

Editorial

IF any progress is to be made towards the realization of ecclesiastical reunion and the restoration of a genuinely national church in England, it is generally expected that the first major step will be the uniting of the Church of England and the Methodist Church. John Wesley himself, the founder of Methodism was a loyal minister of the Church of England to his dying day ; and up to the present time it is common for various services corresponding more or less exactly to those in the Book of Common Prayer to be used in Methodist churches. Liturgically, therefore, as well as historically, Methodism would appear to be closer to Anglicanism than other types of nonconformity. Accordingly, the publication of the Report of the Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church (Church Information Office and the Epworth Press, 63 pp., 3s. 6d.) is an event of unusual interest. Since July 1956 there have been sixteen meetings of the representative committees, and the Report they have now produced is distinguished both for its admirable spirit and for the manner in which the conclusions reached have been presented.

The proposals now set forth envisage the coming together of the two churches in two stages, the first stage being of an interim nature, during which the churches would enter into a relationship of full communion with each other, while retaining their distinct life and identity, and the second stage being the achievement of union in one church. It is with stage one that the present Report is mainly concerned. It proposes that full communion should be realized by means of a service of reconciliation in which the ministries of the two churches would be integrated, and involving the acceptance by the Methodist Church of "episcopacy in continuity with the historic episcopate". The result of this integration would be the free participation by the two churches in each other's sacramental life and worship, as well as sharing in one another's pastoral and evangelistic concerns. At this stage the two churches would be "parallel entities, each with its own characteristics and forms of worship, with their representatives meeting regularly together, the ministries and sacraments of each being acceptable and available to the other". The hope is expressed that, following thorough consideration of this Report in their respective dioceses and districts, the two churches would be ready in 1965 to say whether they can accept the basic proposals for the achievement of full communion.

We are warned (and this will certainly call for a careful thinking through of the doctrine of the relationship that should exist between Church and State, in particular with reference to the concept of a national church) that the achievement of organic union, at stage two, will involve "very extensive legal and constitutional changes for the Church of England, . . . equivalent to the granting of complete self-government", and, also, "a radical revision and repeal of the Acts of Parliament by which the Church of England is now governed". It is also intended "to see that the united Church is not bound too strictly by doctrinal and other such formulations which may quickly be out of

date". Furthermore, we are promised radical revisions affecting diocesan, and probably parochial, boundaries, the parson's freehold, and private patronage. In other words, we may look for the thoroughgoing alteration, or even the abandonment, of the establishment as we know it, and as it has existed for centuries, and the discarding of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as the doctrinal standard of our church. Change, even in some respects of a drastic nature, will doubtless be necessary; but the truth does not change, and the last thing we wish to see is a church which is theologically nondescript and unreformed.

The Methodists, on their side, have made it clear that they "would not be able to accept episcopacy or episcopal ordination if such acceptance involved the admission that either of these is indispensable to the Church", or the theory of apostolic succession "as constituting the true and only guarantee of sacramental grace and right doctrine". The Report, in discussing the subject of episcopacy, recognizes "that their ordinations have made Methodists true ministers of Christ's Word and Sacraments"; and yet at the same time the question is posed how "Orders such as Anglicans have inherited from the undivided Church may be given to those who have not previously received them". This would seem inevitably to imply that there is, in fact, some radical defect in Methodist orders which can be remedied only by the reception of episcopal orders. Whether it is a pill which the Methodists will swallow remains to be seen, but it is only thinly sugared by the assurance (the sincerity of which we do not question) that "each should bring all its riches to the other", and that, whatever adjustment and modification may be necessary, there will be no deprivation.

If, with regard to episcopacy, it is true that "Anglicans believe it to be the form of government and ministry which God gave to His Church", then it is undoubtedly "a norm from which they ought not to, and cannot, depart", and, further, to which they should require all others to conform. It is, however, a fact that by no means all Anglicans—certainly not Anglicans of evangelical and liberal persuasion—hold this belief. This categorical assertion, therefore, is not accurate. Nor would all Anglicans agree that "the episcopate symbolizes and secures in an abiding form the apostolic mission and authority within the Church". That is an office which should be assigned, rather, to the apostolic testimony of the New Testament canon.

Again, the valuation of "the gifts of catholicity, involving comprehension, continuity, and authority derived from the historic episcopate, as vital to the fulness of the life of the Church", means that non-episcopal ministries, such as that of the Methodists, are lacking in fulness, and are thus at least relatively inadequate. The Methodists, on the other hand, and understandably, have declared that "they are unable to assent to anything which can be regarded in any way as repudiation of their spiritual history", and accordingly "ask for assurance that, in accepting episcopacy, no interpretation making episcopal ordination essential to the being of the Church and episcopal succession an exclusive channel of the grace of God is a condition of the ministration of the grace of God in the Church". The Report argues that, as Methodism has *episcopè* in the corporate form (with its President, Chairmen of Districts, superintendent ministers, and the

governing Conference), there would seem to be no objection in principle to the coalescence of the functions of *episcopē* in a single person (as in the Church of England). Our Anglican spokesmen may expect to commend the latter form of episcopacy in the ecumenical sphere only when they cease to speak of it as something indispensable to the fulness of the Church and advocate it as a convenient, historic, and excellent method of ecclesiastical government and discipline.

Space does not permit the consideration of all the important theological issues which receive attention in this Report. Those who study it, however, will readily appreciate the assurance of the drafters of it, "that we have not arrived at our conclusions lightly or easily, but only as the result of much searching thought and discussion of the many issues involved". If, in due course, the two churches reach agreement on the basis of this Report, then the service of reconciliation will be held in areas covering the whole land, thereby inaugurating a state of full communion. Thereafter men elected by the Methodist Conference would be consecrated as bishops, and all subsequent ordinations in the Methodist Church would be at the hands of bishops, assisted by other ministers. The next step would be the devising of a service of ordination which would be used in common by both churches—possibly after the pattern of the Ordinal of the Church of South India.

The crucial section of the Report is the service of reconciliation, a draft of which is given in full. It is proposed that the service should be conducted by a bishop of the Church of England, and by a minister appointed by the Methodist Church, designated here the Presiding Minister. The service of reconciliation is placed, appropriately, within the setting of Holy Communion, and commences after the reading of the Gospel with a Declaration of Intention, in which it is affirmed that "neither of us wishes to call in question the reality and spiritual effectiveness of the ministry of the other Church", but that "we wish to share each in the spiritual heritage of the other". What the Church of England has to communicate is, apparently, the "precious gift" of "the laying-on of the hands of bishops", and all that that may be held to imply. What the Methodist Church has to communicate is more difficult to determine. Can it seriously be maintained that "witness to the universal grace of God, to the gift of assurance by the Holy Spirit, and to the power of the Holy Spirit to make us perfect in love", is really something distinctive of Methodism and not of Anglicanism as well?

There follows an Act of Thanksgiving and Penitence—a finely conceived section the main structure of which is that of the Litany. This leads to the actual Reception, first of the Methodist people and ministers by the Church of England, and then of the bishops and other members of the Church of England by the Methodist Church. In the case of the former, the Methodist ministers kneel, and the bishop and four priests of the Church of England stand facing them, with their right hands stretched out towards them. (What the outstretched right hands symbolize is not explained. There is no answering action when the bishops and priests of the Church of England are received by the Methodists.)

In the prayer offered by the bishop the request is made that each

Methodist minister who is being received may be endued "each according to his need with grace for the office of priest". The bishop lays his hands on the head of each one in silence, and then says: "We receive you into the fellowship of the ministry in the Church of England. Take authority to exercise the office of priest, to preach the Word of God, and to minister the holy Sacraments among us as need shall arise and you shall be licensed to do".

When the turn of the Anglicans comes to be received, the Presiding Minister lays his hands on the head of each bishop and priest in silence, and then says: "We receive you into the fellowship of the ministry in the Methodist Church. Take authority to exercise the office of a minister, to preach the Word of God, and to minister the holy Sacraments among us as need shall arise and you shall be appointed to do."

The difference between the two acts and formulæ of reception is quantitatively small; but it would appear to be not small in significance, for the plain implication is that by means of this rite "priesthood" is conferred on the Methodist ministers.

The service of reconciliation concluded, there is con-celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Holy Table.

In the section of the Report devoted to Safeguards and Reassurances, the Church of England, on the *one* hand, requests "assurance that episcopal ordination will be strictly invariable within the Methodist Church after relations of full communion have been established", while the Methodist Church, for its part, requires "assurance that it would be free to preserve the relations of inter-communion and fellowship with other non-episcopal Churches which it now enjoys". In the interests of church order and regularity the prescription of episcopal ordination is only reasonable—though, to remove any suggestion that it is attached to a rigorist theory of episcopacy, we would wish to see the term "normal" substituted for "strictly invariable". With regard to the Methodist requirement, we would point out that there are many—one may safely say a majority—in the Church of England who, so far from being exclusive in outlook, stand firmly by the tradition of inter-communion and fellowship with non-episcopal fellow-Reformed churches which was the common heritage of Anglicanism until the Tractarian doctrine of episcopacy was introduced during the last century.

The suggestion that the Church of England and the Methodist Church belong to the "catholic" and the "evangelical" traditions of churchmanship respectively is not helpful. The connotation of the term "catholic" has become distorted in our day, and wrongly connected with doctrines and practices which are unreformed (or pre-Reformed) and unevangelical. In its foundations and formularies, however, the Church of England can claim (as our Anglican forefathers from the sixteenth century onwards repeatedly did claim) to be truly catholic and evangelical—as Mr. Duffield's article in this issue seeks to show.

This is not a unanimous Report. It includes "A Dissentient View" signed by four Methodist delegates—that is, a third of the Methodist representation. None will deny that the names of the Rev. Dr. C. Kingsley Barrett, Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham, Dr. Thomas E. Jessop, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy in the Uni-

versity of Hull, the Rev. Thomas D. Meadley, Principal of Cliff College, Sheffield and the Rev. Dr. Norman H. Snaith, lately Principal of Wesley College, Headingly, are names of weight. Their dissent from the majority is so radical—albeit charitable—that it would be unrealistic to predict the general acceptance of the scheme proposed in the Report unless their objections are taken into account and suitable adjustments made.

These four signatories charge the scheme with being “in principle sectarian and exclusive”, and foresee that it would “in practice lead to certain division in the Methodist Church, and could conceivably lead to division in the Church of England also”.

They complain that the section on Scripture and Tradition “does not recognize adequately the pre-eminent and normative place of scripture, or set out satisfactorily its relation to tradition”, pointing out that traditions are of mixed value and must continually be sifted, and tested by Scripture.

They complain about the conception of Methodism as being in need of “taking episcopacy into its system”, maintaining that Methodism already possesses episcopacy in the scriptural sense of the term, and that so-called “historic episcopacy” is historically incapable of proof, and in any case “has notoriously failed to act as the safeguard it is claimed to be”. They hold that “the Christian heritage is in faith and life, not in institutions”, and that “most Methodists would prefer to be visibly one with the Churches of the Reformation than with medieval and un-reformed Christendom” (a sad comment, this, on the image of our Church of England today, seeing that in essence and as constituted it is *the* church of the Reformation in this land). Very much to the point is their comment that “the largest episcopal Church in the world believes that the Church of England does not have, and therefore cannot impart, the historic ministry”; and, what is more important, that the concept of “historic episcopacy is completely without support in the New Testament”, with the consequence that “no ecclesiastical body has the right to demand participation in historic episcopacy as a qualification for communion or union with itself”.

They complain that the service of reconciliation, with its prayer that the Methodist ministers may be endued with “grace for the office of a priest” and the subsequent authorization “to exercise the office of a priest”, “is capable of being, and in some quarters certainly will be, interpreted as an act of ordination”—especially as “this extra but essential gift must . . . be imparted to the Methodist ministry by the laying on of episcopal hands before the Methodist ministry can be regarded as qualified for inter-communion”. This objection is not removed by the fact that the Methodists also lay hands on the Anglicans—something, we are told, which Methodists would not wish to do. “The only satisfactory solution,” they say, “would be for neither party to lay hands on the other; in this way it would become unambiguously clear that ordination was not in mind.”

Disquiet is expressed “over the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and eucharistic sacrifice as they are referred to in the report”; and the four signatories interpret the Report to indicate that the freedom of the

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