Editorial

Forms and Instruments of Unity

The year 2010 will mark the centenary of ‘the modern ecumenical movement’ that is conventionally reckoned to date from the ‘world missionary conference’ held in Edinburgh in 1910. Reflection will naturally be devoted to the intervening achievements and failures as well as the new and remaining tasks connected with the maintenance, restoration and furthering of unity among Christ’s followers. That cooperation in missions entails fundamental matters of ecclesiology was clearly seen by Charles H. Brent, who attended the Edinburgh conference as a missionary bishop – then serving in the Philippines – of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. On his return from Scotland, he persuaded the general convention of PECUSA to call for a world conference on ‘faith and order’. The first such conference eventually took place in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927. Brent is thus rightly honoured among the initiators of what became a continuing strand in the ecumenical movement.

A vital question in faith and order has always been that of the forms and instruments needed for unity at the ecclesial level.

The present issue of this journal contains several items touching on those matters. In particular, Andrew Atherstone – an English Anglican – examines what struck many as the curious alliance between two pairs of self-identified ‘catholics’ and ‘evangelicals’ in the Church of England whose argumentation in and around the jointly produced book Growing into Union combined to help persuade a sufficient number of persons in their Church’s decision-making bodies to vote against the ‘plan of union’ with the Methodist Church of Great Britain and thus prevent the attainment of a 75 per cent majority that had been deemed necessary for the plan to go forward (a plan which the Methodist Conference, for its part, twice approved by a sufficient majority, in both 1969 and 1972). Atherstone is perhaps most interested by what Growing into Unity meant, and may still mean, for relations between ‘catholics’ and ‘evangelicals’ in the Church of England, and indeed, in the longest run, the Anglican Communion as a whole; but his
article notes also the puzzlement and frustration felt at the time by many British Methodists and English Anglicans (including Archbishop Michael Ramsey) at seeing their vision of an attainable ecclesial unity – or, in this case, historic ‘reunion’ – thus thwarted.

A second article with implications for the forms and instruments of ecclesial unity is that by the Cornishman Colin Podmore, who directs his gaze across the Atlantic to what he calls the ‘Baptismal Revolution in the American Episcopal Church’ and reflects more broadly on whether a ‘baptismal ecclesiology’ matches historic Anglicanism and what it might mean for the Anglican Communion as a whole, and perhaps (one might think) the ecumenical scene at its widest.

An editor may, I hope, be allowed to enter at least tangentially into these discussions, particularly if he confesses up front his own origins and allegiances. Let me then say that as a young British Methodist I viewed very positively the prospect of reunion with the Church of England; that in mid-career I worked closely on the final stages in the drafting of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the ‘convergence text’ put forward by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches from our meeting in Peru in 1982; and that for the past decades I have served as chairman on the Methodist side of the doctrinal dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church.

First, as to ecclesial unity between Anglicans and Methodists: As Andrew Atherstone relates, the plan of 1963-72 sprang from the positive response of the British Methodist Church to a sermon delivered by Dr Geoffrey Fisher at Cambridge in 1946, whereby the Archbishop of Canterbury, proposing ‘a step forward in church relations’, invited the ‘nonconformist denominations’ to ‘take episcopacy into their systems’. The Archbishop himself did not offer a detailed vision as to what this might entail, but I think it fair to state that ecumenically-minded Methodists looked with favour and hope upon the constitution of the Church of South India (CSI), which in 1947 brought into an ‘organic union’ the local fruits of labours on the part of Anglicans (both the – perhaps largely ‘evangelical’ – Church Missionary Society and the – perhaps largely ‘catholic’ – Society for the Propagation of the Gospel), the British-based Methodist Missionary Society, the Foreign Missions of the Church of Scotland, and some Congregationalist bodies. The pastoral and governmental structures of the CSI included both bishops and presbyters as well as more ‘congregational’ features. All existing presbyters of the local bodies entering into the South Indian union – whether or not their ordination had been at the hands of bishops – were to be recognized as such in the united