

AN INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE LIMA TEXT, BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY

Introduction

Very few circuits and only one Synod responded to the invitation to comment on the Lima Text. Several respondents simply expressed satisfaction or referred to the complexity of the language for laymen. One circuit stated that its ambiguous language was not acceptable in a theological document; and the Natal Coastal District felt that a stronger emphasis was needed upon the role of faith in Baptism and considered that the vital truth of the all-sufficiency of trust in Christ as the ground, on man's side, for new life was inadequately safeguarded.

It is significant that comment was very limited; that it related exclusively to Baptism; and that it concentrated on criticisms and did not evince any readiness to learn. This document takes account of comments received but reflects further upon the significance of the Text for our Church. (Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in the Lima Text).

Baptism

1. The statement describes baptism as "the sign of new life through Jesus Christ" which "unites the one baptised with Christ and His people". (2) It refers to the NT images of baptism and expounds its meaning under five heads:

- baptism means participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- the baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ and are given a new ethical orientation;
- God bestows on baptized people the anointing and promise of the Holy Spirit and implants the first instalment of their inheritance as His children;
- baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship;
- baptism initiates the reality of the new life given in the midst of the present world;
- baptism signifies and effects both participation in Christ's death and the receiving of the Spirit.

Teaching of this kind makes many Methodists uncomfortable. We emphasise the necessity of personal faith for the personal appropriation of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, and are very suspicious of any suggestion that an outward rite

either effects salvation irrespective of faith
or is necessary for salvation when faith is present.

And yet our tradition accepts and practises infant baptism! As a result many Methodists either devalue the sacrament of baptism into a rite of dedication or feel the attraction of believer's baptism and place the primary emphasis upon the faith of the baptised. Either way they fail to face the full implications of New Testament teaching.

2. The Lima Text can assist S.A. Methodism as it seeks a constructive approach to this problem:

1. It emphasises "the necessity of faith for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism" and that personal commitment is necessary for responsible membership in the body of Christ (8);
 2. It emphasises that "Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ" and that the Christian life is one of "continuing struggle yet also of continuing experience of grace". (9) The act of baptism, whenever it takes place, begins a process which continues through life (9,12) It "initiates the reality of the new life" (7); and God "implants ... the first instalment of their inheritance" (5).
 3. It emphasises the corporate nature of baptism. White Methodists tend to be individualistic in their approach to Christian experience and it is therefore natural that they tend to understand baptism in individualistic terms. The Text expounds baptism as "a basic bond of unity", as a "sign and seal of our common discipleship", as "liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division ... are transcended (6,2), in short, as entry into the Church. What implication does this have for our understanding of membership and admission to communion?
 4. While the consideration of the Baptism of Believers and Infant does not resolve the tension between the two practices, it does stress the common features and encourage us to explore the similarities as well as the differences. The Church needs to give attention to this matter.
3. However, the Lima Text is a "convergence" and not a "consensus" document and it does not answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Further consideration needs to be given by the Commission on Faith and Order to such issues as the following:
1. A clearer exposition of the relationship between sign and spiritual reality - does the act of baptism signify a spiritual event contemporaneous with itself or an ongoing process; in what sense is the sign "effective"; and is the spiritual reality in any way dependent upon the sign? This is an area where differences probably exist between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'.
 2. A clearer exposition of the relationship between divine initiative and faith-response in the sacrament.
 3. Further study of the similarities and differences between the baptism of infants and believers and the possibility of mutual recognition.

THE EUCHARIST

The attitude of Methodists to the Eucharist or Holy Communion has been greatly influenced by Reformation controversies and by our reaction to the Anglo-Catholic movement. This has sometimes led us to regard a "high" view of the sacrament as incompatible with justification by faith. If we approach the Lima Text with this attitude we shall probably accuse the authors of ambiguity and papering over the cracks. That this is not the case is abundantly clear from the commentary which points out the differences of understanding that still remain and does not attempt to hide them. The Text attempts to move away from polemic and to discern the truth underlying divergent interpretations and practices. Perhaps it will help us to see that we have tended to caricature each other or to assume that unacceptable interpretations in the past persist in the present.

The Text defines the Eucharist as "a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God's love in Jesus Christ". (1) It is an act of thanksgiving to the Father - a proclamation and celebration of His work and a sacrifice of praise. It is a "living and effective sign of (Christ's) sacrifice, accomplished once for all on the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind" (5); it is a foretaste of the parousia; an anticipation of the Kingdom; a renewal of the covenant; an offering of ourselves to His service. Word and Sacrament belong together for both recall and proclaim the living Christ. Christ is really present by virtue of His promise. We have different understandings of the mode of His presence but agree that faith is needed to discern it. The Holy Spirit makes Christ really present to us and gives meaning to every part of the sacrament. The Eucharist binds us together with all other Christians and demands that we serve Christ in all aspects of life in the world.

A sympathetic reading of the Lima Text reveals the deep significance of the Eucharist and should challenge Methodists to appreciate its value more fully.

We offer the following comments:

1. It is stated in para 2: "The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and blood of Christ". Methodists are likely to react against this and to assert that we receive the gift of salvation through faith in Christ. We should prefer a more explicit statement of the need for faith in the reception of the sacrament. On the other hand, we welcome the statement in para 30 that "Christian faith is deepened by the celebration of the Lord's Supper".
2. The treatment of the sacrament as anamnesis or memorial is very helpful and should help us to overcome fears of the "eucharistic sacrifice". The statement stresses both the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice and its continued effect in the present, and links this to thanksgiving, intercession and self-offering. Particularly welcome is this statement in paragraph 12: "Since the anamnesis of Christ is the very content of the preached Word as it is of the eucharistic meal, each reinforces the other." This linking of preaching and sacrament is useful in removing the bogey of a repeated sacrifice and helping us to grasp the concept of a past event being recalled in such a way as to have continuing effects in the present. It should also challenge us to a high view of preaching.

4. The real presence was important for the Wesleys (cf MHB 771) although later Methodists appear to have become nervous of it. The Text (13-15) shows that it may be understood in various ways and certainly does not involve crass materialism. This should provoke reflection in Methodism but is also one of the points that the Commission on Faith and Order needs to explore further.
5. The stress on the Holy Spirit is welcome and is true to the Methodist tradition (15-18).
6. The stress (19-21) upon the communion of the faithful is important to counteract the individualism to which we are prone. We also need to recognise that a eucharistic celebration is not "the assemblies' own creation or possession" (29) and that the presiding minister "represents the divine initiative and expresses the connection of the local community with other local communities in the universal Church." (29). This underlines the need for the presiding minister to be recognised as widely as possible in the Christian Church, and should strengthen our resolve to limit the presidency at the eucharist to ordained ministers of the Word and Sacrament.
7. We need to reflect upon the fact that the eucharist embraces all aspects of life and thus commits us to reconciliation, sharing and the search for appropriate relations in social, economic and political life." (20). This should counter a pietistic approach to the sacrament and challenge us to relate eucharistic worship more closely to discipleship in daily life.
8. The concept of the eucharist as a foretaste of the Kingdom and an expression of hope (22-26) is present in our liturgy and should be valued more highly in a time of struggle and conflict.
9. The outline of the eucharistic liturgy (29) should remind us that the eucharist is a complete act of worship and not an isolated ritual tagged on at the end of a preaching service.
10. We should reflect upon paragraph 32, and especially upon the relationship of communion for the sick to the celebration of the whole congregation. Do we see it as a continuation of the church's liturgy or as a type of "private communion"? Should we not make plain that the sick are in fact sharing in the worship of the whole church? If so, should not the person administering the elements be accompanied by other members of the congregation? And is it necessary for an ordained minister to administer the elements?

MINISTRY

The section on Ministry reflects positive progress in theological thinking but it remains to be seen how it will be received by the governing authorities of the Churches. If its basic propositions are accepted it will open the way for constructive discussions of issues that still divide us. Methodists welcome the general approach which allows us to face the challenges of the Text without being defensive as we have tended to be in past discussions of this subject. Instead of trying to establish the credentials of our ministry we may now ask how the insight and traditions of the wider Church may help us to express its significance more fully.

I THE CALLING OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD

We welcome the emphasis upon the calling of the whole people of God which has been characteristic of Methodism from its beginning. We agree that the Church is a body which lives "in communion with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit" (1); that "the Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts ... for the common good of the whole people ... in acts of service within the community and to the world" (5); and that the Church as a whole may be described as a priesthood whose members "are called to offer their beings as a living sacrifice and to intercede for the Church and the salvation of the world" (17). This is a positive exposition of the Priesthood of all Believers.

II THE CHURCH AND THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

A The Ordained Ministry

The description of ordained ministers as heralds and ambassadors, leaders and teachers, and pastors, and the insistence upon their inter-relatedness with lay members of the community are in line with our own thinking. We need to explore the concept of the minister as "a focus of unity" (8 cf 14) which is not prominent in our thinking; and the "representative" role of the minister (11, 14 and commentary on 13) which has caused some puzzlement in responses to the CUC Plan of Union.

B. Ordained Ministry and Authority

There is a noticeable fear of authority or the abuse of authority in the Methodist Church and a temptation to make ministerial authority "dependent on the common opinion of the community" (Commentary on 16). This, and a false stereotype of bishops has adversely influenced discussions of episcopacy. It is therefore important for us to explore the concept of authority as service, as a gift for the continued edification of the body and as "responsibility before God ... exercised with the co-operation of the community." (15)

C. Ordained Ministry and Priesthood

The account of the unique priesthood of Christ, the priesthood of the Church and the priesthood of the ordained ministry is acceptable. However, we question whether it reflects the views of certain churches, and we prefer to avoid the term in relation to the ministry as it is open to misinterpretation.

D. Ministry of Men and Women in the Church

We agree that "both men and women must discover together their contributions to the service of Christ in the Church". (18) Our acceptance of women as ordained ministers should not blind us to the need to seek "a deeper understanding of the comprehensiveness of ministry which reflects the inter-dependence of men and women." (18)

III THE FORMS OF THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

A. Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons

These paragraphs indicate the variety of New Testament patterns of ministry, the general acceptance of the threefold pattern in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, the fact that there have been changes in function and understanding through the years and the evident need for reform of the present patterns.

If this approach is accepted, it means that no pattern of ministry may claim exclusive legitimacy on biblical grounds, and that Methodists may consider the threefold ministry without a sense of threat. It means, moreover, that it need not be considered solely on the basis of historical or even contemporary patterns and that we should also be free to examine critically our own pattern of ministry and the reasons for our attachment to it. We need seriously to consider para 22 and especially the statement that "the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it." This should be considered in the report on Bishops in Methodism which has already been requested by Conference.

B. Guiding Principles for the Exercise of Ordained Ministry

We agree that ordained ministry should be exercised personally, collegially and communally (26) and that each of these aspects should find adequate expression at all levels in the life of the Church. (27). We also recognise that it is easy to over-emphasise one aspect at the expense of others (Commentary on 26). We need to examine our own pattern of ministry in the light of these principles.

C. Functions of Bishop, Presbyter and Deacons

It is fascinating to read that there does not need to be a uniform answer to the question about "the functions and even the titles of bishops, presbyters and deacons" (28). We shall await with interest the response of episcopal churches.

The tentative definitions are useful.

We need to ask whether the functions attributed to a bishop are adequately fulfilled in our present pattern of ministry. Are there persons who can rightly be called "representative pastoral ministers of oversight, continuity and unity in the Church (who) relate the Christian community in their area to the wider Church and the universal Church to their community" (29)? Is this within the functions of the Chairman of District and, if so, is he able to fulfil it adequately among his many duties?

The definition of presbyter is wholly acceptable.

We need to consider the role of deacon in relation to local preachers, lay workers and probationer ministers. We note that various responses to the CUC Plan of Union have referred to the need to elaborate this role

D. Varieties of Charism

This section is in line with the Methodist understanding of the life of the Church in which each member has his or her ministry. We believe that John Wesley fell into the category of prophetic and charismatic leaders through whom God has preserved the truth of the gospel; but we need also to remember that He may speak to us today through similar leaders whose message we may find difficult to accept.

IV SUCCESSION IN THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION

Paragraph 34 contains an excellent definition of Apostolic Tradition. The account of Apostolic Succession in paragraph 35 states very clearly the new understanding which has been current for some time in ecumenical circles but which Methodists have often failed to appreciate. Gone is the old identification of the apostolic and episcopal successions. It is now stated that "the primary manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole." (35). "The orderly transmission of the ordained ministry is therefore a powerful expression of the continuity of the Church throughout history; it also underlines the calling of the ordained minister as guardian of the faith." This we may accept for in fact there is a strong emphasis in Methodism on the orderly transmission of the ministry through Conference (cf 37). We need to acknowledge that "the succession of bishops became one of the ways ... in which the apostolic tradition of the Church was expressed" and that this "was understood as serving, symbolising and guarding the continuity of the apostolic faith and communion." (36). We hope that episcopal churches will indeed recognise increasingly "that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship and mission has been preserved in churches which have not retained the form of historic episcopale" (37). By the same token we need "to appreciate the episcopal succession as a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church" (38) and to ask whether the acceptance of that succession would not enrich our understanding and serve the unity of the Church even though we "cannot accept any suggestion that (our) ministry ... should be invalid until the moment that it enters into an existing line of episcopal succession." (38). This too should be considered in the context of our examination of bishops in the Methodist Church of S.A.

V ORDINATION

Ordination is described as "an action by God and the community by which the ordained are strengthened by the Spirit for their task and are upheld by the acknowledgement and prayers of the congregation" (40). It is

- "an invocation to God that the new minister be given the power of the Holy Spirit in the new relationship between (him) and the local Christian community and, by intention, the Church universal" (42)
- a sign performed in faith that the spiritual relationship is given and the prayer answered;
- an acknowledgement by the Church of the gifts of the Spirit in the one ordained;
- a commitment by both Church and ordinand to the new relationship.

This is most acceptable to Methodists.

The discussion of the conditions for ordination raises several questions which are or should be live issues within our Church:

- the possibility of tent-making ministry (46);
- the nature of ministerial training (47);
- the possibility of leave of absence (48).

VI MUTUAL RECOGNITION

By accepting the Covenant the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has moved some distance along the way to mutual recognition of the ministries of CUC Churches. However, if we are to move forward, we shall need to take seriously the challenge in para 53(b):

"Churches without the episcopal succession, and living in
 unfaithful continuity with the apostolic faith and mission,
 have a ministry of Word and Sacrament, as is evident from
 the belief, life and practice of those churches. These
 churches are asked to realise that the continuity with
 the Church of the apostles finds profound expression in the
 successive laying on of hands by bishops and that, though
 they may not lack the continuity of the apostolic tradition,
 this sign will strengthen and deepen that continuity. They
 may need to recover the sign of the episcopal succession."

R E C O M M E N D A T I O N

That Conference accepts the above document, with any necessary amendments, as the initial response of the M.C.S.A. to the Lima Text and resolves it be forwarded to the Faith and Order Commission and to the Church Unity Commission, and made available within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to encourage further consideration of and response to that Text.