

can separate us from His love in Christ. The Church must have an even greater responsibility to those who are not Christian and who do not share this hope.

Some may interpret these arguments as indicating that abortion on demand is being advocated. This is far from the case. The position taken by some feminists and others that the woman has an absolute right over her own body and that the unborn human is just part of her own body is not supported by the biological evidence. The fetus is human and is genetically distinct from the mother. The issue is, therefore, far too serious just to allow the pregnant woman to report to a doctor and to request a termination with the certainty that this will be granted without question. This is especially true when the hormonal effects of pregnancy and the fear-reaction that an unwanted pregnancy brings can seriously distort a person's thinking. Some legal framework must therefore be provided to prevent this abuse of human responsibility.

6.1.4. Abortion if the Fetus is 'Abnormal'

Section 2.4 outlines the various tests that can be offered to diagnose possible abnormalities. Most of them carry some risk to the unborn human. Therefore it must be decided whether the test is justified, as there is some danger that a normal fetus could be aborted. Adequate counselling should always be provided. The decision to perform a particular test will depend on the severity of the possible deformity, the mother's (and father's and others involved) attitude to having a deformed baby and the risk involved in the test. There are clearly great advantages in obtaining accurate information as to the state of the fetus as soon as possible since if an abortion is decided upon this is best performed as early as practical. If an abortion is not chosen the parents and others can then begin to prepare, psychologically and practically, for caring for the handicapped baby in the most effective way.

The dilemma whether or not to abort an 'abnormal' fetus focuses on what is considered to be 'normal' for a human being and what are considered to be unacceptably high levels of suffering or handicap. Christians have insights which are helpful in making moral judgements in this difficult area.

First, all that is human is of special value to God. Thus, to claim that even severely abnormal babies such as anencephalics are not really human beings, as Professor John Mahoney, S.J. does, is, in the Working Party's opinion, not helpful. (He argues on this basis that taking their organs for transplant is permissible (Institute of Medical Ethics Bulletin 45, p.11). It may be that taking organs from anencephalic babies is justified in certain circumstances. What is being pointed out here is that the anencephalic baby is human and any decision about it must take that into consideration.)

Secondly, there are the issues of the 'quality of life' not just of the family into which the baby will be born but also for the baby him- or herself. The whole notion of 'quality of life' is a complex one. Many of the couples who find themselves in the situation of knowing that the mother is carrying an abnormal fetus will already have a child who has or is suffering from the disease. Consequently they will be well aware of the pressures created and also will have known sufferers as real humans able to relate, love and be loved. They will also know that 'quality of life' is not something that is on a constant level. Suffering for the

individual and stress for the family will be far worse at some times than others. Prospective parents with little knowledge of what bringing up a diseased or handicapped child could mean will need to be provided with as much information as possible before they can be expected to make a decision.

Another issue that may well become more common in the future is the problem when a mother is carrying the human immunodeficiency virus (i.e. is HIV positive) or has the symptoms of AIDS. It is known that the virus can be transferred to the fetus. In addition to the problem of the quality of life for the mother and baby (including the attitude of society to them) there is the risk of spreading the infection further.

Although in normal circumstances human life is to be valued in its own right, there are, in the Working Party's judgement, occasions when it is acceptable to abort the unborn human in order to minimise suffering if this is what the parents, having been fully informed and supported, feel is right. It is not easy to give hard and fast rules as to when this is the case, but an example might be the particularly distressing disease, haemoglobin Bart's hydrops syndrome. (This is a genetically inherited disease affecting the haemoglobin of the blood and is a common cause of stillbirth in South East Asia. There is no known cure and the defect is always fatal.)

Those parents who do choose not to opt for an abortion and who decide to care for a handicapped child should be given as much love and support as possible. This is not always easy in practice. Society does not care as it should and may be critical of such parents. Also there is the additional problem of confidentiality, which may mean that those who are aware of the situation are very limited in number. Parents seeking to care for a handicapped child should not be made to feel guilty about bringing such a child into the world.

As science advances, it is likely that new diagnostic tests will emerge. As well as providing information of possible deformity or disease, these could be used to select certain characteristics desired by the parents, for example, hair colour, eye colour and perhaps, in the future, even features such as intelligence, athletic or artistic ability.

Already selection is being made on the basis of the sex of the fetus. It is known that in some cultures, where a male child is greatly to be preferred, female fetuses are being aborted. This is to be condemned from a Christian perspective, which believes in the equal value to God of women and men. The consequences of 'selection of sex' are enormous. The longer term effects on the mother and others involved are not known. The balance of the sexes could be seriously upset, affecting future marriages and reproduction. There could be profound psychological effects on women in general, who are going to see themselves as of lesser value. Any society or group within a society that is prepared to kill potential individuals who are thought to be less desirable than others must be strongly resisted.

Christians must provide a clear expression of the value of all human beings before God so that a framework is established to allow those developing and offering pre-natal diagnosis to think through the moral implications of the use to which the new knowledge gained may be put.

6.1.5. Post-Coital Intervention

Some mention of the forms of contraception which are believed to prevent the implantation of a fertilised egg (see Chapter 2), is appropriate, as these may be considered by some to be a form of abortion. Couples who choose to use these methods should at least be made aware of the likely way in which they work. This may seem to be obvious, but there are intelligent women who use the coil who had never been told how it is believed to function.

There is, of course, a significant difference between these methods and abortion in the usual sense of the term. In the latter situation the fertilised egg has implanted and the woman is making a conscious choice to terminate a known pregnancy. In the former cases there is no knowledge whether fertilisation has occurred or not. Also, it must be remembered that a high percentage of fertilised eggs are believed to be wasted, for unknown reasons, without any mechanical or hormonal interference. (See Chapter 2.2.2)

The development of new drugs which are capable of inducing an abortion without the recourse to surgery, such as RU486, make a legal framework even more important. Otherwise a situation could conceivably occur in which the abortion-inducing drugs could be bought across the counter by a pregnant woman without any reference to medical or counselling help. The drug itself can cause physical side effects. Equally, if not more importantly, there are the psychological effects upon the woman of realising that she is pregnant and the stress of facing the situation that causes her to seek an abortion. However, the legal framework must be such that human responsibility is enhanced and not removed. It must also be sufficiently understanding of the woman's needs to prevent the recurrence of the trade in 'back street' abortions with all its evil aftermath.

6.2 Issues associated with Infertility

6.2.1. IVF for Married Couples

The Working Party could see nothing intrinsically immoral in the fertilisation of a woman's egg by her husband's sperm in an artificial environment and then transferring the fertilised egg to the wife's uterus, where, hopefully, it will develop into a normal baby. Infertility does cause great stress and difficulty for many couples (see Chapter 2.2.1), and to help them to have a child of their own who will be greatly loved and bring joy to many seems an appropriate Christian response. However, there are a number of moral and pastoral issues even in this straightforward situation, which need to be fully explored by all concerned.

Wagner and St Clair (*Lancet*, 1989, ii: 1027-1030) claim to have evidence of risks to the woman of IVF treatment and embryo transfer. The Working Party is not in a position to assess the seriousness of these claims but it is important that all reliable evidence is presented to the couple before a decision to undergo IVF treatment is taken.

There is also the question of the resources deployed to provide the IVF service in a world where there is already the threat of over-population and where so many babies die through the lack of proper nourishment and medical care. Of course, these problems are far greater and more complex than a direct choice between feeding the hungry and performing IVF. There are certainly many far less worthy

forms of human enterprise than IVF, such as military expenditure and greedy materialism! It is, nonetheless, a fact that IVF is more often conducted through private clinics and the cost to the couple for IVF or GIFT at a well known clinic in November 1989 is £1660, plus the cost of drugs for ovarian stimulation. It could be questioned whether such help should be more easily available to those infertile couples who can pay for it. IVF is now offered through some NHS clinics and here the question could be whether it is right for society to fund such a procedure.

There is also the question of the publicity surrounding IVF falsely raising the hopes of infertile couples. IVF is only suitable for some couples, and even for them the chance of having a child after one course of treatment is only about 15%. (See Appendix III) The psychological pressures of knowing that the procedure is available and may be the couple's last chance of having a baby could cause considerable stress. Counselling may not always be sought, or available. No one knows whether there will be any long term deleterious effects of the raising of hopes and continual disappointment if IVF fails. Conversely, if the couple do not pursue the lengthy investigations and procedures involved in IVF, etc., and remain childless, no one knows what will be the result in later life of regretting not having tried all the possible options.

6.2.2. Fetal Reduction

Where a multiple pregnancy occurs, there is a greater risk to the development of all the fetuses and to the mother's health. One possible solution is to kill one or more of the fetuses whilst in the womb in order to give those remaining a greater chance of developing normally. (See Chapter 2.3.5)

In the judgement of the Working Party, fetal reduction should be undertaken only very reluctantly, and then only if the presence of multiple fetuses is felt seriously to threaten the life of the mother or the possibility of the fetuses surviving. This is because fetal reduction deals with unborn humans who have evidently passed beyond the stage of individualisation. The Working Party would support measures to prevent multiple pregnancies, such as the present voluntary ban on inserting large numbers of fertilised eggs into the uterus.

Where fetal reduction has to be practised those involved should be given adequate counselling. There is evidence that grief and guilt reactions frequently follow the procedure. No one yet knows the long term psychological effects on the parents or the surviving children where fetal reduction has been practised, and the families ought to be followed up and help given if necessary.

6.2.3. Questions concerning the Production of 'Spare' Fertilised Eggs

Various problems arise from the fact that in most IVF procedures more eggs are fertilised than can be safely introduced into the womb. What is to happen to the 'spare' pre-embryos?

There are at present three possibilities:

1. Disposal
2. Frozen storage for possible future use
3. Immediate use for research and experiment.

What is thought to be right will depend on what status the pre-embryo is believed to have. Some see no difficulty in disposing of any surplus, since at this time there is no primitive streak and therefore no embryo (see Chapter 2.1.1). There is also the added consideration that, if the pre-embryo is to be highly valued, how is this to be reconciled with the apparently great 'natural' wastage? (See Chapter 2.2.2)

On the other hand, there is much anecdotal evidence that parents may think of the pre-embryo as 'their baby'. This is the case although they presumably know that it is 'just a few cells' and are aware that, even if placed in a womb, it will not necessarily grow to become a baby.

The storage of frozen pre-embryos gives rise to further dilemmas. Will the couple (or woman) experience remorse or guilt if they have to order the destruction of their pre-embryos or, if they donate them to another couple or for research, will they later come to regret it? If the frozen pre-embryos are kept for possible implantation in the woman who produced the ova, will the couple feel 'patients' in as much as a genetic part of them is in the hands of the infertility clinic? This may add to the couple's feelings of vulnerability or dependency, or may make them go on with further attempts at having a child when it might be better to give up and seek other options.

There are also problems about what to do with the stored pre-embryos if one of the partners dies or if the marriage fails. Such a situation has already arisen in the U.S.A., where custody of the frozen embryos was contested in the Divorce Courts. (See *Bulletin of Medical Ethics* 1989, No.53:9.) Such problems were predicted in the Warnock Report, but the legal difficulties are generally avoided by using precise consent forms. The mental and emotional stress, however, should be recognised and support given. Such complications reinforce the need to counsel couples before they embark on any IVF programme. Agreement on the future of frozen pre-embryos should always be decided with the medical staff. Even when this is done adequately, however, it is not easy to predict how the couple's feelings will change in years to come, especially if there is bereavement or marriage breakdown.

The morality of using donor material to help an infertile couple is more complex because of the possible difficulties of the relationships of all those involved. Little research has been done in this area, apart from some very careful studies by R. and E. Snowden on families where children are born as a result of artificial insemination by donor. No difference can be discerned, in principle, between donating eggs or embryos and donating sperm. In all cases thorough counselling should be provided beforehand and be available in later years, as the way the donation is regarded may change with hindsight. The welfare of the unborn human should be the paramount consideration in all possible cases of gamete or pre-embryo donation.

6.3 Research on Human Embryos and Fetuses

6.3.1. Production of Human Embryos for Research Purposes

Any attempt to legalise the creation, for research purposes, of pre-embryos or fetuses, either by *in vitro* fertilisation or by natural reproduction, should be strongly opposed. The products of human conception always have human significance, and deliberately to create unborn humans as a means to an end, however worthy, is

contrary, in the Working Party's view, to the Christian ethic of respect for that which is human.

6.3.2. Experiments on 'Spare' Pre-embryos Resulting from the IVF Programme

Those wishing to prevent research on pre-embryos produced in the course of the IVF programme argue against it on one of two grounds. Either they have an absolutist view that the pre-embryo is a human being; alternatively, a slippery slope argument is used. "If experimentation on the pre-embryo is allowed, then before long the medical scientists will be experimenting on babies." Those arguing in this way fear the consequences for those involved and for society at large.

There is, on the other hand, an ethical case for permitting experiments on 'surplus' pre-embryos on the ground that in this situation there is no conflict between the right to life of the individual and the good of the community. On this view the good of the community stands alone for two reasons:

- a. the surplus pre-embryo has no prospect of any life beyond that which it already has. This otherwise wasted life is given purpose if used for experiments which might benefit humanity.
- b. the pre-embryo is not an individual since 'individualisation' does not occur until the end of the pre-embryonic period, i.e. after 14 days. Therefore it cannot be known whether, if the conditions were favourable, the pre-embryo would develop into one, two or more individuals or none.

It must, however, be remembered that the 'surplus' pre-embryo is still part of the human community. It is clearly human material which has human parents and may have the capacity, at least in some circumstances, to become an individual. If experimentation is to be allowed, the pre-embryo should be respected accordingly. Any research work should be properly authorised and controlled by an Ethics Committee, and only be permitted if there are likely to be real benefits to the human community from the knowledge gained. It should not be permissible to produce pre-embryos which contain living material from both humans and other species (chimaeras and hybrids), nor to clone pre-embryo cells to produce genetically identical individuals (although it may be acceptable to culture one cell of a pre-embryo for diagnostic purposes while the rest is frozen), nor (in the present state of knowledge) to modify a pre-embryo's genetic constitution.

In any possible experimentation on the human pre-embryo the parents must give full and informed consent. The pre-embryo should not be kept alive long enough for there to be any suggestion that individualisation could have occurred and should be disposed of reverently.

The development of IVF has placed those responsible for decisions concerning the fate of pre-embryos in uncharted psychological waters. This is as true for the scientists handling them as for the parents whose gametes created them. Pre-embryos have significance as part of the human family and this fact should always be borne in mind when decisions are made as to their creation or disposal. Where possible the techniques of IVF should be refined so that excess fertilised eggs are not produced.

6.3.3. The use of Human Fetuses and Fetal Material in Research and Treatment

Provided that a fetus has not been conceived with the intention of using it for donation or research, and has been either naturally aborted or an abortion carried out for good medical reasons, there can be no moral objection to its use to benefit others, e.g. by transplantation and related research (see Chapter 2.5). In principle, there is no difference between the use of aborted fetal material for research or transplantation and the use of tissue from a person recently deceased.

However, the conditions laid down by the Polkinghorne Committee (see Chapter 2.5 and 2.6.1) must be met. In particular:

- a. The informed consent of the mother (and others with a direct involvement) is essential, and seeking this will need sensitivity.
- b. Those involved in the research or transplantation should be separate from the team caring for the mother.
- c. The needs of the mother must come first – e.g. any abortion must not be delayed for the sake of research, and should be carried out by whatever methods are in the mother's best interest even if these result in the aborted fetus being unusable.

6.3.4. Other Issues

Moral issues raised by surrogacy, sperm or fertilised egg donation to single or lesbian women to allow them to become mothers, are outside the range of this Report. However, it must be stressed in the light of the value that this Report gives the unborn human that its welfare must be given due consideration. The perceived need of the potential parent(s) cannot be accepted as the supreme determinant.

6.4. Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion of some of the real cases confronting people today that the acceptance of the unborn as human has wide-ranging implications. These are not only for the prospective parents and those involved in medical practice and in scientific research, but also for society, especially in its educational and legislative roles. Particularly relevant for the readers of this Report are the implications for the life of the church as it seeks to support and offer guidance and to interpret the will of God in the light of the person and teaching of Christ.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE AND PUBLIC POLICY

7.1. The Church

The Church may be involved in the issue of the status of the unborn through its members, or official publications, or through seeking to offer Christian love, counselling and/or guidance to those having to make the sometimes agonising moral decisions about the treatment of the unborn human. The Church's approach to the issues under discussion must be based on a theological understanding of the status of the unborn human.

The church must also:

- a. accept that knowledge and skill are God-given and therefore not be set aside or ignored. It is not possible to return to 'the state of innocence' before the knowledge was gained.
- b. take seriously the biological facts as far as they can be known, the full range of medical and technical options, and all the human emotions and relationships involved.
- c. encourage all those involved – including parents, would-be parents, other family members, friends, health care workers, scientists and politicians – to recognise that their humanity requires them to face up to moral decision-making for themselves. People must be equipped to address for themselves the ethical issues and to deal with the moral dilemmas these raise.

We have to accept responsibility for the judgments we are making and must also call on other groups with influence in these areas to take these theological considerations into account.

All this has implications for the Church both nationally and locally.

7.1.1. The Church in the Nation

Nationally the Church has to take responsibility for:

- i. Raising the awareness of its congregations of the issues involved in and resulting from the theological significance of the unborn human and keeping those congregations informed about developments at governmental and medical levels. Within the Methodist Church this could perhaps be achieved through the regular bulletins provided by the D.S.R. and the possible use of other media, e.g. videos for small discussion groups. Provision of suitable study material may only be practical on an ecumenical level.
- ii. Making training available for clergy, pastoral assistants and counsellors so that they can enable those who have the responsibilities of making decisions about the fate of individual unborn humans to explore all the implications. Associated with this would be the setting up of more chaplaincies in infertility clinics. Also there is a need to provide a list of those experienced in this field who could be called upon to help with training and discussion.
- iii. Engaging in public debate with a view to bringing theological considerations to bear on government decision-making; and collaborating with other groups with which the Church shares concerns.
- iv. Providing support and opportunities for mutual consultation for those lay members of its congregations involved professionally in these areas and encouraging the involvement on local ethical committees of those with a theological education.
- v. Informing local church pastoral committees and/or counselling groups about how to contact those specialists available to give advice in difficult cases, and of the existence of national support groups.

- vi. Pressing for research into the social, psychological, and spiritual effects on parents and family members of procedures involving unborn humans.

7.1.2. The Local Church

The image of the Church as an extended family is a positive one. Where a local church is seen to operate in this way it can have a profound impact upon a community. As a family, the local church should:

- i. Create an accepting and welcoming environment into which all can come – parents under pressure; the childless or infertile couple; the single parent, etc. - perhaps for discussion and guidance, perhaps simply for friendship and support.
- ii. Provide practical help for those who decide to have the child that has been conceived, but are already under emotional or financial pressure; and for those who decide to keep and care for a handicapped child.
- iii. Provide support and counselling for those who decide to have an abortion. It needs to be understood that bereavement counselling in this situation may be necessary many years after the event.

Particular local responses may take a variety of forms, depending on resources and awareness of needs, but could consist of:

- i. Voluntary home-help and baby-sitting schemes;
- ii. Opening and staffing the church as a family centre;
- iii. Families within the congregation taking in a handicapped child to allow the parents to have a break;
- iv. Developing a group for the childless.

The offering of the type of care outlined above can be seen as an integral part of the mission of the church to portray a loving, enabling God for whom not only the unborn human but also the family and community within which that child is to be born are of great value.

7.1.3. Language concerning Status

Christians have a duty to seek to develop a language which encourages the exercise of responsible choice in the light of the knowledge available. In principle the prophetic and gospel injunctions to act justly and mercifully, and to love our neighbours as ourselves constitute a basis for this process of decision-making. The philosopher Gillon in *Philosophical Medical Ethics* (see Chapter 3.1) formulates autonomy, doing good and not doing evil, and being just, as a set of principles which might unite a broad spectrum of opinion in this area. These offer the possibility of agreement across a broad spectrum of opinion. The Christian will recognise their origin. In applying them when dealing with specific issues in the context of the relationships involved, such as those between the pre-embryo, the mother, the scientist wishing to experiment, and those involved in abortion decisions, the values revealed by Christ concerning the true nature of human relationships will be paramount.

The language concerning the status of the unborn human must involve its relationships with those around it, including its relationship with God. Because these relationships cannot be discerned with total certainty and are constantly changing, as is the developing fetus itself, the language must inevitably lack absolute precision. This may cause uncertainty, giving those involved in the decision making process a sense of unease. Perhaps it would be less traumatic if it were not so, but this seems to be the honest position.

7.2 Counselling

The Working Party believe that those intimately involved with situations such as an unwanted pregnancy, or apparent infertility or the possible diagnosis of a handicapped child, need appropriate long-term counselling both before and after taking the decisions involved. Counselling is necessary because of the general ignorance of the options available and of the implications of pursuing them. Such counselling is seen as valuable not only for the parent(s), but also for the supporting family and friends and for those involved in the medical profession.

This counselling may be provided either by the church, the community or the state. Christians have a particular responsibility to provide counselling in the light of their faith and understanding as God-given. Once they themselves have accepted their responsibility for the welfare of the unborn human and his or her family within our society, then they need also to encourage others to do the same and so to press for the establishing of appropriate counselling and support structures. Ideally, supportive counselling should be available for all facing decisions concerning the unborn human.

The counsellor in these situations needs to be someone with expertise and time to help those involved become aware of the alternatives before them and the implications that taking various decisions would have, not only for the unborn human and the family, but also for the wider community. Because of the fallenness of humanity there is no possibility of making a perfect moral decision. The situation in which many have to decide often generates a self- or family-centred viewpoint. Thus, drawing attention to the vulnerability of the unborn human and its significance for God, may enable those counselled to resist the temptation to subject the unborn human to their own selfish motives.

However it must be stressed that the counsellor is not there to make decisions on behalf of those counselled but rather to enable them to explore in depth for themselves what are difficult and important issues. In law it is recognised that ultimately decisions must lie with the parents to whom the original biological material belonged. There is also the responsibility before God, though scientists, doctors and counsellors cannot be absolved from the responsibility for their actions or failure to enable parent(s) to explore the issues fully. Non-specialists also have an important role to play in offering friendship and so making possible informal conversations within which parents are enabled to share their inner fears and confusions.

7.2.1. Abortion Counselling

Often decisions concerning abortions have to be made under pressure of circumstances such as those of a mother who is a teenager under great emotional stress and who has no husband to support her financially, or one who is already

suffering from depression, or unable to cope with existing family, or whose husband refuses to discuss the possibility of another child being born. Ideally, the counsellor would attempt to alleviate the pressure and so allow a breathing/thinking space, but this is often not possible. Issues to be taken into consideration include the real existence of the unborn human, the health of the mother, the welfare of other siblings, and the support available in family and community.

No amount of counselling can remove the sense of guilt of a woman who feels that a termination is wrong yet for good reasons cannot go ahead with her pregnancy. However, skilled help can minimise the psychological trauma of such a decision. In other situations too, the decision, whatever it is, will often be followed by a sense of guilt, or self-recrimination on account of not having decided to do the opposite. In this situation the Christian counsellor can point both to the inevitability of this happening, and to the existence of a loving God who has already dealt with the fallenness of humanity in Jesus Christ, and who offers forgiveness which involves a blotting out of the past and looking towards the future.

However, for some women and men there will continue to be a deep sense of pain at having terminated life no matter how strong were the justifications for doing so. For them it is a real experience of bereavement heightened by a sense of guilt and bitterness towards the people and circumstances that made the decision necessary. The sense of guilt also makes the feelings more difficult to share with others. Here there is need for continuing family, church, and community support which is only possible as the wider community is encouraged to explore the issues and implications involved.

7.2.2. Antenatal Screening

Counselling needs to be available for all pregnant mothers, as serum AFP screening (a blood test at 16 weeks used in the detection of neural tube defects – in particular spina bifida) is now done routinely in many areas of the country. No mother should have this or any other of the growing number of tests for fetal handicap without understanding why and without giving consent. She should be entirely free to refuse an initial test and further testing, and it should be understood that a positive test engenders extreme anxiety in the parents. It is essential that there are good communications, rapid retesting, further tests available, if necessary, and sympathetic counselling at every stage.

Some parents will know about the possible condition which is being looked for and are likely to have appropriate support from friends and relatives. It is much more difficult if parents have no knowledge at all about the possibility and nature of handicaps when such an abnormality is picked up on a screening test, for then the parents have to be given a lot of information and must make rapid decisions. This situation often leaves them feeling bewildered and confused. If their decision leads to a late abortion, the crisis reaction is comparable to that experienced after a perinatal death. Counselling and support at such a time are vital.

Other parents may decide against aborting a fetus in whom an abnormality has been diagnosed. How will this affect their relationship with it? Will they regard every difficulty in the child as due to the defect for which they rejected an abortion? Should they be told the sex of the fetus, which might influence their decision about abortion? Parents in whom the tests prove negative may well feel that a perfect

baby is ensured, all worries are over. But, on the other hand, many conditions cannot be diagnosed so for a few this sense of security will be misplaced. For all these reasons, Medical Practitioners need to be skilled in how they pass on test results and be aware of the effect their information may have on the parents and family. Nor is there any place for the anxiety provoked by “if you do not hear anything you will know the results are all right”.

The importance of screening-related counselling services and the effects of screening on the family has been neglected compared with the development of the technology of screening.

Long-term counselling and support are needed for the parents who decide against aborting an abnormal fetus, and for those who on moral grounds decide not to have the test and so produce a child with a handicap which could have been diagnosed antenatally. It is a continuing struggle to ensure that adequate services are available for the handicapped and their families. Is society going to place less priority to these services as a result of the tests being available? Is social pressure going to make the parents who have a handicapped child feel guilty? Such questions must be faced and answered in our society.

7.2.3. Infertility

When a couple discover that they are unable to produce a child, often after many years of trying and waiting and accumulated disappointments, the offer of treatment brings with it tremendous hope and a tendency to overlook the adverse implications of such treatment. The task of the counsellor is to draw attention to these issues, recognising that from the start he/she is caring for a couple already deeply hurt by their failure to be, in their own eyes, a “normal” couple.

The success rate in this field is relatively low and perhaps the greatest task of counsellors and friends is helping the couple cope with the building up of their hopes and then the crushing disappointment which may come. Adoption as an alternative may need to be explored. Sadly, the tendency to crave what we cannot have aggravates the situation for some parents.

7.3 Education

Much that has been referred to in earlier sections of this chapter will involve education both formally and informally within the church, by the church in the community, and within the home. But it is crucial that a more complete range of the processes of education should be taken into account.

7.3.1. THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

First, no child should leave school without a knowledge of biology, sufficient to enable him or her to take responsibility for the body’s health. In this context it will be appropriate that the facts of human reproduction are learnt. In this respect it is good to note that the National Curriculum will make it necessary for all children to be taught the sciences until the age of 16. We should therefore be able to avoid, for example, any implication that while girls might continue with Biology, boys might reasonably give it up or even never start it at all. Even at this stage we believe it is necessary to learn about the stages of the unborn human’s development and such matters as the possibility of infertility.

An education programme for schools, however, will be incomplete in this area or even counter-productive if it does not take account of moral values, the role of human relationships and the family. The very fact that there are no indubitable moral imperatives easily applicable and objectively enforceable makes this all the more important. Christians have much to say in this context and we should do so with boldness but humility. One of the ways in which we fulfil our responsibility for our children is by the way we understand and interpret to them the experience of human relationships.

As is apparent earlier in this document, technical developments, whether in the area of birth control or with reference to ways in which we can cope with infertility or procure abortions, make it crucial that these issues are sensitively brought into discussion so that a language is developed in which discrimination and judgement may be made. Courses of this kind will be difficult to create, involving as they do cross-curricular themes, careful planning and delivery. Also to be taken into account is the impact made by the attitude, environment and cultural climate in which these matters are discussed. It is quite clear, therefore, that responsibility cannot be left to schools, though schools do need and will benefit from the critical support of the Christian community in what they do. Sunday Schools, Youth and Fellowship groups each provide opportunities for the exploration of these issues.

7.3.2. THE MEDIA

Secondly, the media are frequently criticised and blamed for the way in which they diminish the human and trivialise serious matters. There is, no doubt, some truth in that, and proposed changes in broadcasting in the United Kingdom do not give us confidence that standards will be maintained, let alone improved. However, this should not lead us to ignore the opportunity which is provided by the development of the media. The technology offers us huge opportunity. This ranges from the production of a particular programme which will inform of scientific advances or technical developments and thus keep our understanding of the paradoxes and complexities sharp and relevant, to discussion tapes for groups in which individuals who have had to make difficult choices discuss their reasons and share their experience. We have hardly begun to exploit the opportunities here.

7.3.3. Education and Professional Bodies

Thirdly, the United Kingdom has done far too little to encourage interaction between professional bodies. Teachers are too frequently isolated within their classroom, yet many of the difficulties which they experience they share with social and health service workers. Changes in the local financial management of schools have made the problems of head teachers and governors more like those faced by, for example, hospital managers and health authorities. This should encourage these groups to come together in fruitful discussion of our responsibilities as a community. In this way they would keep one another informed of developments and also enhance their capacity to understand and take decisions.

The church could take the initiative here to stimulate conferences and to produce materials. In order to do so effectively the church would need to develop or adapt or hire appropriate accommodation. The German Evangelical Academies provide just such neutral grounds for inter-action between professional bodies. That pattern

is not implementable in the United Kingdom. We need to find our own way of doing it.

7.3.4. Parent-Teacher Relationships

Fourthly, in this area of education, as perhaps in no other, the relationship of teachers and parents is crucial. Parents need to know what is being taught at school. Teachers need to have worked with parents to know how best to interpret and develop an understanding of the material. Both parents and teachers need to have that easy relationship which gives pupils confidence.

7.3.5. Education for Parenthood

Fifthly, education for parenthood is widely discussed. It would be right to see courses more widely available in schools. However, education for parenthood, education in relationships, the discussion of the moral and personal issues which arise from developments in our understanding of genetics and in medical practice, should by no means be confined to school and formal education. A much wider provision of appropriate seminars, discussions, courses and conferences needs to be made available through adult and continuing education.

7.3.6. Ethical Education in Medicine and Medical Sciences

Finally, there is the area of professional education. Doctors, nurses, biologists and all those involved in medical care and research need to be given more help during their training and subsequently to develop and maintain an ethical perspective in relation to all their work, including that which involves unborn humans. Within the medical profession it is internationally accepted as an ethical principle that all medical practitioners should practise “with compassion and respect for human dignity” and “maintain the utmost respect for human life from its beginning” (International Code of Medical Ethics and Declaration of Geneva, World Medical Association, 1983); and in the United Kingdom the General Medical Council’s Recommendations on Basic Medical Education (1980) affirm that “instruction should be given in the principles of medical ethics”, especially by “day-to-day teaching . . . in the clinical context” which “gives the student an opportunity to discuss the issues involved in normal clinical practice. His attention should also be directed to the ethical responsibilities of the medical profession in clinical investigation and research, and in the development of new therapeutic procedures.”

It is always possible for medical teachers and students to act as if each patient is no more than a machine, malfunctioning because of a fault in one component or another which the doctor has to identify and if possible repair; and one who views adult patients like this can be expected to take at least as low a view of unborn humans. All those involved in both undergraduate and postgraduate medical education must therefore be repeatedly reminded that the knowledge, attitudes and skills which this education most needs to impart, include not only a knowledge of medical science and the skill to apply this knowledge, but also the attitude of respect for all that is human, and the skill to counsel patients sensitively and non-directively on all health problems including those addressed in this report.

The same attitude of respect needs to be imparted when training other scientists and technicians for work on human material; and the development of this attitude and of the counselling skills discussed earlier in this chapter should figure also in the

education and training of nurses, other health staff, and social and pastoral workers (including ministers of religion).

Though many have somehow lost confidence in the role of education, its importance can hardly be over-emphasised. A Methodist Church with its universal commitment to education could substantially contribute to its rediscovery.

7.4 Conclusion

Consideration of the status of the unborn human has led us to issues other than the biological and medical. There are social dimensions relating to the raising of awareness, education and support (personal and financial) in which the Church nationally and locally has opportunities and responsibilities. There are moral responsibilities in these areas no less imperative than our responsibilities to the unborn.

SUMMARY

This report originated in the developments in medical science and medical technology. It has been presented as a Methodist contribution to the search for understanding of the status of the unborn human, rather than as a definitive statement of Methodist beliefs. It has attempted to move away from established positions and to look afresh at the relevant material.

In this endeavour, chapters have been included covering present scientific and medical knowledge, the main moral theories and theological considerations relevant to the discussion, and contemporary understandings of the status of the unborn human.

There are several key elements in the reasoning of this report:

- i) the significance of our understanding of God making humans in his own image and revealing himself in the human Jesus, the Christ;
- ii) the recognition that real choices have to be made by people concerned with the unborn human, choices that cannot be avoided by resort to external authority;
- iii) the love and forgiveness of God in Christ which give us hope even if we make mistakes or do wrong;
- iv) recognition of the principle of love as the highest of all principles in guiding all our decision-making and our rules of behaviour, for God is love (1 John 4.8).

All these must be brought to bear on our understanding and decision-making with regard to the unborn human.

In the light of these reflections, some of the practical outworkings, given the present knowledge, in the worlds of medicine, the Church, education and the law, have been reviewed.

From the evidence presented it is clear that the unborn human is part of the whole human community. The unborn human is never without significance in its own right, and decisions regarding it are therefore never trivial, but must be made with

respect for its human nature and awareness of dimensions which not only affect an individual or a single family but also affect society at large. Decisions made in this area, therefore, are not the responsibility of the mother alone, or even of the mother and father. Society, and especially the Church, must face their responsibility for enabling the consequences of these decisions to be lived with.

APPENDIX I

THE LAW OF ENGLAND RELATING TO ABORTION

Centuries ago, without the intervention of Parliament, the Courts found in what they believed to be ancient custom a prohibition against attempting to procure a miscarriage. But the offence could be committed only after the child had “quickened in the womb”. An attempt to procure an abortion before this stage had been reached was not an offence.

It seems to follow that the rule was based on the assumption that, after quickening, the fetus was a living being, but not prior to that time. A statute in 1803 made it an offence to administer poison to a woman with intent to procure a miscarriage, but a distinction was drawn between a woman “quick with child” and any other woman. In the former case the death penalty was prescribed, while in the latter the punishment was transportation.

The Offences Against The Person Act of 1861 seems to have been regarded as a statute largely codifying the existing law. Sections 58 and 59, which deal with this subject, evoked no discussion in Parliament. Section 58 declares:

“Every woman being with child who, with intent to procure her own miscarriage, shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, and whosoever, with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall unlawfully administer to her or cause to be taken by her any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, shall be . . . liable . . . to imprisonment for life.”

Section 59 deals in substance with assisting an offence under Section 58.

The woman herself commits no offence unless she is in fact pregnant, while anyone else who seeks to procure a miscarriage is guilty of an offence whether the woman is pregnant or not. There was no obvious reason for the distinction, and the Courts held that a woman could be guilty of aiding and abetting another person even although she was not pregnant.

The offence is committed only if the act is done “unlawfully”. Clearly it was contemplated that it might be done lawfully, although there is no record of the Courts having considered exactly what was imported by the word until 1939.

In 1929 Parliament passed the Infant Life Preservation Act, which provides:

“(1) Subject as hereinafter in this section provided, any person who, with intent to destroy the life of a child capable of being born alive, by any wilful act causes a child to die before it has an existence independent of

its mother, shall be guilty of felony, to wit, of child destruction . . . provided that no person shall be found guilty of an offence under this section unless it is proved that the act which caused the death of the child was not done in good faith for the purpose only of preserving the life of the mother.

(2) For the purposes of this Act, evidence that a woman had at any material time been pregnant for a period of twenty-eight weeks or more shall be prima facie proof that she was at that time pregnant of a child capable of being born alive.”

This provision applies only to a “child capable of being born alive”. These words have been construed to mean a child capable of surviving after separation from the mother although, as the section makes clear, it applies only where the child has not in fact been separated. (Otherwise, the offence would be homicide.) At the time when it was passed, the Act seems to have been intended to protect children shortly before delivery.

In 1939 a Dr Bourne was prosecuted under the 1861 provision. The circumstances were such as to occasion the maximum sympathy for the doctor. The girl was aged 14 and was pregnant in consequence of rape. The parents consented to the operation and the doctor performed it without charge. The judge directed the jury that the word “unlawfully” in the 1861 provision “imports the same meaning expressed by the proviso in . . . the Infant Life Preservation Act 1929”. He went on to say that the words “for the purpose of preserving the life of the mother” should be construed in a reasonable sense to include cases where the mother’s life might well be endangered if the pregnancy were to continue.

Already, therefore, prior to 1967, the law recognised two essential distinctions. It distinguished in the 1929 Act (although not in the Act of 1861) according to the stage which the pregnancy had reached. And it recognised a test of what was and what was not an unlawful abortion, the test being that set out in the 1929 Act.

Such was the state of the law prior to 1967. The Abortion Act of that year provides:

“1 – (i) Subject to the provisions of this section, a person shall not be guilty of an offence under the law relating to abortion when a pregnancy is terminated by a registered medical practitioner, if two registered medical practitioners are of the opinion, formed in good faith –

(a) that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk to the life of the pregnant woman, or of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated; or

(b) that there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped.

(ii) in determining whether the continuance of a pregnancy would involve such risk of injury to health as is mentioned in paragraph (a) of section (1) of this section, account may be taken of the pregnant woman’s actual or reasonably foreseeable environment.”

The Act contains a “conscience clause”, absolving anyone who has a conscientious objection from any obligation to participate in an abortion, unless to save the life of a pregnant woman or to prevent grave permanent injury to her.

The Act defines “the law relating to abortion” as sections 58 and 59 of the 1861 Act. It seems, therefore, that the intention was to provide an exclusive criterion of what was lawful within those sections, and nothing is now likely to be deemed lawful which does not fall within the tests prescribed in the 1967 Act.

The Act does not provide a defence to a prosecution under the Infant Life Preservation Act, so that, although it is not by its terms restricted to the earlier stages of pregnancy, it does not apply to the destruction of “a child capable of being born alive”.

Subsequent attempts to restrict the operation of the 1967 provision to a precise period from the inception of pregnancy have been unsuccessful, so that statutory guidance continues to consist of subsection (ii) of section (1) of the 1929 Act.

There are no restrictions in law on the use of a fetus for research purposes. The Warnock Committee recommended in 1984 that a statutory licensing authority should be established to regulate research on *in vitro* fertilisation. The authority would provide guidelines to which research must conform as a condition of being licensed. And the Committee recommended that it should be a criminal offence to undertake research without a licence.

The recommendation has not been implemented, but the Medical Research Council and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have sponsored an Interim Licensing Authority. Its decisions are, of course, not supported by criminal sanctions.

APPENDIX II

THE METHODIST STATEMENT ON ABORTION 1976

Introduction

1. The question of abortion continues to exercise the thought, conscience and compassion of men and women. The area of debate at this stage is limited to the period between conception and birth.

2. Abortion has at once moral, medical, legal, sociological, philosophical, demographic and psychological aspects. In addition, the Christian will seek to bring to the discussion insights and emphases which derive from his faith.

Theological Aspects

3. The Christian believes that man is a creature of God, made in the divine image, and that human life, though marred, has eternal as well as physical and material dimensions. All human life should therefore be revered. The fetus is undoubtedly part of the continuum of human existence, but the Christian will wish to study further the extent to which a fetus is a person. Man is made for relationships, being called to respond to God and to enter into a living relationship

with Him. Commanded to love their neighbours, Christians must reflect in human relationships their response to God's love. Although the fetus possesses a degree of individual identity, it lacks independence and the ability to respond to relationships. All **persons** are always our "neighbours"; other beings may call forth our loving care. In considering the matter of abortion, therefore, the Christian asks what persons, or beings who are properly to be treated wholly or in part as persons, are involved and how they will be affected by a decision to permit or forbid abortion.

4. It is of the essence of the Christian Gospel to stand by and care for those who are facing crises and to help them make responsible decisions about their situation. It also respects the conscientious decisions of doctors and nurses who find themselves unable to take part in carrying out abortions.

5. In considering the question of abortion, Christians must never overlook the reality of human sin. This impairs judgement with the result that the abortion decision may be made in a context of selfishness, carelessness or exploitation. Human sin is also seen in attitudes and institutions which foster any debasing of human sexuality or are complacent to social injustice and deprivation. In facing these dimensions of failure and sin, Christians will work for an experience of spiritual renewal and a deeper understanding of the nature of human responsibility in the response made to the abortion.

The Issues Involved

6. On one side of the abortion debate is the view which seeks to uphold the value and importance of all forms of human life by asserting that the fetus has an inviolable right to life and that there must be no external interference with the process which will lead to the birth of a living human being. The other side of the debate emphasises the interests of the mother. The fetus is totally dependent on her for at least the first twenty weeks of the pregnancy and, it is therefore argued, she has a total right to decide whether or not to continue the pregnancy. It is further argued that a child has the right to be born healthy and wanted.

7. Both views make points of real value. On the one hand, the significance of human life must not be diminished; on the other hand, abortion is unique because of the total physical dependence of the fetus on the mother, to whose life, capacities or existing responsibilities for the fetus may pose a threat of which she is acutely aware. It is necessary both to face this stark conflict of interests and to acknowledge that others are also involved – the father, the existing children of the family, the extended family, and society generally.

8. From the time of fertilisation, the fetus is a separate organism, biologically identifiable as belonging to the human race and containing all the genetic information. It will naturally develop into a new living human individual. A few days after fertilisation, implantation (or nidation) takes place; it is significant that in the period before nidation a very large number of fertilised ova perish. At some time after the third month, the "quickening" occurs – an event which is of significant, perhaps crucial, moment for the mother. Not earlier than the 20th week, the fetus becomes viable, i.e., able to survive outside the womb if brought to birth.

9. There is never any moment from conception onwards when the fetus totally lacks human significance – a fact which may be overlooked in the pressure for

abortion on demand. However, the degree of this significance manifestly increases. At the very least this suggests that no pregnancy should be terminated after the point when the aborted fetus would be viable. This stage has been reached by the 28th week and possibly by the 24th or even earlier. It would, in fact, be best to restrict all abortions to the first twenty weeks of pregnancy except where there is a direct physical threat to the life of the mother or when new information about serious abnormality in the fetus becomes available after the twentieth week. There is indeed also a strong argument on physical, psychological and practical grounds to carry out abortions in the first three months wherever possible.

10. Because every fetus has significance, the abortion decision must neither be taken lightly nor made under duress. It is for this reason, as well as in her own long-term interests, that the mother should receive adequate counselling. This should enable her to understand what is involved in abortion, what are the alternatives to it and what are the considerations she should weigh before asking for termination. The skills of social workers and the particular technique of counselling, as well as the responsible medical judgement of doctor and consultant, must therefore be engaged. The provision of this service should be a duty laid by administrative regulations on those approving abortions whether in the N.H.S. or the private abortion clinics. This is another reason why abortion on demand is to be rejected.

THE ABORTION ACT 1967

11. It is again to preserve the awareness of the significance of the fetus that the present form of the Abortion Act 1967 is of value. It retained the basic statement that abortion is unlawful, but indicated criteria which sufficiently altered the situation as to make abortion permissible. The intention behind the Act is therefore to be welcomed as it reflects a sensitivity to the value of human life and also enables serious personal and social factors to be considered.

12. These factors include, for example, the occasion when a pregnancy may pose a direct threat to the life or health of the mother. The probability of the birth of a severely abnormal child (where this may be predicted or diagnosed with an appreciable degree of accuracy) also provides a situation in which parents should be allowed to seek an abortion. It is right to consider the whole environment within which the mother is living or is likely to live. This will include the children for whom she is already responsible and there will be occasions when she is unable to add to heavy responsibilities she is already carrying. Again, there are social conditions in our country which are offensive to the Christian conscience, particularly those connected with bad housing and family poverty. These conditions must be improved; meanwhile it is clear that abortion is often sought as a response to the prospect of bearing a child in these and similarly intolerable situations. In the particular circumstances indicated in this paragraph, abortion is often morally justifiable.

13. The Abortion Act is nevertheless imperfect and requires clarification and amendment either by legislation or administrative regulations. Abortions should be limited to the first twenty weeks of pregnancy save in the exceptional cases to which reference has been made. Counselling must be offered in all cases. The profit motive must be reduced. There must be further consideration of the clause which allows abortion when the risks of continuing the pregnancy are greater than

the risks in terminating it. This clause can be interpreted to justify abortion on demand. Unless the medical profession or suitable administrative regulations can ensure that this clause is not used alone to authorise abortion on demand, the difficult task of amending the Act at this point must be attempted. There is little doubt that the responsible interpretation of the Act and the proper provision of abortion are more likely to be secured if a high proportion of terminations are carried out in N.H.S. hospitals and not in private abortion clinics. The Methodist Church urged this in 1966. It again emphasises its concern.

14. Abortion must not be regarded as an alternative to contraception, nor is it to be justified merely as a method of birth control. The termination of any form of human life can never be regarded superficially and abortion should not be available on demand, but should remain subject to a legal framework, to responsible counselling and to medical judgement. The Church, with others, must help to provide more adequate counselling opportunities. Society must also be sensitive to the burden it places on medical personnel, and not least upon nurses, by permitting abortion very freely. It must fully respect the conscience of those in the medical profession who feel unable to carry out terminations; though, on their part, they have a responsibility to put women who approach them in touch with alternative sources of advice.

15. The problems raised by abortion can be finally resolved only by a new and sustained effort to understand the nature of human sexuality and to encourage expressions of sexual relationships which are joyous, sensitive and responsible, and which do not tend to exploit others. Christians believe that in conception and birth, parents are procreators with God of new human life. They also affirm in the whole of their sexual relationships that identity-in-mutuality which is inherent in marriage and which argues so strongly for the permanence of the marriage commitment. In an imperfect world, where both individuals and society will often fail, abortion may be seen as a necessary way of mitigating the results of these failures. It does not remove the urgent need to seek remedies for the causes of these failures.

APPENDIX III

STATISTICAL BACKGROUND

***In vitro* Fertilisation and Gamete Intra-Fallopian Transfer**

The fourth and most recent report of the Interim (formerly Voluntary) Licensing Authority for Human *In Vitro* Fertilisation and Embryology lists 40 clinical centres approved by the Authority in the United Kingdom. It also brings together results from 34 of these centres for 1987, when attempts were made at these 34 centres to carry out *in vitro* fertilisation in 7,488 women during 8,899 menstrual cycles. In 5,592 (63%) of these attempts, one or more ova were obtained, fertilised and transferred to the mother's uterus. The number of live births/100 attempts varied from 14.5 in five of the six largest centres to 3.1 in the eight smallest. The percentages of attempts which had a successful outcome will have been lower than these figures, since the children born were not all from different attempts – some were twins and triplets.

The Licensing Authority also reported that gamete intra-fallopian transfer was carried out on 2,658 occasions in 2,288 women in 1987 and that implantation and

embryo formation occurred on 498 (18.7%) of these occasions. The number of live births was not given.

Prenatal Diagnosis

In 1985, amniocentesis to determine whether fetus had abnormalities for which abortion should be offered was carried out in at least 23,375 cases (about 3% of all pregnancies) in England and Wales – 4,478 in which the alpha-fetoprotein level in the amniotic fluid was measured because the level of this substance in the mother's blood was high (suggesting a neural tube defect), and 18,897 others in which the chromosomes were examined (eg because the mother was relatively old and therefore more likely to bear a child with Down's syndrome).

Legally Induced Abortions

According to the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 183,798 legally induced abortions occurred in England and Wales in 1988 – 168,298 in residents and 15,500 in non-residents. Of the non-residents, 21% came from Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, 25% from the Irish Republic, 20% from France and 21% from Spain. The annual total for residents is now at an all time high, having increased by nearly a third since 1983 (the last year when a decrease was recorded), whilst the non-resident figure (which had been rising prior to 1983) is less than half as high as it was then, and lower than at any time since 1970 (Fig. 3). The recent increase in the resident figure has been particularly great for private patients, who accounted for 53% of cases in 1988, as against 47% in 1983.

Among residents, about three quarters of legal abortions (126,904 in 1988) are carried out on single, widowed, divorced or separated women. Girls below the age of consent (3,568 in 1988) account for just over 2% of all resident cases. Among all pregnancies conceived during 1986 (excluding those ending in miscarriage), legal abortion is estimated to have been carried out in 7% of those conceived within marriage, and in 36% of others, including 54% of those whereconception occurred below the age of consent. Among non-residents undergoing abortion, the proportion who are single, widowed, divorced or separated, is slightly higher, and the proportion below the age of consent, slightly lower, than for residents.

The grounds given for abortion only include risk to the woman's life in 0.3% of residents, and substantial risk of handicap in the child in 1.0%. The only grounds given in virtually all other cases (i.e. 98.7% of the total), are that continuation of pregnancy would involve a greater risk than termination, to the health of the woman and/or any existing children. The most recent statistics available as to the health problems of such women give a breakdown by 'principal medical condition' of the residents who underwent abortions in 1987 in whom medical conditions were reported. Among 140,843 of these women whose 'principal medical condition' was not a fetal abnormality, it was classified in over 99% as a mental disorder - neurotic in 72.5%, depressive in 26.6% and other in 0.2%. Among abortions in non-residents, the proportions carried out because of risk to mother's life, or risk of serious handicap in the child are even smaller, and mental conditions account for an even higher proportion of the medical conditions reported.

Figure 3 and 4

Most abortions in residents are carried out well before the time (around 24 weeks gestation) when the fetus has developed sufficiently to stand any chance of surviving outside the body. In 1988, 87% took place before 13 weeks, 8% at 13-16, 4% at 17-20, 1% at 21-24, and less than 0.02% at 25 weeks and over (Fig 4). Abortions in non-residents tend to occur later: 57% before 13 weeks, 18% at 13-16, 16% at 17-20, and 9% at 21-24 weeks in 1988. Abortions on the grounds of serious risk of handicap in the child inevitably tend to take place relatively late in pregnancy, since most tests for fetal abnormalities are done from 16 weeks gestation onwards. The most recent national statistics which allow this effect to be quantified refer to abortions among residents in 1987, and give less detail about gestation length than the above. There were 156,191 of these abortions, and risk of handicap in the child was one ground (more often than not the only one) for 1,862 of them. Abortion was carried out before 13 weeks in 44% of these 1,862 cases, at 13-19 weeks in 40%, and at 20 weeks or more in 16%, whereas the corresponding figures for all other abortions are 87%, 11% and 1%. It follows that the proportion of all abortions with risk of handicap as a ground increases from 0.6% before 13 weeks to 4% at 13-19 weeks and 13% at 20 weeks and over.

Despite this association between late abortion and fetal abnormality, more than eight times as many abortions with risk of handicap as a ground, but less than half as many abortions after 16 weeks gestation, are carried out for NHS patients as for resident private patients.

(Agenda 1990, pp.9-69)

No resolution was printed in the *Agenda*, but the Conference adopted the following:

‘The Conference receives the Report on The Status of the Unborn Human, in 3.3.6 line 1 reading ‘DSR publication’ for ‘Methodist Statement’, and commends it to the circuits and districts for study and discussion and as a basis for a Methodist understanding of the issues with which it deals, and directs the Faith and Order Committee to produce a summary in popular language suitable for wider distribution through the Epworth Press or Methodist Publishing House. The Conference further directs the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Social Responsibility to look into the legal situation regarding the funeral of stillborn babies.’

Appendix IV – an extensive reading list – is not reproduced in this Volume. It can be found on pp. 69-74 of the 1990 *Agenda*.

THE STATUS OF THE UNBORN HUMAN (1991)

i) The Conference of 1990 received the Report on The Status of the Unborn Human and commended it for study. The Conference further directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a summary in popular language suitable for wider distribution. The Committee has made good progress with this “simplified” version of the report, despite the intrinsic difficulties of presenting complex and technical material in a popular style, and hopes that it will be available for sale in time to be used by study groups during the forthcoming autumn and winter.

ii) The Conference also directed the Faith and Order Committee in consultation with the Division of Social Responsibility to look into the legal situation regarding the funeral of stillborn babies. The Committee reports as follows:

The Infant Life Preservation Act (1929) set the legal age of viability at 28 weeks. S12 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act (1926) and S41 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act (1953) define a stillborn child as a child which has issued forth from its mother after the 28th week of pregnancy and which did not at any time after being completely expelled from its mother breathe or show any other signs of life. A stillborn child has a right to a burial or cremation provided that certain formalities are complied with :

S5 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act (1926) states that it shall not be lawful for a person who has control over or who ordinarily buries bodies in any burial ground to permit to be buried or to bury in such burial grounds a stillborn child before there is delivered to him either a certificate given by the Registrar under the provisions of this Act relating to still births or, if there has been an inquest, an order of the Coroner.

The Cremation Regulations (1930) provide that the medical referee may permit the cremation of the remains of a stillborn child if it is certified to be stillborn by a registered Medical Practitioner after examination of the body and if the referee, after such inquiries as he may think necessary, is satisfied that it was stillborn and that there is no reason for further examination. However, before permitting the cremation he must, except when an inquest has been opened and a Coroner’s certificate given, require the production of a Registrar’s Certificate that the stillbirth has been duly registered.

S11 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 sets out the special provisions as to the registration of stillbirth. The statutes give a strict definition of stillbirth and it is therefore clear that at present only babies born dead after 28 weeks of pregnancy are defined as stillborn. Only such babies are entitled to be registered as stillborn and therefore entitled to a burial or cremation and hence a funeral, in the sense that this word is normally understood. There is no provision for funerals for babies born dead prior to the 28th week.

The Department of Social Security has published a guide, “What to do after a Death”, which indicates not only what must be done but also what help is available. A section of this guide is devoted to stillborn babies, and gives a simplified description of the procedure.

The Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society (SANDS) has published “Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Neonatal Death – Guidelines for the Professionals.” which contains clear detailed, practical guidelines for the care and support of parents both in hospital and in the community; a discussion of the issues involved in the management of miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death; and examples of good practice from around the country.

As babies are being born alive before 28 weeks of pregnancy there have recently been many calls for the definition of stillbirth to be revised and the number of weeks lowered, so that more babies born dead would be entitled to burial or cremation.

There is obviously a need for a funeral service for stillborn babies, and the Church, when dealing with this matter, should also be aware that many parents would like some form of service for their dead baby even if it is not entitled to burial or cremation. There is obviously a great need for pastoral care in this area.

A helpful booklet, “Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Neonatal Death”, which has been published by the Joint Committee for Hospital Chaplaincy, gives guidelines in Pastoral care for Clergy and Hospital Chaplains.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the report.

(Agenda 1991, pp.189-190)

The Conference, adopting the above resolution, added:

1. Definition of Stillbirth

The Conference resolves that a letter be sent to the Secretary of State for Health, William Waldegrave, urging him to introduce legislation to change the legal definition of stillbirth so that babies born dead after 24 weeks of pregnancy are defined as stillborn.

2. The Conference further resolves to ask the Secretary of State for Health to direct that a health circular to be sent to local authorities containing advice and guidelines to District Health Authorities and Trusts about the care that could and should be given to parents who suffer the loss of an expected baby through miscarriage or stillbirth.

3. A letter along the same lines also be sent to Michael Forsyth, MP, Minister of State, Home and Health Department, Scottish Office.

THE FILIOQUE CLAUSE (1990)

1. Introduction

The Methodist Church is being asked to consider whether it would be willing to omit the *Filioque* clause from what is popularly known as the Nicene Creed, if and when there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to this among the Western churches; in order to restore the Creed to the form accepted by the Church in East and West in A.D. 381. Reports from the World Council of Churches (*Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, 1978) and the British Council of Churches (*The Forgotten Trinity*, 1989) have recommended this, and the BCC is now asking individual churches to decide where they stand on the matter.

The *Filioque* clause adds the words 'and the Son' to the Creed: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken by the prophets'. It thus affirms belief in the 'double procession' of the Spirit from God the Father and God the Son, as an integral part of the doctrine of the Trinity.

While Western churches have used the clause for centuries, the Eastern Orthodox churches have never adopted it. The Orthodox church today gives high authority to the early ecumenical creeds, and finds the insertion of the *Filioque* into an ancient creed which is common to both East and West a major stumbling block in ecumenical dialogue. Hence the Orthodox, now supported by the WCC and BCC, urge Western churches to reconsider its place in the Western version of the Creed.

2. Historical and Theological Background

The Creed of the Council of Nicea (325) was primarily intended to refute the views of the Arians, who denied Christ's full divinity, making him subordinate to the Father. On the Spirit, it simply asserted 'And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit'. The Council of Constantinople (381) added the words 'who proceeds from the Father', to secure the deity of the Spirit. This version of 381 – formally the 'Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed' but commonly called the Nicene Creed – was confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451). No other creed had such full affirmation by the early church in East and West. (The Athanasian Creed, which contains the *Filioque*, originated in the West under Augustinian influence in the 5th century; the Apostles' Creed, though early, is also Western, and in its present form dates from the 8th century.)

How was the Creed's teaching on the Spirit understood in the West? The Creed of 381 followed the thought of the Eastern Cappadocian fathers, who were concerned to defend the deity of the Spirit against vigorous opposition. They argued that the Holy Spirit was to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. They tackled the question of the Spirit's origin: the Father is unbegotten; the Son is begotten; the Spirit – who is not in a relation of sonship to the Father – *proceeds* as 'the breath from his mouth'. The precise relation of Son and Spirit was not addressed, though they wrote of the Spirit proceeding 'through the Son' and 'being manifested in the Son'. The Creed itself was silent on this point: probably because such statements could be interpreted by opponents as subordinating the Spirit to the Son.

The individuality of the Persons was to be a strong theme in later Eastern Trinitarian thought, but the unity of the Godhead was defended by the *common* origin of Son and Spirit in the Father. Yet it was firmly held that the Son and Spirit each originated in a *distinct* way within God's hidden essence; this led to an emphasis in the East on the Spirit's complementary role beside the Son, though not to a separation of their activity.

Arianism continued to be a serious threat to orthodoxy in the West. Western theology, evolving against this threat, moved in a different direction. Defence of Christ's deity was paramount. The idea that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* was a bulwark against Arianism. Augustine played a critical role in spreading the doctrine of the *Filioque*. He wrote of the Spirit as the bond of love uniting Father and Son, and concluded that the Spirit proceeded *from both Father and Son*. This did not mean that there were two sources of the Spirit: rather, the Father so begot the Son that the Spirit proceeded from Father and Son simultaneously. By this, he safeguarded (a) the Trinity's unity and (b) the primacy of the Father, for the Spirit proceeds *principally* from the Father. It should perhaps also be noted that while Augustine held to the *Filioque*, he continued to speak of the Spirit proceeding from the Father, *through* the Son.

For the West, the doctrine of the *Filioque* served several valuable purposes: it defended the divinity of Christ; it helped to distinguish Christ and the Spirit within the Trinity by putting a relation of origin between them; and it bound up the unity of the Godhead (a strong Western concern) by relating the Spirit to Father and Son, rather than to the Father alone. Its supporters, past and present, would argue that it has distinctive merits lacking from Eastern thought. But from the perspective of the East, then and now, the *Filioque* results from, and gives rise to, flawed doctrines of the Trinity and the Spirit. Father and Son are not sufficiently distinguished from each other (this reflects what the East sees as the West's over-emphasis on the unity of the Godhead). They share a kind of deity in which the Spirit does not participate: the Spirit is made subordinate, overshadowed by Christ; as a result the Spirit's work tends to be 'domesticated', limited to the sphere of the Church.

The *Filioque* clause was first added to the Nicene Creed in the West by popular custom, against the wishes of the Papacy, but eventually was accepted as part of the Creed. The Council of Toledo (589), which saw the conversion of Spain from Arianism to orthodoxy, affirmed it. From Spain its use spread to the Frankish Empire. Early in the 9th century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne pressed for the *Filioque* to be included officially in the Creed. Pope Leo III resisted this, though he accepted the *Filioque*'s teaching, because he did not think an ecumenical creed could be unilaterally altered by the West. Later that century, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, argued that the *Filioque* was false. The West agreed at this point not to add it to the Creed. But Benedict VIII (1012-1024) sanctioned its use at an Imperial coronation. Schism between East and West formally occurred in 1054, with the *Filioque* as one of its causes. Nevertheless, the sense of a united Christendom remained for a time, and theologians debated the *Filioque* without polemics. The advent of scholasticism in the West brought rigorous defences of the *Filioque* from Anselm and Aquinas, and the rift became wide. The issue was not re-opened at the Reformation, and has only become vital again in recent years, with the renewal of closer contact between East and West.

3. Scriptural support for 'proceeds from the Father' and the *Filioque*

The theology of the Spirit in the Creed of 381 was based on Old Testament texts about the Spirit (*ruach*) of God, and New Testament texts such as 2 Cor. 3:17 ('the Lord is the Spirit'); and John 15:26 ('the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father').

Scriptural evidence for the Spirit's procession from the Son is less straightforward. John 16:14 is used: '[the Spirit of Truth] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you'. It is argued that the Spirit could not perform this role except by procession from Father *and* Son. John 15:26 ('I will send [the Counsellor] to you from the Father . . .') has been used to support the procession of the Spirit from the Son in God's mission to the world, and, by inference, in the Trinity's inner relations. Texts which closely connect Christ and the Spirit are also brought forward to support the *Filioque*: for example, 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:19); 'you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Rom. 8:9).

4. Ecumenical Discussions

As the matter concerns the version of the Nicene Creed common to all Western churches, it seems important for Western churches to decide about change ecumenically. WCC and BCC reports, noted above, have recommended that the *Filioque* clause be omitted from the Nicene Creed, to restore the Creed to the form agreed by East and West in 381. The Lambeth Conference of 1978 made a similar recommendation to the churches of the Anglican Communion. The Church of Scotland in 1979 expressed a willingness to move in this direction, in step with other churches.

The BCC report urges that this stumbling block in relations with the Orthodox be set aside, 'not for merely diplomatic reasons, but in order to give all the churches of divided Christendom the freedom to penetrate to the underlying questions which are at stake' (*The Forgotten Trinity* I, p.34). It sets the issue in the context of lively new interest in the relevance of Trinitarian theology for the life of the Church; interest sparked off by dialogue with the Orthodox, by the charismatic movement, and by fresh approaches in academic theology that reach beyond entrenched formulas of the past.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

It is important to bear in mind that the doctrine of the *Filioque* is not being judged here, but rather the place of the *Filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed. Some would argue that its merits, doctrinally, mean that it should stay there; some may even suggest that to omit the clause would be a betrayal of the doctrine of Christ's divinity. But even if its doctrinal value is firmly endorsed, a question still remains: was the West right to insert it, unilaterally, into the ecumenical creed which received widest affirmation in the early church? The depth of feeling about this among the Orthodox must be taken seriously. The clause clarifies (in a Western direction) a point on which the Creed is silent: the relation of Son and Spirit. However, the positions on each side of this issue are much more subtle, and closer to each other, than those caught up in fierce controversy in the past would admit.

Given the obstacle that the clause presents for ecumenical dialogue, the restoration of the Creed to the form of 381 would open the way for East and West to explore the doctrines of the Trinity and Holy Spirit together, from the riches of their traditions. The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends that the Conference express its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in A.D.381, if and when, in the judgement of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church.

RESOLUTION

The Conference expresses its willingness to restore the Nicene Creed to the form agreed by East and West in A.D.381, if and when, in the judgement of the Conference, there is sufficient ecumenical agreement to such a policy in the Western Church.

(Agenda 1990, pp.115-118)

METHODIST DOCTRINE AND THE PREACHING OF UNIVERSALISM (1992)

The Conference of 1990 received a Memorial (M.7) from the Telford North (28/22) Circuit meeting requesting the Conference to instruct the Faith and Order Committee to determine whether the preaching of "Universalism" (i.e. that all people will inevitably be saved by God's love) is Methodist doctrine.

The Conference referred this Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1992.

Report to the 1992 Conference

Introduction

1. The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church are set out in the Deed of Union Section 2, sub-section 4. There it is said, "The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation."

2. It continues, "The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church both ministers and lay men are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons. The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation."

3. The interpretation of doctrine is dealt with in sub-section 5 which declares that the Conference "shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines."

4. As has often been said, those words demonstrate that while there is no doubt about where some of the source material for the formation of it is to be found, Methodist doctrine is not so easily determined. It is not clear what is meant by "the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation." The creeds consist of precise clauses intended to define doctrines or exclude heresy but the clauses themselves are not specified in the doctrinal standards. The Protestant Reformation had several strands which sometimes, especially in the area of eschatology, were not compatible. The Deed of Union does not define the exact nature of the Methodist commitment to Protestantism. Again, our doctrines are based upon the "Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures" but the revelation is not identical with the Scriptures and the teaching of Scripture is diverse within a broad unity. Further, while our doctrines are said to be contained within Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and his 44 Sermons, it is expressly stated that these do not impose any theological system upon us.

5. Added to this, there is the insistence that the last word on the interpretation of doctrine rests with the Conference which leaves room for the continuing teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit and acknowledges the dynamic nature of Christian doctrine.

6. Methodist doctrine cannot, therefore, be determined by simple reference to any proof texts or documents. The Bible and Christian tradition set limits to the development of doctrine but their variety of thought and language allows considerable divergence of belief within those limits. The teaching of John Wesley and the past deliberations of Conference must have authority for Methodists today but that authority cannot be treated as infallible without calling in question the present work of the Spirit.

7. In determining Methodist doctrine it is important to consult all authorities and precedents from the past to ensure proper continuity but to do so creatively rather than in servile fashion and to take account of present experience and current theological insights before trying to form conclusions. This is the method adopted here.

The New Testament Evidence

8. In considering New Testament teaching about the future, it is important to recognise that biblical language, like later language, is wide and varied. All religious language concerning the future belongs to the realm of faith and hope based on our experience of what God has done and our understanding of his nature. Part of the value of biblical language lies in this variety. "Be saved" is one among many images and one that is only rarely used in the New Testament. Not all images are compatible with each other and New Testament writers do not offer a single, literal account of how things will be.

9. Several passages in the Synoptic Gospels appear to indicate the final rejection of those who fail to respond to God e.g. Matthew 7:13-14, 21; 18:34-35; 25:30; Mark 3:29; 9:43-48; Luke 6:23-24. The clearest statement comes at the conclusion of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:46) with its explicit threat of eternal punishment.

10. The fourth Gospel contains many sayings offering eternal life to those who respond in faith to Christ without accompanying threats to those who do not but also passages like John 3:16, 36; which imply the eternal death of those without faith and John 5:29 which speaks of a rising to judgment. In other passages e.g. 3:18-21; 10:25-28; judgment is said to have taken place already. The emphasis in John is not on what the future will bring but on what the present response carries with it. It is not clear how this relates to pictures about the future in John or the rest of the New Testament. (Cf. John 12:31-32 with 12:44-50.)

11. Some have seen a faint sign of of universalism in Mark 12:18-27 where the implication could be that all will rise again. It is possible though, as Vincent Taylor said,¹ that Jesus is thinking only of the resurrection of the righteous. In Luke 14:14 he explicitly speaks of "the righteous" rising from the dead. Paul refers to "A resurrection of good and wicked alike" in Acts 24:15 but a universal resurrection does not necessarily mean that all will come to final blessedness.

12. Again it is just possible to see a hint of universalism in Mark 10:27 with its insistence that no limits can be set on the freedom of God to save. The emphasis here is on the power of God which makes possible what men would regard as

impossible but it is reading too much into this passage to find here an assurance that all will be saved.

13. The stress on judgment is strongest in Matthew and much less obvious in Mark which is the prior Gospel. This has led some scholars² to ask whether judgment was part of the original teaching of Jesus or a later addition but passages such as Mark 3:29 and 9:43-48 do have to be taken seriously.

14. While it may be true that the threat of everlasting punishment is less securely based in the teaching of Jesus than is generally assumed, there is very little to suggest that everyone will ultimately possess eternal life. The preaching of Jesus emphasises the need to meet the conditions that God lays down if we are to enter the kingdom.

15. Stronger support for belief in universalism is found in the epistles. Passages like Romans 11:32; Ephesians 1:10; Philippians 2:10-11 and 1 Timothy 2:4 affirm that the will of God is that all will acknowledge Christ and find salvation through him. Universalists find support here but while these passages speak of the purpose of God that all should be included in the final triumph, they do not guarantee that his purpose will be fulfilled.

16. More crucial are Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22. The consequences of Adam's misdeed are contrasted with those of Christ's redemptive acts. Both passages assert that whereas Adam's sin brought condemnation and death upon the whole human race, the effect of Christ's death and resurrection is life for all.

17. There is no doubt that Paul's meaning is that the solidarity of the human race is such that Adam's sin brought guilt and and condemnation on every human being. If the effect of Christ's activity is genuinely parallel to that of Adam, it is natural to assume that it also has a universal effect and that the destiny of all human beings is resurrection to eternal life.

18. Few commentators are prepared to affirm what seems to be the natural sense. They prefer to limit the resurrection to those whose faith is in Christ. But C. K. Barrett commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:22 writes of the statement about Christ, "Its parallel form suggests at first that Paul means that, as from the time of Adam all men die, so now the lot of all men is resurrection. But this can hardly be said to fit the context, in which, as in Paul's thought generally, resurrection seems to be the privilege of those who through faith are in Christ. Though the wording has been affected by the parallel clause, his meaning appears to be that all who are in Christ shall be brought to life; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16: The dead in Christ shall rise. **This is not a denial that all men may ultimately come to be in Christ; indeed, this may be implied.**"³

19. It is difficult to be absolutely certain of Paul's mind and it is particularly easy here to allow our interpretation of Paul's words to be determined by our own theological presuppositions. John Hick, who himself adopts a universalist position, sums up the situation fairly when he says, ". . . one can quote Paul on either side of the debate. I would not in fact claim with confidence that he was a universalist; though I suggest that sometimes as he wrote about the saving activity of God the inner logic of that about which he was writing inevitably unfolded itself into the thought of universal salvation."⁴

The Patristic Period

20. Some of the early Christian fathers held universalist views. Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215) recognised different levels of spiritual attainment. Those at the lower levels might need education in the unpleasant consequences of disobedience but they would eventually be saved along with those at higher levels. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 - c.394) also showed strong universalistic tendencies.

21. The most prominent teacher of universalism in the patristic age was Origen (c.184 - c.254). He insisted that if God is pure goodness, divine punishments can never be merely retributive. They must also be purgative and remedial. “Everlasting fire” must not be taken literally. Though some might endure severe punishment, damnation is not final and salvation is the destiny of all. He wrote, “If I may offer a conjecture on so great a matter, I think that, as the last month is the end of the year, after which the beginning of another month ensues, so it may be that, since several ages complete as it were a year of ages, the present age is ‘the end’, after which certain ‘ages to come’ will ensue, of which the age to come is the beginning, and in those coming ages God will ‘shew the riches of his grace in kindness’: when the greatest sinner, who has spoken ill of the Holy Spirit and is under the power of sin throughout the present age, will, I know not how be under treatment from beginning to end in the ensuing age that is to come.”⁵

22. Origen was strongly attacked for his views by Augustine of Hippo and condemned in Justinian’s *Edictum contra Origenem* in 534.

John Wesley

23. Wesley insisted that all could be saved. In his sermon on Justification by Faith, he declares, “He hath redeemed me and **all mankind**; having thereby ‘made a full and perfect, and sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.’”⁶ He was certain that the grace of God and the atonement effected by Christ are for everyone. Rupert Davies writes, “So much is this the burden of all his evangelism and of the hymns which his brother wrote in the interest of that evangelism, so clearly is it presupposed by his published *Sermons* and *Treatises*, and argued by his controversial writings against Whitefield, Hervey, and their friends, that it is not necessary to quote specific statements. He said, and said, and said again: ‘For all, for *all* my Saviour died’.”⁷ Wesley followed the 16th century Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius, who opposed the strict Calvinism of his day and taught that God’s offer of grace was universal. It was because of his opposition to Calvinism that Wesley split with Whitefield.

24. But to say that all can be saved is not to say that they will be. Wesley was equally insistent that our salvation was dependent upon the fulfilling of God’s requirement of faith. “Faith, therefore, is the *necessary* condition of justification; yea, and the *only necessary* condition thereof.”⁸

25. On occasion he did appear to relax the strictness of that requirement but only to realise he was on dangerous ground and so to pull back somewhat. For example, on 1st December, 1767, he reflected:

That a man may be saved who cannot express himself properly concerning Imputed Righteousness. Therefore to do this is not necessary to salvation.

That a man may be saved who has no clear conceptions of it. (Yea, that never heard the phrase.) Therefore clear conceptions of it are not necessary to salvation. Yea, it is not necessary to salvation to use the phrase at all.

That a pious churchman who has not clear conceptions even of Justification by Faith may be saved. Therefore clear conceptions even of this are not necessary to to salvation. That a Mystic, who denies Justification by Faith (Mr. Law, for instance) may be saved. But, if so, what becomes of *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* (the article by which a church stands or falls)? If so, is it not time for us . . . to return to the plain word, "He that feareth God and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." 9

26. Wesley would be impatient of extended speculation of this kind and of the attempt to find ways by which everyone could be assured of salvation in the end when it is freely available now by faith and when those who believe can find immediate assurance of it. It would cut the nerve of his evangelistic endeavour.

27. Fundamental to Wesley's thought are divine grace and human freedom. Grace is universal but not irresistible. If there are times when he appears to doubt that we possess free will, it is only in order to stress our reliance upon prevenient grace in being able to exercise it. His conviction is clearly stated, "Suppose the Almighty to act irresistibly, and the thing is done; yea, with the same ease as when God said, "Let there be light; and there was light." But then, man would be man no longer: his inmost nature would be changed." 10 Holding this position so firmly, he could embrace neither predestination nor universalism.

28. Commenting on the predestinarian passages in Paul he avoids any suggestion of arbitrariness or irresistibility on the part of God by explaining the divine action in terms of the prior human response. So, for example, in dealing with Romans 9:18, he says, "So then – That is, accordingly He does show mercy on His own terms; namely, on them that believe. And whom He willeth – Namely, them that believe not. He hardeneth – leaves to the hardness of their hearts." 11

29. He rarely finds it necessary to comment at all on those passages which suggest universalism, taking it for granted that the word "all" generally refers to "all those who believe." In the crucial passage 1 Corinthians 15:22, he finds no problem because it speaks of a resurrection to judgment rather than to eternal life.

30. The fate of those who do not believe is everlasting separation from God. In his note on 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Wesley says, "As there can be no end of their sins (the same enmity against continuing), so neither of their punishment; sin and its punishment running parallel through eternity itself. They must be of necessity, therefore, be cut off from all good, and all possibility of it." Perhaps we may detect a hint that this was something he could not contemplate with any comfort in his comment on the previous verse. Paul speaks of God taking vengeance in flaming fire. "Does God barely permit this," asks Wesley, "or (as 'the Lord' once 'rained brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven,' Genesis 19:24) does a fiery stream go forth from Him for ever?" 12

Nineteenth Century Developments

31. Whether or not Wesley had any scruples about the idea of everlasting punishment, as the nineteenth century progressed increasing numbers of Christians certainly did. They were horrified at the injustice they saw in the notion of infinite punishment for finite sin. J. A. Froude expressed his abhorrence at what he regarded as a horrible doctrine powerfully in his novel, *The Nemesis of Faith*: “I mean that the largest portion of mankind, these very people who live about us, are our daily companions – the people we meet at dinner or see in the streets, that are linked with us with innumerable ties of common interests, common sympathies, common occupations – these very people are to be tortured for ever and ever in unspeakable agonies. My God! and for what? They are thrown out into life, into an atmosphere impregnated with temptation, with characters unformed, with imperfect natures out of which to form them, under necessity of a thousand false steps, and yet everyone scored down for vengeance; and laying up for themselves a retribution so infinitely dreadful that our whole soul shrinks horror-struck before the very imagination of it; and this is under the decree of an all-just, all-bountiful God – the God of love and mercy.” 13

32. F. D. Maurice was dismissed from his chair at King’s College following the publication of his *Theological Essays* in 1853. He rejected the notion of eternal death on the grounds that any such finality is incompatible with a belief in a God whose nature is supremely loving. He hoped for universal salvation without actually asserting it.

33. Maurice earned the severe strictures of the Wesleyan theologian, J. H. Rigg and was bitterly attacked by the Wesleyan London Quarterly Review which warned readers to steer clear of “this new complex and deadly heresy, which is little better than a modern Gnosticism of a refined character.” The reviewer went on to say, “If this is the true doctrine, not only the peasant and the beggar, but the cold-blooded murderer, the brutal ravisher, the most fiendish of slave-drivers of all the children of the devil on earth, and all the demons of hell, may ‘rejoice and sing merry songs’ together. Hell may hold carnival on earth to the glory of the God of heaven. This does not seem to be the way in which our Loving Saviour and His Apostles preached to sinners; nor from the general proclamation of such a gospel as this could we expect anything but a fearful increase in wickedness.” 14

34. There were still many orthodox preachers like the Anglican, H. P. Liddon, who could reflect “there are probably souls condemned for single unrepented sins, and there may well be thousands.” 15 Hell-fire sermons continued to thunder from many Methodist pulpits. As late as 1904 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference forced the resignation from his chair at Richmond of Joseph Agar Beet because of universalist tendencies expressed in his book, *The Last Things*. 16

35. Nevertheless a significant change of mood had taken place. In 1909 H. B. Workman could speak of the “all-pervasive universalism of the age” avowedly based upon what is perceived to be possible for a moral Governor of a moral world. He saw it as a “deduction from the universalism of appeal for which Wesley contended.” The difficulty of the twentieth century was, he thought, “to find in a scheme of perfect love any place for damnation at all, except as the continuance of present conditions – ‘myself am hell nor am I out of it.’” 17

Current Methodist teaching and liturgical language

36. In “A Catechism for the use of People called Methodists”, question 19 asks, “What is the state of those who refuse to repent and turn to God?” and the unequivocal answer is given, “They continue to be under the judgment of God and to be separated from him.” Question 20 asks, “What is the promise of God to those who persevere in faith to their lives’ end?” The answer is, “The abundant life which they have already begun to enjoy will become theirs in full measure, they will experience for themselves Christ’s victory over death, and they will share fully the eternal joy of all believers in the presence of God. This is what is meant by heaven.” There is no hint of universalism here.

37. Hymns, while not perhaps a source of exact theology, nevertheless give some idea of what Methodists believe. Presumably Hymns and Psalms (1983) can be taken to be some sort of indication of what is currently acceptable. It is interesting, and probably significant, that nothing included in the section, “The Church Triumphant”, was written in this century. But there are hymns in this section and elsewhere which celebrate the life of heaven. Charles Wesley puts the emphasis on the grace of God and rejoices in the assurance of eternal life. Amongst the best known is *H&P* 216 with its final verse,

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

The previous verse makes it clear that this state of assurance is one into which the writer has been awakened. The initiative lies entirely with God and the response is simple, “I rose, went forth, and followed thee.” Yet the response is enough to show that salvation is not automatic.

38. John Mason Neale also puts the stress on the divine action in salvation in *H&P* 813:

There he wins our full salvation,
Dies that we may die no more.

Trust him, then, ye fearful pilgrims:
Who shall pluck you from his hand?
Pledged he stands for your salvation,
Leads you to the promised land.

But he carefully ends with a prayer:

O that we, with **all the faithful**,
There around his throne may stand!

The promised land is clearly not for all.

39. The nearest the hymnbook comes to universalism is in a few triumphalist verses reflecting Biblical passages. The anonymous hymn, *H&P* 256, is an example:

He is Lord, he is Lord;
He is risen from the dead, and he is Lord;
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is King, he is King;
He will draw all nations to him, he is King;
And the time shall be when the world shall sing
That Jesus Christ is King.

One suspects that this kind of optimism is more concerned to affirm the power of God and the Lordship of Christ than to promise eternal life for all. The effect is more emotive than theologically persuasive.

40. The nearest we come in the Methodist Service Book to universalism is the Final Prayer of the Sunday Service which looks forward to “the heavenly banquet prepared for all mankind.” The suggestion is that God intends everyone to partake but that is not to say they will. The prayer reminds us of, and may reflect the parable of the big dinner party in Luke 14:15-24 where a major point is that those for whom it is prepared refuse the invitation. The prayer need do no more than echo Wesley’s insistence that all can be saved.

41. The theology of the Burial Service is made evident in the Thanksgiving, “We thank you because he has conquered sin and death for us, and opened up the kingdom of heaven to all believers.” At the committal it offers “sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.” But this is on the assumption that the deceased has died in faith. A second form of the service tones down the assurance and is intended for use with regard to those who are not so obviously within the Christian community. It reads, “Forasmuch as our *brother* has departed out of this life, we therefore commit *his* body . . . **trusting the infinite mercy of God**, in Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is a gentle way of introducing doubt about the eternal destiny of the deceased rather than an assurance of salvation. It proclaims the priority of grace and takes refuge in a reverent agnosticism about the fate of the departed. It sounds a positive note but is not universalist because even infinite mercy can be rejected.

42. No official Methodist statement is unequivocally universalist and accordingly local preachers in training have been taught, “Hell would appear to be something which people bring upon themselves in spite of the efforts of God to prevent them, in which case sermons using hell as an encouragement to belief might still have their uses. Whether hell is full or empty (the words apply to places and are therefore inappropriate, but they are all we have) is unknown. But the possibility of there being room must always be there. The way must be open for us to say a final ‘no’ to God, even if no one ever says it.”¹⁸

Theological considerations

43. This broad, and necessarily sketchy, survey of the documents available to us in determining Methodist doctrine leads us to the conclusion that the Methodist Church has never officially embraced universalism. But it is also true that

universalist tendencies have always been present in the Church at large. Some leaders of Christian thought, from Origen to Karl Barth, have been led towards universalism even if they have not always adopted it completely. The belief that all would eventually be saved was revived in the sixteenth century by groups on the fringe of the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptists and the Socinians. The Cambridge Platonists accepted it in the seventeenth century. The force of nineteenth century objections to the doctrine of everlasting punishment is still deeply felt and sermons threatening hell are now rare. The Burial Service phrase about “trusting the infinite mercy of God” with its proper readiness to leave the fate of the unbeliever and the non-Christian in the hands of God may well reflect the majority opinion in today’s Church. It is a healthy, humble and compassionate approach. God wants to save everyone. Most of us would like to think that he will. No Christian can be content with the thought that some might for ever be separated from God. Has the time, then, come for the Methodist Church formally to assent to the doctrine of universalism?

44. The argument for doing so is not based only on a sentimental humanitarianism. It rests even more importantly, upon a conviction about the nature of God. The God of love whose gracious purpose is to save all is also the almighty God who is able to fulfil his purpose. In the end, therefore, it is argued, all will be saved.

45. It is also based upon confidence in the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work. He offered on the cross “a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.” Universal salvation must, therefore, be a possibility. Some argue that it must be a certainty for without universal salvation the victory of Christ must be incomplete. Without it the bliss of heaven cannot be perfect. Just as there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, so there must also be sadness in heaven over one sinner who does not. This they find impossible to contemplate. As Archdeacon Michael Perry puts it, “God cannot create and love human souls and be satisfied to see them eternally unhappy or even eternally annihilated. Love cannot create and then acquiesce happily in the loss of what it has loved. The soul of man is too precious a thing either to spoil or to do away with.”¹⁹

46. Powerful as these arguments are, account must be taken of other considerations. The first is that God has granted us genuine freedom and responsibility. Our salvation requires our positive and totally voluntary response to him. Equally, human beings are free to keep God out of their lives if they so desire. That may be hell in the Christian view but we are free to choose it and choose it eternally. God does not assign us to hell. We bring it upon ourselves but we are allowed to reject God’s love eternally.

47. John Hick counters this argument by claiming that “God does not have to coerce us to respond to him, for he has already so created us that our nature seeking its own fulfilment and good, leads us to him . . . Since man has been created by God for God, and is basically oriented towards him, there is no final opposition between God’s saving will and our human nature acting in freedom.”²⁰ He rejects the criticism that this entails a universal predetermining of humanity on the grounds that this presupposes that human beings could have chosen their own basic nature. All human beings are contingent, dependent beings, conditioned by the creator. With Augustine, Hick believes that God has so structured our nature that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. He is convinced that God will continue

to be at work for the salvation of humankind, even after death until the work is done.

48. Hick's position does not rule out the possibility of judgment or punishment for finite sin. It allows that any punishment imposed upon the sinner may be purgative, reformatory and temporary, not merely retributive.

49. But it may still be thought inadequate in its treatment of human freedom. It is one thing to say that we are made with a leaning towards God and experience restlessness and unease when that leaning is not obeyed. It is another thing to say that that leaning is irresistible. If we cannot resist, it is hard to see how we can be said to be free. The freedom we may feel is merely illusory. Even more important, if the pull towards God is irresistible, the grace of God is called into question.

50. Another view, somewhat similar to Hick's but careful to preserve human freedom and responsibility, is that salvation must always be through our response to God's word but that, given infinite opportunity to respond beyond death, we shall all eventually do so. It is more perhaps a matter of hope than of doctrine but it springs from both confidence in God's grace and compassionate concern for all humanity.

51. The doctrine of universal grace is instrumental in Methodist belief. Grace is God's unconditional love for sinners in action. It is undistinguishing, extravagant self-giving. It is utterly free from self-concern in enabling the loved one to be. It finds its ultimate expression on the cross. The cross is both the demonstration of the length to which human opposition to God may go and the only response which God in his love will make to that resistance. Grace ceases to be grace if **at any point** it refuses to bear with rejection and applies even the kindest form of coercion. Grace involves God in an ultimate risk and must allow the possibility that the joy of heaven will never be complete. Geoffrey Wainwright sums up the situation sensitively, "A love which took self-giving to the point of suffering crucifixion is likely to be deep enough to persist while ever there is a chance of response. God's grace may then be expected to assume and develop even the slightest human motion towards love. Considerations of theodicy will point to a particular divine care for those individuals whose own capacity for love has been tolerably restricted by nature or society. It may be that the only way to fail salvation is by wilful refusal." But he goes on, preferring the idea of eternal death to that of everlasting punishment, "Programmatic universalism would be a totalitarian threat to the freedom which must characterize any human response in kind to the love of God towards us. Deliberate closure to the love of God to the point of irretrievability spells death. That such death should be subjectively experienced, permanently and eternally, makes no sense. Hell will be empty, though God may continue to bear in his heart the wounds incurred through taking the risk of love in creation."²¹ The most serious objection to universalism is that it denies that risk and thus is untrue to the nature of God.

Conclusion

52. The attractiveness of the doctrine of universalism is obvious and no doubt some Methodists accept it for reasons of moral concern and Christian compassion. The spirit of Christ leads us to long that, in the end, everyone will be saved. Our experience of God's grace assures us that he will use every means to persuade men and women to turn to him. But he will not violate human freedom. Were he to do so, he would not be the God revealed to us on the cross. The Methodist Church

continues to hold in tension the universality of God's persistent love and the freedom of human beings to reject that love eternally. Preaching should reflect this and from time to time one or other emphasis held in tension may be stressed. Nevertheless the Methodist Church has been right not to adopt as part of its official teaching the doctrine that "all people will inevitably be saved."

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RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts this report as its reply to Memorial M7 (1990).

(Agenda 1992, pp.113-123)

HUMAN SEXUALITY (1993)

Standing Order 236 directs that “all matters concerning the faith or order of the Church presented to the Conference by other bodies shall be scrutinised by the (Faith and Order) Committee”. The Committee has given careful consideration to the report of the Commission on Human Sexuality, and offers the following observations to members of the Conference. No resolutions accompany this section of the Committee’s report.

The Faith and Order Committee is aware that human sexuality is a subject on which strong and sometimes conflicting views are held among the Methodist people. The Committee believes that it can best assist the Conference in seeking to preserve the unity and fellowship of the Church as it continues in the search for truth and justice in these matters by offering a number of comments on major issues rather than a detailed critique of the 1990 report.

1. In a Christian context, disagreements about sexual matters are often significantly linked to divergent views about the ways in which the Bible should be understood and interpreted. We should be clear that the issue here is the way in which we use the Bible in making ethical decisions. The 1990 report properly seeks to address what it means to use Scripture in such a report and does not claim that the Bible can supply direct answers to every question which people in our day may ask. In the judgment of the Faith and Order Committee the report accepts the authority of Scripture and uses the Bible responsibly.

2. We have now begun to move away from a long history of regarding sexuality as inherently sinful and we have begun to affirm it as a gift of God. We cannot divorce ourselves from the culture of the past or the present, but we can look at it critically and weigh it in the balance against what we discern as the Gospel. The sensitive and difficult nature of the task of seeing sexual love as sharing in the divine act of loving is evident in the report.

3. As we try to determine how the Methodist commitment to Scriptural holiness is to be related to questions of sexuality, we have to wrestle with the question of how to interpret Scripture for today. Wesley’s reading of the Scriptures was of his time and, in cultural terms, so were his attitudes to sexuality. For him, the pursuit of holiness was paramount : even divisions of opinion over doctrine and discipline were secondary. In moral matters he did, however, acknowledge areas of doubt (plays and cards were not for him in later life but might be allowable for others). As the Report makes plain, our knowledge of the causes of sexual orientation is limited. Faced as we are with the need to deepen our understanding of sexuality which balances affirmation of God’s creation with proper restraint about its abuse, we would be well-advised not to claim greater wisdom than we have nor to seek to impose our own strongly held views on others whose views, different from our own, are held as strongly.

4. As the Conference seeks to come to a mind about ways forward in the light of the report, the Faith and Order Committee appeals to the Church to seek to discern (through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) how the Spirit is leading us, recognizing that, not for the first time, the people of God are called to live with the pain of their differences.

(Agenda 1993, pp.249-250)

THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT (1994)

CONTENTS

Introduction

Part 1 Characteristics and Origins of the New Age Movement

- I Characteristics
- II Origins

Part 2 New Age Perceptions of Creation: A Christian Response

Part 3 Humankind, Salvation and the Person of Christ: A Christian Response

- I Humankind and Salvation
- II The Person and Work of Christ

Part 4 Missiological and Pastoral Questions Raised by the New Age Movement

Part 5 Concluding Reflections

Resolution

Recommended Reading

INTRODUCTION

1 The Conference of 1990 referred to the Faith and Order Committee the following Memorial (M.8) for consideration and report not later than the Conference of 1992:

The Pickering (29/22) Circuit Meeting (Present 32. Vote: unanimous) request that Conference examine the New Age Movement with respect to its theological content and socio-political ambitions, in order that the Methodist people may receive guidelines as to its compatibility with the Christian faith and Methodist doctrines.

2 In 1992 the Faith and Order Committee expressed its regret that, for a number of reasons, it was not in a position to present a recommended reply to the Memorial, and requested that it be allowed a further two years in which to prepare its report. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a reply to Memorial M.8 to the Conference of 1994.

PART 1: CHARACTERISTICS AND ORIGINS OF THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

I Characteristics

- 3 New Age ideas are all around us on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines. We meet them in the shopping place, possibly – depending on the work we do – during training. **They are becoming all-pervasive.** This all-pervasiveness is both characteristic in itself and a fact which has arisen from other characteristics. While there are certain noted centres of the movement, particularly Findhorn and Glastonbury, there is no focal point from which it sprung, no single co-ordinating centre – instead there are hundreds of ‘centres’, increasingly interconnected by computers. Similarly, while there are some significant people involved (Marilyn Ferguson, Sir George Trevelyan, David Spangler among them) there is no leader, no inspirational central figure – it is “a leaderless but powerful network” (Ferguson, quoted in Chandler 1988, p229). It does not consist of an established set of doctrines which can be set down and examined by those who might consider ‘joining’ it – in fact, any thought of dogma is anathema to it.
- 4 ‘Movement’ is a good word to describe it since **it is in a state of continuous change.** As John Drane puts it, “Understanding the New Age is like trying to wrestle with a jelly” (Drane 1991, p40), precisely because it is amorphous and eclectic in nature, drawing into itself so many of the new movements and developments, like particle physics and alternative medicine, as well as a range of ancient patterns of thought and belief: “Anything and everything that has potential for promoting a change of thinking among the world’s people will be sucked up and utilized as we move relentlessly towards the Age of Aquarius” (Drane 1991, p45). In publishing terms, it is one of the major growth areas, some 25% of all new ‘religious’ publishing coming under its umbrella in this country alone.
- 5 To try to study the New Age is to experience the intellectual equivalent of the sense of drowning – yet certain distinguishing and cohesive features can be made out, like figures emerging from the haze. We mention four:
- 6 (i) The most prominent and most important of these is **the emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the material.** In the New Age, people are rediscovering a sense of the spirit and the concept of the soul, a belief that there is more to them than just their material bodies. Together with this has come an increasing sense of a spiritual world which is ‘out there’, which can be communicated with directly, through channelling of spirit guides, through trances and mediums. Reincarnation has become a fashionable belief, out-of-body and near-death experiences are openly spoken of, past lives are recalled. There has been a steadily growing interest in the subtleties of Eastern faiths, practices and mysticism, and there has been increasing involvement in the occult. At the popular level, films such as *Star Wars* and *E.T.* show interest in the possibility of life forms beyond this planet and of forces beyond our comprehension, while *Ghost* echoes resurgence in the hope of a life beyond this one. But there is more than just a sense of the individual having spiritual depth and existence: the universe is the scene of great forces which can influence people’s lives if only they are harnessed and directed through such things as crystals and pyramids, or discerned through astrology. Linked into

this is the New Physics, where matter is declared to be no more and all that is, is a pattern of electrical and magnetic forces.

- 7 A major part of that sense of life forces beyond themselves has been the growth among many of a belief in the 'Gaia' hypothesis, the concept of Mother Earth as a living entity carefully nurturing the total world environment and maintaining a stability if humankind will only attune to its needs. As well as being part of the upsurge in interest in matters spiritual, this focus on Mother Earth has also been part of the shift towards an emphasis on female rather than male values and thought. Many feminist thinkers are involved, viewing men "as brutalizing women through sexual violence and pornographic exploitation, and dominating them through a stern, overbearing, male 'sky-god'" (Chandler 1988, p121): for them, the religiously-sanctioned domination of nature is of a piece with the exploitation of women.
- 8 There is a belief that "We have been conditioned to operate through only one half of our brain – the left half, which does the thinking – while the right half, which majors on feeling and perception, has been left undeveloped and immobilized" (Drane 1991, p68). The view that the way forward lies not with conflict and competition (though interestingly, certain aspects of New Age thinking have been incorporated into management training and techniques) but rather with co-operation and harmony, whether that be global or individual, has taken increasing hold.
- 9 (ii) So, **harmony and the related concepts of unity and wholeness, are also crucial to the New Age:** "This wholeness encompasses self, others, ideas . . . You are joined to a great Self . . . And because that Self is inclusive, you are joined to all others'" (Ferguson, quoted in Drane 1991, p70). Health is wholeness, a harmony between mind and body, a oneness with the universal spiritual energy, which can be achieved through meditation, though the use of such practices as aroma, colour or cymatic therapy, through iridology, reflexology and essential oils, through acupuncture and acupressure which restore balance to the forces within the body.
- 10 That need for harmony between people and omnipresent spiritual energy is a particular thrust of the New Age, a need for people to 'attune' themselves and come together, in 'harmonic convergence', to stave off the disasters our world is otherwise coming to. Underlying much of this thought is Pantheism, the belief that 'All is One. We are all One. All is God. And we are God'.
- 11 (iii) This leads to another emphasis of the New Age – one which brings it close to the dominant political thought of the 1980s – **the emphasis on the individual and the individual's right or ability to select from all that is on offer the mix that is appropriate for them.** Not only is this a right, but it is also a responsibility: "There are no victims in this life or any other. No mistakes. No wrong paths. No winners. No losers. Accept that and then take responsibility for making your life what you want it to be." (Chandler 1988, pp28-29). This springs from the view that there is no reality outside yourself – 'You create your own reality' is a New Age slogan. Also, it is in tune with the New Age emphasis on positive thinking: ". . . if we all create our own reality, then by focussing on wholeness and health, instead of worrying about disasters and failures, we can together create something entirely new, that will be better than what has gone before" (Drane 1991, p42). Educational thought follows this line with its emphasis on 'confluent' education, which 'posits the

equality of individual values because everyone has the wisdom of the universe within'. It also raises questions of good and evil, of right and wrong behaviour. Evil is an illusion, so there are only alternative ways of reaction: what counts is that one is properly attuned to the cosmic forces.

- 12 One manifestation of the New Age Movement's emphasis on individualism is that, by and large, it encourages political quietism. Those writers who put forward a 'conspiracy theory', arguing that it wishes to take over the world politically, seriously over-estimate its structural resources. New Agers tend to be individualists, arguably self-absorbed to a high degree. One result of this is that the commitment of many (though not all) New Agers to social and economic change is slight: many of its members have prospered during the 'yuppy' years of the 1980s.
- 13 (iv) The final major feature of the New Age to be noted is **its hopefulness**. Coming to an end, it claims, is the current astrological age, the Age of Pisces, the age of the fish which was inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ and which has been characterised by division, conflict, war, injustice, hatred, bigotry and mistrust, all of which are seen to be related to the division between God and humankind demanded by organised religion. Approaching is the age of Aquarius, the age of the water-bearer, a figure who symbolises healing and restoration, the promise of new life and the growth of peace, harmony and wholeness. This will be "a time when people and God will be reunified, when there will be a healing of all the separation and an assertion of the fact that we are all part of our natural environment." (Drane 1991, p42). Sir George Trevelyan issues a warning in that there is, he claims, "a sense of urgency. We are approaching a crucial turning point, and this generation is involved in a great task. Either Man learns the true healing impulse of blending consciously with the powers of light, or he will plunge himself into disaster and catastrophe" (Bloom 1991, p33), but he speaks mainly of a 'note of joy' and with great confidence: "the immediate present is a time of profound growth and mind-opening – a resurgence of the spirit linking individuals and injecting fresh impulses into man's understanding . . . We are truly involved with a Second Coming" (Bloom 1991, p33). Such in outline only, are some of the characteristics of the New Age.

II Origins

- 14 It is helpful to review some of the sources of the Movement, to look at its growth and consider its history: New Age is a flourishing tree and, like all plants that flourish, **it has roots which are both widespread and deep**. At first sight, however, it would seem to be a phenomenon of the recent decades only, coming into existence with the approaching end of this millennium and the consequent awareness that now is a significant time in which to be living. The first distinctive 'counter-cultural' movements of the post-war era came in the 50s. Given that this was a period of conflict still, between rival gangs of Teddy-boys and Greasers, between Hoods and Socs, it would seem to be part of the age of Pisces, but it was also a time when interest in Eastern faiths and philosophies began to emerge into the public arena through the fascination with Zen. New Age attitudes came to the fore in the following decade with 'flower-power', the emergence of the Hippies, the emphasis on love – essentially 'free' – as the way forward, the production of the film "Hair" and its central theme that "this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius", the

prominence of the Beatles and their (brief) espousal of the East in the shape of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

- 15 Other Eastern gurus, such as Swami Muktananda and the teenage Maharaj Ji, “Lord of the Universe” and overseer of the Divine Light Mission, emerged on either side of the Atlantic. That in the 90s there is a particularly fervent development of New Age thought can be explained, not only by the prospect of the approaching end of the millennium, but also by the passing of the youth of the 60s into their time of middle-age: material needs satisfied, children produced, careers well established, they are turning in large numbers to the search for greater depths in their lives and a rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual which they have ignored or set aside for the last thirty years. Their thinking is fed by such seminal works as Marilyn Ferguson’s *The Aquarian Conspiracy* and Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, produced in the 1970s, and New Age ideas are made common property through the media that features, for instance, Shirley Maclaine’s experiences and the New Age music of John Denver.
- 16 If such has been the emergence of the New Age into the public arena since the war, **there was a steady growth of ideas – ‘root systems’ – taking place before it and stretching back well into the last century.** A significant name is that of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (writer of *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*) who, together with her close companion, Colonel Olcott, founded the Theosophical Society in 1875: this was an occult organisation into which she and Olcott imported their own brand of Hinduism after their visit to India in the latter half of the 1870s. Blavatsky has been described as “a godmother of the New Age movement” because “she paved the way for contemporary transcendental meditation, Zen, Hare Krishnas; yoga and vegetarianism; karma and reincarnation; swamis, yogis and gurus.” (Chandler 1988, p47). 1893 saw the establishment of the World Parliament of Religions as part of the World Fair held in Chicago: this brought a flood of Eastern figures to America and so made eastern mysticism widely available to Americans for the first time. The centenary of that date – 1993 – was designated a ‘Year of Interreligious Understanding’ and, as Seddon points out (1990, p7), it “is perhaps not entirely coincidental that astrologers regard 1993 as a propitious year when, for the first time since 1821, Uranus meets Neptune just over halfway through Capricorn.” The earlier part of this century saw the contribution of several significant writers – the Afrikaaner, Johanna Brandt, is credited with giving the first coherent presentation of the ‘new age’ between “The Millennium” of 1916 and “The Paraclete” or “Coming World Mother” of 1936.
- 17 Charles Williams was fascinated with the occult and a successful, popular writer – but perhaps the most prominent of these was Alice Bailey, who wrote in the 30s and 40s. It is she who is credited with first using the title ‘New Age’ and who spoke – in *The Way of the Disciple* – in terms of a shift in the approach to God, away from “those who look back to the past, who hang on to old ways, the ancient theologies, and the reactionary methods of finding truth . . . people who recognise authority, whether that of a prophet, a bible or theologies . . . who prefer obedience to imposed authority” to those, small in number, who are an “inner group of lovers of God, the intellectual mystics, the knowers of reality who belong to no one religion or organisation, but who regard themselves as members of the Church universal and as ‘members one

of another’.” It is these latter who, “in the fullness of time . . . will so stimulate and energise the thoughts and souls of men that the New Age will be ushered in by an outpouring of love, knowledge and harmony of God himself.” (All quoted in Bloom 1991, pp22-23).

- 18 But **the deepest roots of all** – as is clear from some of the influences mentioned above – go back far further than the last century, in fact **go back for thousands of years**: “The new culture is the consummation of all previous cultures, for only the combined energy of our entire cultural history is equal to the new quantum leap of evolution”. (“The Independent Weekend”, 30 Sept 1989, quoted in Seddon 1990, p8). Perhaps it is the greatest irony of the ‘New Age’ that so many of its significant features and ideas are so ancient, because here is a movement that draws variously on Buddhism and Hinduism, on Zen, Taoism and Paganism, on Egyptian, Greek, Aztec and Mayan mythologies and sees the re-birth of one of the oldest Christian heresies, Gnosticism (though it was more than that, being a widespread phenomenon in many cults and faith-systems during the early years of Christianity), which maintains that “humans are destined for reunion with the divine essence from which they sprang”. (Chandler 1988, pp47-48). The language is new, particularly that which draws on modern psychology and science; the essence of the age is the renewal of the ancient. If that is true, then a species of its reverse is also true, that the ‘New Age’ involves the overthrow of ideas and patterns of life that have developed in more recent centuries, or at least offers a challenge to them. Some of these warrant closer examination.
- 19 Certainly **New Agers have turned to developments that have taken place in scientific thought this century to support their beliefs**. These developments present significant challenges to the assumptions of scientific and rationalist thought as it has proceeded from ‘the Enlightenment’, which, according to Sir George Trevelyan, “in many respects, was anything but that” (Bloom 1991, p31). That the Enlightenment was given that title indicates very clearly how the ferment of new ideas that arose was viewed: the ‘primitive’ ideas of the Middle Ages and before, were pushed aside by it; belief in a flat earth was replaced by acceptance that the world was a globe; despite the initial objections of the Church, a heliocentric replaced a geocentric universe, this discovery single-handedly dismantling medieval ideas about concentric spheres and undermining the ‘layer’ concepts of creation with God in the remotest heavens. The French philosopher and mathematician, Descartes (1596-1650), introduced an analytical approach to thinking, whereby thoughts and problems were broken down into smaller pieces and then reassembled in a logical manner.
- 20 Newton (1642-1727) as well as discovering gravity, produced a model of the universe which depended on precise mathematical laws and exact relationships of time and space. Eventually laws of nature were formulated that gave a rational explanation of phenomena which previously had seemed to be miraculous. Following hard on such ideas came rapid progress which produced the Industrial Revolution and, with it, a rapid spread of western culture throughout the world.
- 21 Implicit in all these ideas are certain presuppositions about matter, the earth and the universe. In a rather simplistic way, the universe came to be viewed by many as mechanistic and subject to eternal laws established by God, which

meant that experiments conducted under identical conditions would produce identical results. Everything within that universe was knowable to the rational mind, in particular the disembodied mind of the scientist who would 'make observations'.

- 22 Developments this century – particularly what has come to be known as the New Physics – have challenged many of these assumptions and been eagerly gathered into the fold of New Age belief. The combination of Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum theory, chaos theory and the 'Big Bang' theory has produced a scientific upheaval. In popular and often uncritical and mistaken forms, many New Agers have used – arguably abused – 'the New Science'. In particular, most New Agers argue that the earth is not a dead globe but a living entity – hence the name 'Gaia', the Greek Earth goddess also known as Ge. She has given her name to the sciences of geography and geology, and "the hypothesis that the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of constituent parts" (Lovelock, in Bloom 1991, p166).
- 23 For New Agers, the machine metaphor is no longer acceptable in a universe begun by a 'big bang' – preferable is the image of an embryo, growing and unfolding. The scientist is no longer seen as a disembodied mind, the detached observer. Rather, scientists are members of cultural and social groups, their observations are not independent of the minds that produce them, they participate in what they observe.
- 24 It is that connection between the new science and the spiritual which leads us to the second major area which calls for closer examination – **that whole area of the spiritual, of faith and belief.** Capra, one of the earlier New Age scientists, makes specific connections between scientific developments and characteristics of Eastern mysticism: "The conception of physical things and phenomena as transient manifestations of an under-lying fundamental entity is not only a basic element of quantum field theory, but also a basic element of the Eastern world view. Like Einstein, the Eastern mystics consider this underlying entity as the only reality: all its phenomenal manifestations are seen as transitory and illusory" (quoted in Bloom 1991, p156). Similarly, "In spite of using terms like empty and void, the Eastern sages make it clear that they do not mean ordinary emptiness when they talk about Brahman, Sunyata and Tao, but, on the contrary, a Void which has an infinite creative potential. Thus, the void of the Eastern mystics can easily be compared with the quantum field of sub-atomic physics . . . Like the sub-atomic world of the physicist, the phenomenal world of the Eastern mystic is a world of samsara – of continuous birth and death" (Bloom 1991, p157).
- 25 But the Eastern world view had begun to penetrate the West some time before modern science became alive to these and other such connections. As has been shown above, with the Chicago World Fair of 1893, and before that through the Theosophical Society of Madam Blavatsky, Eastern religions began to find a foothold in predominantly Christian cultures. With the increasing pluralism of the twentieth century, that foothold has become larger and firmer and the New Age has eagerly absorbed a range of thoughts from such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism.

- 26 **New Age spirituality has about it the quality of the supermarket shelf;** it draws on a diversity of spiritual tradition and includes among its sources Transcendentalism and Spiritualism, native American religions, Neo-Paganism, Druidism and Goddess-Worshippers. This has allowed it to give added credence to the channelling of spirit guides. New life has been breathed into astrology and Pantheism has come to be seen as a uniting, monistic, spiritual principle – hence ‘The Force’ or “The High C, High Consciousness or God-self” which is “the innate wisdom within all of us, where we are all one” (Kystal, quoted in Bloom 1991, p195). It is this supermarket quality which has led to a revival of Gnosticism, until recently the preserve of only a few specialist scholars.
- 27 Gnosticism, the belief that there are two worlds – this one, dominated by materialism and corruption, and another which is dominated by ‘God’ and where true spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment may be found – has proved especially attractive.
- 28 That such a belief should resurface is both a sign of the shift that has taken, and is taking, place in Western thought and a warning to the Church that the path it has trodden since the time of Schleiermacher – the path which has produced much rationalist and scholarly theology, which in the sixties allowed theologians to claim, like Nietzsche, that ‘God is dead’, the path which has allowed the church to be part of “the new, self-confident, all-pervading worldview dominated by the progress of science, reason, technology and materialism” (Drane 1991, p53) – is rapidly becoming a cul-de-sac. New ways of understanding the faith, ways which emphasise spirituality, are coming forward. The fastest growing ‘section’ of the church in the Western world is the charismatic movement, a movement which comes very close to many New Agers in its fervency.
- 29 The Catholic Church, especially, though not solely, is re-discovering the meditative spirituality of pre-Enlightenment times in such figures as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The former Dominican, Matthew Fox, has become a champion of creation spirituality, which moves from an “‘I think therefore I am’ philosophy to a ‘Creation begets therefore we are’ philosophy” (Fox 1991, p102), a spirituality which “celebrates the whole person – right brain and left brain, body and mind, soul and spirit . . . feeling and judgement” (Fox 1991, p103-104). Fox has not, however, remained in good standing in his Church.
- 30 Christ is being presented increasingly as a Cosmic Christ, “a cosmic principle, a spiritual presence whose quality infuses and appears in various ways in all the religions and philosophies that uplift humanity and seek unity with spirit” (Spangler, quoted in Groothuis 1990, p222). The western world has been desiccated by rationality and materialism. There is need and demand for a re-emphasis on the spiritual, and for a theology that eschews arid intellectualism but does not shirk serious reflection upon matters of contemporary relevance and urgency.
- 31 New Age beliefs are, by and large, shaped by an attractiveness to prosperous or relatively prosperous people in the Western world. It is not in their interest to radically change, still less overthrow existing political and social structures. For this reason, this report contends that the ‘socio-political ambitions’ of most New Agers are negligible.

- 32 Its theological content is to be taken much more seriously, as both a challenge and a stimulus to orthodox Christian teaching. The nebulous, disparate and ego-centred characteristics of the quests of many New Agers underscore the need for Christians to have an adequate ecclesiology, or doctrine of the Church, as a framework for (among other things) worship and Christian nurture. The wide variety of often incoherent beliefs prevalent among New Agers indicates the need for Christians to be grounded in their faith and knowledge of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- 33 But two matters stand out as particularly important because versions of them are so often found in New Age writing. The first is the doctrine of creation, and the second is the person and work of Christ. Parts 2 and 3 will examine these areas in relation to the New Age Movement.

PART 2: NEW AGE PERCEPTIONS OF CREATION – A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

- 34 Because perceptions of creation are central to New Age thinking, this is the first major area to which we must respond. For this limited purpose we can identify three major cultural/perceptual issues in relation to which these attitudes have been formulated, in however loose conceptual shape.
- 35 (i) **There is invariably little affinity with, and often antipathy towards, certain strands of traditional monotheistic, including Christian, accounts of creation.** Understanding creation as the purposive act of an omnipotent personal Creator (usually depicted in the sources as male) who remains ‘outside’ or ontologically discontinuous with the natural world and who decrees that humans are to exercise ‘domination’ over the earth is a problematic concept for New Agers. That the creative Spirit ‘broods over the face of the deep’, that at each stage of creation earth’s life was pronounced ‘good’, that humans are to bear the divine ‘image and likeness’ and therefore are to exercise, as the divine representatives, lordship within the time/space realm, and that they are to be as vegetarian as the animals in the original divine intention – these themes may well find resonance among New Agers.
- 36 However, those New Agers with more ecological commitment find the anthropocentrism of the Genesis I account of creation, in which humans are to ‘dominate the earth’ and all other living beings, a far from earth-friendly doctrine. ‘Christians’, said Lynn White as early as 1967, in a widely influential essay reprinted in innumerable journals and anthologies, ‘bear a huge burden of guilt for the destruction of the earth’. This is primarily because of their espousal of this divine decree to the human race to master the earth. New Age ecologists look for an account of human relationship with other life-forms in creation more in terms of mutually dependent co-equals sharing together in earth’s life. Even the more clear emphasis, in the Genesis II account, on human ‘caring’ for earth (by an Adam who is shaped by God from earth’s substance, then into whom is breathed living spirit), if interpreted in terms of ‘stewardship’ of creation, is still problematic for the very committed ecologist.
- 37 To some extent, it may be the lack in many traditional Christian accounts of creation of the presence of the continuously creative Spirit of God as the life immanent within the whole creative process and of the cosmic Christ as the

centre-point through whom all things cohere that has made those accounts so unacceptable to many ecologically sensitive New Agers, as well as, indeed, to many Christians.

38 There does, however, seem to be a perceptual divide on at least two points here:-

(a) Any Christian doctrine of creation will need to be emphatically theocentric (as the Genesis account and other biblical pointers are) – at least affirming that creation derives solely from the good purpose and creative power of God, effected through and finding its integrating point in Christ. For New Agers, however, cosmic life appears as a self-enclosed system within which impersonal forces affect the direction of events, rather than the creation of a personal, purposive Creator, the transcendent source of as well as the immanent power within cosmic life. This provides the framework for the New Age tendency to see the spiritual powers flowing through cosmic life as controllable and manipulable by those sufficiently initiated into New Age esoteric wisdom. A number of New Age practices, therefore, look like magical acts or occult arts performed within this self-enclosed system and providing the secret keys to its successful functioning.

(b) However much an ecologically sensitive Christian account of creation may wish to emphasize the participant character of the human presence among creaturely life and the need to contain the arrogant aggression that has proved so destructive of nature, the responsibility to care for the rest of creation implied in the bearing of the divine image that is distinctive of human nature is inescapable. The New Age reluctance to accept any such distinctive role for humans again indicates a further perceptual divide. On the other hand, where New Age thought is linked with ecologically-sensitive developments in our time, there is a radical rejection of the view (from which mainstream Christianity has found difficulty in distancing itself) that Earth's rich resources are there to be exploited by humans to provide unlimited consumer-products to satisfy human wants. New Age generally is not consumer-orientated, it often proposes a radical counter-culture.

39 (ii) **A second self-distinguishing issue for New Age thought is modern techno-scientific secular culture.** Descartes made a radical distinction between rational, analytical mind and insentient, objectifiable nature – perceived as an inanimate mechanism rather than a living organism. This led him to use pointedly violent imagery about the way in which mind, and therefore the human enterprise, relates to nature.

40 Rational knowledge is essentially power, enabling the 'hounding', 'binding', 'enslaving' of nature by the scientist, who is to 'torture' secrets from her. Mastery, possession and exploitation of nature to rational human ends were key concepts in this Cartesian world view, (called Cartesian, because it was based on the philosophy of Descartes), even though the concept of God was also deemed necessary for the functioning both of the rationality of mind and the mechanism of nature.

41 In many respects the refinement of this early philosophy in the 18th century, served only to perpetuate the mind-nature dualism. Even the emergence of biologically determined evolutionary theory in the 19th century did not bring about a fundamental 'paradigm shift' in western cultural attitudes towards

nature – in spite of a mild resurgence of nature-romanticism in some cultural circles. Rational mind, though in some sense emerging from nature, was still seen as immeasurably superior to, able to transcend and objectively review, the preceding evolutionary process. New Age thought has vigorously rejected this Cartesian dualist world view and presents itself as a radical alternative to techno-scientific secularity. Its forms of expression often appear anti-intellectual and also anti-science as science is understood today. However, it is also true that modern biological science has largely determined the emergence of the ecological sciences often linked with New Age. And a few biologists have shown decided affinity with aspects of New Age thought, (e.g Rupert Sheldrake). In general, New Agers vigorously reject the view of reality defined by modern technology and science, traditionally understood:

- 42 a) As against any mind/nature dualism, along with other ramifications of such a basic dualism, New Age emphasises the interlocking inter-dependence of mind and nature. Generally, a wholistic (which we spell in this alternative form, to emphasise the New Agers' emphasis on the whole-ness of all) account of all the constituent elements of being is given. True, there may also be an emphasis on the pre-eminence of a spiritual dimension, or some higher level of consciousness. But material nature and bodily sensation will be seen in some integral way as instrumental to such a spiritual dimension or emergent consciousness. Frequently New Agers refer to the Yin-Yang character of the universe which does not imply a dualistic system. Rather it means the eternal balance of opposites. Equilibrium is the key.
- 43 b) New Agers often seek alternative forms of healing, either on the grounds that Western allopathic medical practice fails to treat the sick person in a wholistic way, or because some more esoteric view of the body's constitution is held. A quite common New Age view, for example, is that the body and its inner selfhood is an integrated micro-cosmic form of the macro-cosmic universe, a concept that can have widespread ramifications for our understanding of the relation of self to body, of individual person to the rest of creation and, of course, for our understanding of personal wellbeing and healing.
- 44 c) New Age claims that modern scientific knowledge, including medical practice and its effective technological skills, have largely been based on the scientist's ability to isolate more and more irreducible entities in the natural world, and thus control that world. True knowledge of our world and our place in the world, however, needs to recognise the interwoven character of all things and should seek their equilibrium and integration. The practice of yoga is often one of the ways in which it is believed such integration can be achieved.
- 45 d) While techno-science assumes the power of the rational intellect to effect control of things, New Agers claim we need to find harmony with a wide range of supra-mundane energies flowing through cosmic life, and potentially able to flow through bodily life. The numerous ways in which such cosmic energies are thought to be channelled and utilised include astrology, meditative techniques and yogic practices, spirit-media and 'channelling' etc.
- 46 e) New Agers urge people to create their own reality. This implies an individualistic but also, in some ways, an idealistic attitude to reality. Here, though, there is a certain ambivalence: the New Age certainly emphasises the

need for each individual to work things out creatively within his/her own being, but community reflection and community living also finds emphasis, for it is believed that alienation of body from mind also leads to other forms of alienation, of individual from community and male from female.

- 47 **iii) A third cultural tradition in relation to which New Age thought about creation has been formulated is that of Eastern religion, some aspects of which have already been referred to. Others include:**
- 48 a) The concept of all in one and the oneness of all. In a sophisticated form this is the core theme of the Advaitic (or non-dualist) system or 'vision' within the most prominent Hindu religious philosophy, Vedanta. There this 'all in oneness' means that in an ultimate sense, there is only pure oneness of being. In other important schools of Vedanta, rather than pure identity of being or of consciousness it is relationship that is seen as ultimate reality, clearly an ontology closer to a traditional Christian perspective. New Agers generally are ambiguous on this vedantic distinction, merely affirming that divine life, or elevated consciousness, is somehow interwoven with all cosmic life.
- 49 b) Some form of deluded consciousness, often affirmed by New Agers. This corresponds directly to the doctrine of maya or 'illusion', expounded in many and various ways within the different Hindu schools of Vedanta. Some affirm that all our perceptions of separate objects in the world are caused by maya; they are not real in the way that either our selfhood or the Great Self of all is real. Others affirm the exact opposite; because all that the Great Self by his power of maya has wonderfully created, must be real, all created objects are as real as that Self. This intra-Hindu debate has been very fierce, a point entirely ignored by many New Agers.
- 50 c) The Hindu idea of divine emanation. The primal image of the great creative Being transforming itself into the manifold form of our created universe was deeply embedded in ancient Hindu mythology. The non-dualist found this problematic, impossibly threatening to divine transcendence, for such self-emanation can only appear to take place. There cannot be the real emanation of the Great Self into the multiform life of the world. There is a similar problem with the related idea of creation as divine play (Lila). Again there are several ways of interpreting this within the Hindu traditions. In all, however, it implies that God creates without compulsion, is spontaneous and free in every way. In that sense, creation is also said to be without prior motive, though this does not entail lack of meaning and value in creation. Although New Agers make reference to the ideas both of a divine self-emanation and divine playfulness, there is little evidence of recognition of how these beliefs have been developed and debated within Hinduism.
- 51 d) The very primal concept of the cosmos as Earth Mother. This vision of all living things as enfolded in the encompassing being of the sacred Mother who gives birth to and nurtures all life, so that all life-forms share her sacred being, is found within much Eastern religious life as well as in many other primal traditions. Thus it has often been declared in primal cultures that any human intrusion into or destruction of these life-forms that share the Mother's sacredness, makes it necessary to ask the Mother's pardon, or to seek to propitiate the concerned Spirit of the place. New Agers clearly see such an attitude as far more desirable than the unbridled exploitation resulting from the de-sacralised licence of modern industry.

- 52 e) Karma, another freely used New Age word taken from Indian religious thought, being a term basic to almost every Indian religious system. Literally meaning 'action', it refers to the inescapable result of every action, good or bad, the fruits of which the eternal individual soul is literally bound to experience at some stage in its endless journey through birth, life, death and birth again. The cycle is endless until some transcendent factor can break the chain and set the soul free (moksha).
- 53 Karma thus has a creative role, for it is karma that determines in what form the soul is to take each new embodiment. While this is a concept that has provided a way of coping with tragedy and suffering, even a way of seeing cosmic life as coherently interlinked, it can and often has been used to justify all manner of unjust and oppressive situations. In fringe New Age writing, it has even been used to justify the Jewish holocaust. New Agers have also taken on board the doctrine necessarily accompanying karma, that is the doctrine of a cycle of rebirths in order that the soul may eventually realise its true destiny. However, whilst Hindus tie this in to a belief in cause and effect in a moral universe, New Agers believe that they can choose their own, upwardly mobile, form of future reincarnation.
- 54 f) Avatara, literally meaning 'descent', which refers to the stories in Hindu scriptures of special divine embodiments on earth, in animal as well as in human form, who in each age are believed to have saved the world from calamity and chaos. The meaning of these Avataras differs greatly in different Hindu theological systems. In some of them, Gurus, those specially enlightened teachers able to initiate the seeker into the esoteric truth of things, are also seen as Avataras. This resonates with the New Age idea of various outstanding figures specially empowered to direct the world away from impending chaos and guide such souls as are responsive to their influence into a new level of cosmic consciousness. Some New Agers speak of the descent of Christ-consciousness, others of Buddha-consciousness in such Avataras. And there are numerous other kinds of extra terrestrial beings and powers thought from time to time to enter into and affect the course of world events.
- 55 g) The complex chronology in Eastern religious traditions, in which many ages are structured as part of the creative process in the cosmic cycle. Within any series of ages there is also the idea of gradations of moral and spiritual progress (or decline), perhaps leading up to an ultimate age of enlightenment. We have noted that in New Age thought the present age is often described as that of Aquarius, the cosmic water-carrier deemed to signify the healing and restoration which will be characteristic of the coming New Age to be realised in the new millennium. A millennialist strand is strong in New Age thought. The fact that Aquarius is both one of the heavenly bodies and one of the signs of the Zodiac, reminds us of the reality for New Agers of astrology and the efficacy of celestial bodies – sun, moon, planets, stars – in determining human destinies, though this is but one of the numerous ways unseen forces are believed to be at work in cosmic life. While Persia may have been the original home of astrological science, at least some of its influences in western life – quite apart from the New Age Movement – is through its very important role in Eastern religion.
- 56 h) Meditation and the various techniques developed for focusing the mind and harnessing spiritual energy, which in Eastern religions, as in New Age

practice, are an important way of controlling the influences at work within cosmic life. Different forms of yogic meditational technique provide one genre of such practices.

- 57 Frequently such meditation today is focussed on world peace and the quietening of aggressive passions – and the latter has always been a key motive in meditational practice in most Eastern religions. It should be noted that yogic practice is not locked into and dependent upon any particular spiritual theory. It is capable of adoption within a wide range of accompanying theories, non-theistic and theistic. Literally, it simply means the ‘yoking’ of the mind (in its tendency to be distracted by sensory objects). Many Christians, in India and elsewhere, have found spiritual benefit through a distinctively Christian practice of yoga.
- 58 i) The fact that a number of Eastern religious systems – Buddhism, Jainism, Ritual Brahmanism, Early Sankhya, Taoism – have no significant place for a Creator. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, cosmic life is thought of as in a state of permanent flux, with nothing having substantial continuing being. While New Age thought may not be directly or explicitly indebted to any one of the Eastern religious systems in this case, as we noted earlier, New Agers do not easily accommodate the concept of a personal Creator God. When the male imagery so strongly prominent in the traditional Judeo-Christian depiction of the Creator is transposed to female imagery, the creation concept does generally become more acceptable to a New Age world view.

Conclusion

- 59 Therefore, in relation to the Christian doctrine of creation, the major positive and negative points raised by New Age thinkers are as follows:-
- 60 i) New Age presents a challenge to numerous directions taken in modernity with which Christians have gone along. For New Age is fundamentally pro-earth and ecologically sensitive, where the dominant culture has been ecologically destructive and economically consumer-orientated. Creation is seen as having worth in itself, not merely as humanly useful.
- 61 ii) But New Age thought goes beyond affirming that creation is ‘good’. It tends to see Nature as sacred and replete with sacral powers. Mother-Earth has recovered some of her lost status as primal Earth-Goddess incorporating innumerable cosmic powers. Cosmic life thus tends to become a self-enclosed system, within which initiation into esoteric, semi-magical arts becomes necessary.
- 62 iii) This inevitably weakens faith in a personal creator who has a purpose for creation. This is a key Christian belief, even though it may be desirable to include female imagery within that concept, and however disastrous the male-dominated aggression towards nature may have been in western civilization. When the reaction to human aggression rejects any key role or responsible status for humans in relation to the natural world of which we are a part, then we deny our God-given role as those who bear in a special way the divine image.
- 63 iv) However, New Age’s wholistic understanding of the human as an integrated being of body, mind and spirit, with the health of humans being

dependent on just such integration within, as well as on harmony with the eco-world of which we are part, is another necessary emphasis which all contemporary people must take seriously. Indeed, attunement to a radically new way of thinking and feeling – about ourselves and our world – and attunement to a new life-style appropriate to this new world view is central to being a New Ager. While this may often be expressed in terms of self-fulfilment and personal integration – rather than in terms of the fulfilling of the good purpose of a loving Creator, the challenge to change is clear.

- 64 v) In some circles this is even expressed in terms of social, economic, political and ecological change. There is even a kind of eschatological expectation similar in some respects to Christian hope for a changed world, a new age which must surely come.
- 65 vi) Within other New Age circles, however, there is a tendency to think of the evils in our present world as rather illusory. All we need is a new consciousness and all evils will disappear. This is very different from the biblical call to struggle against evil, injustice and oppression. There is a danger, too, in the related idea of complex levels of cosmic life through which levels the soul is to work out its destiny as it moves on to an even higher grade of consciousness. Clearly this weakens the critical, cutting edge of the ethical challenge in this one world of which all life is part, and within which all are interdependent.
- 66 vii) Finally, a related aspect in New Age thought, equally problematic from a Christian perspective, is the often naive, seemingly indiscriminate and eclectic acceptance of esoteric and archaic wisdom from a wide range of sources. Creative and critical dialogical interaction, from a well-grounded position, with various religious traditions is desirable. Indiscriminate use of concepts and practices drawn from such diverse sources makes for an esoteric hotchpotch, which New Age writing often, but not always, is. Insofar as coherent response to such an amorphous movement is possible, critical dialogue by Christians is what is needed.

PART 3: HUMANKIND, SALVATION AND THE PERSON OF CHRIST: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

I Humankind and its Salvation

- 67 New Agers tend to regard human beings as essentially themselves constituting God. This can be very affirming of human individuals, giving them sense of their own infinite worth and of their potential to be the most creative, well integrated and successful people imaginable. Much traditional Christian preaching which begins with people's natural sinful state, can create in them a debilitating sense of guilt; in a society where immoral behaviour and shady practices attract a good deal of admiration, being reminded of their alienation from their true being (their immaturity) might shame people out of moral inertia much more effectively than being reminded of their sin. In the Gospel story it was because Jesus first demonstrated how much he loved and valued him, that Zaccheus repented.
- 68 However, Zaccheus did repent. The New Age perspective does not recognise the reality and tenacity of sin and evil. Moreover, the New Ager's concern to

develop her or his potential to the full can become a self-centred or even elitist quest. It does not answer the needs of the poor and marginalised of society.

- 69 The Christian message is rather that all of us, secure or insecure, need the personal purposive, creative Being who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians believe that human beings are created in the image of God, not in the sense that they are essentially identifiable with God, 'sparks of the Divine fire', as it were, but in the sense that, though distinct from him as his creatures, they are made to enjoy personal relationships with him and to draw upon his resources of love and goodness to live lives themselves of that same quality.
- 70 New Agers are quite right to remind Christians of the analogical nature of the language of personhood or parenthood when applied to God. They need to be listened to, and learnt from, when they balk at the way calling God 'Father' has encouraged an understanding of him as patriarchal, oppressive and severely authoritarian and how this has often set the tone. Their predilection for using feminine imagery of God, especially 'mother', is an important corrective. The richness of both feminine and masculine (though both alike are analogical) needs to be drawn on sensitively in our talk about God as well as appropriate impersonal imagery.
- 71 At the same time, Christians will not want habitually to refer to God as the life Force, as cosmic Power or Energy, or even as universal Consciousness, as do many New Agers. Thoroughly personal language enforces both the transcendence and immanence of God and God's incarnation in Jesus Christ; it reminds us that while God is much more, he is at least a personal Being, suprapersonal rather than impersonal.
- 72 The Christian message also affirms that the image of God in his human creatures has been vitiated by sin and evil, a state from which we are not able to save ourselves. Christian theology down the centuries has speculated much on the origin of evil, a debate that will doubtless continue. It is, however, noteworthy that the Gospels do not record Jesus as having debated the question; he simply accepted the reality of evil. But one thing is clear from Christian tradition, which is that evil cannot be explained away, in the manner of much New Age thought, as the result of our ignorance, or our inability to see things in the way they really are, essentially good and pure. Also clear is that, whatever we believe about 'Satan', the origin of evil is not to be explained by laying it all at his door, else we lay ourselves open to a dualistic view of the universe with good and evil divinities eternally at war. So there is something suggestive about the way some New Agers see good and evil alike as having their source in God. If this is taken to condone or passively to accept evil situations, then this is something the Christian cannot countenance, but as a way of hinting at the truth that ultimately God takes responsibility for creating a universe within which it was possible for evil to emerge, it is very salutary.
- 73 Christians have sometimes emphasised God's holiness to such an extent that he is said not to be able to look upon evil or abide it in his presence. His attitude to sinful people has then been taken to be one of implacable antagonism instead of compassion and mercy. Seen as thrust out from his very presence like this, instead of being borne by him to redeem it, evil has often been projected on to people who are believed to be so far immersed in it that

they cannot be suffered to live, hence the witch-hunts, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms and holocausts of history. Those New Agers who practise Wicca (popularly known as ‘witchcraft’) may be seriously misled but they are not necessarily satanic. The same inordinate emphasis on the holiness of God to the exclusion of his love has also left many people with a pitiful sense of their own unworthiness and overwhelming guilt.

- 74 The Christian message affirms that all people need salvation, not just enlightenment. We need saving from the tight hold that unbelief and selfishness have on our lives, in short, from sin, not only when it expresses itself in unethical behaviour but even when it masquerades as enlightened self-interest or fulfilment.
- 75 At the same time, God, who reaches out to save us from this, is full of compassion, love and understanding, and does so with full regard for our infinite worth and our place in his purpose for the universe. This is not the place for a full treatment of all the ‘revelatory’ and natural means God uses to reach us even before we respond to him, but it is worth noting that John Wesley regarded such means as the grace of God at work and understood them as able to elicit some response from people for their salvation, even if they had no knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Sermon LXXXV; Letters to Thomas Whitehead and John Mason; Explanatory Notes on the New Testament: On Acts 10:35)
- 76 If New Agers have any doctrine of salvation, it is usually expressed in terms of reincarnation and its attendant concept, karma, a concept we have already mentioned. If the New Age objection to one earthly life per person is that it is unfair for a person’s eternal destiny to be decided on the conduct of one brief life, then it can be countered that God’s generosity towards us is surely not limited to our present existence and that the future life he has in store for us beyond this earth will not be a static one, bereft of growth and all activity. The so-called ‘near-death experiences’ that appeal to the imagination of some New Agers, are shared by an increasing number of people in these days of improved resuscitation methods, and they are nearly all characterised by a vision of glorious light, accompanied by a sense of peace and well-being and a feeling of love. While this should not be allowed to lull anyone into a false sense of security or inhibit their moral seriousness in the present, whatever explanation be given to them, physiological, psychological or spiritual, they are congruous with what Christians believe to be the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ: that we are, for all our sin, objects of the undeserved grace of God.
- 77 It is very important for Christians to stress ‘structural’ sin, as well as individual. The Churches themselves, as well as many other institutions and organisations have often oppressed groups, within and without, and been used to exercise power over people, rather than for them and their liberation. The gospel presents a challenge to institutions and structures; it does not reveal salvation as a mere quest for personal spiritual betterment, as do so many New Age ideals.

II The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

- 78 The Christian message is that Jesus Christ has brought to a sharp focal point in a unique and decisive way this truth about God’s gracious attitude to us, and that in responding to this movement of God towards us in Jesus Christ, we find

the dynamic for repentance and creative living. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is peculiarly equipped for this task in that he has two natures, a human and a divine.

- 79 With the passing centuries, and within different cultures, a variety of models will be used for exploring the meaning of the human and the divine in him and of the relationships between them (even if the language of ‘natures’ is used at all), but there is a consensus that Jesus Christ meets our creaturely need so appropriately because he is one with us, as human as we are, while at the same time, being God with us, able, as he is, to do for us what only the Creator-Redeemer can do.
- 80 Many New Agers also find a place for Jesus Christ in their understanding of reality, but rarely, if at all, does he play the decisive role for them that he holds in traditional Christian belief. There are, indeed, some New Agers, especially some who practise Wicca, who would deny the right of any teacher to have authority over our lives or a directing function there, whether “Jesus or Buddha or Mohammed or Moses . . .” (Starhawk, cited by William Bloom (ed), *The New Age: an Anthology of Essential Writing*, Rider 1991, p34) on the grounds that the self needs to consider itself free from such enslavement and to teach itself, discovering for itself what spiritual truth it is to live by.
- 81 Many Christians would respond that enslavement is the very antithesis of their experience of the Lordship of Jesus Christ: rather, he frees one to be oneself or to discover one’s true self within a liberating relationship of love to God, to others and to oneself. On the other hand, New Agers are right to accuse Christians of the way in which we have often been slow to interpret and apply the basic truths of our faith in fresh and more timely ways, given the widening of the frontiers of human knowledge and new ethical challenges. A particularly difficult problem raised by practitioners of Wicca is whether a male saviour can save women; even some Christian women wrestle with this issue. Such women do find themselves enslaved by the ‘Lordship’ of Jesus since, for them, it is coloured by ‘masculine’ notions of power and possession. Christians need to reflect how Jesus can be interpreted in ways consonant with women’s experience, and men must reflect how this might liberate them, too.
- 82 Amongst other New Agers there are a bewildering variety of understandings of Jesus Christ which we shall try to summarise under four headings, though recognising that there is much overlap between them:
- 83 i) Several New Agers make a very sharp distinction between Christ and Jesus, and identify with the life force, cosmic energy or universal consciousness that is at the heart of all things and their ultimate truth. It is significant that in this guise Christ is normally described as being most characteristically the power or principle of love, to which Methodist Christians might well warm with Charles Wesley’s words ringing in their ears, “Pure universal love Thou art”.
- 84 However, while Christians ought to be generous and humble enough to recognise that that character of Jesus Christ does exercise a positive influence over the hearts and minds of people of many different beliefs, we want to take issue with the very idea inherent in this particular New Age belief, that human beings in their essential nature are one with such a divine Christ.

- 85 Moreover, this New Age Christ is usually thought of as the same divine being that inspires or indwells all the great religious teachers of humankind, and so is variously called by different individuals including Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus (or Christ) and Mohammed, according to what is appropriate to his or her religion or cultural environment. Where Jesus himself is concerned, the Christ is usually said to have entered him at some significant point in his adult life, e.g. at his baptism, and then left him on his death (or thereabouts) to pursue his, the Christ's, universal career again. Although this has been an influential 'adoption' understanding of 'messiah-ship', it has never convinced a majority of Christians that it is an adequate interpretation. The Adoption heresy does not sufficiently root the Christ-event in the eternal purposes of God.
- 86 Without denying that the great religions of the world do have much common teaching and that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is creatively at work outside the Christian faith, it is most misleading to reduce all the religions of the world in this way to one common denominator. It denies the manifest differences between the tenets of the different religions and their great teachers, and for the Christian blurs what is distinctive about Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Also the Christian will hesitate to make a distinction between Christ and Jesus in the way many New Agers do, even if one is taken to stand for the divine principle in him and the other the human. For then the danger is that the union of God with the human being, Jesus, becomes purely fortuitous and not one ensured from Jesus' very conception onwards and permanent and planned and prepared for by God through the long centuries of preceding human history.
- 87 None of this is intended to detract from the thoroughly Christian conviction that Jesus Christ represents humanity of the quality God wants for all his human creatures. We are called to grow into his likeness, whether this is expressed in Pauline terms as coming "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians, 4:13), or even in Johannine terms as likeness to God (I John 3:2). In this sense the notable New Age teacher, Sir George Trevelyan, is right to hope for "the enChristing of all of us", (cited by Michael Perry, *Gods Within: A Critical Guide to the New Age*, SPCK 1992, p32), and when he says in the same context, "When we overcome the greed and fear of the ego and become a heart-centre, the rising tide of love will flow . . . [and] will never be checked", we catch an echo of the optimism of John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection of perfect love, which would put no limit to what the grace of God can accomplish in human lives if we would but let it. In the last analysis, though, Trevelyan's words fall foul of what both the New Testament and Wesley were intending, because of the metaphysical background against which they were uttered, that of the identity (not just likeness) of the human person with God. For Trevelyan had begun "The 'I am' in you is a droplet of divinity in a bodily temple, a little piece of God".
- 88 Loosely related to this New Age perspective on Christ under discussion still is the significance, already mentioned, which some New Agers find in the successive astrological ages: of Aries the Ram (beginning c2000BC); of Pisces the Fish (beginning with the Christian era); and Aquarius, the Water Carrier (beginning c2000AD). In this scheme, in the Age of Aries, God was said to have been characterised by the name, Father, and religion to be patriarchal; in the Age of Pisces God has been characterised by the name, Son, and religion,

especially Christianity, has been largely institutional; in the Age of Aquarius, God will be characterised as Spirit and religion of a hierarchical and organisational kind will give way to an era of uninhibited and creative spirituality. Again, this only relativises Jesus Christ in a way that Christians cannot countenance; it is also a caricature of the history of religions as well as being a distortion of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Christian perspective is that a new age began with the coming of Jesus and then the descent of the Holy Spirit on his disciples at Pentecost, that same new age is here now, with its urgent challenge to respond to Jesus Christ and his gospel, and will continue until the end of time.

- 89 ii) Some New Agers conceive of Christ as one of a hierarchy of spiritual beings mediating between God (however he is conceived) and human souls and emanating from him – all arranged in a variety of groups, orders or ranks. Christ can be reckoned as the highest of these spiritual beings or emanations, but not invariably so. In some versions of the scheme he is located lower down, sometimes sharing a place with Maitreya, the Buddha who is to come, or even exchanging places with him; and either one or the other of these beings can be said to be about to return to the earth to inaugurate a new world order of peace and unity.
- 90 Some New Agers seem to have come up with these views as a result of self-conscious borrowing from both Gnosticism and eastern religions, others as a result of drawing eclectically and indiscriminately on the mass of religious data that is around today in literature and through the media. It is all a far cry from the Christian message that in Jesus Christ, God himself has come into direct contact with his human creatures, body, mind and spirit.
- 91 In this same context, we may consider a theme which is present in both the ancient mystery religions and in popular Hinduism today and which has surfaced in Wicca: the dying and rising deity who typifies the cyclic movement of nature, the changing seasons and the life-cycle of the crops. Some Wiccans conceive of Jesus as one of the many “magically born, annually dying and sacrificed hero-gods” (Marian Green, *A Witch Alone*, Aquarian Press 1991, p18). If nothing else, the once-for-all nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection and their historical grounding rules this out of court for Christian faith.
- 92 iii) Among New Agers, Jesus is also conceived of as one (albeit a very important one) of the enlightened teachers of world history. In this role he can be said to speak either as a purely historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, or as the mouthpiece of the divine Christ, considered under (i) above; and his teaching itself can be available today in a variety of ways.
- (a) from extant apocryphal gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas;
 - (b) from channellers who claim to be in touch with spirits from the past such as the spirit of Jesus himself or of one of his disciples, e.g Bartholomew;
 - (c) from a wealth of published Gnostic material, some explicitly attributed to Jesus in the text, some uncritically attributed to him by New Agers;
 - (d) from sheer assumptions that such an enlightened teacher as Jesus would teach vegetarianism, reincarnation etc and would authenticate any

wisdom that New Agers find congenial from ancient Egypt, Essene, Jewish, Cabalistic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Ahmadiyya Muslim sources.

- 93 There is a common assumption among New Agers that all such teaching was deliberately excised from the Christian faith by the orthodox Church of the first Christian centuries and that the Gospels as we have them in the New Testament represent only a very small portion (and a biased one at that) of Jesus' original teaching. Whilst it is true that the debate about Christian origins has been and remains important and often heated among some Christian scholars, New Agers have not engaged in this scholarly and intellectually serious quest. They have merely asserted or assumed whatever supports their eclectic and eccentric views. Certainly the teaching this New Age Jesus promulgates is not characteristic of the authentic Jesus the New Testament Gospels present to us. It is verbose and turgid; it presents a very vague concept of the deity; it speaks almost exclusively to the listener's or reader's own private spiritual quest and it is full of a bland moralism. Admittedly, it highlights the importance of love, but is hardly recognisable as Jesus' love, lacking, as it does, guts, and rarely directed to the deprived and rejected of society as it did with Jesus, costing him suffering, rejection and death.
- 94 iv) Finally, it will not then be surprising to find that very little is said about the Cross in New Age thinking about Christ.
- 95 Some New Agers argue that during the course of the human Jesus' life, at least from his baptism onwards, the divine Christ took greater and greater control of his body until, on the cross, "the incarnation was fully achieved and death conquered (cited by Lawrence Osborn, *Angels of Light: The Challenge of the New Age*, Daybreak 1992, p148). But the truth that is extracted from this is primarily the ability of the mind to master matter. Certainly Christians would want to affirm that in Jesus Christ crucified, divinity and humanity are seen in the closest relationship imaginable. It is about the cross that Paul is speaking, and not about the incarnation, except indirectly, when he says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Corinthians, Ch5.10); for there God is seen to face with such utter realism the evil human beings perpetuated, and yet still to hang in there, absorbing it, not compounding it, out of love for us and for our forgiveness, though it cost him so very much. One looks in vain for this redemptive message in New Age understandings of Jesus Christ; the scandal of the Cross remains. This is probably why several New Agers find a peculiar fascination in the belief of the Ahmaddiyyas, a heterodox Muslim sect, that Jesus did not die on the cross but escaped and made for Kashmir, where he continued his teaching until his eventual death there.

PART 4: MISSIOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

- 96 Here, we summarise the pastoral and missiological implications of the rise of the New Age Movement:
- 97 i) The New Age has at its heart a serious search for a divine reality which meets the spiritual needs of people today. In their search for God, New Agers do not have ties to the Church as did previous generations, though many have tasted what the Church has to offer and found it unpalatable. The sobering fact

is that New Age exponents are more likely to perceive the Church as the embodiment of powerful and corrupt structures, rather than the repository of spiritual truth and reality. Indeed the bureaucratic structures of the churches are increasingly viewed, even by Christians, as a managerial necessity, rather than as a source of theological wisdom or spiritual leadership. Theologians begin to speak of authority “from below” rather than “from above”, suggesting that the person in local communities is at the centre of the Church’s life. Language of the Holy Spirit is useful in this regard, since its freedom of movement cannot be contained by structures and it is no respecter of human status or traditions. The churches are beginning to democratise the life of the spirit, something which is known well to Methodists.

- 98 ii) The New Age Movement poses a serious challenge to an arid and over-rationalist theology. This report contends that there is need and demand for a re-emphasis on the spiritual and the ethical: the challenge for the Church is to meet that need and show that the new life is to be found in Christ. In this regard, it is as well for Methodists to own their own tradition as one which was in its earliest days thought to be an uncontrolled expression of emotionalism (as nowadays is much of the New Age Movement) rather than as one which displays the marks of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Butler described these enthusiastic experiences as “a very horrid thing” and wrote to challenge John Wesley on this point. What needs to accompany these Spirit-filled experiences and occasions is the recognition that we are still human and God is still divine. Realising the gifts which the Spirit gives does not mean that we shed our humanness, either temporarily or permanently. We are not so easily transported from one realm, or mode of existence, to another. Rather, what we as Methodists seek to affirm is that what the Spirit effects in human life is the beginning of a life-long process of committed action and prayer, so that we may grow into the life of God. This does not happen overnight, and although we are certainly upheld at every step of the way by a power we call the Holy Spirit, we are not lifted out instantly into something new.
- 99 In the process of growing into holiness, we are also growing in relationship with the divine who continues to stand out before us, to challenge us and question us, to meet and uphold us in our journey. The Holy Spirit accompanies us and draws us on into further, deeper, and more profound knowledge and involvement in the divine love.
- 100 We need to find ways to describe this to our neighbours, and to preach and teach this in our churches. It may be important in this process to affirm the search for enlightenment which the New Age represents, and to acknowledge how real is the hunger for the divine out of which it emerges. What we may be more cautious about is the context of consumerism and instant gratification in which this quest is set today. We need to be careful about the tendency to speak of the power of the Spirit as another consumable item, which can be bought and enjoyed as an extension of our normal range of activities. We need to be aware of the tendency to believe that once someone has bought something, they have “been there” or “done that”. We need to understand, in ourselves as well as in others, our desire to be taken up painlessly into new life, and our avoidance of the struggle, through the ambiguities of relationship and community, towards God. The history and the text of the people called Methodists are full of material which is relevant to this project emphasising, as

they do, scriptural holiness and experiential religion. These may provide new insight into the relation of God's Spirit to human life in our day.

- 101 iii) Spurning an arid rationalism does not mean that we should cease to love God with our mind. The New Age Movement should cause Methodists, as other Christians, to look to the rock from which we were hewn. But New Agers have taught us precisely that mere reiteration of stale doctrine does not convince and may even repel searchers after truth. We must recognise that they have often raised issues, such as the kind of universe we inhabit, and the mutuality of masculine and feminine, which compel us to examine how our tradition of faith has to be understood and lived at the end of the twentieth century. Clearly we need to be faithful to our inheritance yet interpret it in ways relevant and life-giving to the contemporary world.
- 102 iv) Much has been said about the darker side of the New Age Movement. Some say that all of it is demonic, others protest that it is without exception an authentic search for spirituality. Our analysis suggests a third course. The New Age Movement has its darker side and part of it slides off to witchcraft, the occult and at its worst to satanism. "Channelling", for instance, clearly is not the same as the transformation of being "in Christ" for in it the persona of the individual is taken over by another and is open to the presence of evil. This calls to mind the state of people described in the synoptic gospels before they were 'exorcised' by Jesus. On the other hand, Christians ought not to 'demonize' all aspects of the New Age Movement and all New Agers, because of the involvement of some with evil. Nevertheless, such evil must be challenged by Christians.
- 103 v) An emphasis on the imminence of the spirit is for Christians a helpful counter-balance to what many perceive to be too much stress on the distance of God. Unlike New Age teaching, much Christian theology has insisted upon a radical discontinuity between the divine and the human or natural world. As descriptions of the physical world became increasingly mechanistic and deterministic in the early centuries of modern science, so Christian theology turned increasingly to other-worldly emphasis on the utter transcendence of the divine. The remoteness of God and the portrayal of God as the final Master of the Universe and the Controller of Destiny have been more difficult to sustain in a contemporary context, and in addition, have had some fairly damaging consequences in people's emotional and spiritual lives. As a result, some Christians have lost their nerve altogether in discussing or believing in the reality of a transcendent being.
- 104 However, throughout the Bible, the blessing of God brings Peace, Shalom. Such peace, being more than the absence of conflict, is the offer and challenge of the best in personal development, community living, sharing of resources, national and international responsibility, and above all a depth of devotion to God. It is about coherence and unity within the love of God. In particular, physical and spiritual healing and wholeness has become much more widely practised in the Christian Church in recent years. This response to the teaching and ministry of Jesus has been profoundly helpful to many people.
- 105 vi) Environmentalism is one of the powerful influences leading people to the New Age Movement. The social, political and economic issues concerning our global environment have been the access point to New Age for many people. For all this the New Age response is not only diverse but divided.

Into this maelstrom of the Green agenda and Green spirituality, Christians have much to say about our responsibility before God for all creation. In particular we need to express how and in what sense the Spirit of God is given to the creation, is *bestowed upon* the world and human life by a loving Creator. Images of tenderness may therefore be more appropriate than those of mastery. For tenderness presumes closeness and care, and at the same time acknowledges a transaction in which there are two parties. The Holy Spirit has been understood to be the means by which this loving transaction between the divine and the natural/human has been effected (affected). So the Holy Spirit does not stand alone, but as an intrinsic part of the whole relationship between God, the world and humanity. Before us, therefore, lies the challenge of learning to speak to others of our belief in the Holy Spirit, and of preaching and teaching about the Holy Spirit, in words which express that the spirit found in the world is at the same time, an essential expression of the life of God.

106 vii) Many people describe their experience of life as being ‘out of control’, whether reflecting on security of employment, nourishing relationships, and indeed the balance of their own life. They are conscious of social, political and economic instability in national and international affairs. To this secular worldview the New Age is attractive, with its confidence, based on the Gaia hypothesis, in the ability of Mother Earth to explain all things.

107 At the same time as many people are asking ultimate questions about life on earth (and hereafter) the churches have often failed to emphasise the Christian hope of the redemption of all creation (Romans 8:18-25 and Colossians 1:15-23).

PART 5: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

108 This report has refrained from giving explicit guidelines for Methodists, in their relations with New Agers. In part, this is because the New Age Movement is so amorphous and eclectic, that the framing of guidelines is a difficult, if not impossible, task. It may prove helpful, however, to draw out from the main body of this report certain conclusions which could act as principles for Methodists in their relation to New Agers and the New Age Movement.

109 (i) Any over-reaction by Christians to New Agers, their beliefs and practices, is very unhelpful and unwise. Actually, New Agers often address themes which our modern society, including Western Christianity, has until recently, largely ignored: for example, the nurturing of our planet. Moreover, many Christians have tended to shun perfectly respectable practices, such as homeopathy, because New Agers have annexed them to serve their points of view. Even more controversial practices, such as yoga, are not inherently associated with non-Christian belief systems, so the determination of some Christians to shun them can seem an over-reaction.

110 (ii) Indeed, Christians would, to some extent, share three of the four cohesive features of the New Age Movement, mentioned in Part 1: the spiritual as opposed to the physical; harmony and wholeness; and hopefulness. To be

sure, there are major disagreements about the form of these features and in whom (or, for many New Agers, in what) they are located. In the one major area of disagreement, the New Age insistence on the individual's right to choose, there is still much to discuss, not least because, in practice, Christians do choose, from their faith, themes for their life stories. There would, therefore, seem to be more wisdom in talking to New Agers.

- 111 (iii) Themes concerning the Holy Spirit may provide something of a framework for consideration as we talk to one another, and to those influenced by and committed to the New Age, about the spiritual dimension of life. There is much to be learnt through dialogue.
- 112 Our own starting points may be these :
- 113 Firstly, the Spirit which is known in and through the natural world may be affirmed as an expression of the divine life. Through engagement with this Spirit, we may begin the process of acknowledging the creative work of God, and of discovering the fullness of the divine through what has been given.
- 114 Secondly, the Spirit which is available to all persons as energy, resource and possibility for self-transcendence may be affirmed as the important first steps in a process of continuous spiritual development. A method of life and prayer will then be needed as more challenging dimensions of the development open up, and as we struggle through relationship with others, to grow into the life of God.
- 115 Thirdly, we may affirm the presence of the Spirit in a whole range of people throughout history who are living testimony to the greatness and the benevolence of God. We will then need to articulate the uniqueness of Christ as the one through whom we know the divine to be love itself, and in whom we are constantly stirred to be amongst the suffering of our world. Methodists have much to contribute in the articulation of all these themes in our world.
- 116 (iv) If Methodists are to be encouraged to engage in dialogue with New Agers, then it is vital that they be nurtured in the essentials of their faith. Otherwise, there is the likelihood of the blind leading the blind. There is also the possibility of Methodists being attracted and captivated by notions and practices which, although alluring and apparently harmless, are not consonant with Methodist teaching.
- 117 (v) However, Methodist teaching is not static. It needs to be applied, critically and creatively, to the needs of the societies in which Methodists find themselves. To some extent, New Age-ism has flourished because many Western Christians have uncritically assumed that the values of our techno-scientific culture have resulted from and are congruent with Christian beliefs. Methodists must hear the legitimate questionings of New Agers and not fall into the extremes of dismissing them or of readily accepting all their critiques, still less the answers or solutions they offer.
- 118 (vi) Everyone involved in the New Age Movement is someone whom God loves and for whom Christ died. This is another ground for serious and searching dialogue with New Agers, rather than avoiding them. It is also a reason for sharing the faith that is in us as providing all people with the key to an answer to life's deepest questions.

RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts the Report, *The New Age Movement*, as its reply to Memorial M.8 (1990).

(Agenda 1994, pp.274-299)

The Conference adopted, in place of the above resolution:

The Conference:

1. Thanks the Faith and Order Committee for the detailed work that it has undertaken in producing the report on the New Age Movement, receives the report, and encourages the Methodist people to use it as the basis for further study of the issues raised.
2. Emphasises the particular importance of paragraph 116(iv) to the extent that some of the practices mentioned in the report could well need further investigation if people are to protect themselves from the spiritual dangers which may be involved.
3. Declares that the report, the debate, and these resolutions shall be the reply to memorial M.8 (1990).

THE TORONTO 'BLESSING' (1996)

The Conference of 1995 adopted the following as Notice of Motion No. 8:

Conference welcomes every genuine work of the Holy Spirit, holding to the words of Scripture: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything". (1 Thess 5:19-20) (sic) Conference acknowledges that there are Ministers and lay members who testify to an experience of the Holy Spirit known as the 'Toronto Blessing'.

Conference therefore directs the Faith and Order Committee to set up a working party to present a report on the 'Toronto Blessing' to the Conference of 1996, and invites Ministers and members to write to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee to express their views.

1. Origins of the 'Toronto Blessing'

- 1.1 The phenomenon known as the 'Toronto Blessing' was first evidenced at a meeting of the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship. The Association of Vineyard Churches is a network of 'new churches' under the international leadership of John Wimber. It states that it "is committed to an evangelical theology, to equipping every church member for works of service and to encouraging biblical renewal across the whole Church." During 1992 and 1993 the Fellowship had been prompted to seek a fresh anointing from God for its work.
- 1.2 On 20th January 1994, the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship began a four-night series of meetings. The senior pastor, John Arnott, and the leadership team were overwhelmed when on the first night, following the speaker's address, the whole congregation responded to an invitation to receive prayer. What followed was understood by them as a powerful move of the Holy Spirit and was characterised by physical manifestations including falling to the ground and 'resting in the Spirit'; shaking, trembling and jerking; laughter, weeping and wailing; apparent drunkenness; intense physical activity such as running or jumping on the spot; animal sounds; the receiving and proclaiming of alleged prophetic insights; visions; and a range of other mystical experiences. Although the manifestations are by no means new in pentecostal/charismatic contexts they have been witnessed in a more intense, frequent and widespread form in this Movement. Dubbed the 'Toronto Blessing' by the secular press, it is perhaps unfortunate that the title has stuck, because of the undue focus on a particular place, and because it begs the question of whether or not it is indeed a 'Blessing'. The preferred designation in some circles is 'Times of Refreshing', an allusion to Acts 3:19f. However, the term 'Toronto Blessing' is used in this Report because it has gained common currency and no other name for the phenomenon commands universal acceptance.
- 1.3 Since January 1994 the Toronto Fellowship has continued to hold nightly meetings. Some 300,000 people have been on 'pilgrimage to Toronto' of

whom 10% have been from Britain. Many of the 'pilgrims' have been Ministers and their spouses who often testify to having felt tired, dry, and frustrated with Church life. Initial testimonies on their return point to personal spiritual refreshment and a renewed love for Jesus Christ and his Church. Some discover that when they begin praying in their home congregations similar phenomena to those experienced in Toronto are repeated. The manifestations are not everywhere the same – rather there seems to be a cluster of related incidences under the 'Toronto' banner. A number of British churches have become particularly noted as centres for the 'Toronto Blessing', among them Holy Trinity, Brompton, Queens Road Baptist Church, Wimbledon and the Sunderland Christian Centre, but overall it remains an experience of a minority of Christians.

- 1.4 The 'Toronto Blessing' has not been without controversy. Although its leaders have been at pains to point out that it is the resulting fruit of the Holy Spirit that is of prime importance it is the manifestations that have caused concern. As might be expected there has been trenchant criticism from those who have never been able to accept the claims and teachings of pentecostals and charismatics. However concern has also been expressed by a number of senior figures from within pentecostal and charismatic circles who have sought to adopt a Gamaliel-style approach (Acts 5:34-39), waiting and seeing 'if this is of God'. It is apparent that to some extent, the manifestations are, with time, becoming less frequent and less pronounced than at first.
- 1.5 In December 1995 the Toronto Airport Fellowship agreed to part company with the Association of Vineyard Churches which had felt it necessary to question the teaching and administration of the 'Blessing' in Toronto and stating that it could not accept attempts to give "theological justification or biblical proof-texting for . . . exotic practices that are extra-biblical." Whilst the concern expressed is about the Toronto Fellowship's handling of the manifestations (and the authority of the local vis-à-vis global leadership) rather than a judgement on the 'Toronto Blessing' as a whole, it certainly underlines the fact that there are serious theological and pastoral issues that cannot be brushed aside as of no consequence.

2. The working party

- 2.1 Responding to an invitation in the 'Methodist Recorder' and the Conference 'Bulletin', nearly 300 submissions were received, including a number of audio and video tapes, books and other published material, as well as personal testimony and reflections. All members of the working party were able to read these submissions. A more detailed analysis of the submissions is given in section 3 of this Report.
- 2.2 The working party, of 18 members, was constituted so as to bring together a wide cross-section of experience and opinion about the 'Toronto Blessing', as well as expertise in such fields as sociology, psychology, and history. In addition to the written submissions, contributions by the members of the working party themselves, and impressions gained from visits to various churches affected by the

'Blessing', many of the numerous published sources of information and opinion were consulted.

- 2.3 Mindful of the debate in the Conference itself, and of the controversy surrounding the whole issue, the working party considered that the most helpful approach to the subject would be to offer a brief overview of the phenomenon, followed by a summary of the varied views submitted to us, and then an outline of some of the tools and insights that could be brought to bear upon the situation, so as to assist Methodists in making an appropriate, helpful response, especially in local pastoral situations. However, we recognise that a short Report such as this cannot do more than introduce the issues. Parallel work to this Report is being undertaken in the Church of England, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, and within the Evangelical Alliance.
- 2.4 The attention of the Conference is drawn to the 1974 Report on 'The Charismatic Movement' (Agenda 1974, pp 267-71), much of which applies to the current situation. It is beyond the brief of this Report to engage in a comprehensive reassessment of the matters dealt with in the 1974 Report, but nevertheless some of what is said now may well be applicable more widely to charismatic phenomena.
- 2.5 The 1974 Report welcomed "the renewed emphasis upon the individual and corporate experience of the Holy Spirit, including those aspects of experience high-lighted by the Charismatic Movement, so long as they are not held to be universally obligatory, exclusive of or superior to other Christian insights" and urged "that all Methodists, whatever their experience of the Holy Spirit, show tolerance in seeking to understand the claims and experiences of others." The Report commented on certain aspects of the Movement which "require further clarification or safeguards against abuse", but "as guidelines to be noted, not rules to be obeyed, "and expressed the hope "to avoid the splitting of societies over this issue, or the creating of a 'second-class Christian' outlook *in either direction* (sic)." The Report warned, "whilst it is true . . . that Christianity is greatly impoverished when the rational element is stressed at the expense of the emotional and the volitional; it is equally important to guard against any danger of irrationality, with the consequent devaluing of the mind in Christian experience, since for many Christians reason is the supreme tool for discerning the Spirit. Such safeguards are particularly necessary in a Movement in which the extraordinary and the unusual receive emphasis."
- 2.6 The experience of the working party has been that sustained and honest sharing of spiritual experiences from a variety of perspectives and inclinations has led to a deeper appreciation of the riches of God and the benefits of breadth in Christian fellowship. Such experiences are very much in the class meeting tradition and we covet them for all members of our Church.

3. Digest of the written submissions

- 3.1 Nearly 300 letters and other items such as dissertations, books, magazines, video and audio tapes were received in response to the Conference invitation. The range and depth of the experiences described and the careful reflections based upon them, made it a privilege to read the submissions. The members of the working party are all very grateful to those who took time and trouble to write in.
- 3.2 A broad analysis of the submissions and the views expressed within them shows that 26.4% of the letters were from Ministers, of whom approximately 82% were broadly supportive of the 'Blessing', and 18% non-supportive; 73.6% of the letters were from lay people, of whom approximately 65% were broadly supportive, and 35% non-supportive. It should, however, be borne in mind that this is not a **representative** sample, being only an analysis of the views of those who chose to write in. Also, in many cases people could see both positive and negative features in the 'Toronto Blessing', so this breakdown is an oversimplification of the many shades of opinion. Nevertheless, it does give in our view a fair overall impression of the balance of opinion.
- 3.3 It is not always clear from the submissions whether the writers are referring to 'Toronto Blessing' phenomena with strange vocal manifestations, or Toronto-like experiences as witnessed during the last 20-30 years within the Charismatic Movement (weeping, laughter, resting in the Spirit, etc.). Whilst some confirm that their first experience of the 'Blessing' was during private prayer time, the majority appear to be writing after attending a praise fellowship, such as at Holy Trinity Brompton, Sunderland Christian Centre, etc., Easter People or Spring Harvest. Also mentioned are the Alpha Groups and the Dunamis Conference. When the 'Blessing' is received it is frequently said to result in a new awareness of the love of Christ and a new sense of empowerment for Christian work, although there is a small proportion of negative experiences.
- 3.4 Many of those who wrote in criticism of the 'Toronto Blessing' had not observed it for themselves and wrote as a consequence of hearsay, TV, video and press coverage. Some considered that it was demonic, whilst others attributed the manifestations to hypnosis, or drew attention to its alleged association with the controversial ministry of Rodney Howard-Browne.
- 3.5 Many, whether broadly approving or disapproving, wrote of the need for sustained teaching of leaders and helpers, and a greater pastoral care of those who had experienced the 'Blessing', and especially of those who were not sure what, if anything, had happened to them.
- 3.6 The question of the relationship of the manifestations to biblical teaching on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit was raised in many submissions, as was the link with the ministry of the Wesleys and the subsequent history of the Methodist Church.

3.7 Some representative quotations from the submissions:

- * I have been surprised at the absence of hysteria and the almost lack of emotion. (Minister)
- * The excitement, emotion and general lack of control and self-discipline caused us a great deal of concern. (Church Stewards)
- * One elderly Local Preacher confessed before asking for prayer, "I'm not sure that I have ever really loved God or known his personal love for me." . . . In the next three weeks she experienced in a very personal way God's love for her. (Minister)
- * It was stated that this was the way the church was going and if you didn't agree you might as well leave. There was a lot of heartache. (Couple)
- * I found myself overcome with sobbing, . . . as before my eyes passed many occasions in life when I had badly needed to cry but circumstances made it impossible. I had a training in Clinical Theology . . . the Holy Spirit brings inner release which would normally take months in counselling. (Lay person)
- * We are learning to minister to one another. One minute you are receiving ministry, the next you are offering it. This must have some insight to offer on the priesthood of all believers. (Minister)
- * I saw a gentle flowing river – the river then getting faster, culminating in an extremely powerful waterfall. (Lay person)
- * The outer manifestations must not detract from the inner ones. (Church Meeting)
- * By its very nature this phenomenon is probably beyond analysis. Just as there is a difference between 1st-hand and 2nd-hand evidence, there is a risk that observation alone is insufficient to form a proper assessment. Care is needed lest any judgements are unduly dismissive or negative. (Lay person)

4. Insights from Christian doctrine and Scripture

4.1 *The doctrine of the Holy Spirit*

- 4.1.1 The Holy Spirit is the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to and in all that is. God creates all things in the power of the Spirit, sustains the universe, and will bring all things to fulfilment in the Spirit. The arena for the Spirit's work is all space and time.
- 4.1.2 The Holy Spirit is God communicating to all that is, sharing the Being of the Trinity with all life. The Holy Spirit opens humanity to God, reveals God to us, speaks through prophets and preachers, is the dynamic who gives us the Scriptures and mediates the Word of God through them. All true knowledge of God's world, human life, God's nature and will and work is mediated through the Spirit.
- 4.1.3 Jesus comes to us in the power of the Spirit, as the Man of the Spirit, as God the Son. His ministry, teaching and work were in the truth and grace of the Spirit. He was raised from death and is present to all space and time in the Spirit's power. For Christians, the Spirit of God is now

supremely recognized as the Spirit of Christ (Acts 16:7; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11).

- 4.1.4 All confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour is the work of the Spirit. Thus through the Spirit the Church comes to be, the Scriptures are written and are given their authority, the faith is clarified and confessed, the Church is kept in the way of Christ crucified and risen, her servants are called and commissioned. The Spirit mediates the Lord's grace and makes Christ present through the gospel sacraments and through the Church's worship, ministry and prayer. The Spirit is always promoting the Church's vitality, faithfulness and unity, her mission to the ends of the earth and her sanctification.
- 4.1.5 All our prayers are in the Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. The Spirit is God's saving and perfecting power who purifies them and gives them a potency we cannot understand. Thus one of the most everyday (and glorious) works of the Spirit is that which enables us to pray, without which our attempts would be mere gabble and pretension.
- 4.1.6 In the Spirit we are constantly being called to repent, to live 'in Christ', and are made new in the faith which too is a gift of the Spirit. In the Spirit we are always wrestling with evil and dying to sin, always being forgiven, strengthened in our belonging in the Church, being directed into the new way of love. We are given new callings and tasks, experiencing the gifts of the Spirit, pressing on together towards maturity in Christ and more intimate communion with him.
- 4.1.7 Whenever we are aware of God we are 'blessed' by the Spirit. This may be anywhere and in any circumstances – inside or outside the Church's life, as personal or communal experience, as dramatic emotional uplift or profound calm, with or without some sort of vision or voice or heightened sense. It may be unexpected and sudden, or expected and longed-for.
- 4.1.8 The Spirit is God's freedom to initiate the radically new, to turn the Church inside out, to let loose a new spiritual dynamic, to inaugurate reformation, renewal and revival in an unprecedented manner. The Spirit may bring to us a startling new awareness of God long lain dormant or never quite realised before. The Spirit is as free as the wind.

4.2 *Discerning the Spirit*

4.2.1 In a true work of the Holy Spirit:

- * Jesus is confessed as Lord, Saviour, Son of God (John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1ff).
- * The fruit of the Spirit are evident in love (1 Corinthians 13), **the** mark of Christian holiness, especially love for fellow Christians. Time must be allowed for this fruit to mature (John 13:34-35; Acts 5:33-39; Galatians 5:22-26; 1 John 4:7-12).
- * There is a building up of the Church with an increase of respect both for its leaders and its weaker members (Romans 14:1; 15:1; 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17).

- * There is an increase of wholeness. This wholeness may be evident in a greater degree of healing of, and integration of the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects of a person, and have to do with relationships, memories, guilt, grief and fear, etc. (Matthew 28:5-6; 10; Mark 6:56; John 10:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).
- * There is a greater practical concern shown for the poor, the disabled and all sufferers from social and political inequality and injustice (Luke 4:18-19; 10:25-37; James 1:27-2:26).
- * In order for the fruit referred to above to be evidenced there is an increased desire for the enabling sources of this growth – prayer, Bible-study, fellowship, the sacraments.
- * There is an increase of ability to distinguish between the true and the false: a discernment between true and false spirits, prophets, teachers and disciples. This is linked to an increased desire for sound doctrine and true teaching (John 16:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Titus 1:9-11; 2 John:9).

4.2.2 In the biblical tradition the experience of prophecy has always been accompanied by a recognition of the danger of false prophecy, and the need for discernment (see particularly 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-3). As a scriptural principle, inspiration and evaluation go hand in hand. In our profound frailty and sinfulness we are always subject to delusion, not least in our religious experience, where it can be the most dangerous. We so often want to manipulate God to suit our own ends, so we are only too prone to consider our imaginings as a special blessing in the Spirit. Therefore we must test all such experience and claims rigorously.

4.3 *The Blessing of God*

- 4.3.1 The sense of the Greek words most often translated as ‘blessing’ or ‘blessed’ (eulogein and makarios) in the Bible is simply ‘goodwill’ or ‘favour’, but the content of these takes different forms according to the life situation of those in need of God’s blessing. The blessing associated with the teaching and ministry of Jesus is defined in terms of the message and priorities of the Kingdom.
- 4.3.2 In the early books of the Old Testament, the blessing of God is linked chiefly with the question of survival of the people, and is consequently cast in primarily material terms (see Genesis 1:22; 12:2; Deuteronomy 33:11; 2 Samuel 6:11). By the time of the more settled societies in which the Wisdom literature appeared, a more spiritual sense of blessing is emphasised (Wisdom 3:13, 17-18; cf. Philippians 4:8). In the prophetic literature, blessing takes on an ethical dimension, with God’s righteousness its distinguishing feature, e.g. Isaiah 65:16-25; Zechariah 8:13-23; Malachi 3:6-10). These three emphases are all taken up in the common concept of ‘Shalom’.
- 4.3.3 The New Testament insists that this state of blessedness as Shalom has arrived in the coming of Jesus and will arrive fully at the end times (Mark 1:14f; Luke 4:18-21; 21:32-33). Jesus warns against any interpretation of

Shalom in terms of prosperity; in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) he pronounces blessed not the well off, but those who are 'with him', whether they are prosperous or not. His pronouncement of blessing is an invitation to his hearers to watch for and attune themselves to the coming Kingdom of God.

- 4.3.4 In the biblical sense, blessing invites a response – God's generosity is returned in our worship and obedience. This reaches its climax in the ministry of Jesus, who blesses those who respond to him in their need. Supremely, in the cross, he blesses by bringing God's peace to estranged creation and also by offering a sacrificial response. We are blessed when our attitudes and actions follow the pattern of Jesus.
- 4.3.5 As Jesus teaches and exemplifies in his ministry, blessedness in the biblical sense is experienced by those whose attitudes and actions most closely imitate him. A life-giving, fruitful fellowship begins when, blessed by God in Christ, men and women bless God in reply by doing God's will and living in intimate companionship with God and one another. In asking whether or not the Toronto phenomenon is indeed a 'Blessing', we will therefore look for evidence of Shalom as it is shown to us in Jesus – spiritual and ethical fruit in the recipient, without undue emphasis on material or physiological 'blessings' (see section 4.2 above).

4.4 Biblical perspectives on the manifestations

- 4.4.1 In our Methodist tradition we try to maintain an appropriate relationship between Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Scriptural teaching is never considered in isolation, and we are aware that all reading of Scripture tends to be selective and influenced by the presuppositions from which we start. Nevertheless biblical perspectives are essential, and we outline the relevant ones here. Previous sections of the Report outlined experience and tradition; other comment will follow this attention to the Bible; our final comments will aim to formulate reasonable conclusions which derive from "the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures", which the Deed of Union states the Methodist Church acknowledges as "the supreme rule of faith and practice". Scripture is primary, but it is to be seen in lively partnership with the other authorities cited.
- 4.4.2 To say that "the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures" is "the supreme rule of faith and practice" still leaves open the question of **how** scripture is to be interpreted and related to different situations and problems. For example, there can be a process of "direct transference" when the application of scripture is direct, most obviously in the command, "Love your neighbour as yourself". But what, for example, of Paul's command that women should cover their heads in church, or the teaching of Jesus in Luke 14:33 that would-be disciples must forego all they have?
- 4.4.3 Therefore, our reaction to the 'Toronto Blessing' will to a large extent be governed by our approach to interpreting Scripture. Given this, what precedents might there be in scripture for the manifestations seen in the 'Toronto Blessing' and, in the light of our findings, what might we make of the various manifestations?

- 4.4.4 Take *Falling to the Ground, being Slain in the Spirit or Resting in the Spirit* for example. Clearly there are those who have fallen to the ground in Scripture (for example Abraham (Genesis 17:3), Daniel (Daniel 8:17-18), Peter, James and John (Matthew 17:6), Saul (Acts 9:3-4) and John (Revelation 1:17)) and have been changed by God in various ways through it. For some, these would be sufficient justification for today's experiences. However, there are at least three differences which should be noted. Those who 'fell' in Scripture generally fell face down, whereas those who fall today generally fall backwards; in Scripture they fell in awe and fear at the glory of the Lord, whereas that is not always the case today; in Scripture the falling was a spontaneous action – in contrast today carpets and catchers are often provided in advance, though of course this need not deny the validity of the experience.
- 4.4.5 Then there is the phenomenon of *Shaking or Trembling*. Trembling in the Bible can be seen as a natural spontaneous response to God's power, holiness, judgement, presence and word (see Exodus 19:16; Ezra 9:4; Daniel 10:11; Matthew 28:4; Luke 8:47; Acts 7:32). And all of us of course are to work out our salvation with 'fear and trembling' (Philippians 2:12-13). But is such 'trembling' always to be understood literally and is the stiff jerking witnessed during the Toronto experience the same as the biblical phenomenon?
- 4.4.6 *Weeping* is also common within the 'Toronto Blessing'. There are many references to tears in Scripture. For the most part these come as a natural and predictable reaction to human experience (see Genesis 27:38, Ruth 1:9; Psalm 137:1; Isaiah 25:8; Matthew 26:75; Luke 19:41; John 11:35; Acts 20:37; Philippians 3:18) and also occasionally as a response to God (see 2 Kings 20:2-3; Ezra 10:1; Joel 2:12; Luke 7:38). When such tears come during the 'Toronto Blessing' they may be seen as healthy and therapeutic, but if they are manipulated either by the person or by others, their significance must be treated with caution.
- 4.4.7 *Laughter* in Scripture is less common. Such instances as there are (e.g. Genesis 17:17, 21:6; Psalm 126:1-2) might be described as an expression of holy joy at the goodness of God. However Scripture also records the laughter of scorn and contempt (Nehemiah 2:19; Luke 6:25), reminds us that shallow or inappropriate laughter is not pleasing to God (James 4:9) and teaches that godly joy is far more than laughter, although laughter may be contained within it. But helpless laughter without adequate or appropriate cause is not found in Scripture, nor is the raucous laughter that is sometimes heard today during preaching which can detract from the hearing of the Word of God. Such behaviour finds no warrant in Scripture.
- 4.4.8 *Emitting animal noises*, e.g. growling and barking, is perhaps the most controversial of the manifestations. The texts which are sometimes cited as precedents for this fall into three categories. Firstly, two verses from the prophets (Amos 3:8; Micah 1:8) do indeed refer to the noises of animals, but in both cases they are images or similes. In the former, God's word is compared to the roar of a lion; the latter likens the prophet's lamentation to the sound of a mammal or a bird. Secondly, two verses in the Gospels (Mark 1:43; John 11:33) have an unusual Greek

verb whose literal meaning is to 'snort' (it is used, for example, of horses). That can hardly be its meaning in those verses and neither verse can be said to be a precedent for what is happening today. Finally, if Romans 8:23 and 27 are referring to audible noises during prayer (and that is not certain), the words used indicate human, not animal noises. Despite this lack of clear scriptural precedent, when such 'growling' has a beneficial effect, such as 'empowering', or 'releasing', it might perhaps be justified. However, serious questions remain about an experience which some may perceive as degrading or humiliating to God's people.

- 4.4.9 Other manifestations may cause us even more concern. *Behaving as though drunk* is difficult to justify on the grounds of Acts 2:13 or Ephesians 5:18 when a careful study of the verses and contexts indicates that 'spiritual drunkenness' is neither depicted nor an accurate description of what is taking place.
- 4.4.10 *Convulsions*, sometimes claimed as a sign of God's blessing, are in fact quite the opposite (Mark 1:25-26; 9:18). Jesus in his ministry delivered people from such things, he did not want them to glory in them. Whilst we are treading here in the area of the healing and deliverance ministry, which is beyond the scope of this Report, we do urge extreme caution, wide consultation and shared ministry in such matters.
- 4.4.11 In view of all this, whilst some of the manifestations in Scripture may be seen as God's action, and some as human reaction to the glory or power of God, the precedents for others are less clear. Therefore manifestations should not be used to gauge the rightness or effectiveness of any meeting or ministry. Some may be blessed without any manifestations: others may experience the manifestations without being blessed or blessing others. It also follows that the objective and external signs of the kingdom (Luke 4:18-19; 7:21-23; 9:1-2) should not be lost sight of in the desire for more and more subjective experiences.

4.5 *Conclusions from the biblical material*

- 4.5.1 It is important to be open-minded. Scripture bears witness time and again to a person's total reaction to God, who seeks a response from the heart as well as the mind, the body as well as the spirit. Such a response may have physical, as well as spiritual, moral and emotional effects. Scripture also shows that the Spirit does not always act in quiet, hidden or predictable ways, and often the human response to the Spirit's prompting is unusual. Whilst being wary of 'excess', we should not try to confine the activity of God within the socially, culturally and psychologically acceptable limits of our preferences. Every genuine response will be compatible with the character and activity of God as revealed in Christ.
- 4.5.2 The emphases of the New Testament should be noted. For example, visionary, ecstatic or mystical experiences may be experienced by most Christians at some time or other, but they usually come unexpectedly, and there is no suggestion that they should be actively sought. Paul was mightily indebted to the Damascus Road event, but is more reticent about later 'visions and revelations', as 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 shows. Amongst other New Testament writers, James, in his characteristically down-to-

earth way, describes true religion in moral and practical terms (James 1:22-27). Others stress that the Christian life is mainly characterised by suffering (for example, Hebrews 12:3-12; 1 Peter 4:12-19), a suffering which, as usual in the New Testament, is accompanied by joy (1 Peter 1:8).

- 4.5.3 There is no basis in Scripture for Christians claiming to be, or feeling superior to other Christians. They may differ in their views and convictions, they may feel it right sometimes to criticise each other, but 'spiritual one-upmanship' (1 Corinthians 12-14) has no scriptural foundation. Indeed, Paul's teaching indicates the opposite (Romans 12:10; Galatians 5:25; Philippians 2:3), and Jesus himself taught that self-righteousness – a very 'religious' sin – is one of the most terrible of all (Matthew 23; Luke 15:25-31; 18:9-14).
- 4.5.4 God always offers us the whole richness of the Spirit (hence Ephesians 1:3-14), but individuals and groups have had unexpected and often dramatic times of conversion and spiritual renewal from Pentecost onwards. Through baptism by water and the Spirit (Acts 2:37-41; Romans 6:2-4; 1 Peter 3:18-22; etc.) we are all initiated into the life which experiences the fruit of the Spirit (as outlined, for example, in Galatians 5:22-26). Some Christians also receive specific callings needing to be exercised on behalf of the Church (as listed in 1 Corinthians 12:27-30 or Ephesians 4:11-16) but the essence of all our development is growth in caring love (hence such crucial teaching as in Matthew 5:43-48; 25:31-46; Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13; James 2:8; 1 John 2:7-11; 4:7-21) and complete willingness to be used in whatever way Christ wills and the Spirit leads (hence Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:57-62; 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 and 12:10; Philippians 3:7-11).
- 4.5.5 The 'truth' by which we must live is always seen as the practice of love (for example 1 John 3:18-24). Our tradition in particular has emphasised the New Testament teaching on love. John Wesley taught us to grow into 'Scriptural holiness', which above all means living in 'perfect love' towards all.

5. Further perspectives

5.1 *An historical perspective on revival*

- 5.1.1 It is always risky to draw historical parallels, because each age and generation has its own characteristics, but the kind of physical experiences associated with the 'Toronto Blessing' seem similar to numerous instances in the history of the Church, not least within Methodism.
- 5.1.2 Reference is often made by those writing about the 'Toronto Blessing' to the American revival of the 1730's, which is described by Jonathan Edwards in ways that appear very similar to those associated with the 'Toronto Blessing'. But that phase did not last very long.
- 5.1.3 There was a great revival at Cambuslang in Scotland in 1742, with which George Whitefield was involved. The evidence is that the physical phenomena soon ended but the renewal went on. The short-lived nature of the phenomena accompanying revival underlined for John Wesley the

view that such movements would be a 'rope of sand' unless people used the normal means of grace – the Bible, prayer, the Lord's Supper, 'Christian Conference' and fasting, and what he called 'prudential means of grace'. For him these included preaching services, love feasts, Watchnight, Covenant, band meetings, class meetings. Of these, clearly the class meeting was vital and the key means of both evangelism and nurture.

- 5.1.4 During Methodist history after the death of Wesley there have been several occasions when physical phenomena have occurred, e.g. the Yorkshire revival of 1792-94 in Halifax and Leeds, camp meetings in the USA and Britain, and during the ministry of James Caughey.
- 5.1.5 The history of the Quakers is also of interest: George Fox's preaching was accompanied often by violent physical manifestations, hence probably the name. But within twenty years the style had changed to the silent waiting upon the Spirit which has characterised Quaker worship for 300 years.
- 5.1.6 It should be noted that the above manifestations were evident during times of revival. Most observers of the 'Toronto Blessing' describe it as 'refreshing' or 'renewal', and not as revival, though there is a growing belief in some circles that it may be the precursor of a greater and imminent outpouring of the Spirit which may come to be recognised as revival.
- 5.1.7 We must also note the cultural setting of many of these occurrences. Many studies point to the influence of the surrounding cultural norms, such as the Age of Reason, Romanticism, Modernism, Post-Modernism. The historian as such does not attribute this or that phenomenon to God (or not), but must leave that to others.

5.2 *A sociological perspective*

- 5.2.1 Interest and involvement in the 'Toronto Blessing' has taken much time, energy and money on the part of the churches concerned. From a sociological point of view this can be seen in terms of, although not be reduced to, the workings of the religious 'marketplace'. The 'Blessing' could be seen, amongst other things, as a means for the churches involved to safeguard their share of a religious market which is, at least in North America and in Europe, relatively static. One of the attractions of charismatic churches has been their offer of a direct, unmediated and unpredictable encounter with God. It has always been the case that, from time to time, as that encounter becomes familiar and predictable, fresh excitement and innovation becomes necessary. The novelty of the 'Toronto Blessing' has been a means both of retaining members and of adjusting to shifts in (religious) consumer preferences. For many church leaders the 'Blessing' has provided an opportunity to resolve a religious mid-life crisis, radically to re-evaluate the course of their ministries and to rediscover their charismatic roots. Leaders may hope to reverse the tendency of all organisations (the Church not excepted) to lose their dynamism and to become staid, bureaucratic and conformed to modern society (the so-called 'routinization of charisma'). This may be a vain hope – ironically, the 'Blessing' also depends a great deal on modern

communications technology and reflects the pragmatic 'functional rationality' that dominates Western societies: 'if it works, trust it!' One particular risk, identified by Margaret Poloma, a sociologist from within the movement, is that the charisma of the 'Blessing' will be 'reined in' and held in check in order to please the conservative elements within the Christian community.

- 5.2.2 The form taken by the 'Blessing' (for instance, spiritual drunkenness) fits with changing attitudes to bodily inhibition in our late capitalist society where more ascetic 'work ethic' attitudes have been supplanted. The 'Blessing' also fits within the context of modern relativism in being a form of religious experience which needs little or no verbalization. This helps to overcome the difficulties faced by evangelicals (in common with all other Christians) in making their gospel intelligible to more than a minority in contemporary society, or even in finding it totally plausible themselves.
- 5.2.3 First contact with the 'Blessing' is often on an experimental, 'let's check it out' basis, sometimes through a visit to a local 'epicentre' or, if finances permit, a pilgrimage to Toronto. Pilgrims speak of receiving an intense 'jump start' awareness of the Spirit's activity and often experience profound personal change in a short time span. The church leadership has tried to shift the focus on the part of pilgrims from the (often bizarre) physical phenomena to processes of interior transformation and redirection, and to ensure that meetings are Christ-centred.
- 5.2.4 One of the most salient features of the 'Blessing' is that it is increasingly framed in global terms. Processes of globalization are binding the population of the world into a single society. This is reflected in the 'Toronto Blessing Movement' and in, for instance, its thorough-going use of mass communications technology. Trends toward both homogenization and diversity within the 'Movement' are apparent – as globalization theorists would predict. The fact that it was a Canadian, rather than US, city that gave its name to the 'Blessing' may well have increased its appeal, at least to Britons suspicious of US cultural dominance. The homogenising tendencies of the 'Movement' may divert churches from exploring and appropriating other more indigenous Christian traditions (for instance, Celtic Christianity); this is especially true of churches that do not form part of older-established denominations. In the 'global village' people have easier access to more people and more places, but their contacts are more superficial and ephemeral. Sociologists of religion can reliably predict that the phenomena, if not the fruit, of the 'Toronto Blessing' will eventually be replaced by the next charismatic focus.

5.3 *A psychodynamic perspective*

- 5.3.1 Some psychiatrists have seen the 'Toronto Blessing' as an instance of what is known as 'dissociation'. By this is meant a process or reaction in which different elements of the mind, normally experienced or expressed simultaneously, become split off and separated from one another. In dissociation people can think, feel or do certain things which seem 'out

of character' and can be experienced as 'not me' (e.g. 'this is of God'), when in fact they are generated by a split-off part of the self.

- 5.3.2 Dissociation is frequently seen in ecstatic religion (and phenomena externally similar to the 'Toronto Blessing' are by no means confined to Christianity, for example the darwish or whirling dervishes phenomena in Muslim cultures) and in situations of extreme distress and emotional 'release' following accidents or disaster. It is the basis of hypnotic suggestion. Preconditions for dissociation include expectation, example and emotional arousal, but people vary as to their ability to experience it.
- 5.3.3 We should not shrink from recognising that preparation and raising of expectations have featured largely in the 'Toronto Blessing' and other charismatic phenomena. There is therefore probably a substantial *human* component in the Toronto phenomenon which could be 'explained' without having to invoke the *divine* at all.
- 5.3.4 This raises the important question of whether it is a good or bad thing and whether it should be encouraged. God may use humanly-derived events for good purposes, but we can also pervert/frustrate God's purposes by human (worldly) interference. We must be alert to the dangers of manipulation by the misguided or malign, and beware of any tendency to see the phenomena as ends in themselves. But if, as seems likely, there has in some cases been genuine growth and a closer walk with Christ as a result of the 'Toronto Blessing' then we can be thankful that God is able to bring good out of all situations, especially where the intention (as it undoubtedly mostly is) is sincere.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 There is a significant number of Ministers and lay people who testify to the benefits of the 'Toronto Blessing', although few Methodist congregations have wholeheartedly embraced it. Many Methodists who have experienced the 'Blessing' have done so outside our own churches, or in special meetings and services separate from the regular programme of worship. Where it has affected Methodism, the manifestations are usually more 'restrained' than in some other settings.
- 6.2 The feature of the 'Toronto Blessing' which distinguishes it from other pentecostal/charismatic/signs-and-wonders ministries is the nature, widespread occurrence, frequency, intensity and duration of such common visible and audible phenomena as laughing, shaking, jumping, jerking, falling to the floor, roaring and barking. Christian history has few instances of outbreaks of phenomena on such a scale. The nature of modern communications (especially electronic media), and the ease of international travel, have undoubtedly accelerated the spread of this phenomenon.
- 6.3 The 'Toronto Blessing' phenomenon has revealed a deep need for 'attentive listening' to the hurts and longings of many people. In an age of increasing alienation and dis-ease, this experience has enabled many people to feel a renewed sense of the love and presence of God, and to

receive relevant, personally-focussed prayer. These needs are a challenge to the spiritual and pastoral life of our churches.

- 6.4 We see a need for far more help in the areas of spirituality, doctrine and biblical interpretation and application than we are currently giving. The lack of these things leaves people ill-equipped to understand and make sense of intense real or alleged experiences of the Spirit.
- 6.5 Whilst wanting to rejoice in every genuine move of the Holy Spirit we must be sure to test every movement that makes such strong claims for itself. Among the tests to be applied is that of time. Whilst it is natural to ask whether or not this (or any other phenomenon) is 'of God', at this, still relatively early stage, any answer must be a matter of faith. It is more helpful to ask whether or not God uses experiences such as are found in the 'Toronto Blessing', and our Methodist tradition provides ample criteria by which the activity of God may be discerned through its fruit in human lives. We have indicated above (paragraph 4.2.1) the sort of checks and balances which all Church life needs. However, we have seen that the 'Toronto Blessing' is an experience in which many people's awareness of God, and of their relationship to God, is heightened, and through which God ministers to them. In that way it can be a 'blessing'.
- 6.6 Whilst some of the manifestations of the 'Toronto Blessing' and the practices associated with it are consistent with Scriptural teaching and practice, some are not. On the other hand, as we have already affirmed, God is present in the Holy Spirit in all that is, and may enrich every experience with blessing.
- 6.7 It is undeniable that some people have been deeply disturbed by their experiences of the 'Toronto Blessing', and this has in some cases been exacerbated by insensitive responses from enthusiasts. Others are disappointed that they have not, it seems, received gifts that they have earnestly sought. There is a vital pastoral work to be done in helping all people, whether their experience has been positive or otherwise, to be assured that their integrity and faith are not being questioned nor are they unwelcome in the Methodist Church.
- 6.8 The quality of leadership/ministry/teaching experienced has a great deal to do with the forming of opinions. God has taken the risk of choosing to work through fallible human beings, so inevitably there will be faults, flaws and abuses of power. Being realistic therefore, in any movement of God through people there will always be the risk of:
 - * Pride, manipulation, control, power-seeking, & exhibitionism.
 - * Seeking religious experiences/manifestations for a 'feel good factor'.
 - * The opinion that 'this' is 'the answer', or 'the way for all people'.
 - * Self-righteousness, or conversely feelings of spiritual inadequacy
 - * A diverse range of interpretations in terms of the 'spiritual forces' at work, such as the Holy Spirit, the human spirit or possibly evil agencies.

- 6.9 Many people may feel drawn to travel to Toronto itself or other ‘centres’ of the ‘Blessing’. Such pilgrimages may well be a source of inspiration that can be informative and helpful to individuals and their home church. In some ways Toronto may stand in the tradition of Christian pilgrimage to such places as Jerusalem, Lourdes, Taize and Iona. However, it is essential to examine one’s motives for such a journey very carefully, and to be prepared to apply the insights of our tradition (as outlined particularly in section 4 of this Report) in careful appraisal of what one finds.
- 6.10 The ‘Toronto Blessing’ is frequently referred to by analogy with the ‘times of refreshing’ of Acts 3:19f. Such a description draws attention to the fact that this is primarily a movement in which ‘saints are blessed’, rather than ‘sinners converted’. There are numerous reports of individual and corporate growth in terms of Christian Spirituality and a greater overt expression of love between Christians (especially husbands and wives). Also on record is the increased involvement of laity in ministry; for example in prayer and counselling, a desire to forward evangelism and hints of developments in social outreach. Among the fruit of this phenomenon may thus be Christian renewal, but there is little evidence as yet that we are witnessing ‘revival’, although some would see it as a prelude to that. Certainly Methodists would not want to identify themselves with any of the millenarian movements that are particularly prevalent at this time, and which tend to seize on any alleged ‘evidence’ to support their expectations. Within the life of our Churches there are many and various movements through which renewal is being found, whether individually or corporately. We may be enriched by them all, but a sense of proportion is essential. This accords with the approach of Wesley, the ‘reasonable enthusiast’.
- 6.11 Where churches have lost a sense of purpose, where their worship is emotionally-inhibited and over-cerebral, where ‘tradition’ is used to excuse unwillingness to change, where church life is tedious and attractive mostly to the elderly and very young, it is not surprising that features of charismatic experience such as are found in the ‘Toronto Blessing’ are highly attractive. Its holistic spirituality, the ‘holy anarchy’ of its less-inhibited worship, the sense of excitement, participation, novelty and unpredictability in its experience of God’s activity all combine to attract large and relatively young congregations. Charismatic experience is, however, at its most healthy when it forms part of the life and witness of broad churches and where appropriate checks and balances exist. Just as the balance in the Church can sometimes tip so much towards order and tradition that the Spirit is stifled and change becomes impossible, similarly, too much charismatic disinhibition and spontaneity can lead to spiritual anarchy and superficiality.
- 6.12 The Kingdom of God is an inclusive community, in which all people are called to share. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called to witness in its corporate life to the inclusiveness of that Kingdom, and individuals are invited to join with others of diverse backgrounds in mutual love, praise and service. Participating in the life of the Kingdom, as members of Christ’s Church, we have much to learn from God and from each other. The experience of the ‘Toronto Blessing’ is one of the ways in

which we may together discover more of God. Taken as a whole, the 'Toronto Blessing Movement' has many lessons for the worship, mission and prayer life of the Church at the end of the 20th century.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 We invite the Methodist people to explore the issues outlined in this Report without fear, but with open and prayerful minds, sharing their experiences and perceptions in an atmosphere of honesty and Christian love.
- 7.2 We affirm and encourage those who have been blessed by their experience of the 'Toronto Blessing'; at the same time, we ask that special care be given to those for whom it has been a cause of distress, division or disappointment for whatever reason.
- 7.3 We urge all those with responsibility for pastoral care to take seriously the phenomenon of the 'Toronto Blessing', and to seek informed guidance on appropriate ways to handle people's experiences. In particular, care needs to be taken to distinguish between external manifestations, which may indeed be disturbing, and the possibility that there is an inner catharsis whose lasting effects are beneficial and to be welcomed.
- 7.4 There is urgent need for a much more deliberate teaching and preaching programme on the doctrine and work of the Holy Spirit.
- 7.5 The renewed emphasis on prayer ministry is to be welcomed. Opportunities should be provided in all our churches for attentive listening to the spiritual hunger felt by many people, supported by relevant, personally-focussed prayer and by intercession.
- 7.6 To encourage fruitful developments and minimise the potential hazards which result from human sinfulness the following checks and balances are important:
 - * Balance in church life in terms of:
 - proclamation and preaching of the Word;
 - celebration of the Sacraments;
 - styles of worship;
 - a recognition that Christians are Trinitarian in matters of faith & worship;
 - allowing the Spirit of God to use all the above means and others to make God's will and purpose known.
 - * Accountability/Supervision/Submission:
 - a godly use of authority and discernment in church leadership at all levels and a willingness to deal lovingly and firmly with what is deemed inappropriate.
 - * A willingness to:
 - listen to different points of view and tradition;
 - learn from each other;

admit that none of us possesses the whole truth revealed in Christ Jesus.

7.7 We recommend further study of the following Conference Reports, which have already addressed many of the issues touched upon in this Report:

- * The Charismatic Movement (1974)
- * Christian Initiation (1987)
- * 'Let the People Worship' (1988)
- * 'Called to Love and Praise' (1995)

7.8 We reaffirm the conclusions of the 1974 Report, summarised in paragraph 2.5 above. It is vital that charismatic and non-charismatic Christians should increasingly appreciate each others' strengths, as well as weaknesses. They need to meet each other not as members of two opposing parties, but as fellow pilgrims who enrich each other. Non-charismatics, for instance, could do with understanding the attractions of charismatic worship. It would be helpful to observe or experience the 'Toronto Blessing' phenomena for oneself before passing judgement. Charismatics and non-charismatics need to 'speak the truth in love' to each other, as fellow pilgrims on fundamentally the same road.

RESOLUTION

The Conference receives the Report and commends it for study.

(Agenda 1996, pp.161-179)

THE ROLE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT IN ORDINATION SERVICES (1996)

Introduction

- 1 The following Memorial (M22) was presented to the 1995 Conference:

The Cumbria Synod (R) (Present 121. Vote: 111 for, 4 ag, 6 neut) believing that we should take seriously the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers, and in the light of the increasing call for the laity to be fully involved in the “Ministry of the Whole People of God”, suggests that the Vice-President should be directly involved, with the Officiating and Supporting Ministers, in the laying on of hands in the ordination of Presbyters. The Synod, therefore, asks the Conference to agree to this with immediate effect.

- 2 The Conference replied as follows:

The Conference notes that proposals similar to that of the Cumbria District Synod were made to the Ministerial Sessions of the Conferences of 1984 and 1985 but were not adopted. In 1987 the Ministerial Session of the Conference adopted a report which recommended that the Vice-President should read one or more lessons and should present Bibles to the newly ordained presbyters – practices which have obtained since that Conference. Because the business arose in the Ministerial Session of the 1983 Conference, none of the reports was presented to the Representative Session. In order that the Representative Session may have an opportunity to consider the arguments for and against the Cumbria District’s suggestion and to express its mind on it, the Conference refers the Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1996.

Discussion during the 1980s

- 3 As the reply of the 1995 Conference indicates, the question of lay involvement in the ordination of presbyters was extensively discussed in the Ministerial Sessions of the Conference during the 1980s. In 1983, a notice of motion was tabled ‘that the Conference rules that only ordained ministers shall lay hands on the heads of the candidates at the Ordination Service’. The Conference did not adopt this motion, but referred it to the Faith and Order Committee, which in 1984 presented a report which set out arguments for and against the motion, and concluded that its adoption would be “inopportune and might well inhibit a proper expression of our doctrine”.
- 4 The 1984 Conference was not willing to adopt the Faith and Order Committee’s report but referred it back to the Committee “for further consideration”. In 1985, the Committee proposed to the Conference “that power should be given to the President to invite, if he so wills, a lay person to join with him and the other ministers in the laying-on of hands. (This person might be, though need not be, the Vice-President.)”

- 5 Once again, the Conference proved unwilling to adopt the Faith and Order Committee's recommendation. Instead, the 1983 notice of motion was adopted: "The Conference rules that only ordained ministers shall lay hands on the heads of candidates at the Ordination Service".
- 6 The arguments on both sides of the debate were finely balanced and both in 1984 and 1985, the Faith and Order Committee itself was unable to achieve unanimity about its proposals. The case for and against change has not altered in the last decade and many of the arguments which appear below were employed in 1984 and 1985.

Two understandings of ordained presbyteral ministry

- 7 Though there are many views held among Methodists about ordained presbyteral ministry, it may be helpful to identify two different approaches which could influence the response to the matter under review. These approaches were described in the Report of the Commission on the Two Sessions of the Conference in 1987. Paragraphs 8 and 9 include quotations from that Report.
- 8 . . . one view of ordained ministry would stress its historical continuity with the past, its representative character on behalf of the whole church, and the corporate responsibility of all ministers to watch over one another, to maintain fidelity to the gospel, and to regulate their common life. This view stresses that ministers are ordained by those previously ordained.

(Agenda, 1987, p. 722)

This view points to the 'givenness' of ordained ministry, deriving by historical succession from Christ himself. It is not necessary to adopt an over-literal view of that succession or to argue for "unbroken continuity" to accept the theological point that revelation by incarnation implies a historical *continuum* whereby we have access to that revelation. Pastoral ministry is passed on by those who have received it.

- 9 Another view insists that the ordained ministry is one among many forms by which the church exercises the ministry of Christ, and that it is accountable to the whole church. This view would place emphasis upon lay participation in the ordination service and in decisions about admission and discipline, if ordained ministry is to be truly representative of the whole.

(Agenda, 1987, p. 722)

This second view regards all ministry, under Christ, as given to the Church. Each ordination is an act by which the Church commits or delegates it afresh to a new generation of representative ministers.

The case for the status quo

- 10 The first view of ordained ministry, identified in paragraph 8 above, supports the *status quo*.

- 11 Methodism's usage is that only ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments lay hands on the heads of candidates for presbyteral ministry. This has obtained since Methodist Union in 1932 and reflects earlier practice. The principle that only those who were in connexion with the Conference received others into connexion was firmly established from 1791. Ordination by prayer and the laying on of hands by ministers in full connexion was the usage of Wesleyan Methodism from 1836, though the Conference of that year deliberately avoided using in the Ordination Service any minister who had been ordained by John Wesley, lest too much weight be placed on tactile succession. The Primitive and United Methodists, for the most part, did not include the laying-on of hands in their ordinations.
- 12 The practice of ordination by prayer and the laying-on of hands by those already ordained is widely accepted across most Christian traditions. Whilst this should not conclude the matter, there would need to be a very clear understanding of the meaning of any change, in order that it might be intelligible and acceptable to other Christian traditions. Furthermore, in Methodism theology often develops from usage; many of our most prized doctrines had a pragmatic origin. Unless lay participation in the laying-on of hands is shown to be urgently and theologically necessary, it would be wise to avoid new practices which at some future date might be difficult to interpret or which might be used as a basis for a theological position at variance with the theology which lay behind their introduction.
- 13 The *status quo* is consistent with our sacramental usage. Baptism is normally administered by an ordained minister; normally an ordained minister presides at the Lord's Supper. Consultation with the Superintendent is required before anyone other than an ordained minister may baptize; authorisation by the Conference is needed for anyone else to preside at the Lord's Supper. Ordination is not described in our documents as a sacrament, but the laying-on of hands by ordained presbyters is an act representing the whole Conference and often, through ministers from overseas, other Conferences. Presbyters are not simply representatives of the ordained presbyteral ministry but of the whole Church:
- The whole people of God . . . are called, all of them, ordained and unordained, to be the Body of Christ to men. But as a perpetual reminder of this calling and as a means of being obedient to it the Church sets apart men and women, specially called, in ordination. In their office the calling of the whole Church is focussed and represented and it is their responsibility to lead the people to share with them in that calling. In this sense they are the sign of the presence and ministry of Christ in the Church, and through the Church to the world. (Conference Statement on Ordination, 1974 : *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, pp.135f)
- 14 The Cumbria Synod's Memorial refers to 'the priesthood of all believers' in support of its recommendation. It is important that there should be no misunderstanding of what Methodism means by 'the priesthood of all believers' or of the place of ordained persons within it. As the draft Conference Statement, *Called to Love and Praise*, says:

... the New Testament directs us to the priesthood of the *body* of believers, rather than the priesthood of *every* believer. This latter emphasis is not necessarily wrong, but it is much more individual-centred than the language of Scripture, which stresses the inter-dependence of believers. Nevertheless, in the churches to which Paul wrote, each person has a Spirit-endowed gift. This did not mean that everyone could do everyone else's task, but that everyone had both a gift and a task. (*Agenda* 1995, p.192)

The Statement, *Ordination in the Methodist Church*, adopted by the Conference of 1960, makes it clear that

the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' is that we share, as believers, in the priesthood of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. . . . Into that priesthood of Christ we are taken up by faith, and we in our turn, and in self-identification with Him, offer ourselves in utter humility and obedience as a living sacrifice to God. We are 'priests unto God', and therefore 'take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience', as we are enjoined in the Covenant Service. So the doctrine does not mean that every Christian has the right to exercise every function and administer both sacraments. For it is not an assertion of claims, but a declaration of our total obedience. A Methodist Minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are Ministers. (*Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, 1933-1983*, p.130)

Thus 'the priesthood of all believers' does not mean that "every Christian has the right to exercise every function" and does not in itself support the contention that lay persons should join ordained presbyters in the laying-on of hands. As argued in paragraph 8 above, it belongs to the office and work of those ordained to presbyteral ministry to ordain others, by prayer and the laying-on of hands, to that same ministry.

Further support for this view is to be found in the Doctrinal Clause (Clause 4) of the Deed of Union:

... in the exercise of its (sc. the Methodist Church's) corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

- 15 A similar point may be made in respect of 'the Ministry of the Whole People of God', to which the Cumbria Synod also refers. It is one thing to say, as we should, that the whole Church has a ministry to exercise and indeed that every Christian has a ministry to exercise. It is quite another thing to contend from this basis that all ministries are interchangeable. As the 1984 report of the Faith and Order Committee (see paragraph 3 above) put it:

Lay people are the source, support and partners of the ordained ministry. Lay people share vitally in the process of testing the call of candidates to the ordained ministry. . . . Lay ministry has its own characteristic richness and variety. It is vital that, at a time when we hope to identify, authenticate and develop lay ministries appropriate to our age, we do not diminish either lay or ordained ministries in their relation to each other. There is real danger, in our present situation, that we clericalise the laity, and use our ordained ministers in ways that mute the ministry of word and

sacraments and their exercise of discipline. (*Ministerial Session Agenda 1984*, p. 9)

The case for change

16 The second view of ordained ministry, identified in paragraph 9 above, supports the case for change.

17 In these days when the variety of ministries is recognised and the integration of different ministries within the life of the Church is so important, ordained and lay persons should work together and be seen to work together in all circumstances where that is possible. Past practice, uncritically accepted, is not a sufficient reason for confining any task or function to the ordained.

18 Clause 4 of the Deed of Union asserts that

Those whom the Methodist Church recognises as called of God and therefore receives into its ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call.

If ordination represents 'the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call' then one argument for limiting the action to ordained presbyters is removed. The whole Church can, and indeed must, recognise that a particular person has received a call from God. This is best expressed by the involvement of a representative lay person in the action of ordination itself.

19 Those who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13) were not passing on a gift which they themselves possessed but embodying, in a symbolic act, the Holy Spirit's appointment of the two men to their missionary task. This is clear from the fact that it was to the whole church at Antioch that Paul and Barnabas reported back (Acts 14:24-28). If the important point is not that those who commissioned the apostles were prophets and teachers, but that they were representative leaders of the church, there is no reason why the imposition of hands in ordination should be restricted to those ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

20 Lay people already engage in significant sacramental acts. It is commonplace for them to share in the distribution of the elements at the Lord's Supper. (It is true that without the authorisation of the Conference, they do not preside; but then there is no suggestion that they should preside at ordinations.) Lay people are deeply involved in the calling, encouragement and selection of those who are to be ordained and they play an equal part with ordained presbyters in the standing vote which receives ordinands into full connexion. It would be a fitting climax to all these processes if lay people shared with ordained presbyters, as representatives of the whole Church, in the tactile act of ordination.

21 The arguments on both sides have, up to this point, referred to 'lay persons'. The Cumbria Synod's memorial, however, refers particularly to the Vice-President. If the foregoing case for the involvement of lay persons in general is upheld, the Vice-President, who clearly exercises a special representative rôle, is ideally qualified to share in the laying-on of hands. Since several

ordinations take place simultaneously during each Conference, the current President is not able to preside at all of them. Our usage is that the President or the President's deputy should preside. The deputy has nearly always (though not invariably) been a former President. It would be appropriate for former Vice-Presidents to share in the laying-on of hands at ordinations at which the current Vice-President could not be present.

Deaconesses and deacons and the Vice-Presidency

- 22 The office of Vice-President of the Conference may be held by a deacon or deaconess, who, according to our recently revised understanding, cannot be regarded as a lay person. Both the 1993 and the 1995 Conferences overwhelmingly adopted a resolution affirming that "the Methodist Church recognises and has received from God two orders of ministry, the presbyteral and the diaconal". Unless there is a change in our regulations as to eligibility for Vice-Presidential office, therefore, it will sometimes happen that the Vice-President is a deacon or deaconess, not a lay person. The Cumbria Memorial takes no account of this fact.
- 23 It may be judged, however, that the issue raised in paragraph 22 need not influence the Conference's decision on the Memorial, one way or the other. Those who support the *status quo* hold that no one other than a presbyter should lay hands on ordinands. If those who argue for the involvement of the Vice-President in the tactile act are more concerned that a representative person who is **not** a presbyter should assist the President and other presbyters in this act than that he or she should necessarily be lay, then it will not significantly affect their case if the Vice-President happens to be a deaconess or deacon.

Conclusion

- 24 The Faith and Order Committee has given careful thought to the arguments for and against change. It is clear that ordained presbyters will always have an essential part in the ordination of new presbyters. What is at issue is whether the participation of another representative person (the Vice-President or the Vice-President's deputy) in addition to ordained presbyters would detract from and confuse what is taking place or add something to it. The Faith and Order Committee believes that there are strong arguments both in favour of the *status quo* and in favour of change. On balance, the Committee's view is that the arguments for change are not sufficiently strong to counteract the ecumenical, theological and pragmatic arguments in favour of the *status quo*. Moreover the Vice-President and other lay persons already exercise important rôles in ordination services. In addition to the Vice-President and his/her deputy, the person deputising for the Secretary of the Conference is often a lay person. The whole congregation, the majority of which is not ordained, joins in the declaration, "They are worthy", and thus assents to the ordination.
- 25 The Faith and Order Committee, therefore, while strongly supporting the case for the involvement of lay persons alongside ordained presbyters in ordination services, advises the Conference that, in its judgement, neither the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers nor the affirmation of the ministry of the whole people of God requires the Conference to introduce lay participation in the laying-on of hands. There can be, and must be, partnership between lay and

ordained in ordination services as in all Church life, but this does not mean that all must share in the same actions. The Committee is not persuaded that a sufficiently strong case can be made for a significant change to a usage which the Methodist Church shares with the vast majority of Christians.

- 26 Nevertheless, the Committee judges that in practice too many presbyters are often involved in the tactile act, and that this creates an unhelpful impression. Frequently, hands are laid on a candidate by the President, the preacher, the Secretary, the divisional representative, the overseas representative and the candidate's chosen assisting minister, sometimes accompanied also by the assisting ministers chosen by other candidates. While there is need to indicate that the ordination of presbyters is a collegial act, the college does not need to be so extensively represented. The Committee believes that it would be better if only the President, the ordinand's chosen assisting minister and another assisting minister, who might appropriately be the overseas representative (if a presbyter), were to lay on hands. Amendments to Standing Orders are supplied in resolution 3 below. Circumstances are different, however, in the Cymru District, where few ordinations take place at any one time, and where a large number of presbyters is unlikely to be involved in the tactile act. The Faith and Order Committee understands that the Cymru District would not wish the number of assisting ministers at ordinations governed by S.O. 495 to be restricted to two.
- 27 The opportunity has been taken, in bringing these amendments, to simplify S.O. 719 and to introduce a reference to prayer in S.O.s 495 and 716, as well as providing for the laying on of hands to be restricted to the President or a deputy and two assisting ministers (other than in the Welsh context).

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference adopts the report and resolves that it shall be the Conference's further reply to Memorial M22 (1995).

The Conference reaffirms the usage that only ordained presbyters shall lay hands on the heads of candidates at the Ordination of Presbyters.

The Conference adopts the following amendments to Standing Orders:

- (i) renumber the existing S.O. 495 as 495(1); and for "by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by his or her deputy, assisted by other ministers", substitute "in a service at which the President or a deputy shall preside".

- (ii) add, as S.O. 495(2):

"Each ordinand shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands with prayer by the President or a deputy, assisted by other ministers in accordance with Standing Order 719, one of whom may be nominated by the ordinand."

(iii) in S.O. 718(6), for “during the same Conference by the laying-on of hands at a service conducted by the President or by a deputy, assisted by other ministers”, substitute “in a service held during the meeting of the same Conference, at which the President or a deputy shall preside”.

(iv) add, as S.O. 718(6A):

“Each ordinand shall be ordained by the laying-on of hands with prayer by the President or a deputy, assisted by two other ministers in accordance with Standing Order 719, one of whom may be nominated by the ordinand.”

(v) for the existing S.O. 719, substitute:

“719 Ministers assisting at Ordinations. (1) Anyone assisting at an ordination in accordance with Standing Order 495(2) or 718(6A) shall be either:

(i) a minister in full connexion or a minister of the Irish or another autonomous conference;

or

(ii) a person ordained to the ministry of the word and sacraments in a church whose ministry is recognised by the Methodist Church.

(2) No person shall be invited to assist under head (ii) of clause (1) above unless the connexional Probationers Oversight Committee is satisfied that he or she meets the requirements there laid down, has been made aware in writing of the view of the Methodist Church that to participate in the laying-on of hands in a Methodist ordination service implies the intention to ordain to the presbyterate in the Church of God, and has subsequently indicated that he or she is willing to participate. Where necessary the Faith and Order Committee shall be asked to investigate a particular case.”

(Agenda 1996, pp.205-212)

A LAMP TO MY FEET AND A LIGHT TO MY PATH (1998)

THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY AND THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

CONTENTS

- 1 Preface
- 2 Introduction
- 3 A brief sketch of the history of the interpretation of the Bible
 - Early examples of Different Methods of Interpretation
 - The Reformers
 - The Emergence of Modern Biblical Criticism
 - The 20th Century
 - Summary
- 4 The authority of the Bible in the Methodist Church and the place of the Bible in Methodist decision-making
- 5 The nature of authority and the shape of the decision-making processes in Methodism
- 6 The handling of biblical material in relation to some specific issues
- 7 Scripture and the Methodist Church Today
 - Where are we now?
 - Different Perspectives
 - Models of Biblical Authority
 - The Bible in the Worshipping Community
- 8 Conclusion and Resolutions

1. PREFACE

- 1.1 How does God speak to us through the pages of the Bible? Do we all hear his voice in the same way? How does the Bible guide our thinking and our actions? Methodists answer these questions in a variety of ways. The following report seeks to explore the nature of authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church in the light of our different experiences of hearing God speaking to us through Scripture.
- 1.2 The concept of authority sits uneasily in a society which increasingly values personal autonomy and personal choice. 'Authority' tends to be linked in people's minds with 'authoritarianism', power as control, and with individuals' fear of losing their sense of personal freedom. On the other hand,

others are seeking certainties in this uncertain post-modern world and are looking for an external authority which will provide guide-lines for living. It is within this climate that a debate has arisen concerning the Nature of Authority in the Methodist Church.

- 1.3 During the 1993 Derby Conference widely differing opinions were voiced on the subject of human sexuality, based on different interpretations of the Bible. In this debate Methodists found themselves in situations of conflict with one another over the authority of Scripture. Sometimes this has led to helpful debate but sometimes bitter dispute has arisen.

QUESTIONS

Why do you think many people today are suspicious of authority, while others long for a 'clear lead' from authority figures? How much do these factors affect our attitude to the authority of the Bible or of the church?

'I also am under authority.' (Luke 7:8). 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (Gal. 5:1). How should Christians resolve this tension?

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The origins of this document lie in a Notice of Motion which the 1994 Conference referred, without debating or voting on its substance, to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration. That original Notice of Motion read:

This Conference instructs the Faith and Order Committee to establish a working party to consider the nature of biblical authority and how it is implemented in the life of the Methodist Church. The Conference further instructs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference either of 1996 or 1997 a report in the form of a discussion document, to be received there and sent to circuits and churches for discussion and comment. These comments to be received by an advertised date, giving time for full response in the life of the church, so that in the light of them a definitive report could be brought to a future Conference.

- 2.2 The Faith and Order Committee reported back to the 1995 Conference:

The Committee wishes to respond positively to the spirit of the Notice of Motion, while noting that there are some difficulties with its precise wording. How, for example, can biblical authority be said to be 'implemented' in the life of the Church? Furthermore, in view of the diverse views held among the Methodist people about the nature of biblical authority, it is difficult to see how a 'definitive' report could be presented in the foreseeable future. Nor does the Committee believe that the question of biblical authority can helpfully be addressed without reference to other sources of authority in the Church.

The Committee, therefore, proposes to establish a Working Party to produce a relatively short document setting out, within the wider context of authority, the different views of biblical authority which

exist in Methodism. The working title of this document is 'The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church'. It is envisaged that the document to be produced would be a resource for study and discussion throughout the Connexion and that, in the light of responses received, the Faith and Order Committee might be able to offer a further report – though not a definitive report – to the Conference at a later date.

- 2.3 The Conference accepted this recommendation from the Faith and Order Committee and a working party was duly set up to produce the suggested study document.
- 2.4 The Committee offers a study document which illustrates the complexities involved in using the Bible, outlines the nature of authority in the Methodist Church and gives examples of the different views of the Bible which exist in Methodism. We would like to emphasize that this is not a definitive statement about the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church but rather an attempt to stimulate the serious exploration of this issue by members of individual Methodist congregations.
- 2.5 By the Bible the Methodist Church means the 39 books of the Jewish Scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament which had come to be recognized as 'canonical', or normative by the fourth century AD. (Some other churches include in their canon additional Jewish Scriptures.) These books, originally written in Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT), were copied many times by hand in antiquity and in mediaeval times, until the invention of printing made this unnecessary. Because these books were regarded as Scripture the manuscripts were treated with great care, but mistakes in copying were inevitable and there are many variant readings, though the great majority of these are relatively unimportant. Until recently, we had very few Hebrew manuscripts earlier than the ninth century, but some early manuscripts were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and these have often thrown new light on the text. In the case of the New Testament, we have many early manuscripts (though these are often only fragments, or contain only a few books). At an early stage, the various books were translated from Hebrew and Greek into other languages, and early Church leaders commented on them. When there are variant readings in the Hebrew or Greek manuscripts, these translations and commentaries sometimes help to determine which of them is original.
- 2.6 When we talk about 'the Bible', therefore, we need to remember that there is no definitive text. The Authorized Version was based on very late texts of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Modern translations are based on much earlier texts, but we cannot always be certain that we know exactly what was written in the 'original' text.
- 2.7 The glorious English of the Authorized Version is today difficult to comprehend, since words change their meaning over the centuries. Moreover, we have today a better understanding of the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek, as well as better manuscripts. Today there are many translations of the Bible into English: inevitably, some are better than others. Some sound better than others when read in public worship, but are not necessarily the

most accurate translations; others, which sound less pleasing, may be better for study.

- 2.8 All translation involves interpretation, since there are many words in one language which have no exact equivalent in another. Some translators try to overcome this by paraphrasing, others try to produce a more literal translation. Inevitably, translators do not always grasp the full meaning of the original text. No one translation can be wholly satisfactory. The Methodist Church does not promote or authorize any one translation, ancient or modern.
- 2.9 Christians believe that God was at work, inspiring not only those who wrote the books that became our Bible, but those who collected them, recognized them as Scripture, copied them, edited them and translated them. But the men and women through whom God works are inevitably fallible and limited. The Bible is sometimes referred to as ‘the Word of God’, but in the Bible itself that phrase is used of God’s revelation of his purpose, and that purpose is revealed in many different ways. The Word of God can be expressed in both word and action: God reveals himself in creation, in the law, in prophecy, in history, and above all in Jesus (e.g. John 1:1; Ps.119; 1 Chron. 17:3; Isa. 45:23; John 1:14). The Bible bears witness to God’s self-revelation, but the Word of God itself is far greater than the words of the Bible.
- 2.10 All texts require interpretation. Very few people express themselves with total clarity: even when they do, the readers of the text may well have expectations which lead them to interpret it in a way very different from that which the writer intended. No doubt the ways in which this report is read will illustrate this point! Readers sometimes live in a quite different culture from that of the writer. In the case of the Bible, we are living in a very different world from that of its authors, and two or even three thousand years after they wrote. Interpreting the Bible is therefore a difficult task. But from the very beginning, it has needed to be interpreted, translated and applied. The Bible, for all its immediate appeal, is not an easy book to comprehend, and it needs constant study. Nevertheless, as Martin Luther wrote, ‘it is food which, the more it is read, the more delicious it tastes’!

QUESTIONS

What translation of the Bible do you most use personally, or find most helpful when read in Church and why?

Look at a biblical passage in as many different translations as possible. Do the various translations help you to see new meanings in the text which you had not discovered before? (Eg. Psalm 8; Isaiah 7:14-17; John 1:1-18; Rom.3:21-5; Phil. 2:5-11)

Read Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 in several different translations. Discuss what these words might have meant to the early church and what they mean for us today.

Christians often speak of the Bible as ‘the Word of God’. Do you find this description misleading or helpful? Why?

In what ways do our 'cultural assumptions' (where and when we live, our occupation, place in society and experiences) affect the way in which we read the Bible?

Is Martin Luther's statement, quoted in paragraph 2.10, echoed in your own experience? Try to give specific examples of how this has been, or has not been, true for you.

3. A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE WITHIN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Early Examples of Different Methods of Interpretation

- 3.1 The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters. Even within the Bible itself we can see the process of interpretation and continuing arguments about interpretation. Many of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees, as well as those between Paul and his fellow Jews, concerned the **interpretation** of the Law. In his letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul presents a particular interpretation of texts concerning Abraham as he argues that Gentile converts should not be circumcised because Abraham's true descendants are those who share his faith in God (Gal. 3:1-5:1). Paul points to the faith of Abraham which precedes his circumcision (Gen. 15:6); his opponents presumably pointed to the covenant obligation that all Abraham's descendants must be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14). For the earliest Christians the Jewish scriptures were authoritative and they interpreted their meaning in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel writers believed that Jesus' ministry was a fulfilment of the Scriptures (Matt. 5:17, Luke 24:25-6, John 5:39). The accounts of the passion are especially full of allusions to the words of the prophets (Zech. 9:9/Matt. 21:5, Is. 56:7 & Jer. 7:11/Matt. 21:13). The belief that God was at work in Christ illuminated the Old Testament scriptures and revealed new meaning in them.
- 3.2 From the very beginning, Christians have recognized that the living God cannot be confined to the pages of scripture. In 2 Cor. 3, Paul draws a distinction between the covenant chiselled in letters on stone and the covenant written by the Spirit on human hearts: the former is static, and can lead to death, while the latter brings life. Although Paul appealed to the scriptures (our Old Testament) as authoritative, he was persuaded that God had spoken more directly in the person of Christ: the scriptures now had to be read and interpreted in the light of Christian experience of the crucified and risen Lord.
- 3.3 In the early years of the Christian Church, the Old Testament remained its only scriptures. The first books of the New Testament to be written were Paul's letters, but it was only at a later period that they came to be recognized as 'scripture'. Until the gospels were written (towards the end of the first century AD), the traditions about Jesus were oral. Our four gospels were recognized as 'canonical' by the later Councils of the Church, which discussed individual writings at length and included some in the New Testament and excluded others. We see, then, that tradition, experience and reason all played a part in the writing and collection of scripture.

- 3.4 Early Church leaders understood the authority of the Bible in different ways. For example, Justin Martyr (c.100-165) wrote that God's Spirit inspired 'holy men' as a harp-player plays on a harp. Irenaeus (c.115-190) thought that the truth contained in Scripture was like a deposit in a bank to be guarded by the Church. During this time the canon of Scripture had not been ecumenically agreed. The word 'canon' derives from the Greek *kanon* meaning measuring stick or rule. It was used to refer to the collection of books that was acknowledged to be authoritative in the Church. Only after AD367, when Athanasius (296-377) wrote his now famous Easter Letter that listed the books of the Bible, had there been sufficient time for most disputes to be settled concerning which writings should test and measure the faith of the Church. A variety of approaches to interpretation was developed by other writers, such as Origen (184-254), Augustine (354-430) and Gregory the Great (c.550-604).
- 3.5 Allegorical methods of interpretation, used within Judaism, were taken over by Christians. It was assumed that authoritative texts must have meaning for the Christian community. If there was no obvious literal meaning there still must be a meaning (God could not say nothing). It was believed to be there in allegorical form. This method of interpretation gained popularity from the time of Origen. St Augustine described the approach by saying, 'Whatever appears in the divine word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behaviour or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative'. So, for example, the general meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan was clear, but details, the actors and places in the story, could be given additional significance.

The Reformers

- 3.6 The Reformers Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-64) felt that allegorical methods too easily allowed interpreters to find in Scripture what they wished to find. They challenged the Church's rule of faith in matters of interpretation and struggled to reaffirm the supremacy of the Bible for all theological teaching. Different understandings of the nature of Christian tradition were at stake. Significantly, Luther did not revert to a simplistic or literalist interpretation of the Bible. Instead he had a principle for discerning the authoritative value of different passages of the Bible which was simply whether or not a passage proclaimed Christ. On this basis he was critical of the epistle of James. He could also say that whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if it were in a letter by St. Peter or St. Paul. Calvin was a little more cautious and was careful to affirm that true interpretation rests not with an individual or in the Church but lies in the object of investigation itself, that is, in Jesus Christ and the Bible. He warned against allowing interpretation of the Bible to become a private, subjective matter and was convinced that no application of philosophical ideas or systems was necessary. The Bible needed only to be interpreted from within itself; one passage should be allowed to interpret another. All the Reformers emphasized that, as the Holy Spirit had first inspired the writing of the Scriptures, so now Scripture should be interpreted under the Spirit's guidance. They maintained the Spirit, and not the tradition of the Church, guides the authoritative interpretation of Scripture.

The Emergence of Biblical Criticism

3.7 One of the main results of the Reformation, together with the invention of printing, was that the Bible became both accessible and authoritative in ways that it had not been before. This led to the writing of a wealth of devotional commentaries on the one hand, and to the scientific, critical study of the Bible on the other. Both approaches believed that the Bible as it is must be taken with the utmost seriousness, and that it was no longer enough for the Church to tell people what the Bible meant. The Bible could and should be allowed to speak for itself. So from the end of the 16th century onwards, biblical scholars tended to move their research further away from the worshipping life of the Church as they applied scientific tools derived from history and other disciplines. At the heart of this new approach was the belief that the meaning of a biblical text was the meaning which its author had intended, and what its first readers or hearers would have understood. So before we can ask what a text means, we have to ask questions like, Who wrote this? When? Where? and, if possible, Why? This basically historical approach to the Bible has dominated academic Bible study until very recently. An Old Testament example of the results of this method is the recognition that the material gathered together in the Book of Isaiah does not all come from Isaiah of Jerusalem but from later writers too, each addressing a particular situation. It can be argued that the better we understand the situation, the more clearly we see the message. A New Testament example of the method is the recognition that the gospels both shape and reflect the beliefs of the early Christian communities, interpreting the words and actions of Jesus in order to show their relevance to their own situations. The Church has not always been comfortable with the results of such scholarship, though most Biblical scholars have been dedicated Christians who saw their work as taking the Bible seriously and allowing the Bible to speak for itself.

The 20th Century

3.8 The 20th century has seen the continuation of old and a blossoming of new approaches to the study of the Bible. Some of these new approaches modify, challenge or even undermine the historical approach. Some approaches try to trace how stories in the Bible arose and were told in successive generations, others invite the reader to treat the Biblical texts as literature and to identify imaginatively with situations and persons in them.

3.9 Significant archaeological discoveries happened soon after the second world war at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. These scrolls include non-biblical texts which describe the life and beliefs of the community at Qumran, which existed at the time of Jesus, as well as manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible which are one thousand years older than any previously known. They have had a profound effect on scholarly understanding of Judaism near to the time of the writing of the New Testament. Archaeological discoveries contributed to the development of sociological approaches to the Bible that try to understand some of the day to day social and economic factors that shaped the lives of the earliest followers of Jesus.

3.10 The 20th century has also seen many attempts to read and interpret the Bible in the light of contemporary experiences within societies, in western countries and elsewhere. Liberation theologians in Latin America, Africa and Asia have

tried to interpret the Bible's message in situations of oppression and hardship today. Sometimes they made use of social and Marxist theories within the context of their Christian endeavour to preach good news to the poor today. The black experience of marginalization has led to a particular understanding of the Bible as a book offering emancipation from all oppression. Feminist theologians have developed a number of ways to reassess and to resist Biblical texts that either marginalize or recount the abuse of women. They offer critiques of patriarchal ideology underlying the Scriptures.

Summary

3.11 Thus, from the earliest days, Christian people have been engaged in the task of interpretation. Some approaches have emphasized the divine inspiration of Scripture over the human character of its writing. Some have been more concerned with human and historical matters. Some have stressed questions of how we hear God speaking to us through the text **now**. The very diversity of approaches indicates that no single human method or manner of approach can encompass all that the Bible tells us about God; the Word of God explodes any human constraints that we might impose on the text. It also suggests that the task of interpretation is not finished but is ongoing and forms an important part of responsible and expectant Christian faith today. With this in mind we are left with the question, 'How are we to use Scripture in our decision-making?'

QUESTIONS

'I find it bewildering that the Bible has been interpreted in so many different ways.' 'I find it exciting that the Bible has spoken in such different ways to people in different times and places.' With which of these statements do you most agree, and why?

How do you read the Bible? Do you look for symbolic/allegorical meanings? Do you find that information about its historical context helps in interpretation? Or do you read the text primarily in the light of your own experiences?

Some Christians talk about scripture, tradition, experience and reason as all playing a part in reaching decisions. Do you consider these four to be equally important?

It is very easy to read our own ideas into the texts (e.g. in allegory). Does this make the idea that they are authoritative dangerous?

Are some parts of the Bible more authoritative than others? If so, which, and how do we decide?

Does it undermine the authority of the Bible to suggest that God's word to us is always mediated through men's and women's understanding of it?

Marginalized groups have found the Bible coming alive as they have discovered that so much of it was written out of experiences similar to their own and therefore speaks directly to their current situation. If the Methodist Church in this country were to take the study of the Bible in this way

seriously, what difference would it make to our life and witness, theology and worship, and the study of the Bible?

4. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH AND THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN METHODIST DECISION-MAKING

- 4.1 In considering the key question of the authority of the Bible in the Methodist Church and the place of the Bible in Methodist decision-making, the first place to look is the *Deed of Union*. The second paragraph of Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union* begins,

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

and the key sentence on the place of Scripture comes next,

The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.

Thus a summary statement on the place of the Bible in Methodism would be:

The Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice.

- 4.2 The *Deed of Union* is a very carefully worded statement, and we should notice what it says and what it does not say:

4.2.1 It does say that there is such a thing as a **supreme rule of faith and practice** for the Church!

4.2.2 It says that **the divine revelation**, which is **recorded in the Holy Scriptures** is the supreme authority for the Church. It does not say that **the Bible** is the supreme authority.

4.2.3 It does not define what it means by **the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures**. One could interpret this as meaning that it is the actual words of the Bible that form the divine revelation. Alternatively, one could understand it to mean that the self-revelation of God took place in the great events of the Old and New Testaments, in the words of the prophets and Biblical writers and supremely in Jesus, and that the Bible is the record of that self-revelation.

4.2.4 It says that our doctrines are **based upon** God's revelation which is recorded in the Bible. It does not say that our Methodist doctrines are taken straight from the Bible.

- 4.3 This statement implies that the authority of the Methodist Conference (described below in section 5) is subject to the authority of God's revelation recorded in the Scriptures. Its authority is not independent of, nor superior to, the revelation recorded in Scripture. However, the Conference is the final authority in the interpretation of this revelation.

- 4.4 Obviously Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and his 44 *Sermons* are rooted in the Bible, and his views on the Bible can be gleaned from these works as well as from his other letters and writings. Wesley held that Scripture is the Word of the living God and that Scripture's authority rests upon this fact. In the Preface to the *Notes* Wesley writes

The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the foundation of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all the writings of men, however, wise or learned or holy. (Preface to *Notes*, paragraph 10)

He goes on to describe the inspiration of the human authors as follows,

God speaks, not as man but as God. His thoughts are very deep, and thence His words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of His messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree; for the words which were given them accurately answered the impressions made upon their minds. (Preface to *Notes*, paragraph 12)

- 4.5 For Wesley Scripture was authoritative because its human authors were inspired by God and thus for the Christian the Bible is the final authority in faith and practice.

This is a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right and wrong, of whatever is really good or evil. He esteems nothing good, but what is here enjoined, either directly or by plain consequence; he accounts nothing evil but what is here forbidden, either in terms or by undeniable inference. (*Sermon* 'The Witness of our own Spirit', paragraph 6)

- 4.6 However, this statement of his position on Scripture is not all that Wesley had to say on the question. He accepted that the human authors of Scripture played an active role in the process of writing; they did not receive the words by passive dictation but rather used their memories and sometimes quoted the Old Testament inaccurately (*Notes* on Matt. 2:6 and Hebrews 2:7); they also repeated traditions from the Jews which were not exact (*Notes* on Matt. 1:1). Wesley did not see this acceptance as being contrary to his fundamental position on the inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture; in each case he explained that the apostles did this knowingly and gave a reason for the imprecision. Equally, he was clear that reason has an important role to play in religion; indeed, religion he argued, should **exalt and improve** our reason (*Notes* on 1 Cor. 14:20). This does not mean that reason was another source of revelation in Wesley's thought, rather it is a logical faculty which helps us to grasp the revelation given in Scripture. What it does mean is that reason has a vital role in the interpretation of Scripture. One example of the use of reason is described by Kenneth Cracknell who, in his paper *Doctrinal Standards: A Study Course on the Doctrinal Clause of the Methodist Church*, comments on

... Wesley's own close attention to the text, and his readiness to amend the King James Version whenever he felt it necessary, some 12,000 times! As a former Lecturer in Greek at Oxford University, not only did he carry out

his daily Bible study of the New Testament in Greek, but he was also aware of better textual methods and had access to better texts than the 1611 translators had.

- 4.7 Finally, Wesley also argued that the Spirit inspires and assists those ‘that read it (the Bible) with earnest prayer’ (*Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16). This current activity of the Spirit who inspired the original authors is clearly vital to Wesley’s understanding of inspiration, indeed he goes on to argue from this statement ‘hence it is so profitable for doctrine . . . instruction . . . reproof’ etc (*Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16). The authority of Scripture rests on the present day activity of the Spirit as well as the inspiration of the original authors. The very fact Wesley provided *Notes on the New Testament* indicates that he believed that Church leaders under the guidance of the Spirit had a responsibility to guide the interpretation of Scripture within the Church. He argued that this should happen according to what he called the analogy of faith. The Scriptures should be expounded

according to the general tenor of them; according to that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith and present inward salvation . . . Every article, therefore concerning which there is any question should be determined by this rule; every doubtful Scripture interpreted according to the grand truths which run through the whole. (*Notes* on Romans 12:6)

- 4.8 This point about the interpretation of Scripture is an important one. There is, according to Wesley, a theme which runs throughout Scripture, that of sin and faith and present salvation. Wesley’s great concern with the subject of Scriptural holiness is well known; it is this theme which provides us with the key to interpreting what the Bible has to say. Any individual text must be interpreted with reference to the general tenor of what Scripture has to say about these subjects.
- 4.9 The only other statement on the Methodist view of the Bible is in Question 52 in the *Methodist Catechism* which was authorized at the 1986 Conference,

52. What is the Bible?

The Bible, comprising the Old and New Testaments, is the collection of books, gradually compiled, in which it is recorded how God has acted among, and spoken to and through, his people. The writers expressed themselves according to their own language, culture and point in history and in their different ways were all bearing witness to their faith in God. The Bible is the record of God’s self-revelation, supremely in Jesus Christ, and is a means through which he still reveals himself, by the Holy Spirit.

- 4.10 Notice the six points in the answer:

- 4.10.1 The Bible is not one book but a collection of books, gathered together over a long period of time,
- 4.10.2 The Bible records how God acted among his people and spoke to them,
- 4.10.3 The writers expressed themselves in the language and forms of their day,

4.10.4 The writers in the Bible saw things differently and wrote in different ways, but all were expressing their faith in God.

4.10.5 The Bible shows us how God was making himself known to us.

4.10.6 The Bible is one of the ways in which God still makes himself known to us.

4.11 There is little other relevant material, except for one of the questions which each ordinand is asked in the Ordination Service, ‘Do you accept the Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?’ This is old phraseology going back to disputes about the Bible in the time of the Reformation. It is important to note what it asks and what it doesn’t ask. The question insists that the Bible contains **all things necessary for eternal salvation**, not that it tells us **everything we would like to know** about God, or the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

QUESTIONS

Read again the summary comments on the *Deed of Union* in paragraph 4.2 and on the Catechism in paragraph 4.10. Do you find these provide for you a helpful description of what the Bible is, and is not? What would you want to add or take away from them?

What does it mean to describe the revelation in the Holy Scriptures as ‘the supreme rule of faith and practice’?

To what extent is the Bible useful in providing guidance to the Church regarding its life and work, or to individual Christians regarding their daily life and work?

What other things would you like the Bible to tell us?

If the Bible doesn’t provide immediate ready-made answers to our modern day ethical problems, what general principles should we apply? How, for example, would you deal with questions such as pollution, third-world debt and embryo research?

5. THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY AND THE SHAPE OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN METHODISM

5.1 How then are the Scriptures to be interpreted? Within the corporate life of the Church, who is to define what the ‘divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures’ means today? This is not a new question; as we have seen, and will see again in this report, the Church has always had to tackle the problems of interpretation. In the early 1740s, John Wesley was faced with the problem of differing understandings of doctrine and the interpretation of Scripture among the leaders of the revival in England. His answer in 1744 was to gather together a small conference of people who accepted his leadership, to consider the questions ‘What to teach, how to teach and what to do; that is how to regulate doctrine, discipline and practice’. This conference became an annual event and the precursor of the modern day Methodist Conference. Today the

Conference still seeks to answer the questions that Wesley answered and as part of this work most of the reports which the Conference issues discuss the relevant Biblical material. We move on, therefore, to consider the role of the Conference and how decisions are made in the Methodist Church.

- 5.2 The *Deed of Union*, which is our basic constitutional document, says very clearly that

The governing body of the Methodist Church shall be the Conference (*Deed of Union* 11)

The government and discipline of the Methodist Church and the management and administration of its affairs [are] vested in the Conference (*Deed of Union* 18)

The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines (*Deed of Union* 5, *Methodist Church Act* 1976 3(2))

Thus the Conference, which meets annually and is made up largely of elected representatives, is the determining authority for all issues within the life of the Methodist Church, both in questions of law and polity and in matters of faith and order.

- 5.3 The Standing Orders to be found in *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* lay down the constitution of the Conference, the ways in which it makes its decisions and the procedures by which it exercises its authority within the Connexion. Calling a governing body a 'Conference' is itself suggestive, indicating that our approach to decision-making is consultative, collaborative and conversational. Material for discussion, debate and decision is brought to the Conference by national committees, Districts and Circuits as well as by members of the Conference through Notices of Motion. The Conference itself will discuss or debate this material under the guidance of the President who will try to make sure that all opinions are properly heard. Some of the decisions made have to be referred to Synods or Circuits before the next Conference can ratify them, and in matters affecting the doctrinal clause of the *Deed of Union* there has to be considerable consultation before the Conference can effect any changes. In other cases the Conference will decide to seek opinions and views as widely as possible before finalizing a report. Decisions duly made then become binding on the Connexion and it is the responsibility of those concerned to implement them.
- 5.4 The general doctrinal position of the Methodist Church is set out in the first paragraph of Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*:

The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unflinching resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.

This paragraph contains a grateful acknowledgement that the Methodist Church owes its origins and its continued life to the grace of God. It recognizes the authority for Methodism of the 'fundamental principles' of the historic creeds and of the Reformation, as well as that of the mission to which Methodism was called in its beginnings. The crucial place of the Bible is implied throughout this paragraph in the references to apostolic faith, the historic creeds, the Protestant Reformation and 'scriptural holiness', as indicated in Section 4.

- 5.5 If we ask what our doctrines are we discover that the Deed of Union does not offer a direct answer to the question. Rather, it tells us where these doctrines can be found. Firstly, as stated above, in the fundamental principles of the creeds and the Reformation. However, no-one has ever defined exactly what these 'fundamental principles' are! To attempt to do so would be a major task and so in the interests of brevity, we can confine ourselves to the following point:
- 5.6 In the Reformation a major point at issue was the authority of Scripture as against the authority of the Church. The Reformers argued that Christian doctrine should be based on the teaching of Scripture and that the Church has authority to define doctrine only in so far as it is faithful to the Word of God in Scripture. This raises the question of who, if anyone, can provide an authoritative interpretation of Scripture, and thus decide whether or not the Church has been faithful to biblical teaching. Whilst encouraging individuals to read the Bible, the main Reformers did not, on the whole, simply argue that each person should interpret Scripture for him or herself. The individual needed guidance; the question was from where that guidance should come. Calvin's *Institutes*, for example, which looks like a work of systematic theology, was intended as a guide to enable people to understand the message of the Bible.
- 5.7 Secondly, the *Deed of Union* goes on to state that the distinctively Methodist understanding of Christian doctrine is drawn from the teaching of John Wesley:

These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his *Sermons*.

but straight after that it insists that in Methodism we do not in fact make any sort of list or statement about what our doctrines are! It puts it like this:

The *Notes on the New Testament* and the 44 *Sermons* are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.

- 5.8 This is a very important point and needs to be carefully noted. Except for the statement of faith found in the *Deed of Union* Clause 8a,

All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as members of the Methodist Church.

neither here nor anywhere else in our constitutional documents are 'our doctrines' ever closely defined in terms of formulae, lists, definitions or any other kind of statement of faith to which Methodists have to give assent. From time to time, however, the Conference adopts reports, makes Statements on particular doctrinal matters or authorizes liturgical or educational material. The Statements at least must be seen as in some way defining 'our doctrine' in a particular instance and giving a definition which is binding for us. This is part of the way in which God's Spirit leads us onwards. The 1937 Conference Statement on *The Nature of the Christian Church* put it like this:

a life which is under the guidance of the Spirit should be richer as time goes on . . . and new apprehension of divine truth is given.

- 5.9 The Conference exercises authority over the preachers. In matters of doctrine this authority is seen in Conference itself in that ordinands are required to affirm that they 'believe and preach our doctrines' before they are admitted into Full Connexion, and in that each Chairman of District has to answer annually to the Conference that the ministers in his or her District have all given a positive affirmation to the same question at the Spring Synod. Similar authority is exercised over Local Preachers through the Local Preachers Meeting and over members exercising office through the Church Council.
- 5.10 In fact, the Conference, like all other Church Councils from Acts 15 onwards, makes all kinds of decisions on all manner of issues in a variety of ways but how those decisions are actually made on the floor of the Conference can be influenced by the time of day, the state of the weather, the dullness or the brightness of a particular speech, who it is that is speaking, what previous lobbying has gone on, what pressure groups are interested and who has put forward the Notice of Motion or the report. How people get to be members of the Conference can be subject to equally non-theological factors in their Synods. Quite how individual members of Conference balance all these things in their minds before they vote is known only to God. However, many would feel that, despite human failings, the action of the Holy Spirit can be perceived in the ultimate outcome of debates.
- 5.11 Again, although the Conference makes all kinds of decisions on all manner of issues, in practice its authority is limited, perhaps least limited in matters of finance and property and most limited in matters of 'doctrine'. The average Church member will be affected by Conference decisions on ministerial stipends, but not by the latest report of the Faith and Order Committee (even by this one when it appears), for he or she is not likely even to have heard about it. The issue is not just one of poor communications. Rather it is that some Methodist churches are congregational in their outlook, hardly looking outwards even as far as the Circuit let alone the Connexion. So parts of Methodism have no strong sense of connection with the Conference, no interest in its debates and do not regulate their life by its decisions to any great extent. To such chapels, circuits, members or ministers it can be a matter of complete and utter indifference what Conference decides or thinks. Of course there are many churches, circuits and ministers who value belonging to a wider

network for the fellowship, support and help they can receive from it and give to it. For them the guidance and encouragement of the Conference is something to be welcomed.

QUESTIONS

If the Bible needs to be interpreted, who should be responsible for that interpretation? Should Christians be free to make up their own minds as to its meaning, or should they accept the judgement of the Church?

To what extent is your local church aware of the decisions reached at the Conference and what weight is given to them in local life?

If the influence of the Conference over your belief and practice is limited, to whom or what do you look for guidance in these matters? Why? What would be lost if each individual church or circuit was left simply to make up its own mind?

Can the work of the Holy Spirit be seen in the decisions of the Conference? If so, how?

6. THE HANDLING OF BIBLICAL MATERIAL IN RELATION TO SOME SPECIFIC ISSUES

- 6.1 Examples can be given of various ways in which Methodists have developed attitudes, or made doctrinal or ethical judgements. In some of them interpretations of different scriptural passages have been weighed. Sometimes, on the other hand, there has been little or no explicit reference to the Bible.
 - 6.1.1 Methodist people have been content to set aside biblical texts dealing with food regulations and, more recently, the text about women covering their heads in church.
 - 6.1.2 The debates on sexuality, going back to the Conference of 1979, illustrate the difficulty of making an authoritative judgement when people interpret biblical material differently. The problem is compounded when other factors are considered along with biblical teaching.
 - 6.1.3 The Methodist Church has taken strong attitudes on the use of alcohol and engagement in gambling when explicit biblical instruction is weak or non-existent. The same is true about the Christian use of Sunday.
 - 6.1.4 The Methodist Church permits the marriage of divorced persons, even though there are biblical texts that explicitly forbid divorce. There are other texts that are ambiguous on the matter.
 - 6.1.5 In early Conference reports (1933 and 1939) on the ordination of women there was no explicit reference to the Bible. A report in 1961 carefully considered biblical material bearing on this issue. Following this report, when the final decision to ordain women was taken (1971), it was assumed that no biblical impediment existed.

- 6.1.6 Within the universal Church interpretation of biblical texts about baptism has given rise to two traditions. Some allow the baptism of believers only; others allow the baptism of infants. The Methodist Church stands within the tradition which affirms that infant baptism is true baptism.
- 6.1.7 Sometimes Christians discover fresh insights in areas of the Bible long since set aside because they seemed irrelevant to later societies. For example, in recent years Methodists have shown considerable interest in the biblical concept of Jubilee, a year in which environmental, social and economic relations were to be restored to an earlier, more just norm, reflecting the idea of a people, freed from slavery in Egypt to become the people of God. The Jubilee ideal – restoring of rights, remitting of debts, freeing of slaves – aimed to prevent the emergence of a society in which the rich grew richer and the poor poorer. This interest in Jubilee also comes from renewed understanding of the Gospel’s concern for the poor and from grasping that much of Jesus’ teaching relates strongly to the Jubilee vision (see Leviticus 25 and Luke 4:16-19).
- 6.1.8 The Methodist Church has always upheld a firm biblical position on many matters in the ethical realm, for example murder, theft and adultery. About these things there has been general agreement.
- 6.2 Methodists are not alone in having to struggle with problems like these. Many churches have refused to take a firm position on issues where conflicting views have been so deeply held that agreement was unlikely: pacifism is such a case. Some questions that perplexed Christians before us are no longer seen as a problem: the Bible clearly prohibits the lending of money with interest, but in later centuries this prohibition was deemed to be unworkable in changed economic and social conditions (but see 6.1.7). For many years a particular interpretation of Scripture supported the practice of slavery: Christians have come to see that a wider understanding of the Bible makes slavery an evil that cannot be tolerated.
- 6.3 It is important to recognize that it is people who are involved in making judgements and therefore agreements will not be possible on all issues. Some people are happier with a clear, defined position; others have more tolerance towards uncertainty; and yet others are stimulated by the process of working things out. Loving our brothers and sisters may involve recognizing these differences and not expecting that what is acceptable for us must be so for them.
- 6.4 The reading, discussion and interpretation of Scripture continues. As already mentioned in this report, the Church has always believed that the Holy Spirit guided and inspired the original writers of Scripture. In our struggle to interpret the Bible and apply it to our lives, we look to the same Spirit to guide and inspire us too; recognizing always that

Thou hast more truth and light to break
Forth from thy Holy Word.

(Hymns and Psalms 477)

QUESTIONS

Why do we ignore some parts of the Bible and give weight to others when making ethical decisions?

Should preachers be encouraged to tackle ethical issues in their sermons?

Christians with opposing ideas have often used the Bible to argue for their own point of view. Can you think of any examples? Does it concern you that there is not always a 'Christian view' with regard to ethical issues? Why or why not?

How can we disagree without being disagreeable?

7. SCRIPTURE AND THE METHODIST CHURCH TODAY

Where are we now?

- 7.1 The *Methodist Catechism* (Question 52, see paragraph 4.9) sets out the Methodist understanding of the role of the Bible. The Bible is thus the primary witness to God's self-revelation, above all in Christ, within the formative events of the life of God's people, pointing the Church of today to the present activity of God. The Church through the centuries has heard the Word of God in the Bible in many different settings, and has affirmed its authority by accepting it as 'canon'.
- 7.2 Today the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures to awaken and nurture faith and provide ethical direction for the Christian community. Through exploration of the Bible, the Church's ongoing task is to discern God's revelation afresh in every time and place. True biblical interpretation depends on the Holy Spirit, recognizes the literary character and the historical and cultural background of each book, takes account of the teaching of the rest of Scripture, and acknowledges a rich diversity of theologies and contexts.
- 7.3 In the incarnation, God chose to accept the limitations of time, place and culture, and made himself vulnerable to misunderstanding and rejection. Indeed, God's Word is always heard within a particular time, place and culture and is always open to the possibility of misunderstanding and rejection. We must therefore seek to interpret God's will behind the written word, reckoning with the possibility that the contents of the Scriptures themselves sometimes encourage us to challenge certain statements found in Scripture.
- 7.4 Drawing conclusions for today's ethical issues is complex even when that issue is dealt with in Scripture. Modern ethical questions, unimagined by Biblical writers, such as those raised by genetic engineering, make it obvious that the Church needs to discover how to apply the guiding principles used by Jesus, Paul and the early Church as they were faced with the emerging issues of their day. These principles can be summarized in the words of the two great commandments: love God and love your neighbour. Of course, working out what these mean in any situation is an extremely complex and difficult matter.

Different Perspectives

- 7.5 Within this broad agreement there are differences of interpretation. For example, we may agree with the Psalmist that ‘your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path’ (Psalm 119:105), but what is meant by ‘your word’? If the Psalmist meant (as he probably did) ‘God’s word of instruction and promise in the Law’, is it legitimate for us to see the text as referring to the whole Bible? Or may we say that God speaks a ‘word’ to us in many ways – sometimes through a passage of Scripture, at other times through a friend, a preacher, or in private prayer?
- 7.6 A key text is 2 Timothy 3:16: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (NRSV), but there is no single way to interpret this. What does the writer mean by ‘scripture’? After all, the New Testament had not been compiled when these words were written. Certainly, the author gives ‘scripture’ a high place by describing it as ‘inspired by God’ (literally, ‘God-breathed’). But does that mean that it is without error of any kind (‘inerrant’) as some claim? Does it mean that all Scripture is of equal value? And what do we make of the description of Scripture as ‘useful’? It certainly means that it is valuable, helpful for the purposes listed; but does that necessarily mean that it is authoritative or binding in the absolute sense?
- 7.7 The point of raising these questions is not to imply that there is nothing on which we can agree, or that any opinion about the Bible is as valid as any other opinion. As we have seen already, there is a broad area of agreement about the importance and place of the Bible in the Church’s life. We mention the differences, and illustrate them from the two familiar texts above, to show that we cannot expect only one specific view of the Bible’s authority to win the day and convince everyone else. Though we agree on the central issues, there are many open questions which lead different Christians to view the Bible in somewhat different ways. It is necessary to remember that salvation is by faith in Christ and not through attitudes to Scripture, or doctrines held, or the living of a perfect life.
- 7.8 If we can begin to understand how and why Christians come to a range of views of the Bible, some of which might seem strange or questionable to us, perhaps we can come to respect each other’s perspectives, and together make biblically-informed decisions about Christian living in the world today.

Models of Biblical Authority

- 7.9 The seven following examples represent different perspectives on biblical authority which are held within the Church. They are not precise definitions, and any one of us might feel that our own position is a mixture of two or three of these examples. But they are intended to illustrate briefly the range of views which are held, and the reasons for holding them.
- 7.9.1 *The Bible is the Word of God and is, therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour. It is ‘God-breathed’ and its human authors were channels of the divine Word. The Christian’s task is to discern accurately what the Bible*

teaches and then to believe and obey it. Reason, experience and tradition should be judged in the light of the Bible, not the other way round.

This view is concerned to safeguard the conviction that the Bible has its origin in God. It works from the premise that God cannot be the author of error, and therefore the Bible cannot contain error. To give undue status to any other source of authority is to exalt fallible human insight over the infallible Word of God.

- 7.9.2 *The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected, however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose. Nevertheless, it provides the supreme rule for faith and conduct, to which other ways of 'knowing', while important, should be subordinate.*

This view also stresses the divine origin of Scripture, its supreme authority for Christian belief and practice, and its priority over other sources of authority. But it holds that reliable information on, for example, historical or scientific matters may not fall within God's purpose in giving the Bible.

- 7.9.3 *The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light. The way to apply biblical teaching in today's very different context is not always obvious or straightforward. Reason is an important (God-given) gift which must be used to the full in this process of interpretation.*

This view emphasizes that the Word of God contained in a collection of books written in times and places very different from our own cannot simply be read as a message for our own situation. We must work out by the use of reason how far and in what way the ancient text can appropriately be applied to the modern situation.

- 7.9.4 *The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by Church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching. Church tradition is therefore of high importance as a practical source of authority.*

This view is concerned to stress that the people of God, the Church, existed before the Bible and that the Bible therefore does not exist independently of the Church. Interpretation of the Bible is essentially a matter for the Church community, and especially its appointed leaders, rather than for private individuals.

- 7.9.5 *The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance. The Bible helps to interpret experience, but*

much stress is placed on spiritual experience itself, which conveys its own compelling authority.

On this view, to give too high a status to the Bible may prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us today. We should be guided principally by the convictions which emerge from our own Christian experience as individuals and as a church community, which on occasion will go against the main thrust of the Bible's teaching.

- 7.9.6 *The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it. Christians must therefore discern where and to what extent they perceive the true gospel witness in the various voices of the Bible. Reason, tradition and experience are as important as the biblical witnesses.*

This view emphasizes that the Bible mediates the Word of God but is not identical with the Word of God. We can discover which parts of the Bible are God's Word for us only if we make use of all the resources of reason, church tradition and experience.

- 7.9.7 *The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ. And to the extent that the Bible records evidence of his character and teaching it offers a useful resource. However, in the late 20th century it is simply not possible to obey all its teachings since these stem from very human authors and often represent the ideology of particular groups or classes in an ancient and foreign culture. Reason and experience provide much more important tools for faith and practice.*

This view also stresses that the Bible was written by people addressing particular times and situations. But, guided by the insights of, for example, feminist and liberation theologies, it further argues that before we can discover in it God's Word for us we must strip away from it those elements which betray the vested interests of particular groups, for instance, the interests of male dominance or of political and economic power-blocks.

- 7.10 If we go back to the *Deed of Union* and its summary statement that, 'the Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice' we can see that most, if not all, of these positions are compatible with possible interpretations of this ambiguous phrase!

The Bible in the Worshipping Community

- 7.11 Most of the approaches listed above can be heard underlying the preaching from Methodist pulpits each week. However there is a risk that preachers, both ordained and lay, may at times give the impression that they believe their own method of interpretation is the only appropriate one, with the result that congregations are not enlightened concerning the rich heritage of biblical

interpretation within Methodism. Where this happens, it overlooks the fact that many in the pew have been challenged to think carefully about the interpretation of Scripture through secondary education and the many courses now available for adults. For these, the fact that preachers appear to handle Scripture without indicating or justifying their approach, can lead to a loss of respect.

- 7.12 Some would argue that the pulpit is not the place for such teaching, and that it should take place in Bible-study groups or house fellowships. However, this view overlooks the fact that the majority of church-goers do not attend such meetings. Their encounter with the Bible is when it is read and expounded in Church. Therefore responsibility for teaching about the Bible, its content, and ways of hearing God through it lies with those who in their ministerial or local preacher training have been educated in the exploration of Scripture. It is essential that in their sermons all preachers should wrestle with the meaning of the Bible and its interpretation for today.
- 7.13 However, the task and the joy of reading the Bible and the challenge of interpreting it for today is not merely for preachers but for every Christian. The annual Membership Ticket points out that every member of the Methodist Church should be 'committed to prayer and Bible study'. Through such Bible study, both individual and corporate, the Church tries to relate the will and ways of God as discerned in the Bible to the complex issues of life and faith in today's world. The collect for Bible Sunday reminds the Church that God 'caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning', and prays that we may 'hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them'.

QUESTIONS

What responses do you make to the questions in 7.5 and 7.6?

Read again the seven perspectives on biblical authority described in paragraph 7.9. Which of them do you feel most comfortable with and why?

In the light of what has been said about the *Deed of Union* and the *Catechism* (paragraphs 4.2 and 4.10), do you think any of the seven perspectives fall outside the limits of what should be acceptable in Methodism?

Does the Church do enough to help its members to grapple with the problems of understanding the Bible? Should there be more opportunities for learning about the Bible? If so, have you any practical suggestions?

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 It is clear that there are diverse views held within the Methodist Church concerning the models of Biblical authority and for this reason there is unlikely to be a consensus of opinion about how the Bible is to be used to enable decision-making. The existence of differing approaches to Scripture often causes disagreements about fundamental issues. Could our diversity be seen as a strength rather than a weakness?

- 8.2 In the Bible God is encountered in wrath and forgiveness, in power and in vulnerability. It is not surprising that Christian people who experience God's self-revelation in such diversity also recognize that God's Word in Scripture is encountered in different ways. Each model of Biblical authority emphasizes something individual Christians wish to affirm about Scripture as God's Word and together these models remind us that we can encounter and be encountered by God, yet never fully comprehend the divine nature. Thus, if we listen to each other, our diversity may enable us to gain new insights into the nature of God and safeguard us from too narrow a view.
- 8.3 It is the task of every generation to try to determine, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how the Word of God in Scripture informs our decision-making in the present. Just as previous decisions have been made in the light of Biblical scholarship, so future decisions must take into account current thinking among Biblical scholars.
- 8.4 However, the task of interpreting Scripture is not merely for theologians but for every Christian person. For this reason, it is important that preachers should use the different models of interpretation as a resource alongside insights from current scholarship, while continuing to emphasize that God continues to encounter and challenge his people through the pages of Scripture.
- 8.5 The nature of authority in the Methodist Church encompasses decisions taken by individuals, by small groups, local Church Councils, Circuit Meetings, District Synods and by Conference. The place of the Bible is to inform this decision-making. When these decisions are discussed in the light of prayerful consideration of Scripture then the Methodist Church is continually engaged in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Word of God for today's world. This is the mission of the whole Church of God and is a process involving all Christian people.
- 8.6 Those who drafted this report included people from all parts of the Methodist constituency, and although labels are inadequate, they could be described as evangelical, liberal and catholic. All wish to restate their belief in the authority of the Bible for us. We believe that God was at work in those who wrote the books of the Bible, and in those who recognized them as canonical. We believe that God continues to work in those, though limited and liable to error, who edit and translate those books. The Word of God is far greater than any human expression of it. To affirm this is to affirm too that the presence of the living God is inexhaustible, life-renewing, life-transforming; so the Church may live in expectation and hope that God will continue to lead it into truth.

QUESTIONS

How might reflection on this report now affect your own reading of the Bible, your preaching or listening to sermons, your approach to group Bible study, your approach to controversial issues of Christian belief and behaviour?

‘God has spoken . . . in many and various ways’ (Heb. 1:1). Are we sufficiently willing to recognize the multi-faceted nature of God’s revelation, and the diversity of our own interpretations of that revelation?

Do we understand how sincere Christians can hold opinions radically different from our own, and are we prepared to acknowledge that they may have glimpsed some aspect of divine truth which we have failed to comprehend?

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference receives the report, commends it for study, and invites individuals, local churches, circuits and districts to send comments on it to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee not later than 31 July 2000.

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to report to the Conference of 2001 on the comments received.

(Agenda 1998, pp. 40-66)

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TOWARDS A COMMON DATE FOR EASTER (1999)

The Faith and Order Committee has studied the report of the Consultation on the dating of Easter which took place in Aleppo, Syria, in March 1997, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. Through the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (as it was then known) and the Joint Liturgical Group, the Committee has also been made aware of other Churches' responses to the Aleppo report. All quotations which follow are from the Aleppo report.

It is a matter for regret that, by celebrating Easter, 'the feast of Christ's resurrection . . . on different days, the churches give a divided witness to this fundamental aspect of the apostolic faith.' The early Christian communities set a date for Easter in relation to the Jewish passover. The Council of Nicea in 325 determined that Easter should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon, 'linking the principles for dating Easter to the norms for the calculation of passover during Jesus' lifetime.' Since the 16th century, however, 'western Christians have come to calculate the date of Easter on the basis of the Gregorian calendar, while the eastern churches generally have continued to follow the older Julian calendar.' 'Our present differences in calculation of the date of Easter thus may be ascribed to differences in the calendars and lunar tables employed rather than to differences in fundamental theological outlook.'

The report argues for a common date for Easter. This concept should be carefully distinguished from a 'fixed' date (such as the last Sunday in March or the first Sunday in April). The latter would 'obscure and weaken the link between the biblical passover and the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ by eliminating any reference to the biblical norms for the calculation of the passover'. 'The most likely way to succeed in achieving a common date for Easter . . . would be (a) to maintain the Nicene norms (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon), and (b) to calculate the astronomical data (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means, (c) using as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's death and resurrection.' The Aleppo report recommends this way of achieving a common date.

The report invites responses from the Churches in time for a further consultation in 2001, and it is desirable that the Conference should express a view. When the Conference last discussed this matter, in 1965, it expressed its desire for a fixed Easter. Methodism was not the only church to express that desire at that time, but fortunately, not least in view of the current, much wider ecumenical developments, nothing came of the suggestion. The proposals which arise from the Aleppo Consultation have been welcomed in principle by those British churches which have so far expressed their mind, and the Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Conference should also welcome them and should make clear that the view expressed in 1965 no longer expresses the mind of the Conference.

RESOLUTION

The Conference, believing that a fixed date for Easter would weaken the link between the Jewish passover and the Christian Easter, but that a common date, established according to the recommendations of the Aleppo Consultation, *Towards a Common Date for Easter*, would preserve that link and be a valuable contribution to ecumenical relationships, expresses its broad agreement with those recommendations.

(Agenda 1999, pp.222-223)