In this contribution, I examine the Roman Catholic-Methodist international dialogue. I attempt to explain its significance, to describe its course and to estimate its achievements to date. Lastly, I will to point to areas for further work.

The dialogue began in 1967, in the immediate wake of Vatican II and the creation of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. It began at the same time as ARCIC, the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, but, for various reasons, has not become as well known as ARCIC. Despite this, it has, in the opinion of the late Canon Michael Richards, an eminent Catholic ecumenist who participated in it over many years, made more fundamental progress than ARCIC. It has produced six quinquennial reports, each being submitted to the World Methodist Council and the Vatican. These reports are generally known by the name of the meeting place of the World Methodist Council to which they were submitted. Thus, the first is known as the Denver Report, published in 1971, the second as the Dublin Report (1976), the third as the Honolulu Report (1981), the fourth as the Nairobi Report (1986), the fifth as the Singapore Report (1991) and the sixth as the Rio Report (1996).

Currently, in its seventh quinquennium, the dialogue is now studying the question of how the Church discerns the truth and teaches authoritatively, hoping thereby to get to grips with some of the issues on which, previously, Catholics and Methodists have been furthest apart. It is not yet possible because of the unfinished provisional nature of its work to describe or comment on it in detail.

Right from the beginning, the dialogue has held in tension the goal of ultimate unity, precious to both churches and a constant concern of

1 For the first three reports, see H. Meyer and L. Vischer, Growth in Agreement (hereafter cited as ‘Growth’), Geneva: WCC, 1984, 307-388. The fourth and sixth reports were published, respectively, as Towards A Statement on the Church, Lake Junaluska: World Methodist Council, 1986, and The Word of Life, Lake Junaluska: World Methodist Council, 1996. The fifth report, The Apostolic Tradition was published at Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1991. These reports can be obtained by writing, as appropriate to the World Methodist Council, P.O. Box 518, Lake Junaluska, NC 28745, USA or to Methodist Publishing House, 20, Ivatt Way, Peterborough, PE3 7PG UK. The six reports are usually known by the name of the place of meeting of the World Methodist Council in their year of presentation. The places, in numerical order were, Denver (1971), Dublin (1976), Honolulu (1981), Nairobi (1986), Singapore (1991) and Rio de Janeiro (1996). The reports will be referenced subsequently under these names.
Methodists since their pioneering participation in the Ecumenical Movement in its earliest years, and the need for utter frankness and honesty on the way. All the reports have been honest in stating differences as well as convergence in thinking and practice. The first two reports, while recording a higher than expected degree of agreement on eucharistic theology, were quite clear as to where the differences lay. Similarly, the last two reports have been quite clear that though Catholics and Methodists share a fundamentally pastoral perspective on ministry, they “identify the ministers differently”. My one criticism is that some of the early recorded differences on the Eucharist have been, as it were, allowed to ‘lay on the table’ and that not enough has been done subsequently to see whether they might now, in view of developments in eucharistic understanding in both churches, be resolved, at least in part. One hopes that a similar criticism will not have to be made of the work on ministry. If I have correctly understood the aims of the current dialogue quinquennium, we should certainly see in its report signs of very strenuous effort at convergence on teaching authority and ministry, whether or not it is able bring us significantly closer.

The dialogue has taken a particularly interesting path. At first, it concentrated both on examining areas where there were known to be differences and on looking at spheres where there was a real and immediate possibility of being able to learn from each other. Thus, considerable amounts of work were done on spirituality and ethical issues. Both of these have always bulked large in the agendas of both churches. The third quinquennium was largely devoted to the work of the Holy Spirit. The fourth saw an attempt to move to a common statement about the nature of the Church. This new emphasis on “doing theology together” was reinforced in the fifth and sixth quinquennia when the major themes of the Apostolic Tradition and ‘The Word of Life’ (faith and revelation) were taken. In both cases, creative attempts were made to establish a common understanding of the mystery of Christian life interweaving strands from the two varying theological standpoints.

The dialogue has, I believe, an importance that transcends the purely domestic concerns of the two churches concerned. To most Catholics, Methodism no doubt still appears to be “just another Protestant Church”. It is not often realised that there is a very real sense in which it, like the Anglican Church, is a “bridge” church. This is not, as with Anglicanism,