

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

THE COVENANT COUNCIL

The Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland

REPORT OF THE COVENANT COUNCIL TO THE CHURCHES 2007

MEMBERSHIP

Church of Ireland

Rt Rev Harold Miller (co-Chair)
Mr David Brown
Ms Elva Byrne
Very Rev Nigel Dunne (Secretary)
Rev Dr Maurice Elliott

Rev Canon Adrian Empey
Rev Canon Virginia Kennerley
Mr Cyril McElhinney
Dr Andrew Pierce
Rev Peter Thompson

Methodist Church

Rev David Kerr (co-Chair)
The Secretary of Conference
Mrs Sandra Dickson
Rev Andrew Dougherty
Rev Geraldine Gracie

Rev Brian Griffin
Ms Gillian Kingston
Rev David Rock
Mr Kenneth Twyble

The Covenant Council has met in three residential sessions during the year and has focussed on three principal areas of work:

1. Theological Reflection – Interim Statement

The Council has given much time to a continuing reflection on ministry, especially the co-related issues of the interchangeability of ministry and the nature of oversight (*episcopate*). It has continued to evaluate ecumenical conversations involving either or both of the Anglican and Methodist churches (and others) and has revisited the Tripartite (Church of Ireland/Methodist/Presbyterian) conversations of the 1970 and the Covenant document of 2001.

We were delighted to welcome to our January meeting this year the Revd Peter Sulston, the Methodist Co-convenor of the Joint Implementation Commission for the Covenant between the Church of England and the Methodist Church in Great Britain. His account of the growing covenant relationship between the churches in England and the similarity of recurring themes shared by that body and this Council were striking. Peter Sulston's experience in this area was of considerable use to the Council's ongoing reflections and the consideration of its future structure and direction.

The statement appended to this report as Appendix A is an interim statement on progress thus far. This was promised by the Council in last year's report to the General Synod and Methodist Conference as the third of ten points made therein:

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

“that an interim statement towards mutual recognition of ministries, drawing on and acknowledging the 1973 statement and 2001 Covenant document, be produced by the Council and publicized by the two Churches;”

The Council views this as an important statement of where our discussions have reached and asks both churches to undertake a comprehensive discussion of it both separately and, where appropriate, in partnership and to respond to its contents in time for the General Synod and Methodist Conference in 2008. Members of the Covenant Council would welcome the opportunity to introduce the Interim Statement to the Standing Committee of the Church of Ireland and the General Committee of the Methodist Church in Ireland and any other relevant bodies.

2. Joint Projects

The Covenant Council continues to monitor the development of joint projects and is grateful to those who continue to send us news of local developments. We appeal to our Facilitators to keep the Council informed, whether it be news of problems or successes, and to inform us if we can be of any help in bringing about further co-operation among our churches.

3. Resources and Information

Website

We are pleased to report that the Council's website is now up and running at www.covenantcouncil.com. The site provides a history of the Covenant process, the text of the Covenant document, the Guidelines for Local Ecumenical Partnerships, a news page, reports section and event guide. The Council will continue to develop the website in the coming year, particularly with the development of a dedicated Facilitators' Area which will provide further resources for joint projects, alongside the opportunity to publicise joint events and share experiences and ideas. We would greatly welcome suggestions of any links relevant to the life of either church for inclusion on the website's links page.

Worship Resources

Last year, the Council began to collate liturgical material for use during a time of celebration both of the Covenant and of our common heritage around September 26th each year. This year marks the 300th anniversary of the birth of Charles Wesley and will be the principal focus of the resources for this year's celebration. Particular attention will be given to his hymns from the hymnals of both churches. This material will soon be available on our website and will include suggested readings and prayers, sermon material and other resources. We encourage congregations to make use of it on or around 26th September which is the anniversary of the signing of the Covenant.

Publications

This year, the Council decided to begin the publication of a series of short booklets about the Covenant and the Council's work. The first, entitled *Working Out the Covenant* –

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

The Journey So Far written by the Revd Peter Thompson is designed to introduce newcomers to the Covenant process and to remind those who are already involved just how far we have journeyed together. We are pleased to be launching this document at Synod and Conference this year.

4. Canon Law

The Council has noted from advice received that the Church of Ireland will need dedicated “ecumenical canons” in order to implement fully some of the Local Ecumenical Partnerships envisaged in the *Guidelines* agreed by the General Synod and Methodist Conference last year. The Council has produced a draft document using the Ecumenical Canons of the Church in Wales as a general framework, drawing on Canons B51 and B52 of the Church of England and writing fresh legislation to meet the specific needs of the Irish context. We are awaiting further advice from those who have an expertise in canon law and hope to submit a Resolution seeking the enactment of these new canons to the General Synod in 2008.

It should be noted that attention has also been given to any necessary change in Methodist legislation. It seems that there is little or no new legislation needed to facilitate future developments.

5. Joint Mission Event

The Council has this year further progressed its work with the Church of Ireland Council for Mission and the Methodist Church in Ireland Board of Mission in the staging of two joint mission events. The first will be held on Saturday 3 November 2007 in the Emmaus Retreat and Conference Centre, Swords, Dublin from 10.00am – 4.00pm. This will be an informal gathering with discussion opportunities centred on places where “Fresh Expressions” of church are working well. It is hoped to involve about 100 people from both churches. The second event will be a much bigger overnight event and is being planned for April 2008. It will continue to reflect on the “Fresh Expressions” theme.

RESOLUTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE GENERAL SYNOD 2007

- 1 That the report of the Covenant Council be received.
- 2 That the General Synod set in motion a process of reflection on and response to the Interim Statement on interchangeability and oversight appended to this report.
- 3 That the General Synod continue to encourage Church of Ireland congregations to celebrate the Covenant relationship with neighbouring Methodist congregations on or around September 26th each year.
- 4 That the following be appointed as the Church of Ireland members of the Covenant Council:

Rt Rev Harold Miller
Mr David Brown

Rev Canon Adrian Empey
Rev Canon Virginia Kennerley

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

Ms Elva Byrne
Very Rev Nigel Dunne
Rev Dr Maurice Elliott

Mr Cyril McElhinney
Dr Andrew Pierce
Rev Peter Thompson

APPENDIX A

The Covenant Council

Interchangeability of Ministry and Episcopate: Key Issues for the Churches

*Interim Report to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland
and the Conference of Methodist Church in Ireland
2007*

In our report last year we suggested “that an interim statement towards mutual recognition of ministries, drawing on and acknowledging the 1973 statement and 2002 Covenant document, be produced by the Council and publicised by the two Churches”.

The following serves as that interim statement in relation to mutual recognition but also addresses the issue of episcopate/oversight in more depth than heretofore. It is our firm belief that one cannot be discussed without the other.

While our suggestion last year referred to the acknowledgement of the 1973 statement, *Towards a United Church*, and the 2002 Covenant document, the Council has drawn from other documents in order to shape its reflections and these are thus quoted where useful.

A. Ministry

1. What is Ministry?

a. Ministry is the common calling of all Christians to participate in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

i. This is in accordance with the Tripartite Conversations document of 1973 *Towards a United Church*:

It is the duty and privilege of every member to share in that service of God which is the Church’s ministry. Such ministry embraces the worship of God, both public and private, the offering to God of daily work and of family and social life, Christian loving service, both within the fellowship of the Church and the community at large, and the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ through mission and evangelism.

(Ministry: paragraph III)

ii. The Porvoo Statement which the Church of Ireland endorsed in 1995, using two phrases from the Lima Document (paragraph M 5), to which both our churches, for the most part, responded positively, says:

The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world. All members are called to

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent.

(Paragraph 2. A. 19)

iii. The Anglican Methodist International Commission has said:

Anglicans and Methodists begin their consideration of ministry at a common point: the calling of the whole people of God to be engaged in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ to the world.

(Paragraph 3. B. 39)

b. Ministry is therefore the continuation of Christ's work with and through him, as it was continued by his first apostles. In the Covenant document of 2002 we have already acknowledged this task as common to our churches:

We acknowledge one another's churches as belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and as truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God.

(Paragraph 1)

2. Ordained Ministry

a. Our churches have agreed for many years that some are called by God into particular areas of ministry, and are "set apart" through ordination for particular roles and functions within the churches as part of Christ's apostolic mission to the world:

To exercise this special ministry Christ called and chose certain disciples (followers) whom the Church came to call Apostles. Since then, those who serve in this ministry, likewise called and chosen by Christ, and abiding in the faith, teaching and mission of the Apostles, continue the Apostolic ministry in the Church.

(Towards a United Church – Mission – paragraph 3)

b. Those who are called to ordained ministry do not have exclusive responsibility for the ministry of the church – they are called to be leaders and partners in the apostolic ministry of all Christians. This has been well expressed elsewhere:

The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.

These tasks are not exercised by the ordained ministry in an exclusive way. Since the ordained ministry and the community are inextricably related, all members participate in fulfilling these functions. In fact, every charism serves to 'assemble and build up the body of Christ. Any member of the body may share in proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, may contribute to the sacramental life of that body. The ordained ministry fulfils these functions in a representative way, providing the focus for the unity of the life and witness of the community.

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

(Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry paragraph M.13 & Commentary M13)

c. The development of a three-fold ministry of oversight, leadership and service is accepted by both our churches, exercised in a variety of ways and is one consistent with Scripture.

3. “Recognising” and “Acknowledging” Each Other’s Ordained Ministry

a. It is important to note that our churches have for many years “recognised” and “acknowledged” each other’s ministries. In 1974 the General Synod, the Presbyterian Assembly and the Methodist Conference each passed the following resolution:

We recognise the ordained ministries of our three Churches as real and efficacious ministries of the word and sacraments through which God’s love is proclaimed, his grace mediated and his fatherly care exercised.

The Covenant document of 2002 says:

We acknowledge each other’s ordained ministries as given by God and as instruments of his grace by which our churches are served and built up. As pilgrims together, we look forward to the time when our ministries can be fully interchangeable and our churches visibly united.

(Paragraph 5)

b. Considering the now established tradition of “recognising” and “acknowledging” each other’s ordained ministries, and there being no major objections to the Council’s statements on the questions of the interchangeability of ministry and episcopate in its reports to the churches in 2005 and 2006, the Council recommends that the churches now move purposefully towards a position of the full interchangeability of all its ministries.

B. Episcopate/Oversight

1. Progress to Date

a. In our report to the Church of Ireland General Synod and Methodist Conference in 2005 the Covenant Council presented an interim report on the substantial agreement reached on the question of episcopate. This was in the form of ten points and was seen as the starting-point for a major discussion on the issues. The Council notes that there has not been any strong disagreement with its position expressed by either church thus far and so has continued its reflections since that report.

Following considerable discussion, the Council presents the following as a further statement on this issue and asks the churches to give its contents serious consideration so that action can be taken to bring about the full interchangeability of the ministries of our churches.

2. Research and Discussion

The Council has done extensive research into how other churches in dialogue have worked on this issue. Our discussions have drawn on material from India, South Africa, Europe and North America and on various international agreements, mainly from the

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

World Council of Churches and the Anglican Methodist International Commission.¹ Following this research, the Council now seeks to assist the churches in reaching agreement on episcopacy using the following paragraphs under 3 below as a framework for discussion and decision-making.

3. For Discussion by the Churches

a. The Covenant Council agrees with the Anglicans and Methodists in South Africa “that a ministry of oversight is essential to the life of the church and that this ministry is exercised in personal, collegial and communal forms.” (*The Ministry of Oversight: A Proposal From the Church Unity Commission - 2001*) and with the way in which this had already been made clear in the *Lima Document 1982*:

The ordained ministry should be exercised in a personal, collegial and communal way. It should be personal because the presence of Christ among his people can most effectively be pointed to by the person ordained to proclaim the Gospel and to call the community to serve the Lord in unity of life and witness. It should also be collegial, for there is need for a college of ordained ministers sharing in the common task of representing the concerns of the community. Finally, the intimate relationship between the ordained ministry and the community should find expression in a communal dimension where the exercise of the ordained ministry is rooted in the life of the community and requires the community's effective participation in the discovery of God's will and the guidance of the Spirit.
(Paragraph M26)

i. Communal oversight is exercised locally in congregational meetings and church councils and at regional and denominational levels in representative bodies such as diocesan synods, district synods, general synod and conference.

ii. Collegial oversight is exercised when people who have been given responsibility for oversight consult and act together as, for example, in the meetings of bishops or superintendents.

iii. Personal oversight is exercised when responsibility for certain aspects of oversight is entrusted to particular individuals as, for example, the district superintendent, the President of Conference, or the bishop of a diocese.

The Council further agrees that these three areas of oversight have not always been held in equal balance in our churches but that this ought not to be seen as a barrier to unity. There have been varieties of interpretations of the nature of episcopacy in the history of both churches but this does not call into question the “validity” of the order in either tradition.

It is important however that these three dimensions be clearly discernable in the oversight of our churches.

¹ For full details of the documents consulted, please refer to the bibliography at the end of this appendix.

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

b. It is clear from recent ecumenical dialogue in which Anglicans have been involved, that Anglicanism no longer embraces the “pipeline” theory of apostolic succession.²

For example, the Porvoo Common Statement speaks of a much broader understanding of this issue:

The use of the sign of the historic episcopal succession does not by itself guarantee the fidelity of a church to every aspect of the apostolic faith, life and mission. There have been schisms in the history of churches using the sign of historic succession. Nor does the sign guarantee the personal faithfulness of the bishop. Nonetheless, the retention of the sign remains a permanent challenge to fidelity and to unity, a summons to witness to, and a commission to realise more fully, the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles.

Faithfulness to the apostolic calling of the whole Church is carried by more than one means of continuity. Therefore a church which has preserved the sign of historic episcopal succession is free to acknowledge an authentic episcopal ministry in a church which has preserved continuity in the episcopal office by an occasional priestly/presbyterial ordination at the time of the Reformation. Similarly a church which has preserved continuity through such a succession is free to enter a relationship of mutual participation in episcopal ordinations with a church which has retained the historical episcopal succession, and to embrace this sign, without denying its past apostolic continuity.
(Paragraphs IV A 52 & 53)

Considering the Church of Ireland’s endorsement of the Porvoo Common Statement and Declaration, it can be said that it now shares a broader view of the responsibility of the whole church to continue the apostolic tradition as an essential part of its participation in Christ’s ministry to the world.

The Council wishes to affirm the words of AMIC in this regard:

Concerning ecclesiology, neither Communion claims to be the whole Church, though each claims to be part of the Church catholic. All agree that certain elements and activities are essential to the being and life of the Church: the perseverance of the baptised community in the teaching of the apostles; proclamation of the gospel to the world; faithful worship of God, including the breaking of bread and common prayer; order and discipline in our corporate existence. openness to the operation and gifts of the Holy Spirit.
(Sharing in the Apostolic Communion, Paragraph 24)

This approach had already been stated in the *Lima Document*:

Apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and

² The “pipeline” theory says that apostolic succession is entirely dependent on the transmission of that succession by the laying-on-of-hands by bishops to their immediate successors. It is a personal and physical transmission which began with St Peter and the first apostles.

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which God has given to each.
(Paragraph M 34)

It is our view that both our churches need fully to embrace this approach.

c. Episcopate/oversight then ought to be a distinctive and clearly discernable ministry within our churches so that we can move together in continuing the living and dynamic apostolic tradition into which we are called. Whilst clarity of orders is important to our future unity, there remains the possibility that the way in which oversight is exercised may differ in more practical than theological ways. For example, we do not see a theological or ecclesiological conflict arising should the Methodist Church in Ireland identify its oversight among people who hold particular gifts and calling for that ministry but who do not exercise it for life. The critical issue is the clear identification of the existence of that ministry and not that of by whom, or in what structure it is exercised.

C. Interchangeability

1. Moving Towards Full Interchangeability

a. Taking into account the history outlined above, alongside the reports made by the Council to the General Synod and Methodist Conference since its inception, it is vital that the churches now move to take the next step towards visible unity in the interchangeability of ministries.

b. The interchangeability of presbyteral ministry is deeply related to the churches' entering into full communion. There are a variety of possible ways in which such interchangeability might come about:

i. It could emerge through both churches accepting a form of the historic episcopate, suited and adjusted to their own needs and ecclesial style.

ii. It could emerge through a Church of Ireland bishop being involved in Methodist ordinations and a representative of the Methodist Church in Ireland being involved in Church of Ireland ordinations.

c. The interchangeability of episcopal ministry is also deeply related to the churches' entering into full communion. We encourage the churches to include in their discussions the following possibilities raised during the Council's consideration of this issue:

i. Is it possible that the two churches might discern the exercise of episcopate as already existing within the ministry of District Superintendents?

or

2. Could it be accepted by both churches that the exercise of episcopate lies in the Methodist Conference and or its President.

or

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

3. Would the Church of Ireland be willing carefully to reassess its view of apostolic succession, accepting that it is not only in the laying on of hands by bishops that it is transmitted – i.e. the laying on of hands by bishops is but one of many ways in which the apostolic succession of the church is expressed?

Whatever options may be followed, there will always be a time of anomaly when two formerly separate churches come together. It should be made clear that if it were decided to enter into full communion, there would be no re-ordination of any minister already ordained in either of the churches.

- c. The full potential of diaconal ministry is yet to be explored by both churches. The Council recommends that the two churches should undertake this exploration together.

4. The Way Forward

1. Interchangeability of Ministry

a. It is clear that our churches have a long history of recognising and acknowledging each other's ordained ministry and that our entering into a Covenant relationship in 2002 serves as a foundation upon which to build further unity. The growth of Local Covenant Partnerships will be greatly enriched if agreement is reached on this issue.

b. The full interchangeability of the ministries of our churches would greatly enhance the working out of the Covenant in the following ways:

- i. the mission of our churches both in the local context and to the wider world.
- ii. our journey towards organic unity.
- iii. the pastoral and worship needs of our church communities, especially in rural areas.
- iv. the establishment of many more Local Covenant Partnerships and the strengthening of those currently under way.

2. Episcopate/Oversight

Our churches have engaged in various bilateral and multi-lateral processes, both together and separately, and at other times have responded positively to such processes taking place in other parts of the world. The Council is very conscious of the fact that by either signing up to or responding positively to these initiatives our churches have already significantly reshaped their approaches to episcopate. We encourage our two churches to view the issues of interchangeability of ministry and episcopate/oversight in the light of these discussions and without undue delay to take the necessary steps towards full interchangeability.

3. Proposed Timeline

- a. We call on both churches:

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

- i. urgently to begin a process of reflection as outlined in 2 above to be completed by 2009.
 - ii. to work with the Covenant Council in facilitating discussion on these matters at central committee in 2008 and local level in 2009.
 - iii. to allow for the interchangeability of ministry between our churches from 2009, on an experimental basis and only in experimental situations – i.e. within Local Covenant Partnerships operating within the Council’s guidelines. This should be reviewed by the churches in 2012.
 - iv. to come back to the Council with a detailed response following the process of reflection, the facilitation of local discussion and the period of interchangeability outlined above in 2012.
- b. We call on the Methodist Church in Ireland:
- i. to identify clearly where and in what office of the church the ministry of oversight lies.
 - ii. to begin a process of reflection on the role of the diaconate.
 - iii. to liaise with the Church of Ireland in these reflections.
- c. We call on the Church of Ireland
- i. to clearly define its ministry of oversight as exercised in and through its bishops.
 - ii. to begin a process of reflection on the role of the diaconate.
 - iii. to liaise with the Methodist Church in Ireland in these reflections.

It is in prayer, and our common commitment to Christ’s call to unity and his call to all of us to do his apostolic work in the world, that we urge our churches to accept the recommendations of this interim report.

The Covenant Council January 2007

The Covenant Council – Report 2007

Bibliography

The following documents were evaluated by the Council in its consideration of the issues of interchangeability and episcopate/oversight, some of which are quoted from in this report.

Ireland

Towards a United Church, Tripartite Conversations Report 1972-73

England

An Anglican-Methodist Covenant, 2003

In the Spirit of the Covenant, Interim Report (2005) of the Joint Implementation Commission under the Covenant between The Methodist Church of Great Britain and The Church of England, 2005

Europe

The Porvoo Common Statement and Declaration, 1992

North America

The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate, 1987

Called to Common Mission, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, 2000

Called to Full Communion, (The Waterloo Declaration), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada, 2001.

Africa

The Ministry of Oversight: A Proposal From the Church Unity Commission, South Africa 2001

Asia

The Council reflected on the issues raised at the time of the formation of the churches of North India and South India in response to a paper presented by the Revd Canon Dr Billy Marshall.

International Reports

Accra Document, Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches, 1974

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Sharing In the Apostolic Communion: Proposals to enable Anglicans and Methodists to grow in worship, mutual care and mission together, Report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission to the World Methodist Council and the Lambeth Conference, 1996