

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

The Ecumenical Future for British Methodists and Anglicans

David Carter, 2002

My new book on Methodist ecclesiology in the British tradition, published by Epworth, is entitled, *Love Bade Me Welcome - A British Methodist Statement on the Church*. Price £14.95. ISBN 0-7162-0557-2.

Obviously, I cannot say anything about it except purely descriptively. It describes how British Methodist ecclesiology has evolved since the time of the Wesleys. I try to recover some of the rather neglected riches of nineteenth century Wesleyan ecclesiological thought as well as looking at more recent developments and, in particular, the Conference ecclesiological statement, *Called To Love and Praise* of 1999.

From the perspective of mid-2002, after a long period in which ecumenists have felt rather frustrated, much seemed to be on the move again. Both the report of the formal conversations between the Church of England and British Methodism and the report of the informal, trilateral conversations between the URC, the Church of England and the Methodists were published.

Some expressed disappointment that, in particular, the Anglican-Methodist report was not more radical. Two very positive features can be discerned within both processes. First, the deep level of engagement with ecclesiological issues which have not always been as clearly addressed in the past. Secondly, within that, the level of questioning and engagement with each other. The URC wanted its two partner churches to look at concerns

especially important to it, namely the conciliar nature of the Church and eldership. I discern within all of this a degree of listening to each others' concerns. Ecumenism is about a fine balance between witnessing to the truth that we believe God has committed to us in the past, and which we cannot abandon, and listening to what he may be trying to say to us about our need to receive from the insight of others.

The reception process for both these reports is to be very important. Whatever may be agreed at the level of Conference and the General Synod will only bear fruit if it is taken to heart by the Methodist and Anglican people and will only go on to bear wider ecumenical fruit if it takes account of the concerns of the URC and, indeed, other ecumenical partners. In both sorts of conversations, the ecumenical observers from other traditions played a key role, a valuable reminder that no two communions can exhaust all that it means to be Christ's church in its fulness. Neither the bilateral Anglican-Methodist relationship, nor yet the trilateral one including the URC, has been an end in itself, though both can be a great help and stimulus to the rest of Christendom in the search for unity.

The present process has been powerfully influenced by the Anglican philosophy of 'unity by stages' and this has much to commend it, particularly if it can be backed up by a real reception and growing closer together at the grass roots. As Cardinal Mercier said long ago, 'In order to be united, it is essential to get to know and to love one another'. It is my personal prayer that we may all come to love our sisters and brother of other traditions, and that we take their concerns, riches and values at least as seriously as we take our own. The proposed Covenant Preamble calls for it to be inaugurated in 'a spirit of penitence for all that human sinfulness and narrowness have contributed to our past divisions' and 'in a spirit of thanksgiving and joy for the way in which God has brought us closer together'. The Report calls on us to 'harvest our diversity'. That, of course, is a call that applies far more widely than to just Anglicans and Methodists.