

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Progress with ARCIC

A discussion held in Church House, London on 5 February 1998 at the Annual General Meeting led by Professor Nicholas Sagovsky

A report by David Carter

Nick Sagovsky began by saying that when, a year previously, he accepted the invitation to speak about ARCIC he hoped he would be able to talk about a newly-published document, but that things had moved more slowly than he anticipated. Nevertheless, he remained hopeful that the text which ARCIC was currently working on would be published shortly.

Nick dealt first with the background to the continued work of ARCIC, starting from Lambeth 1988 and its request that ARCIC II explore the reconciliation of ministries, the ordination of women, moral questions and continuing questions of authority, including the relation of Scripture to the Church's developing tradition and the role of the laity in decision making. This was all to be done in the context of an ecclesiology of communion. It was also resolved at Lambeth that within the dialogue on authority ARCIC II should continue to explore the basis in Scripture and Tradition of a universal primacy, in conjunction with collegiality, as an instrument of unity, and the character of such primacy in practice.

Nick then mentioned the 1990 document on *Church as Communion*, as a key text, setting out the ecclesiology of communion with which ARCIC was working. He went on to discuss the response of the Holy See to The Final Report in 1991, which specified the need for further study of the Petrine ministry in the Church, and concerning Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium and their interrelationship. He then mentioned the 'Clarifications' on eucharist and ministry, after which Cardinal Cassidy of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity wrote that he considered the agreement on Eucharist and Ministry 'greatly strengthened' and that "no further study

'seemed' to be required at this stage". Nick stressed the value of *Life in Christ* as a statement on moral issues, which showed a common vision for humanity even though there was divergence in moral teaching.

On the ordination of women, the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, in which the Pope declared that the church 'has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful', had made further discussion of the issue impossible, especially as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a much debated judgement of 1995, had said that this teaching required 'definitive assent' as having been 'set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium'.

Nick identified three factors that had helped the work of ARCIC II. Firstly, the new thinking on apostolic succession, which situated understanding of it in the total apostolic life of local churches. He quoted the paper of the Bishops of the Church of England, *Apostolicity and Succession*: 'Apostolic succession in its fullest sense is a succession of the whole community; it is also a succession of local churches. Secondly, there was the new thinking about episcopacy. The Virginia Report of the Inter-Anglican Doctrinal Commission set out an understanding of a ministry of oversight exercised in a way that was 'personal, collegial and communal', stressing that 'a bishop's authority is never isolated from the community'. Finally, there was the new thinking on primacy in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, in which the Pope looked for a 'patient and fraternal dialogue' with Church leaders and theologians about the exercise of universal primacy. Nick drew attention to the recently-published response of the Bishops of the Church of England, which highlights the continuing problem of the universal jurisdiction of the Pope. He mentioned Anglican unease over the recent sharply interventionist style of the Papacy. He expressed the hope that ARCIC II was building new bridges on the understanding and exercise of authority and that each communion had advanced in understanding of the other's way of doing things.

In the discussion, Paul MacPartlan pointed to the importance of eucharistic theology in this context; it had helped Vatican II to rediscover a strong doctrine both of the episcopate and the laity. The question was raised of how far the Pope had a (? prophetic right) to go ahead of the rest of the Church in his teaching. The different

ways in which *koinonia* could be interpreted were raised and Nick expressed the view that it was perfectly possible to have an over-authoritarian interpretation of *koinonia*. Questions of legitimacy of diversity and their relationship to the need for an atmosphere of mutual trust within *koinonia* were also raised. Barney wondered whether 'untidiness' was not part of the fullness of unity. Nick stressed that the basic concern is for authentic witness to and transmission of the Gospel, the core of which is our participation in the trinitarian life of God.

We thanked Nick heartily for this excellent talk, which generated enough material for several discussions. There are other questions which I think would have emerged had there been the time to discuss them. One, I think, is the limits of magisterial teaching. If Anglicans, Methodists and maybe others could do with more authoritative teaching, can it equally be said that the Roman Catholic Church may, on occasion, have made definitions that are not strictly necessary? The whole relationship between the concept of 'adiaphora' and truths that Roman Catholics regard as lower in the hierarchy of truths, but still as, in their eyes, necessary truths, needs to be teased out. How much teaching is needed to safeguard the authentic transmission of the central trinitarian experience of the Church? Does Wesley's distinction between 'opinions' and essential doctrines help; or, more recently, Geoffrey Wainwright's concept of 'generous orthodoxy', as a Wesleyan principle of evaluation? Does 'unnecessary' teaching offend against the *koinonia* of the Church and unbalance our ecclesiology? Perhaps it will only be in the context of restored *koinonia* that we will be able to find the right balance. All these questions need exploring.

I ponder two further points. Nick talked of the common vision in *Life in Christ*, despite divergent particular teaching and separation. I found a similar thing when, nine years ago, I compared the teaching of Roman Catholics and Methodists on social justice before the initiation of our formal dialogues. This leads me to reflect on what the Spirit says about our mutual recognition. The theme of *de facto* recognition of ministerial authority in the context of mutual, growing ecclesial recognition, has also been raised in the Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together.