

Covenant Council Report

Proposer – Bishop Michael Burrows

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The role of the Covenant Council is to oversee and deepen the special relationship between the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland, a key component of which is the Interchangeability of Ministry the theological foundations of which were agreed by this synod and by the Methodist Conference some years ago. That agreement followed years of careful study of the key concept of episcopate (the nature of the ministry of oversight in the Church of God) and the achievement of fruitful convergence of understanding in that area. Of particular importance was our agreed understanding that Methodist Presidents and past Presidents have been called to a distinctive and lifelong ministry of personal episcopate within the Church, and that reality is recognised in the manner of their installation and consecration as episcopal ministers. Thus it is a joy each year for a number of Church of Ireland bishops to lay hands prayerfully, along with the outgoing President and others, on the incoming President. Covid circumstances meant that the physical size of the congregation who could be present in Belfast last June for that service was modest, but it was a joy for me to be an actual participant not least as the President/Episcopal Minister, the Revd Dr Sahr Yambasu, is a good friend of mine and we work frequently in harmony in Waterford where he is based. Sahr's sermon following the consecration could genuinely be described as lapidary, and was valued by very many who joined online. We hope he will be in a position to greet this synod in equally typically mesmerising style, and only wish that he could offer his pearls of wisdom to us this year in a more face to face manner. Furthermore, we look forward to his participation (or that of one or more past Presidents) at the ordination and consecration of the new bishop of 'Tuamerc'... whenever that may occur, and presuming the person elected is not already in episcopal orders.

All of this is set in the context of much continuing shared worship, and common witness and endeavour across the land. The purpose of the Council is to oversee such endeavour, to share good ideas, to answer questions that may arise as the Churches draw closer together in both faith and order. We recognise that there is still much to be done to build upon what was achieved in principle (and it involved the happy cracking of an apparently mighty theological nut) in regard to interchangeability. However, there are still certain questions to address which will demand focussed attention particularly when the necessary kind of in-person conversations resume anew. By way of example:

- Our present relationship is based on continuing to operate in separate polities, and those who move in ministry from the one to the other are usually involved in a long term commitment which may demand a measure of contextual upskilling. But what of more frequent once-off movement between the Churches on the part of those duly ordained to the Priesthood/ Presbyterate, particularly in the context of Eucharistic presidency?

- What is our mutual understanding of situations where one church may have emergency measures in relation to the provision of the sacraments for which there would not be provision in the other? (I think for example of matters pertaining to the celebration of Holy Communion where no priest or presbyter can be reasonably made available)
- While there is interchangeability of ministry between those duly ordained or so recognised within our Churches, there may be outstanding anomalies concerning those ordained in other contexts who have been accepted into ministry in one of our Churches but who might not be readily received into ministry in the other. And in the manner of many theological anomalies, to what extent is this situation ‘bearable’?

So there is much work to be done, and we look forward to doing it. And indeed, even online, we have learned much about one another’s instincts and disciplines in the respectful and indeed affectionate way we have pooled our understanding regarding the manner in which the Eucharist has been celebrated and streamed during the various lockdowns. Must it be live? What has been our shared understanding of spiritual communion? Lockdown has been a remarkable midwife when it comes to the development of aspects of Eucharistic theology.

At the end of the day, by working closely together we are meant to be more than simply the sum of the parts. We do all of this, of course, like all ecumenical endeavour, so that the world may believe. And we also know that frankly we need each other in order to be whole ourselves. I hugely value formative years spent amid the distinctive embrace of Wesley College Dublin. I often say that there the Methodists made a good Anglican of me – and I mean that as a compliment and as I get older the truer it becomes in my experience. Needing each other in order to be whole ourselves. In Wesley of course I learned a vast number of fine hymns. Every Founders’ Day in October we sang a hymn by Charles Wesley which speaks of the need properly to marry knowledge and piety, learning and holiness, truth and love. ‘Unite the pair so long disjoin’d/ knowledge and vital piety/ learning and holiness combined,/ and truth and love let all men (sic)see’. Wesley typically knocks every nail on the head. The work of the Covenant Council, for the sake of the world, is the pursuit of truth in an atmosphere of love. It is about the necessary theological study that facilitates the shared pursuit of holiness. It is about deepening unity between a pair of Churches too long disjoin’d. As is said in other ecumenical contexts ‘Floreat ut pereat’.