

# **Has the Methodist/Church of Ireland Covenant any serious contemporary relevance in a multi-faith world?**

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## **Introductory remarks**

My first reaction was what a topic! Who dreamed this one up? But, on reflection, it is a valid question. 9/11, just one year before the Covenant was signed, changed, and continues to change, many things, including questions of relationship in matters of faith and faiths. The niceties of inter-church relations may appear to pale into insignificance, at least in the popular mind, when placed alongside the seemingly intractable questions raised by notions of the clash of civilizations, *jihad*, the ongoing unrest in the Middle East and other places. An obsession with inter-church issues, particularly those between churches born of the Reformation, may well seem to some to be self-indulgent navel gazing and to smack of something like fiddling while Rome is burning! I want to argue that, in fact, this is not the case and, further, that the question we are considering tonight needs to more nuanced.

However, I understand my brief to include an update on the progress – or otherwise – of the Covenant and a ‘wrapping up’ of this series of explorations; and it is against these considerations that we may start to explore something of the issues which the title question raises.

## **The Covenant**

Turning first to the Covenant: the Covenant Council has presented five reports to its governing bodies, the General Synod of the Church of Ireland and the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland since its inception in 2003

Briefly, then...

The first report (2004) was by way of being a holding report, though the Council pointed up the importance of appropriate protocols for inter-church projects.

The second report (2005) indicated that the process of establishing protocols had commenced and that a scheme of Covenant facilitators had been initiated. It also – and significantly – presented for discussion Ten Points on *episcopal* or oversight.

By 2006, the year of the third report, it had become clear that in order for joint projects to function properly, the Church of Ireland would

need to put in place ecumenical canons such as those obtaining in England and Wales. The Council was aware of particular areas of sensitivity in relationship. The notion of a mission event or events was proposed, to be sponsored by the mission committees of the two churches. The word ‘interchangeability’ had crept on to the agenda in terms of ordained ministry.

The fourth report (2007) concentrated on an Interim Statement on mutual recognition of ministries, to which the two churches were asked formally to respond. A Covenant Council website had been created. The first of a proposed series of booklets was presented, The Journey so far<sup>1</sup>, telling the story of the covenant process.

Last year’s report (2008) focussed on three themes: the first of the mission events, the preparatory consultation for the Anglican /Methodist International Commission on Unity and Mission (AMICUM) and a second in the series of booklets, Guidelines for the Journey<sup>2</sup>, dealing with areas of sensitivity.

This year’s report (2009) is likely to include reference to a third in the series of booklets focussing on the celebration of our shared heritage; the revisiting of the facilitators scheme and the Council’s continued wrestling with questions linked with ministry and mutual recognition.

The Council is anxious to keep *its* agenda on the agenda of the churches and, to this end, it invites the Primate of the Church of Ireland and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland to a session at each January meeting. This has been most helpful, both to the Council, and, we believe, to the heads of the two churches.

Truth to tell, the task can sometimes be discouraging. Why, we ask, do people not share in the declared vision of the two churches? Why are things so ‘patchy’ – enthusiasm here, apathy, even antipathy, there? Thus it was particularly helpful, in January

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<sup>1</sup> *Working out the Covenant : the Journey so far*. The Covenant Council. 2007

<sup>2</sup> *Working out the Covenant: Guidelines for the Journey*. The Covenant Council. 2008

2007, to have a visit from the Revd Peter Sulston, then co-secretary of the Joint Implementation Group of the British Methodist/Anglican Covenant. There is a strong family likeness between the issues on the larger island to the east and those we face ourselves!

However, on a very positive note indeed, the establishment of AMICUM is a considerable feather in our cap and this was recognised by the inclusion of Bishop Harold Miller and myself on the preparatory consultation last November. For years the Joint Theological Working Part and its successor, the Covenant Council, had raised the matter with both the World Methodist Council and the Anglican Consultative Council in the aftermath of the 1998 Lambeth Conference and the ‘shelving’ of the Report of the Anglican / Methodist International Commission, *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*<sup>3</sup>. This has now borne fruit and for that we are profoundly grateful.

May I, at this point, remind us all of the text of the Covenant into which the two churches entered in 2002.

*1 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.*

*2 We acknowledge that in each of our churches the Word of God is authentically preached and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion authentically administered according to the command of Christ.*

*3 We acknowledge that both our churches share in a common faith set forth in the scriptures and summarised in the historic creeds.*

*4 We acknowledge our common inheritance in traditions of spirituality and liturgy. We rejoice in our diversity from which we may mutually benefit as we continue to develop varied forms of worship as appropriate to different situations.*

*5 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*

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<sup>3</sup> *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion*. ACC/WMC 1996

*pilgrims together, we look forward to the time when our ministries can be fully interchangeable and our churches visibly united.*

*6 We acknowledge that personal, collegial and communal oversight is embodied and practised in both churches, as each seeks to express continuity of apostolic life, mission and ministry.*<sup>4</sup>

Based on those affirmations, and believing...

*that God is calling our two churches to a fuller relationship in which we commit ourselves*

- *to share a common life and mission.*
- *to grow together so that unity may be visibly realized.*<sup>5</sup>

...we committed ourselves to a number of steps to be implemented variously at local and national level and to theological exploration.

The question tonight is of what relevance is all this in the multi-faith world of today?

### **A question of dialogue**

Let me declare my hand immediately and say that I do believe that inter-church relations, as exemplified in the Methodist/Church of Ireland Covenant, have strong contemporary relevance, and not least in a multi-faith world.

Supplementary to that, I need to say that I am somewhat uneasy with the premise on which the question seems to be based, that is that inter-church relations and inter-faith relations are in the same league, so to speak. They are, I believe, quite different issues: put simply, one is a matter of internal relations, the other of external relations; one is a family conversation, the other is with those outside the family (and ‘family’ is a very potent image, here as elsewhere!).

That said, some of the marks of dialogue are common to both, as is clear from the principles of Inter Faith Dialogue agreed by the then British Council of Churches in the 1980s...

- *Dialogue begins when people meet each other*

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<sup>4</sup> Covenant document, signed September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2002

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

- *Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust*
- *Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community*
- *Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness*

The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Vatican says this of dialogue

*Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as an openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of the mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity.*<sup>6</sup>

Inter-church relations, at heart, represent a move towards unity, towards the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer that we might be one that the world might believe. This is fundamentally a process requiring repentance in varying degrees and an acceptance of each other, even in and with our differences. It is, above all, an acknowledgement that we each/all recognise the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, Son of God and son of Mary and that salvation is through faith in him by grace.

Interfaith relations, on the other hand, are *not* about becoming one, but about an overcoming of mutual misunderstanding and prejudices. This too is a process, one of learning and understanding, but ultimately of accepting fundamental difference.

A January 2006 editorial in the Church of Ireland Gazette is admirably succinct...

*The current Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a time of special focus on ecumenical relations and on the building up of our unity in Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. Yet, while the unity of the Church is the first concern of the ecumenical movement, mutual understanding among the different world religions is best achieved by Christians together across denominational boundaries engaging in genuine and respectful encounter with other faith traditions. Inter-faith relations are, therefore, part of the ecumenical agenda and, indeed, by engaging together in dialogue*

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<sup>6</sup> Leaflet from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

*with other faith traditions, Christians may also come to understand one another rather better*<sup>7</sup>

The recently published Guidelines for Interfaith Events and Dialogue of the Church of

Ireland makes a similar point

*The aim of dialogue among the churches is founded upon the vision of Christian unity. However, Interfaith dialogue has significantly different aims. ....Each religious or faith tradition demands and deserves its own unique approach. There are no simplistic means or shortcuts which allow us to place all Interfaith encounters into one category. This remains clear at all time.*<sup>8</sup>

The report to the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland 2007 comments that *There needs to be an over-arching Christian understanding of inter-faith relations within Ireland, but there should also be a distinctive Methodist voice and perspective.*

That distinctive voice and perspective centers round the sensitive area of mission and the report opines that...

*Where there are areas of common social concern we should have no hesitation in co-operating across faith boundaries. Irish Methodism also has a long history of inter-faith evangelistic encounter, both in Ireland and beyond, from which we can learn how courageously and sensitively to offer Christ to all in Ireland.*

It goes on...

*the Conference should note and welcome the emergence of a multi-faith Ireland as an opportunity to leave behind narrow historic arguments and to work alongside others in areas of shared interest and mission. Where there are areas of common social concern we should have no hesitation in co-operating across faith boundaries.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Church of Ireland Gazette January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I don't always agree with the editor of the Gazette, but I do here!

<sup>8</sup> *Guidelines for Interfaith Events & Dialogue* Committee for Christian Unity & the Bishops of the Church of Ireland 2007

<sup>9</sup> Agenda book, Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland 2007

There is, however, a commonality of approach in our respective documents, notwithstanding difference of emphasis. The challenge, it seems to me, is for us to work together rather than doing similar things in parallel. Indeed, it is probably more appropriate that inter-faith relations be tackled by all the churches together, through structures like the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, or even the Irish Council of Churches.

However, Methodist and Church of Ireland people are in a Covenant relationship and it may well be that we together have something to offer in wider interfaith scene.<sup>10</sup> This is something on which you might well continue to reflect!

### **A Common Word between Us and You**

And that continued reflection might centre round one of the most interesting inter-faith documents to emerge, perhaps ever, namely, A Common Word between Us and You.<sup>11</sup>

Written by an international group of 138 Muslim scholars and sent to world Christian leaders of all traditions, this Open Letter makes an appeal for the coming together of Christians and Muslims around mutual acceptance of the centrality of ‘love of God and love of neighbour’<sup>12</sup> The writers come from all across the Muslim world – the Middle East, Nigeria, India, Uzbekistan, Europe - and include both Sunni and Shia Muslims, individuals from the Sufi and Wahabi traditions and representatives from both liberal and conservative Islam. They address themselves to the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and reformed traditions and to the World Council of Churches., and the list of addressees concludes with ‘And Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere...’ The letter is dated October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Responses were ecumenical, immediate and warm; they are still flowing in. And from both sides in the encounter – the original 138 signatories were 280 as of November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008.

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<sup>10</sup> Thoughts arising from an e-conversation with the Revd Peter Sulston (MCGB).

<sup>11</sup> A Common Word between Us and You – an Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders. October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007 CE

<sup>12</sup> See Above Us and Between Us Peter Colwell. CTBI 2008

[I recommend the official website – type in A Common Word on any search engine and look for the official website.]

Looking at the responses, what is impressive is how truly ecumenical they are, both in the range of church traditions from which they come and in the impulse, explicit and implicit, which seems to be there for a Christian response rather than a strictly denominational one.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, as an individual church leader addressed in the Open Letter, responded immediately and then, nine months later, in a lengthy and considered way in a document entitled A Common Word for a Common Good. This was followed, a year after the original letter, by a conference of Christian and Muslim leaders of all traditions within each faith, held in Cambridge on 12 – 15 October, 2008, just a month ago. A communique issued at the close of this ecumenical gathering sums up where the participants stand on love of God and love of neighbour

*We live in an increasingly global world that brings with it increased interdependence. The closer we are drawn together by this globalisation and interdependence, the more urgent is the need to understand and respect one another in order to find a way out of our troubles..... In this conference we are celebrating the shared values of love of God and love of neighbour, the basis of A Common Word, whilst reflecting self-critically on how often we fall short of these standards. We believe that the divine commandment to love our neighbour should prompt all people to act with compassion towards others, to fulfil their duty of helping to alleviate misery and hardship. It is out of an understanding of shared values that we urge world leaders and our faithful everywhere to act together to ensure that the burden of this financial crisis, and also the global environmental crisis, does not fall unevenly on the weak and the poor. We must seize the opportunity for implementing a more equitable global economic system that also respects our role as stewards of the earth's resources.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Communique from A Common Word Conference, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008

This is a statement with which all good-thinking people can identify.

According to the official website, the first response (which would appear to have been written before the Open Letter went out!) came from Professor David Ford, an Irish Anglican who is Regius Professor of Divinity in Cambridge University. It is admirably succinct and readable. I want to draw attention to his comments on why this document is so genuinely important and to his thoughts on any long-term solution to violent extremism.

Professor Ford believes that A Common Word between Us and You is important for the following reasons

- It is unprecedented in bringing together so many of the leading religious authorities and scholars of Islam and uniting them in a positive and substantial affirmation;
- It is addressed to Christians in the form of a friendly word, it engages respectfully and carefully with the Christian scriptures and it finds common ground in what Jesus himself said is central: love of God and love of neighbour;
- It opens a way forward that is more hopeful than most at present in the public sphere...it cries out to be followed by many initiatives in the same spirit.

He poses what seems an obvious question - will this have any impact on violent extremism? A solution should include four elements, elements Professor Ford believes he sees in A Common Word...

- Muslim solidarity around an understanding of their faith that clearly excludes violent, uncompassionate acts, programmes and language;
- better Christian understanding of Islam;
- deeper engagement between Muslims and Christians that makes use of the resources at the heart of their faith, such as their scriptures;
- a concern for the flourishing of the whole human family and the whole planet.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A Common Word between Us and You – a Response by Professor David Ford 9th October 2008

Peter Colwell, secretary for Church Life and Inter Faith Relations of the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, has written a valuable introduction and study resource for this critically important document. He affirms that substantial scholarly work by way of response is in progress amongst Christian scholars all round the world.

I make no apology for such a lengthy reference to this document. We live in an inter-faith world: how we respond, as Christians together, to the challenges this presents is vitally important for the safety and security of the world in which we live. Whatever may serve to bring Christians – including Methodist and Church of Ireland people – more fully together in faith, mission and sacramental life<sup>15</sup> serves the purpose of peace on earth and goodwill among those on whom God's favour rests.<sup>16</sup>

### **In Conclusion**

You have asked yourselves four significant questions in this series of Explorations, and, no doubt, you have been *dis*-comforted and challenged by at least some of those people you have chosen to address these.

*Just Tolerance or real understanding- can Christians in good conscience worship with those of other faiths?*

Our Churches have both indicated that this is an issue to be handled with the greatest possible sensitivity, with due regard for what it is that we, as Christians are doing in worship. The Methodist Guidelines (1998, amended 2004)<sup>17</sup> and the Church of Ireland Guidelines (2007)<sup>18</sup> are each clear that the best option is for a multi faith service in which each faith has a clearly defined and distinct 'space' in which to offer its prayers. The 'with' of the question should be read as 'alongside'

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<sup>15</sup> The declared goal of the Anglican Methodist International Commission: Sharing in the Apostolic Communion pp. 6, 39

<sup>16</sup> Luke 2:14

<sup>17</sup> Report to Conference 2007 p.164

<sup>18</sup> Guidelines p12

*Is religion a major threat to world peace?*

Leading Islamic and Christian scholars would say not. And it is noteworthy that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the participants in the Cambridge Conference in response to A Common Word make reference to Judaism, particularly in respect of the scriptures<sup>19</sup> There is tremendous potential in this suggestion – for reconciliation, for peace, for ‘a common good’.

*Can Christianity, as a world faith, be separated from Western culture?*

This is an interesting one. Christianity is, of course, of the Middle East in origin, and the Coptic Orthodox are proud that, as people of the African continent, they were the ones who received a refugee baby from the horrors of infanticide. Europe was down the line a bit! But of course, Christianity spread via Europe, laden with all manner of cultural baggage, and missionaries of earlier times may well have been guilty of putting undue emphasis on the baggage rather than the Gospel. But this *is* changing. Philip Jenkins is a provocative, not to say controversial, writer. He argues powerfully that the balance of Christianity is changing more rapidly than we realise and that, very soon, the majority of Christians will be in or from the countries often designated as the South and, further, that their priorities in terms of the Gospel may be very different from ours<sup>20</sup>. Whether you agree with him or not, he will certainly make you think long and hard!

The veteran inter-faith scholar, Kenneth Cragg, has suggested that Christian mission in general and inter-faith dialogue in particular, operates round the poles of ‘embassy’ and ‘hospitality’: a ‘going out’ and a ‘welcoming in’. It is clear

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<sup>19</sup> ‘And for Christians and Muslims together addressing our scriptures in this way, it is essential also to take account of the place of the Jewish people and of the Hebrew scriptures in our encounter, since we both look to our origins in that history of divine revelation and action’ A Common Word for a Common Good, p.16 Archbishop Rowan Williams 2007

<sup>20</sup> The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity (2002); The New Face of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South (2005); God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe’s Religious Crisis(2007); The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand –Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia (2008).

that here in Ireland a simultaneous coming out to others different from ourselves and a welcoming of them in is the way we must go if we are to achieve anything resembling a cohesive and peaceful society. This will undoubtedly be challenging and even painful. However, acts of embassy and hospitality towards others have an interesting way of bringing those engaged in them closer to each other. As Methodist and Church of Ireland people, this is part of what it means to be in a Covenant relationship. Difference enriches; it should not threaten.

The other week in Dublin, Archbishop Alan Harper commented that ‘My key conviction ... is that the great challenge in the world in which we live is to seek the grace and generosity to live together positively with difference’<sup>21</sup>

In an earlier time and speaking of relationships among Christians, John Wesley said something very similar, and with this I conclude:

*Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> What divides us? a paper delivered at St Mary’s Church, Haddington Road, Dublin, on Tuesday, October 28th

<sup>22</sup> On a Catholic Spirit John Wesley, Forty-Four Sermons no.39