

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Consultations between United and Uniting Churches

Martin Cressey, 1997

(Abridged - Notes missing)

Only one person has attended all six of the consultations, Reinhard Groscurth of the Evangelical Church of the Union in Germany, which in 1819 began the modern series of church unions (Reinhard was not there in 1817!). The present writer has taken part in all except the first and, by invitation of the Faith and Order Commission, has moderated the last two. Because I was not at the first meeting, I have given particular attention to reading its report and papers, published in *Mid Stream* Vol. vi, No.3. Careful reading of earlier ecumenical texts than those in whose writing one has shared is always, in my experience, a salutary experience in two respects - joyful recognition that one's predecessors had the same or even more profound insights; chagrin that so little has actually changed in the ecumenical agenda!

This was already true for those who met at the Ecumenical Institute in the Chateau de Bossey from April 9 to 15, 1967. Their meeting was an outcome of a suggestion made by a group who discussed church union during the meeting of the WCC Faith and Order Commission at Aarhus, Denmark in 1964. Lukas Vischer, as Director of the Commission, in his Introduction to the published texts of the Bossey meeting, reminds his readers that

Unions of divided churches have occurred again and again in the course of the centuries. Division was never accepted by any generation as so self-evident that attempts were not made to overcome it. Although most of these attempts ended in failure, from time to time, especially when the external circumstances were favourable, they led to tangible results.(1)

The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910, with which so many courses on the ecumenical movement begin, comes in chapter 3 of *The History of the Ecumenical Movement* by Rouse and Neill; and the labours and writings described in the first seven chapters still have relevance today.

O, that it would please God to bring on that day, wherein he will put forth his omnipotent power among you; to command that there be a noise and a shaking, that so the bones may draw near to one another, and come together ...and then the breath come from the four winds, to inspire all that are spiritually dead, that they may live ... the life of Christ

not from a sermon in this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, but from John Amos Comenius in *An Exhortation of the Churches of Bohemia to the Church of England* in 1660 (2).

Both at Bossey and at Limuru there was a sense of readiness to move forward to union from the various negotiations then in progress. Examples from the past, in Germany, in Canada in South India, were called upon for encouragement; analytic comparisons of the various schemes which were before the churches for consideration were set out, because "Many errors and detours can be avoided when (united churches and union negotiation committees) can take account of experience already gained" (5) - a point re-made at every succeeding consultation. If the quotations given in the previous paragraph link the consultations with the current WCC Faith and Order programmes, *Confessing the Faith* and *Church and World*, the analyses prepared for the Limuru conference of what was said in the then current schemes of union about ministry, eucharist and baptism reveal very clearly that the Anglican and Protestant contributions to the Faith and Order Lima text on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* were both shaped by and supportive of the union negotiating committees.

The Limuru documents were again published by "Mid-Stream". George Beazley Jr., the editor, reckoned it 'a privilege to be able to publish these papers, which have such far-reaching consequences for union conversations' (6); and Gerald Moede in the Preface commented that 'The movement bringing churches into greater visible

unity had continued to develop during the intervening three years since Bossey⁽⁷⁾. What I have called the sense of being 'Ready' for a set of unions was strong. Reinhard Groscurth, in his address to the Ocho Rios meeting, counted twenty-two church unions in the period 1961-8 and there were more to come after the Limuru meeting: in North India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Britain, Australia. Yet already at Limuru it was noted that 'two unions had been momentarily delayed by very close negative votes in church assemblies' (8). There was going to be a need for careful education for church union (another recurrent theme of the six consultations) and for unity committees that were 'Steady'.

The occasion for the third consultation was positive; in 1975 the United Church of Canada was celebrating the golden jubilee of its 1925 inauguration and invited its sister united churches to confer in June that year at its Toronto seminary, Emmanuel Theological College of Victoria University. There was a slight irony in the fact that the year was also the centenary of the founding of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, part of which had not entered the United Church. Of much more influence on the consultation was the announcement in February 1975 that the union conversations between the Anglican Church of Canada, the Disciples and the United Church of Canada had come to a halt, the Anglican House of Bishops having concluded that the Plan of Union was unacceptable on theological grounds.

The 1970 inauguration of the Church of North India had achieved an immediate recognition of the ministry of the united church by all the sister churches of the uniting bodies. Thus it avoided the long post-union debate in the Anglican Communion about the ministry of the Church of South India, a debate which delayed full communion for a whole generation. Yet the insistence on 'the North India pattern' for the inauguration of unions including Anglican churches had caused great difficulties elsewhere; now in Canada it seemed that there was always more to be done to meet the concerns of Anglicans. As Paul Crow commented in introducing the Toronto consultation report, 'Some observers attribute this neutralizing of decades of dialogue with Protestant churches to the influence of the Anglican/Roman Catholic bilaterals' (9). This is the kind of concern that underlay the request for a dialogue with the World Confessional Families (now known as Christian World Communions), including 'a fresh analysis and assessment of bilateral conversations to clarify how

they contribute to and also distract from the quest for organic union'. There was at Toronto a positive affirmation of the 'valid present functions' of the world families, including the carrying on of bilateral conversations; but there was a strong sense that the world families

should give priority on their agenda to questions under the heading, 'How shall we contribute our heritage of tradition to the coming united church, and how shall we be corrected by the truths given to others?', rather than the more typical question 'How shall we present a Reformed/Baptist/Quaker witness in its distinctiveness?' (10)

Another evident need for steadiness arose from the perception both at Limuru and at Toronto of growing criticism from those

who think that union will not provide the renewal of the Church which is required today and in the future. They are afraid that, by uniting, the churches could hide the issues which confront mankind in the present generation as, for example, the fight for development and freedom, for justice and peace. (11)

The Toronto address by Burgess Carr on *The Relation of Union to Mission*, or the affirmation in the Toronto consultation message that 'The united churches are a response to the world's needs, a response in which we have sought to obey our Lord' (12), are clear evidence that the united churches themselves took such criticism very seriously.

In response the consultation encouraged 'united and uniting churches to explore increased contact in their local contexts with traditions not involved in church union negotiations, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches, and Pentecostal churches' (18). The Toronto and Colombo Continuation Committees conferred with the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and with Orthodox representatives in Geneva. Still steadily on the ecumenical agenda are the issues summarised in the post-Toronto Vatican meeting:

Our common concern for unity in Christ as one visible body... raises the questions:

- (a) what degree of agreement on order and sacramental practice do the united churches see as necessary for the common life of each church and for future conciliar fellowship as an expression of organic union?
- (b) what degree of variety in order and sacramental practice is it possible to envisage, according to Roman Catholic (or Orthodox) teaching, within such a conciliar fellowship? (19).

There was serious self-questioning by the united churches about the outcome of union, in renewal, in participation, in mission and service: 'There was not agreement...as to whether organic union is the ultimate goal.' (21)

Why was there not agreement on the ultimate goal? Several reasons emerge in the consultation report. One was the recognition that unity committees were producing positive steps towards visible unity without requiring their participating churches to commit themselves from the start to forming a united church; significant examples described to the Potsdam meeting were the development of the Council of Churches in Indonesia into the Communion of Churches and the creation of the Joint Council of the Churches of North and South India and the Mar Thoma Church as an expression of what they have called 'organic oneness'. Another positive reason for flexibility about the ultimate goal has been the introduction of 'covenanting' between churches (e.g. in North America and in Wales), or agreements on pulpit and table fellowship, such as that of Reformation Churches in Europe (the Leuenberg Agreement); while these do not reject the search for church union, they do not have as an essential ingredient a precise definition of visible unity. A negative cause of hesitation was clearly to be found in some of the self-critical comment by united churches on their failure to find renewal through their union or to engage more effectively in mission together.

Nevertheless many at the Potsdam meeting remained deeply convinced of the call to organic union, recognising that it is 'not a call primarily for organizational merger, or colourless theological compromises, or the consuming of the varied traditions by

same monolithic mentality. Those who are open to dialogue are aware that organic union is a dynamic model.' (22). They saw good ground for hope that united churches would continue to develop, overcoming the problems of initial adjustment and reaching out in mission. In particular the Potsdam consultation emphasised that both in the search for visible unity and the developing life of united churches it is vital to secure 'The full participation of all members of Christ's body - women and men, ordained and lay, young and old, able-bodied and disabled, people from many diverse races, ethnic groups, and different languages'. It also noted

a shift from education to participation as an essential element of the union process. What is called for is not decisions handed down and explained from above, but full involvement by the people of God throughout the union process, so that all the people have opportunity to shape the vision of a new united church (23).

In another way the theme of participation shaped the sixth consultation, held at Ocho Rios, Jamaica, in 1995 under the title *Built Together: The Present Vocation of United and Uniting Churches*. In terms of the prophet Zechariah's vision of Jerusalem as a city without walls, guarded only by the Lord (Zech. 2. 1-5), it was made clear that there are to be no walls around this group of churches. They do not wish to be seen as a special kind of church, but as markers of progress towards being the one Church of Jesus Christ. They are penitently aware of the limitations on that progress, but they also rejoice in having moved forward together. In doing so they have come closer to 'those whose context and whose time does not give them such a definite vision, but who are able to celebrate their place on that same journey as an authentic expression of the search for visible unity' (24).

At Ocho Rios the united and uniting churches revived their sense both of sharing the one mission of the whole Christian church and of having a particular witness to give within that mission.