

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

CHRISTIAN UNITY – WILL IT EVER HAPPEN?

*David Gamble, President of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain 2009-2010
Address to the Annual General Meeting of the Society for Ecumenical Studies*

On the Sunday of this year's Methodist Conference, the day after I handed over the Presidency to this year's President, I did an early morning interview on Radio York. In the early 80s I used to produce their Sunday Breakfast Show, so I have a sort of ongoing relationship with them. The presenter introduced me and then said 'David, now you've handed over the Presidency and you're reaching the end of your life.....' I exploded. The presenter reworded it 'Now you've handed over the Presidency and you have many more decades of active and creative work ahead of you....'

Handing over the Presidency and returning to my day job (Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice) has certainly provided an opportunity to reflect – over the past year, but also over a much longer period, the course of my life and ministry to date.

When I spoke to the Church of England General Synod in February this year I said that I entered theological college in 1971 expecting to spend my ministry as a minister in a united Anglican/Methodist Church. 40 years on, I'm still a Methodist minister.

Where it all began

When I was very young we lived in a small village at the London end of the Medway Towns, in Kent. My family went to the Congregational chapel – made of corrugated iron. My mum ran the Girls Brigade. At the age of 5, I took the scripture exam and got 78%, though I was mortified that I couldn't remember how to spell 'centurion'.

When I was 7 we moved to the other end of the Medway Towns, Rainham, and went to Station Road Methodist Church. My mum ran the Girls Brigade. At one time David Frost's dad, the Revd Paradene Frost, was our superintendent minister. We had a lay pastor.

Pastor Hall. As it happens, Albert Hall. It was a source of amusement, particularly as one of the Canons at Rochester Cathedral at the time was Canon Ball.

When I was 14 we moved to Rugby, where my parents had come from. I met 2 uncles who were Methodist local preachers. Oh yes, of course, my mum ran the Girls Brigade. I discovered that not only my mum but her Dad were Methodist organists. In the village where we lived my mum used to be asked to play the organ for funerals at the Parish Church. One year she found that they'd arranged their summer fete for the same date as the Methodist Chapel had. She mentioned it to the vicar. He said 'That's all right. I don't expect any of your people to come to ours and I certainly won't encourage any of our people to come to yours.' Nonetheless, she got the Methodists to change their date.

At 18, in 1965, I went to Hull University to study law. I first discovered Christians of other denominations, especially the Anglican Society and the Catholic Society. We went to their wine and cheese parties (pretty daring for a Methodist young person, particularly one whose mum ran the Girls Brigade!) They came to our Barn dances. Sometimes we worshipped together. I became the President of Methsoc. In the same year the person who became President of Ang Soc was a girl from Rugby. Once a year the boys' grammar school I went to had a debate with the girls from the Girls' High School. All our sixth form used to have eyes for only one girl. Now she was President of AngSoc. The President of Cathsoc was a very bright young student called Eamonn Duffy.

It was at university I discovered things ecumenical. During the vacation I decided to go to a service at our village Parish Church. It was due to be communion – something we shared frequently at university. The vicar came across to me before the service began - he knew I was his stand in organist's son. He welcomed me, told me it was lovely to see me, but explained that of course I wouldn't be able to receive the bread and wine because I was a Methodist.

I trained for the Methodist Ministry at Wesley House, Cambridge, from 1971-74 - the time when the Cambridge Federation was being founded. As chair of Wesley House students I used to go to Westcott House meetings and occasionally to Ridley Hall. Ecclesiologically we were half way between the two. Westminster College was also interested in being involved. It was great. It felt like we were being prepared to be ministers in a united Church. But then the Anglican Synod voted on the Anglican Methodist unity scheme and didn't get a sufficient majority. The organisation called Ecclesia put on a mass at All Saints Church in thanksgiving

'for the recent deliverance of the true catholic church from heresy'. I attended it with friends from Westcott House, who were even more appalled at it than I was.

Almost immediately, the Methodist Church decided to move forward on something it had been holding back on in case it would have put the Church of England off joining us – we decided to go ahead and ordain women. In my last year of training I kindly allowed my room at Wesley House to be taken by one of these new women students, while I generously spent the year abroad – first in Geneva at the WCC's Bossey Winter Course (so I'm a holder of the Geneva University postgraduate Certificate in Ecumenical Studies!), then in Rome, and finally on a two month inter-faith seminar at Tantur, on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

As a Circuit Minister

My first circuit appointment as a Methodist minister was in Tadcaster, North Yorkshire. My main church was in Tadcaster, a brewery town, and I was responsible for 5 smaller, village churches. I was also chaplain to two prisons, Askham Grange Open Prison for Women and Thorpe Arch Remand Centre, and officiating chaplain to Church Fenton RAF Station.

I was there for 7 years. We had good ecumenical relations. Various vicars and I exchanged pulpits for Harvest, Remembrance Sunday and Week of Prayer for Christian unity. In one village we had a united Anglican Methodist Sunday School and Youth Group – and had a United confirmation service (Stuart Blanch and intinction!).

At Askham Grange prison we had a regular 8.00 Anglican/Methodist communion service on Thursday mornings. When the Anglican chaplain had to take three months off for illness the Bishop of Selby (Maurice Maddox) visited the prison to decide what Church of England cover needed providing. He decided I was acting as the chaplain already so asked if I'd be happy if he didn't appoint someone to fill the gap.

From Tadcaster I moved to York city centre. Ecumenical relationships there were a bit more difficult – even (or maybe especially) between the Anglicans. We started a day care centre for homeless people and it received ecumenical support – money, food, people – and it's still going strong. The Minster supported it solidly. And so did St Michael le Belfrey, famous as David Watson's Church but by this time the Rector was Graham Cray (now a bishop). On Sunday mornings Graham's wife and daughter were on duty at our place, cooking lunch for homeless people.

York was also good ecumenically in that while I was there BBC Radio York started up and representatives of the Churches worked together to provide support for a Sunday breakfast Show. I worked on it for around 5 years and was for some time its producer.

In York, too, I was Free Church chaplain to one of the hospitals. Every Tuesday morning the Anglican chaplain and I celebrated communion and took it to all the wards.

When I first moved to York I was invited to an ecumenical prayer breakfast where the theme for prayer for the day was that we should pray against York City Council giving permission for the construction of a mosque. I declined the invitation and explained my reasons. I was not invited again.

As a connexional officer

And then in 1987 I moved to London and have held what we call 'connexional' posts ever since. I was children's secretary at the Division of Education and Youth, General Secretary at the same Division, Family and Personal relationships Secretary and then I became Co-ordinating Secretary for Legal and Constitutional Practice and now I'm the Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice.

Doing connexional or national jobs means you work quite a lot ecumenically, sometimes representing your denomination but sometimes representing the churches as a whole. So I have been moderator of the Consultative Group on Ministry among Children and the Chair of Churches Together for Families. I was moderator of the Group that produced the CTBI report 'Time for Action' on a response to survivors of abuse, and have been involved in this issue both denominationally and ecumenically since 1989.

A very good piece of ecumenical work is that the Church of England and the Methodist Church share an officer responsible for Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults. For the last few years that officer has reported to committees in both churches. Since September 1st we have created joint committees, co-chaired by the Bishop of Hereford and myself. A sign of the covenant.

As President of the Conference

So then, on July 4th 2009, I became President of the Methodist Conference. A one year position during which you represent the Methodist Church all around the British Connexion, with other churches, and in the wider world (I went to Brazil, The Gambia, France, Sri Lanka, India, Gibraltar, Ghana, Palestine, Antigua and Haiti). As I travelled around Britain, I saw

plenty of examples of ecumenical goings on – it's clear that in some places and some situations Christian people, representatives and members of different churches work and worship closely together.

Some examples

First it's clear that Christians of different denominations continue to worship together from time to time and to have preachers from other traditions. I preached or took part in worship and other events in St Albans Abbey, Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, York Minster.

Then there is chaplaincy. I've already quoted my own experience as a prison chaplain in the 70s but I think some of the examples I saw during my year of ecumenical working by chaplaincy teams were several stages further on. I visited Portsmouth and spent a couple of days with Naval chaplains. On a particular ship whichever denomination you may have come from you are **the** Chaplain. I even talked to some Muslim sailors on HMS Daring, the navy's most recent destroyer, and these young Muslims were well aware of the role of the Methodist woman minister who was that ship's chaplain. 'When we wanted somewhere to pray she found it for us. When we have problems she's there for us.' Or we went to Chelmsford hospital on a Saturday and the chief executive came in on his day off to meet us and tell us that amidst all the cuts he was having to make the chaplaincy team was one area he would not be cutting. A totally ecumenical team, including (on the day we were there) a Buddhist. Or I think of the Town Centre Chaplaincy in Watford, or Street Pastors and Street Angels in a number of places. Always ecumenical. Being the church. Being Christ. Learning from each other. Trusting each other.

I was impressed by how theological education had moved on since my time and was now so totally ecumenical. I visited Durham, Birmingham and Cambridge. In all three places I met people of various denominations and it seemed impossible to imagine returning to denominationally specific education and institutions.

There are some united churches and local ecumenical partnerships etc. These sometimes (but perhaps not always) work pretty well. I visited a number of Methodist/URC congregations. I preached at a service of covenant renewal at Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes as the congregation from traditions renewed their commitment to each other in a very moving service. I preached at the Methodist Church in Pateley bridge in Yorkshire – but it's actually part of what is called 'The Church in the Dales', where all the individual churches and pieces of Christian work are advertised and described as part of THE church. I went to Christ Church in Nelson, Lancashire. A united Methodist/Roman Catholic Church

building. With the stations of the cross on the walls – not very common in Methodist buildings. And working arrangements like ‘one of the Catholics opens up in the morning and one of the Methodists locks up at night.’

And then there was Woodhouse Close in County Durham. I went there shortly after I’d spoken at the General Synod and received a certain amount of criticism. But before I went up to the Darlington District I received a letter from one of the officers of the church at Woodhouse. He explained they’d been a united church for around 40 years. Methodist building. Anglican priest. They do all kinds of things in their local community – in which they are THE church. They run the only charity shop on the estate, which includes a furniture store. When the Council allocates a house to an asylum seeker family, the church can furnish a complete house for around £150 – but if they haven’t got the money they can still have the furniture. At Woodhouse, they told me that after General Synod my controversial words had been read out to the morning congregation and greeted with spontaneous applause. The letter ended ‘You are most welcome here, Mr President’.

Oh yes, and I must mention Cambourne, a new town outside Cambridge. When plans were being made for the new town, the churches became involved and decided to act ecumenically. Initially what they did was to sponsor a primary school. So it’s a church school, but not a denominational school. They became very much part of the community and were involved in the lives of many families. Now, ten years later, they have built a church. Next door to the school. One church. On Sunday there is a Catholic mass there. The other churches contribute money or personal to a joint way of working and worship together on Sunday. At the moment the senior minister is Church of Scotland, with an Anglican curate, and some services led by Methodist local preachers as the church appears on the circuit plan. But it’s THE church in that new town of Cambourne.

One or two other things I saw during my year that impressed me. On the day I visited the Corus plant in Redcar and came away somewhat depressed at how a whole community had been devastated by yet another round of redundancies in one of our traditional heavy industries, in the evening I went to Crook for an evening Bible lecture given by the Bishop of Durham. During Lent he was doing these ecumenical Bible lectures and hundreds and hundreds of people had bought his book and were attending the lectures.

The first weekend in last December was The Wave demonstration here in London. 30-40,000 people wanting to show Parliament that we felt the UK should take a lead on the climate change issues that were about to be discussed at Copenhagen. The day began with

a service at a packed Westminster Central Hall. The service was preceded by a photocall – good to see the church leaders seen to be taking a lead on a matter of such importance. Also a sign of ecumenical co-operation as I had to lend my blue gloves first to Rowan then to Vincent. (The picture on the handout sheet).

In Leeds I was asked to do a turf-cutting ceremony at a Methodist Homes for the Aged project. A 'multi-faith living with care' project. A residential home for people of different faiths. A Methodist charity, but on the turf-cutting day the two main patrons turned up – John Packer, Church of England Bishop of Ripon and Leeds and Sister Agatha, from the Bar Convent in York.

In the same month, February, I went to Palestine/Israel and saw – among other things – the work of the Ecumenical Accompaniers. People from various countries and various church traditions just being there as a significant presence in a very difficult situation indeed.

So, on the ground, there are all sorts of ecumenical things going on.

General Synod

In February, along with our Vice-President, I attended the General Synod of the Church of England in Church House, Westminster. We'd been invited by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. This was the first time the President and Vice-President had been invited to address the Synod. And we did so. The occasion went well and a lively discussion followed. But the press decided to make a bit of mischief out of it and suggested I'd said Methodists were ready to give up being Methodist and to return to the Church of England. So there were some angry Methodists – though most people when they actually read what I'd said tended not to be so angry.

One of the main reasons Richard and I attended the General Synod was because – as you will all be well aware - the Church of England and the Methodist Church, have made a Covenant together (2003). A covenant is a serious, deeply committed relationship. Not some irrelevant optional extra. But something at the heart of how we understand our present and future life as church. And the Church of England and the Methodist Church are committed to each other in a covenant relationship. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, but always for the gospel.

One of the big questions, particularly for those who are cynical about things ecumenical but also for those who are very pro-ecumenical and are looking for signs of encouragement, is

what does it look like on the ground? What signs are there that these two churches have a covenant relationship with each other?

At the General Synod, I tried to list a few. One sign was that the Vice President and I were addressing the General Synod and Archbishop Rowan did a return visit to our Conference in June. Another sign is the Fresh Expressions initiative, to which both of our churches are committed along now with the URC. Yet another is our work on Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults – with a joint post as our national officer, increasing joint working between dioceses and Districts, new joint committees.

However, it has to be said that around the country the situation is very patchy. In some places there are very close working relationships and exciting new initiatives. In others you could spend quite a long time trying to find any sign of the covenant in practice. Some churches, clergy and communities are very enthusiastic. Others have theological, ecclesiological or other differences and/or reservations. Some think we have moved beyond these ways of thinking of church structures. For them, the Church is post-denominational and the ecumenical movement is history. And sometimes a bad relationship or total non-relationship between churches can even be down to how particular individuals do or don't get on.

It's also the case that ecumenical working potentially involves – and quite rightly - many other churches and Christian groups as well as Church of England and Methodist. I talked at Synod a bit about some examples of wider ecumenical working, especially in both traditional and newer forms of 'chaplaincy', like Street Pastors.

At the General Synod, I asked, where do we go from here?

Clearly, there are some big issues with theological, ecclesiological and other implications that we still need to work on.

1. **Church structures.** Church of England and Methodist structures have something of a mismatch about them. The Church of England has national, diocese, deanery and parish. Methodism has connexion, district, circuit and local church. But it seems that things we might do by way of connexion or district, the Church of England does through diocese or parish. They don't always match easily.
2. **Ministry and ordination.** There are all sorts of questions still to work on relating to ministry and ordination. How far can we develop interchangeability? What about

women's ministry at every level, including bishops and archbishops? Meanwhile, Methodists still have work to do on how our expression of episcopate relates to personalised episcopacy in the form of bishops. (Last year as President, I found myself being introduced as a Bishop or Presiding Bishop in various Methodist Churches around the world. You can get to quite like it!) And then there is diaconal ministry and two rather different histories of a diaconate.

3. ***Our wider communions.*** Both the Church of England and the British Methodist Church are part of world communions where we have influence and history, but where churches in other parts of the world are growing rapidly in size and importance and sometimes see things very differently. As churches and communions, we are both struggling with how we can cohere in a post-modern world, with learning how to live with contradictory convictions. At such times it is hard to pay attention to those beyond us. But it is precisely at those times that we have things to offer each other.
4. ***The geography of the United Kingdom.*** More practically, how do we relate to the rest of Britain? The Church of England is, geographically, what it says on the tin! The Methodist Church covers the whole of Britain and we are delighted that the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales are now involved in our explorations under the Covenant.
5. ***What's happening locally.*** Whatever happens in our discussions and theologising at a national/connexional level, the question of what is happening locally remains of major significance. I suggested at the Synod that there are many places, especially in rural areas, where we have probably too many buildings and maybe too many services and we could go much further towards working and worshipping together as The Church in that place. I mentioned Cambourne earlier, and that is quite a large community. But there are many much smaller where we could do so much more. The beautifully named MAPUM (Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission) can help us develop appropriate local covenant relationships and get the practicalities right.

I wonder, too, how far we could work further on ecumenical church schools. Again, we have a lot to learn from Cambourne. Speaking from the Methodist Church's point of view, it's interesting that we have been involved in recent years in opening more schools – always ecumenically, generally but not only with the Church of England, and always where it's been a response to the needs of a particular community.
6. ***Living in the 21st century.*** I suppose my last question – at least on the morning of the General Synod – was how do we together respond to the challenges of the 21st century. A society of different faiths, different cultures, different histories. A society where many have no history of involvement with a faith community but where the big

questions remain on the agenda. Questions of meaning and purpose. Of how we shall live together. Of life and death. Of the future of our planet. Of right and wrong and the value of each person.

And for Christians in this country and some other countries there is the fact that churches are declining. Can we even afford to keep so many different ones going in a particular locality or even nationally has to be a question some of us are facing. It may not be the right reason for Christian Unity schemes, but it's there whether we like it or not as part of what we live with in 21st century Britain.

All those issues and many more face us ecumenically and in a narrower way in the covenant between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. Throughout the history of churches working together, as I have experienced it, one of the major and oft-repeated texts has been John 17.21, where Christ prays for the unity of his followers not because it's a nice idea, not because it's financially a better use of scarce resources, but that the world might believe. It's mission led. We only exist to glorify God, to ensure that the word is duly preached, the sacraments duly celebrated, and the people duly formed in discipleship for worship and mission.

I said to the Synod that for Methodists, the word 'covenant' is very important – part of our spirituality and our understanding of our relationship with God. Many of you may have shared in our annual Covenant Service, with its powerful words:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,

exalted for you or brought low for you;

let me be full, let me be empty,

let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

(Then came the paragraph that got me into most trouble!) I said that Methodists approach the Covenant with the Church of England in the spirituality of the Covenant prayer. So when we say to God "let me have all things let me have nothing", we say it by extension to our partners in the Church of England as well. We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission. In other words we

are prepared to be changed and even to cease having a separate existence as a Church if that will serve the needs of the Kingdom.

Are we willing to take our covenant that seriously? It's quite a challenge – for both of our churches.

So, Christian Unity – will it ever happen?

I said earlier on that 40 years ago I had expected to be a minister of a united church and here I am, not far off retirement, still a Methodist minister. So what are my reflections?

- 1 **Is Christian Unity about moving backwards or moving forwards?** Some of the media presented what I said to the General Synod in terms of Methodist President says Methodists are ready to shut up shop and become Anglicans again. Ready to return to the fold. $A + B = A$. Whereas my understanding of what might come out of a bringing together A and B is C. We would both have moved on and we would be creating something new, seeking to retain the best of the old but open to new ways of doing things, some of which might be different from what either of us had done in the past.
- 2 **The things that potentially divide us keep changing.** The reasons that lay behind the Methodist Church coming into existence were very significant in the 18th century. But things have moved on. The Church of England today is different from what it was then. Methodism has been through various changes before becoming what it is today. In 1972 we hadn't ordained women because we didn't want to put the CofE off and they had an eye on Rome. We then ordained women and a few years later so did the CofE, though it needed its system of flying bishops and goodness knows how it will cope with women bishops. But at the same time the move to ordain women and then the discussions about the possibility of women bishops has caused problems in the ongoing ARCIC conversations between the CofE and the Roman Catholic Church. Yet at the same time, as we saw last weekend, there are some Roman Catholics praying for the day when women may be ordained and when priests may be married.
- 3 **Newer lines of demarcation.** The place of women in the church is an ongoing area of division. But there are others which keep hitting the headlines and which have the potential to cause further and different divisions, not just along denomination lines.

- a. Sexuality.
- b. Relationships with other faiths (my example from York days).

4 **Worship.** I'm potentially on dodgy ground here. For me one of the great things from the ecumenical movement has been the opportunity to discover and experience different forms of worship. As Methodist minister in the centre of York I used to attend evensong at York Minster at least once a week. The building; the sun setting through the stained glass windows; the choir; the organ; the procession; the feeling that this has been happening here for centuries. But it wouldn't be my only diet. I love Methodist hymns, especially when members of the congregation sing parts. Taizé works for me. So, in a totally different way does Iona. Equally, I've found that as I get older I like quieter more reflective worship, probably with less people there. And I like music to listen to. And I quite like visual things to help as well. Candles, a worship centre, an ikon. (What a long way I've come from the corrugated iron chapel with its wheezy harmonium!)

So, do we all have to worship in the same way? Is worship identifiable totally on denominational lines? Or can the same church or maybe group of churches in an area offer a rich variety.

5 **The local situation.** My previous point about offering a wider variety of worship raises another important question. On the one hand it is the question 'Why are there so many different churches?' and we know the answer to that historically, but it's pretty difficult to explain to a person who doesn't know or care about the history. In a small village it does seem a bit crazy for three separate groups of half a dozen people to try to keep three different church buildings going. Surely it would be better to have one. Like the church in Cambourne. Even though a variety of things may happen in it.

But even when the geography of the place means it's good to have more than one church building, surely it's better if they complement each other rather than act in competition? That's what I liked about The Church in The Dale up in Pateley Bridge. All the different churches had worked out what each offered to the whole, so they could describe themselves as THE church in the Dale.

I wonder, too, whether that may be how we deal with things like blessing of civil partnerships. If in a collection of churches in a town or a dale or whatever it was known and accepted by all that particular ones had particular ministries.

Christian Unity – will it ever happen?

Maybe not in the over simplistic way I imagined it when I was a lot younger. Probably not in terms of one monolithic structure replicated in the same form everywhere throughout the world.

But in terms of

working together and in complementarity;

being willing to accept sometimes that someone else can do a particular thing better or is better placed to do it;

increasing interchangeability of ministry across historical denominational lines;

accepting diversity of thought and expression and worship as part of the rich tapestry of who we are.