

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Visible Unity and the Ministry of Oversight

The Second Theological Conference held under the Meissen Agreement
Between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany

Ingolf Dalferth and Rupert Hoare, editors

Church House Publishing, 1997

A review by David Carter, March 1998

This book contains the papers of the second theological conference under the Meissen Agreement. It deals with the 'remaining difference' recorded at that time on the question of episcopal succession. The papers are devoted to examining the exercise and theology of *episkope* in the two churches. Those who are interested in the evolution, in this respect, of the EKD will find it a mine of information. It is also illuminating on a variety of contemporary Anglican approaches to the current practice of episcopacy in the Church of England.

The essays betray a variety of approaches on both sides. Perhaps the most important essays are those of Mary Tanner, who gives a clear *exposé* of the thinking behind the Porvoo Agreement and the importance for it both of the general 'sign' nature of the Church and of episcopacy, and of Ingolf Dalferth, who expounds the classic German Lutheran view of apostolicity and ministry. Dalferth argues that apostolicity belongs essentially to the whole people of God and that it is centrally manifested in the right administration of the word and sacraments. He argues that the apostolicity of the ministry is always subordinate to the Gospel and that, in reforming the ministry as they did in sixteenth century Germany, the Reformers preserved the true apostolic succession.

It seems to me that an implicit difference as to the sign nature of the Church underlies the current differences between the EKD and the Church of England.

Dalferth appears to see the 'sign' nature as effectively residing in the authentic celebration of word and sacrament, which point beyond themselves to that which is essentially exterior to the Church, whereas the Anglicans seem to see the life of the Church as a whole as a sign, albeit a sign frequently obscured by the sinfulness of the Church.

It is rather strange, in view of its importance in general ecumenical debate and the recent work of the Lutheran World Federation on this theme, that there is scarcely any reference to the ecclesiology of communion in this context. One feels that, in particular, more use of the insights of Tillard from *L'Église Locale* might have been helpful here. Tillard stresses the co-inherent, interdependent apostolicity of bishop and local church. The bishop is chosen as one in whom the local church discerns its own authentic faith. He is chosen as one fit to be its guardian. He has the job of listening to his church and speaking its concern to the wider church, as well as relating it to the wider church. All this would seem to relate to the concern of the EKD for properly, synodical structures of government, that reflect the apostolic vocation of the entire people of God. Perhaps these matters will be more fully aired at the next consultation. Nevertheless, this book represents an important stage for the two partners of the agreement in coming to a fuller understanding of each other; as such, it is very welcome.

The Anglican essays on the current practice of episcopacy in the Church of England will also prove useful to those engaged in conversation with them in Britain. There are some tensions in the understanding of the relationship between bishop and synod as between the Porvoo Statement and what is said here in some essays. Thus, Porvoo understood the collegial exercise of episcopacy as referring to a bishop's relationship with his own local synod, whereas Gordon Roe sees it in terms of his relationship with episcopal colleagues. The two interpretations are not, of course, necessarily mutually exclusive, but those anxious to affirm the 'connexional' and 'synodical' understanding of *episkope* may wish for some reassurance. An important debate is needed on these nuances. It is better that we examine them now, in the light of the tradition of the whole of the Church than find them causing embarrassment at a later stage of our relationships.