

on the church from Britain & abroad

OBSERVATIONS on the church from Britain and abroad

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Introduction

In its initial response to the proposal that churches in Britain should "share in a process of prayer, reflection and debate together centred on the nature and purpose of the church in the light of its calling in and for the world", the United Reformed Church said: "The theological issues of Faith and Order should only be examined in the light of the mission of the church, and world church experience should be fed into the process, so that we are not limited by the understanding that we in Britain have of our own discipleship." At the inter church meeting held at Friends' House, London in September 1984 it was noted that the process should include "receiving insights from the World Council of Churches' Lima report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and from the bi-lateral dialogues", "as well as keeping before us the cry of the world and its need of the Gospel." In the Working Party set up to prepare a more precise outline of the work to be attempted, it was clear that there was a need to ask: "What is the world saying to us? What is the Kingdom asking of us as Christians? What is the meaning of the Church in a secular society which sees no purpose for it?" There was also concern that, in addition to the "reflections" of the participating churches on how they view their life and mission and the "views from the pews" gained through the individuals and groups taking part in the high-profile Lent '86 Course on What on earth is the Church for? there should be input not only from local ecumenism but also from "other local Christian Communities and Networks and from House Churches." The views of "national bodies such as the Evangelical Alliance" should also be invited, together with "comment from organisations reflecting secular, professional and non-Christian opinion," as well as from "aid agencies such as Christian Aid."

In addition contributions were invited from women and young people and we have two 'observations' not originally envisaged: a survey of responses to questions put to theological colleges and a report of the visit of Jim Wallis to Britain in June 1986 which has a particular relevance to our theme.

The overall aim was that our picture of the nature and purpose of the Church should not be based only on self-portraits but also on a number of sketches which would show ourselves as others see us. The original hope was that there would be an even wider range of such sketches than those printed here, but not all invitations were answered and it was sometimes difficult to find the right person or group to address.

We are grateful to all who have been engaged in the processes of prayer, reflection, debate, living and writing which have produced these *Observations on the Church from Britain and abroad*. Together they offer a variety of perspectives which raise sharp questions and challenge the churches taking part in the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* Inter-Church Process to respond.

Colin Davey
Secretary of the Steering Group
'Not Strangers But Pilgrims' Inter-Church Process

Young People

Working for change

One hundred and seventy young people from sixteen denominations throughout Britain and Ireland came together in Liverpool in September 1986 to reflect on their experiences as young Christians and to consider together their commitment to Christ's church and the unity into which he calls us.

They came, not only from widely differing denominational, national, social, and vocational backgrounds, but also with a variety of expectations: "We wanted both to be able to learn from others and also to profitably express our own insights. We wanted also to be able to take this conference experience back into the churches and communities to which we belong."

The essential message of Liverpool is not to be found in a 'statement', but in the stories told and re-told by those who came together. The young people left Liverpool with a new awareness of that unity which comes from meeting Christians of such widely differing traditions.

For some young people, Liverpool was a first experience of black and white talking together, Protestant and Catholic praying together, young people and bishops listening to each other. For all the participants at Liverpool this was the start of a pilgrimage which, through pain and understanding together with joy and celebration, was leading them into the experience of being pilgrims rather than strangers.

For this pilgrimage to continue the young people agreed

1. To explore new ways of sharing together in the local communities, with all the risk this involves in personal and corporate change.

2. To support the youth representatives involved at all levels within the Inter-Church Process, especially those included in the Inter-Church Steering Committee, and in the delegations to the national conferences in Scotland, Wales and England next spring.

3. To struggle together through a series of follow-up meetings to find a new understanding of the spiritual traditions which have formed us and divided us, and in openness to the Holy Spirit to look for the signs of God's Church now and in the future.

Ron Ingamells, Moderator Myra Blyth, Secretary British Council of Churches' Youth Unit September 1986

Women's Interchurch Consultative Committee

Following discussion of the Inter-Church Process *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* at the meeting of the Women's Interchurch Consultative Committee on 25th June 1986, the members asked that the following points should be made, taking note of:

(i) The World Council of Churches' letter to the member churches on the United Nations World Conference in Nairobi 15th-27th July 1985 to mark the end of the Decade of Women, which includes the following:

Christian Women and men have also raised their voices in support of a more equitable role for women in the life of the churches. The World Council of Churches has acted to bring to the attention of the churches the need for greater sensitivity and awareness of issues related to women's role in the Christian community. Such concerns as cited above were articulated in the 1974 Conference in Berlin on 'Sexism in the 70's'. Moreover, in the message to the World Conference for Women in Mexico in 1975, the WCC Executive Committee noted "that as Christians we affirm that the equality of women is clearly enunciated in the Gospel of Jesus Christ", but confessed "that churches, in their institutional life, have not so far enabled women to render their fullest contribution to the total life of their councils and assemblies".

In the WCC's study on the Community of Women and Men in the Church, Christian women and men raised many questions which challenged traditional assumptions concerning authority, interpretation of scripture, the nature of the church, sexual identity and the relationship between women and men. They acknowledged that for many women and men, there is real pain in the frustration of a church life dominated by male leadership. Therefore, churches are urged to examine their own understanding and practices concerning women.

Therefore we call on all member churches:

to assess self-critically the church's own progress regarding the participation of women in all aspects of the life of the church, in all forms of ministry, including the ordained ministry for those member churches who do ordain women.

To give increased support to women's organisations' efforts to increase the participation of women at all levels of church life; to raise concerns regarding women in all church institutions, schools, lay training programmes, etc.

(ii) The message to the churches from the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women at their Conference in Järvenpää, Finland, 2nd-8th June 1986, which included the words:

"In all our reflections we have sought to find new and imaginative ways to enable women to realise their full potential, to make their unique contribution to the whole society, and to resist oppression from whatever source."

The members of the Women's Interchurch Consultative Committee expressed a deep concern that there were only two women on the Steering Group of the Inter-Church Process and they asked that this concern be conveyed to those responsible for it. They are not asking for positive discrimination for women, that would not be considered a good thing, but that women may be encouraged to make their full contribution at all levels for a more holistic approach in the church's mission.

Marjorie Braithwaite Secretary Women's Interchurch Consultative Committee

The following paper by Thelma Stewart (Society of Friends) was most warmly welcomed by the Women's Interchurch Consultative Committee and it was their desire that it also should be brought to the attention of those involved in the Inter-Church Process.

M.B.

The most valuable part of the Lent '86 exercise was in being able to come together and discuss with people of other denominations who live in the locality. We admire the success of the whole operation in that it reaches hundreds of thousands of people but in equal measure it represents a lost opportunity which has given WICCC cause for concern.

The accompanying booklet What on earth is the Church for?, so carefully presented, takes no account of Jesus' ministry to women but concerns itself only with Jesus' ministry to men. It makes no mention of the many women disciples who accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry, or Mary who 'sat at the feet of Jesus' or of the call of Martha. It makes no mentionn that Jesus' deepest teaching was to women: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life' and 'I am the living water'. Reference is made to Peter's confession yet not to Martha's confession, equally as valid, and which could have raised the question for us of why the early church chose to build on Peter's confession rather than on Martha's. In writing of the apostles, it gives no indication that Mary Magdalene was the first apostle to be appointed by Jesus – 'Go and Tell' - nor that women established centres in the early church which as a result were already in existence for Paul to use as bases on his journeys, nor of the almost equal number of women and men whom Paul commemorates in Romans as his co-workers.

An unfortunate consequence of these omissions could be that in redressing the balance, as so often happens, we are manœuvred into writing a 'woman's version' of the gospel and early church. This is not what we want. We ask for a whole picture of Jesus' ministry to be presented, not just half the story which distorts both men and women's perception of Jesus' ministry. We betray him by failing to let go our customary, narrow version.

Thelma Stewart August 1986

Theological Colleges

During March 1986, over one hundred theological colleges throughout Britain, representing a very wide variety of denominational and theological traditions, both Reformed and Roman, were invited by the British Council of Churches' Standing Committee on Theological Education to respond to a questionnaire which itself stemmed from the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* Inter-Church Process.

In the questionnaire the following six questions were asked:

- 1. During your period of training what contacts, co-operation, shared teaching or exchanges have you had (official or unofficially) with Theological Colleges and Institutions of other Denominations?
- 2. How far are the theology and history of ecumenism and in particular the recent interchurch Dialogues included in your own course?
- 3. Do you think theological education for the future should be done on a Denominational or on a more Ecumenical basis?
- 4. What practical experience (including placements) does your College give you of local ecumenism (eg. Local Ecumenical Projects, Councils of Churches etc.)?
- 5. Has your College been involved in the Lent '86 course 'What on earth is the Church for?' If so, what insights from this would you like to be fed into the ecumenical re-appraisal of the church and its mission being undertaken by the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* Inter-Church Process?
- 6. What are your own personal ecumenical hopes and visions for the church and your own future ministry within it?

Almost forty Colleges (or training courses of one kind or another) replied. In some instances the College or Course Principal responded either personally or following consultation with staff colleagues. In other instances students undertaking training through the colleges or courses replied, again with a mixture of individual and consensus comments. In a few cases there has been a multiple and unharmonised response as individual staff

members and individual students have separately reflected on the questionnaire in the light not only of their own experience but of their ultimate ideals.

It would scarcely be justified, therefore, to claim that the overall response can be considered to be truly representative of all the main theological colleges in Britain, and equally it would be stretching credibility a little too far to suggest that each individual response adequately represents the views of the college from which it has come: yet the material gathered is no less interesting or valuable for that, and indeed there is perhaps a good deal on which the members of the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* Steering Group, and those whom they represent, will wish to reflect.

There are eight general conclusions which do seem able to be drawn:

- 1. There has not been detected in any of the responses received outright opposition to the idea that there should deliberately be built in to all formal theological education an ecumenical element. Now it might be contended that the questionnaire was so worded, and its ecumenical point of origin so clearly known, that outright negatives would not have been expected from those who were to take the time and trouble to reply, but it is not totally without significance, surely, that the replies have all indicated that a measure of informed ecumenical awareness (at the very least) should be positively fostered in all formal theological teaching and training. High church and low church, Roman and Reformed, conservative and liberal, all readily accept that God's truth and wisdom have not been so totally vouchsafed to them that an informed awareness of, and cordial contact with, other branches of Christ's church will not considerably enrich their own work, witness and worship.
- 2. A great many of the colleges that have replied are already positively committed to an ecumenical pattern of life. There are not a few colleges, for example, which to the casual outsider might appear to be preserves of one particular denomination which in fact eagerly open their doors to students of other denominations and where in addition there are members of the teaching staff whose denominational loyalties are other than those of the sponsoring college authorities. Even more refresh-

ingly, there are sizeable groupings of denominational colleges situtated on neighbouring or reasonably adjacent sites where day-to-day co-operation in teaching programmes is very much the routine pattern. The eleven Oxford colleges, the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges, the five-college campus at Rusholme, Manchester and the Queen's, Selly Oak, Oscott co-operation in and and around Birmingham are outstanding examples.

- 3. There are many, and the number is annually growing, formal and official college exchanges whereby students of one college visit fellow students at another college with a quite different tradition: there are, too, exchange of lecturing staff which cross denominational frontiers: there are regular social and sporting events on many college calendars designed specifically to build bridges with Christians of differing backgrounds and traditions. For example, there are fruitful formal links involving the Cranmer (Anglican) and Ushaw (Roman Catholic) colleges in Durham, between Spurgeon's (Baptist) College in London and Lincoln Theological College (Anglican), between the College of the Resurrection (Anglican) at Mirfield and the Wesley (Methodist) College at Bristol, and between Salisbury and Wells (Anglican) Theological College and St John's (Roman Catholic) Seminary at Wonersh. Such examples could be multiplied several times over and their number is most certainly increasing year by year.
- 4. There are more and more courses where certain key parts of the core curriculum are taught and examined without regard to denominational slant or interest. Biblical studies still offer the most common area for such an approach, but aspects of pastoral theology are found to lend themselves to this means of teaching also.
- 5. There is clear indication, from both staff and students, that the ecumenical movement, its history, theology and future development, is regularly taught, often in encouraging detail and with direct and positive emphases within the various course programmes. Modern church history is the setting for much of this teaching, but there is pleasing evidence too that it is not a subject that is ignored in doctrine, systematic theology

and pastoral theology. The students at Oxford have the benefit of a course in denominational history 'taught with an ecumenical bent'.

- 6. The picture is patchy and uneven regarding the opportunities regularly afforded to students to obtain practical experience in local ecumenical projects or in congregations of denominations other than their own. In some areas this is both practicable and encouraged. Elsewhere opportunities are limited or not directly encouraged. More could perhaps be usefully done in this area, especially as those students who have ecumenical experience at this level speak warmly of its worth in ridding them of misconceptions, half-truths and inherited suspicions. What is universally well spoken of is the hospital experience course which students of all denominations follow together and which is essentially totally inter-denominational. No word of criticism has been breathed against this splendid piece of training provision.
- 7. Whereas there is little or no evidence of colleges as such having become formally involved in following the Lent '86 Course there is repeated reference to the fact that individual students were actively encouraged within their practical placements, or within their own congregations, to follow the Course: many did so and report that the experience was as revealing as it was helpful and stimulating.
- 8. There is an oft repeated plea that for Lent 1987 there must be mounted a similarly ecumenical Course so that the momentum of 1986 should not be lost and so that grass roots dialogues begun many of them for the first time should have a structure and purpose within which to continue.

Beyond these general, encouraging if somewhat blandly predictable, conclusions lie certain further comments and allusions which, to this writer's mind at least, ought to be added to the positive agenda for those whose business it is on behalf of us all to pilot the ecumenical ship surely on its way.

Mingled with widespread enthusiasm for a heightened and ever more direct ecumenical approach to theological training, and that shines through in reply after reply, is just a hint of frustration and occasional impatience. This is not with the principle of ecumenicity but rather with certain of the goals which the ecumenical movement's leaders are sometimes thought to be striving to attain.

I think that I detect three cautionary notes being sounded that have an inescapable degree of persistence.

A. From staff and students alike there comes the affirmation that the dawn of the truly ecumenical day does not depend of necessity on the death of the individual denomination. Such a view, disappointing and even depressing to the all-embracing ecumenist in our midst, is not the product of that human realism which views the divided and fallen state of man as an inevitable and enduring second best, but is rather the positive conviction of those who believe that as God has created man in all his diversity so God is neither confused nor confounded by diverse man's continuing diverse responses to Him. Let one of the staff at Regent's Park (Baptist) College, Oxford, for example, state with commendable clarity what others feel:

"I am not personally in favour of anything which would create the loss of valuable features of each denomination's ethos . . . Ecumenical dialogue is of course important but teaching Church practice is related so closely to the understanding and traditions of a particular denomination that to fail to do it in that context would be to lose something valuable."

The same viewpoint is expressed by the Principal of Spurgeon's (Baptist) College in London:

"My own dreams and those of my colleagues are that we do not spend, as we have done in the past, seemingly endless hours in dialogues and conversations with a view to creating at the end of the day some united Church structure, but that we continue to maintain our vision for co-operation at every level and that we . . . do all within our power not to do alone what can be more effectively done together. Part of the agony about some (and I emphasise that it is only some!) ecumenical ventures in the past is that we have done together some things which in the end may have been scarcely worth doing on our own! I am one who does not believe in the 'iniquity' of our divisions, though I certainly

agree that the way we have occasionally treated one another is nothing short of iniquitous – but that is a different story."

If I am allowing the Baptist trumpet to sound with a certain note in this, it is not that we have here a one denominational solo: Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Free Churchmen alike all stress the need, whatever more may commendably come to be done in common, to retain and teach individual traditions and customs. Nor are such feelings motivated first and foremost by a desire for self-preservation, from fear of losing one's own kingdom or from feelings that one's founding fathers would be betrayed by any other stance. Rather is there throughout a recognition of the positive contribution to the strength of the total church of Christ, as ecumenical as it may be, that the various individual traditions can continue to make.

A Baptist student at Spurgeon's College specifically speaks for his own fellow students when he says: "There was a marked lack of enthusiasm for institutional ecumenism." Students of other traditions would not see him stand alone in this as time and again the slogan "unity should not involve uniformity" recurs in the responses received.

B. There is a frequently repeated conviction that truly new and progressive steps towards greater church unity will most immediately be taken at local parish level and not in the great Councils and Synods and Assemblies of our separate Churches. The Lent '86 Course has clearly initiated some inter church dialogues at local level which have been on a more elevated plane than planning a joint jumble sale for Christian Aid and of more lasting year round significance than the ritual or even cosmetic coming together in Holy Week or during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The questionnaires have revealed that there is at local level a new hunger for inter church cooperation and affirm unequivocally that if it is encouraged to develop it will.

More than that, the questionnaires offer two constructive comments as to the lines along which grass roots opinion wishes the development to take place.

(i) It is claimed that Christ's people, lay or ordained, are not

in the main primarily concerned with seeing produced a liturgy, an order of worship, or a form of words for expressing and celebrating the Eucharist which will after years of top level theological diplomacy bear the stamp of approval of all the present denominations. Indeed, there is a certain impatience at the energy being expended in such directions. The student at Queen's, Birmingham, is one of many who feels simply that "unity of purpose is more important than uniformity of expression": a colleague at Chichester Theological College goes a little further but still, it would appear, has the majority with him when he speaks of "the undesirability of uniform and therefore limiting modes of worship and doctrinal interpretation": the lecturer from St Andrew's (R.C.) College, Drygrange, Melrose, would be satisfied with a "recognition of each other as sister Churches", while in reply after reply there is a straightforward plea that all Christians might be able ere long to gather round the Table in love of the Master they serve in common and accept that that love will find different verbal expression and varying outward form from one celebration to another.

- (ii) Following from this it is emphasised that it is on the platform and in the field campaigning against injustice, poverty, war, hunger, unemployment and the like that Christians of all denominations can find their true common purpose and their essential underlying unity. Further it is claimed, not unreasonably as it seems to me, that as Christians unite to fight the ills and evils of our contemporary society, so this unity will be reflected in the contemporary liturgical and sacramental life of the churches in an ever more open acceptance of individuality of expression.
- C. There is, to me at least, a deeply disturbing glimpse of a growing theological disunity which could, if the more gloomy predictions were to come true, prove more damaging to the cause of Christ than our present denominational disunity, and which would most certainly more than neutralise the positive gains that would undoubtedly be derived from the success of the present ecumenical movement.

There is the continuing deep division within the church on the question of the ordination of women. Not surprisingly several of the Roman Catholic contributors immediately identify this as the major single stumbling block to any real progress towards unity, but no less blunt are many Free Churchmen and Anglicans. A member of staff in Trinity College, Bristol in fact is utterly stark: "I think that the ordination of women . . . is a violation of Scripture and Tradition. The fact that some churches have already gone ahead with this step and that the pro-lobby in the Church of England is not likely to rest until it takes place in some form there, suggests that we are going to have to think in terms of two parallel Churches, one of liberal 'provenance', the other seeking essential continuity with Scripture and Tradition". The Principal of Westminster College (URC), Cambridge, wields a less colourful apocalyptic pen, but is no less alert to the problem: "We are strongly committed to the full and equal ministry of women and believe that progress towards unity will depend on general acceptance of that principle". Interestingly, several student contributors, both Roman and Reformed, plead in this context for the British Council of Churches' ecumenical visionaries to be realistic in facing up to this and other 'major problems which will not mysteriously go away': progress towards unity, they claim, is being hampered by an idealism that does not dismantle brick walls nor seek positive ways over, round or through them but which prefers to pretend that they are not there in the first place.

There is a thinly veiled suggestion that, certainly at student level, there is a move towards a unity which will be based on an association of like theological minds. A member of staff at Regent's Park College, Oxford, speaks in concerned tones of this "new ecumenism which might be described as 'post-denominational' and is rather more of an evangelistic character. The predominant opinion (among the College's students) is of a future without our (Baptist) denomination but with very strong supra-denominational links and even, in some cases, loyalties to what is generally classified as renewal."

This threat or promise, this vision of hell or glimpse of heaven, depending on one's viewpoint, should not be dismissed as the

exaggerated exuberance of the trainee ministers who see the sinful world awaiting only their ordained call to conversion. We must not lose sight of the fact that for many years, whatever their failings and weaknesses, our existing denominations have managed to contain within them a total variety of theological view. It is arguably this that has made them able to sustain a broad appeal to the many rather than the few. The Principal of the Northern Ordination Course puts it neatly when he reminds us, "The Church of England is of course an ecumenical movement in itself!". We must be awake to the fact that there is in too many of our denominations today a theological polarisation which is stengthening and which could just leave an increasingly empty middle ground as the only territory susceptible to an ecumenical takeover.

All in all, the issuing of the questionnaire would seem to me to have been entirely worthwhile. Within our theological colleges the BCC's efforts towards greater ecumenicity, in training, worship, and witness, are not only noted but are generally well received. There can be few actively involved at any level of the churches life who imagine that unity will be achieved quickly or painlessly. There is, in the pages I have been privileged to study, no doubting the genuine desire of all Christ's people that progress towards unity should be relentlessly yet prayerfully maintained.

Rev. Ronald S. Blakey *Member of the BCC Standing Committee on Theological Education*

Association of Interchurch Families

We are for 'being a family in Christ', children of God through the Holy Spirit. We are household churches, called to be a sign of the unity of love between Christ and his church. Called to teach and nurture our children in the faith of Christ. Called to witness to them and with them, to others, Christ's ministry of reconciliation on the scale of a human family. We are Christian families each called to do, as a domestic church, what the whole church is called to do in every place; to live as a reconciled community, worshipping God and witnessing to his love by word and action to those around.

Why do we have a special Association to do this? Because we are interchurch couples and families; that is to say, husband and wife are committed to different 'churches' (in the sense of denominations) usually a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another communion. We need a special Association for mutual support because the divisions between denominations make it so hard for us to function as Christian families. We are welded together by God in Christian marriages; but our separation at the eucharist so often seems to be taken for granted by our fellow Christians, although for us it makes a nonsense of our married life in Christ. We cause problems when we want to celebrate the one baptism together for our children. What are these children to do when they come to make their own profession of faith? As families we are bearing the sin of Christian divisions in a particularly painful way. We need to share our experiences with one another and so to support and encourage one another in order to be Christian families, household churches.

In being Christian families we don't want to let go of the churches (denominations) which are represented within our 'domestic' church. On the contrary, we find that holding two church traditions together in one family offers tremendous enrichment and stimulation, both for partners and for children. We want to share this sense of enrichment with our communities.

As interchurch households, as groups coming together for mutual support and celebration, we are a microcosm of what the church is for. We suffer from Christian divisions. We also celebrate the enrichment of diversity lived in reconciled relationships, which is what the church has to offer to the world.

> Ruth Reardon Secretary

National Centre for Christian Communities and Networks

Towards a New Vision of Church

In 1985 NACCCAN was invited to gather and collate the views of a representative sample of those groups associated with it as a contribution to the Inter-Church Process entitled Not Strangers But Pilgrims. In July 1986 NACCCAN convened a conference at Woodbrooke College, Birmingham, to enable any who wished to reflect further on the replies received and to advise those collating the responses on points they wished emphasized. This report to the Inter-Church Process is drawn both from the written replies to the question 'What on earth is the church for?' and the discussions at the Woodbrooke conference. It is not an 'agreed statement' but an attempt to gather together many important reflections on the life and work of the church in the contemporary world based on the everyday experience of groups associated with NACCCAN. It is hoped that what appears below is a fair reflection of the state of thinking of the rich diversity of groups making up the new community movement.

The report is not the end of the debate for NACCCAN groups but a stage on the way to a clearer understanding of kingdom and church and their role in relation to both. The Woodbrooke conference committed itself to continue this 'inter-church process' into the future, both up to and beyond a third National Congress to be held in Birmingham in July 1987. The search for a greater awareness of the prophetic task of the community movement and how this can be more effectively fulfilled continues.

This report is offered to the mainstream churches in a spirit of hope and challenge. Hope that they will come to recognize the immense life and energy welling up through the groups and networks associated with NACCCAN, and elsewhere, and take heart in that divine initiative. Challenge that during the regional and national conferences in 1987, they will pay full attention to

what is happening on the frontiers of church and world and seek in every way possible to affirm and respond positively to this.

'What on earth is the Church for?'

NACCCAN groups believe that the church exists for the continuing transformation of the world into the kingdom of God.

'Our model of church is that of a pilgrim community seeking a communion with God through the transformation of society.' (Justice and Peace Group – Leeds diocese).

'The church is about enfleshing the teachings of Jesus; it is being the leaven in the lump and helping transform the world into God's kingdom.' (Methodist class meeting – Birmingham).

NACCCAN groups strive towards the realization of this ideal in promoting:

a. The development and preservation of our planet:

'The church's mission in which we all share will be impaired if it fails to respond to today's ecological – some might say 'eschatological' – crisis.' (Christian Ecology Group).

'We are called to reject the idols of the nuclear state, to love our enemies not threaten them with genocide, to be stewards of creation.' (Christian CND).

Seeking a deeper understanding of man and woman's relationship with and responsibility for the planet (Teilhard Centre – London);

Exploring new ways of conservation, production and the distribution of food (Christian Ecology Group, Life Style, Daily Bread Co-operative);

Raising humankind's consciousness about nuclear war and nuclear contamination (Christian CND, Christian Ecology Group);

Fostering peace (Pax Christi, Christian CND, St James' Church – Piccadilly).

b. The dignity and growth of their own members and that of those whom they seek to serve.

'The basic task of members of the church is to express in the common life of the world the truth that sets us free to be fully human.' (One for Christian Renewal – Birmingham).

We believe that a major concern of God's is to have his church share his love with the poor, and to demand of the powerful that they act with justice.' (G41 Group – Glasgow).

Those feeling alienated or marginalized; such as lonely young people, the handicapped, the mentally ill (West Central Filipino Group – London, l'Arche, Voluntary Care Centre – London SE23);

Those who are unemployed (Church Action on Poverty, Ecumenical Coalition for Urban Mission);

Those victimized by injustice (Zebra Project, Oxford Covenant Community, Justice and Peace Group – Leeds diocese);

Those estranged from the church because of denominational divisions (Association of Interchurch Families, International Ecumenical Fellowship, One for Christian Renewal – Birmingham).

c. The growth and development of one human family on earth.

'God wants the church to show the world that it is possible to live as an international community, where differences are reconciled and wrongs forgiven' (Grass Roots/Post Green Community).

'The Church is for people a sign and symbol, witnessing by action and word to the values of the kingdom; by being involved in the hopes and struggles for justice of individuals, groups and nations.' (Movement for a Better World).

Striving for a more equitable distribution of material goods (Daily Bread Cooperative, Church Action on Poverty);

Promoting racial equality (Zebra Project, Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission – London);

Fostering justice and equality for women (Oxford Covenant Community);

Overcoming ethnic and religious differences (Quaker International Centre, International Ecumenical Fellowship).

- 2. NACCCAN groups believe that in order to be the servant of the kingdom, the church has to regain:
- A personal and passionate faith in its vocation to make tangible for humankind the life and love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ:

'We think that in God's eyes the way we live is more important than which church we belong to.' (l'Arche).

b. A new experience of church as community, embracing men and women of all races, cultures and traditions:

'Koinonia is at the heart of all that the church is. Its realization brings both the spiritual and temporal spheres into full harmony. It is for each individual and for all people a dynamic and intimate relationship both with God and each other, ever changing yet always constant.' (Volunteer Missionary Movement).

c. A new understanding of the unity of the church which transcends the pain and frustration of current denominational barriers, not least those preventing intercommunion:

'The church is the Body and Christ. We have to overcome the historical barriers which have bedevilled the church throughout the centuries and which we believe are man-made. We try to achieve this by praying, worshipping, studying and living together.' (International Ecumenical Fellowship).

d. Dynamic worship that facilitates the articulation of the pain and joy of daily existence:

The gathered church must be a place where real worship and learning and exchange

of ideas can take place – a lively celebration of God.' (Methodist class meeting – Birmingham).

'The church exists to offer unity in Christ. If the churches are divided amongst themselves then they cannot address with authority any of the divisions within society. They cannot even satisfy people's religious instincts and needs with any confident faith.' (Daily Bread Co-operative).

e. A new call to prophetic mission, in which the church courageously and creatively aligns itself with the poor and oppressed and confronts exploitative and unjust systems:

'As a prophetic church we must point to the signs of hope for the future and highlight the barriers that exist in our society that prevent all people from developing their God-given potential.' (Justice and Peace Group – Leeds diocese).

'We feel that the "option for the poor" is a fundamental dimension in seeking to develop community in the church.' (l'Arche).

f. A new theology of church as the servant of the kingdom which gives full expression to the church as the community of the whole people of God:

'Lay people suffer. They love their church and want to remain within it but they find themselves driven into a wilderness with no way out. One of the problems is that little attention has been paid to a theology of the laity.' (Catholic Renewal Movement – London).

'Theologically we depend on each other's experiences of God for the development of the whole group.' (Community of Christ the King).

'We do not use religious language lightly. We talk not of demonstrations but of witness; of processions not marches.' (Christian CND).

3. NACCCAN groups believe that a new form of church will be required if it is to be the servant of the kingdom in our age. In this new form of church the small Christian group and network will be of fundamental importance.

a. The small group:

The church was born of small groups meeting wherever opportunity permitted (cf. The Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline writings). Throughout its history the church has been revitalized and re-formed through renewal movements at the heart of which lay the small Christian cell. Today there is a new upsurge of small Christian groups across the world (eg. basic ecclesial communities in Latin America) and in the United Kingdom.

'We understand ourselves to be part of three movements far wider than ourselves; the movement to heal the church, the movement to renew the church, and the movement to undertake these tasks in small local groups.' (Community of Christ the King).

'We need to be part of little groups of people from different churches who come together to pray at grass roots. In some ways that is a risky business but that is what it is all about.' (l'Arche).

'Our group has a special mission to support and affirm women as real followers of Christ, especially those who for one reason or another have had a hard time in the institutional church. But our commitment to love other women as Jesus loves them has had global reverberations.' (Oxford Covenant Community).

'The church is organized on a medieval basis and we are not. If you are going to talk about the church in the inner cities, our kind of organization (ie. small groups) is more appropriate than the cultural institutional one.' (One for Christian Renewal – Birmingham).

b. The network:

Small groups in the United Kingdom are growing in their awareness of the need to collaborate and co-operate more closely with each other. This development is born not only of the practical advantages to be gained by such networking but of the conviction that the church has to bear witness to its unity as well as its diversity. Networks enable groups to share their experiences, ideas and resources freely and openly for the mutual benefit of the groups that make them up. NACCCAN represents the gradual emergence of a 'network of networks'.

c. Leadership

Christian groups and networks require a different kind of leadership from that typical of the institutional church today. The emphasis is on participation and corporate decision making with leaders being democratically elected. The latter act as facilitators and animators, and often have a peripatetic role where groups are part of wider networks. Many NACCCAN groups believe this style of leadership to be not only of practical use but to reflect the true nature of the church as the Body of Christ.

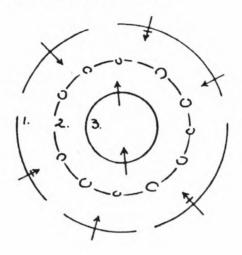
'We ourselves have become more "rounded" people through working in teams.' (The Church at the Centre – Skelmersdale).

'We hope for ecumenical accountability groups.' (Lindisfarne Network).

Strategies for Renewal

The form of the renewed church which NACCCAN groups seek was the subject of vigorous debate at the Woodbrooke conference in July 1986. The thoughts which have emerged can be outlined

with the aid of the diagram below which helped to focus the discussion at the Woodbrooke conference:



The outer ring

This circle represents the contemporary world, the arena of God's revelation where the drama of salvation is being acted out amid pain and suffering, contradiction and confusion. But it is also a world of great hope and possibilities, of dreams and aspirations. The ring is an open one. The arrows represent both the positive (uncrossed arrows) and negative (crossed arrows) forces of our age. It is in this sphere that the struggle to transform our world into the kingdom of God is most acutely in evidence.

The middle ring

This represents NACCCAN groups, along with many other ecclesial as well as secular groups, who are striving to respond afresh to the new challenges of our time. In the diagram the tiny circles represent those small groups which are open to the negative and positive forces operating in rings 1 and 3 and seeking to respond creatively to them. The small groups are loosely linked by the broken line as in a network.

The inner ring

This ring represents the institutions, both ecclesiastical and secular, of our day as people experience and perceive them. The inner ring

is closed indicating that there is only a very limited exchange (uncrossed arrows) of energy between it and the other rings.

Though the diagram and rings represent both religious and secular reality, in what follows the focus is on the former. Thus the inner ring is taken to represent the institutional church and the middle ring Christian groups and networks. But both rings are 'the church'.

A renewed church - Strategy A

Many groups associated with NACCCAN have attained a new and deeper understanding of the church as community through their group/association/network experience. This experience (and its accompanying apostolic action) they ardently wish to share with the institutional church as it now exists. Yet they feel that the latter listens and responds with only a limited degree of openness and interest and is often deaf and blind to the urgent need for its own renewal.

Nonetheless these groups are convinced that the renewal of the church is of paramount importance in our day and age, for without it the kingdom has no identifiable body to serve it. Thus they continue to work with determination from within as well as without for the institutional church's renewal seeking to make it more responsive to the vision of its nature and form which they embrace.

In terms of the diagram these groups envisage themselves to be part of the network of prophetic groups (ring 2), in touch with and reflecting the reality of the contemporary world (ring 1), yet committed to bringing their insights and wisdom to bear on the institutional church (ring 3) in order to facilitate its renewal and regeneration.

A renewed church - Strategy B

Another major section of groups associated with NACCCAN feel that the task of renewing the church is more complex and even paradoxical. Diagrammatically, they too envisage themselves to be in the network of prophetic groups (ring 2). But they see this as a marginal space which they have taken up either in protest against an institution which they experience as alienating and oppressive or disillusioned with a church which they consider to be out of touch with the contemporary world (ring 1). Groups

in this category are reluctant to move back into the institutional church (ring 3) because they perceive it to be a closed system, hostile to effective renewal or reform and thus doomed to die. In their view even the few arrows linking rings 2 and 3 do not exist. For these groups the church of the future will be more like the ring of open groups and networks represented by ring 2 than the church as it is today. It is thus the institutional church (ring 3) which must move out towards the emerging groups and networks (ring 2) if it wishes to find new life and energy, rather than vice versa. Many groups in ring 2 feel, without arrogance or superiority, that they are the new wine and do not want to be poured into the old wineskins. Groups and networks of this kind thus believe themselves to be forerunners of 'the coming church' and look, often with little hope, for the institutional church to acknowledge, affirm and nurture them in this difficult and precarious vocation.

Reflections on the diagram

The contemporary world

'A basic question to be answered concerns the very nature of the gospel to a sick, broken and despairing world.' (Christian Ecology Group).

'The church should come out openly and support all people in their struggle to build a just and democratic society.' (West Central Filipino Movement – London).

Contrary to what some believe, the small group life style is neither escapist nor comfortably utopian. The groups associated with NACCCAN are not seeking a sheltered existence, away from the trials and troubles of our time. Instead, they are keenly aware of a rapidly changing world, demanding new ways of living, of sharing, of inter-relatedness, along with a new realization of what it means to be the church at the heart of today's world.

Many groups and networks, often without realizing it, are caught up in the struggle to bring in the kingdom, to enable humankind to discover and actualize its own immense potential, and to witness to our planet as the arena of God's life-giving, liberating and unifying activity.

Small groups and networks

'Throughout the history of the church there have been new movements with a

prophetic task to try to recapture the essence of the Christian message and to live it out in an altogether radical way appropriate to the needs of the times.' (Volunteer Missionary Movement).

Many groups aspire to a new quality of life and new forms of human community. There is a growing awareness amongst NACCCAN groups of the need for closer links and co-operation so that the network (which in itself is essentially a static model) increasingly becomes a movement for the transformation of society and the renewal of the church.

The institutional church

'To bring Christianity alive means that individuals and the church as a whole have to be willing to change. Some churches are afraid of changing.' (Root Group – Maidstone).

Whether groups espouse strategy A or B, all still desire to be in partnership with those within the institutional church striving to make it more truly the servant of the kingdom. Nevertheless, they are aware that this will mean costly change for themselves as well as for the institutional church as it exists today. This challenge cannot be ignored for a new era is upon us which requires a new church to be the vehicle of Christian life and witness. NACCCAN groups believe that such a church will be more diverse in its ministries yet more united in its mission than ever before.

The Future

'The church is a pattern of a possibility.' (Quaker International Centre).

'Part of the disappointment in the church congregation is not being able to share our wildest dreams; whereas within the group members are enabled to dare and hope.' (S7 Sheffield Group).

NACCCAN groups are seeking to explore the prophetic dimension of the Christian faith in terms of life style, service and mission. In their commitment to the church as servant of the kingdom they are searching for a quality of Christian life transcending that of denominational, legal or sacramental allegiances. In brief, they seek a vibrant and creative experience of being 'not strangers but pilgrims' in today's world.

Though most groups have courageous hopes and dreams, they can also feel afraid and alone. Their perceptions of what the

future holds are still unclear, often ambiguous. It is this fact that persuades many groups of the need to commit themselves to a continuing exchange of experiences, dialogue and reflection together.

Those groups and networks whose views are represented above will continue to meet, to seek to perceive the nature of the kingdom in today's world more clearly and to work for a church fit and equipped to be its servant. In this context they believe themselves to be one with all other pilgrims who are part of the new prophetic, communitarian and missionary church which God is calling into being.

Congregational Independents

Introduction

Phase I of this Inter-Church Process is seeking responses from Christian people both locally, nationally and internationally, up to the early Autumn of 1986, to ascertain what our understanding is of the Church.

This paper is a contribution from some Congregational Independents. By the nature of the phrase 'some Congregational Independents' it must be regarded as a provisional response – although that is what was sought in any case – but it has no greater authority than the single signature of the writer for reasons which will become clear. The writer does however believe that most (if not all) Congregational Independents will concur with the contents and emphases.

Who are Congregational Independents?

The writer believes that in attempting an answer to this question the answer posed by the Inter-Church Process will emerge. It is regrettable that many Christians have the idea that 'Congregationalism' no longer exists in England and Wales since the 1972 formation of the United Reformed Church brought together many Congregational Churches and the English Presbyterian church. The facts are that about 20% of the Congregational Churches did not enter that union but instead retained their historic independency and in the last fourteen years have consolidated their initially weakened position. Many are now experiencing growth and development. In addition some of the original churches have since left the URC and returned to Independency; other new churches have come into being.

Somewhere in the region of five hundred and fifty churches in England and Wales are now known to be 'Congregational' through their affiliations with the three main groupings, but many more probably exist. Nearly three-hundred churches belong to the Congregational Federation (CF); nearly one hundred and fifty belong to an Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC) and about 100 belong to neither and for convenience the Charity Commissioners refer to them as the Unaffiliated Congregational Churches (UCC). In preparing this paper the writer has only made reference to members or publications emanating from the latter two groups. The Congregational Federation is making its own submission.¹ Strictly speaking Congregationalism cannot be regarded as a 'denomination' because of the avowed independency of each and every local Congregational Church within the local community, be that in a village, town or city. Those Congregational Churches who entered the URC clearly gave up their historic independency and became part of a denomination. Some have argued that the CF is becoming a denomination since, inter alia, the training and recognition of Ministers and Pastors is ultimately under the control of bodies external to the local church. The EFCC asserts no authority over individual member churches, the basis for which is an agreed doctrinal statement (which is specifically 'evangelical') reaffirmed every year by those churches who decide year-by-year to remain in the fellowship. The UCC position is clear by definition: they are 'unaffiliated'. The writer terms the churches in the latter two groups as Congregational Independents (CI). They are clearly not a coherent body, nor a denomination. It also seems clear to the writer that many, but by no means all of the churches who describe themselves as 'Independent Chapel', 'Free Church', 'Mission', and so on, together with some of the newer 'house churches' and independent fellowships are also operationally congregational (at least with the small 'c') even if not knowingly so. Many of the so-called 'black-led' churches would fall into this very same category.

Here and there Congregationalists have entered into unions with other churches sometimes giving up their historic independency but sometimes retaining it and indeed introducing it to others. In Scotland no union of the URC type developed and the Congregational Union of Scotland is strong.² Throughout the world, of course, Congregationalism is everywhere and generally increasing as established churches grow and new ones develop.

Note 1. See 'Reflections' pps. 29-32

It should be noted, however, that the Congregational Union of Scotland is currently engaged in unity conversations with the United Reformed Church [Editor].

What Constitutes a Congregational Church?

First of all they are 'free' churches in the sense of not being under the authority of the state; secondly they have a distinctive system of order in their churches.

"All Christians must acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is Head of the Church but, historically, there have been three kinds of church order, or ways in which the Church expresses that Headship and manages its affairs. These can be

described as Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Independent.

The episcopal system of church government recognizes a bishop who can be said to rule as a 'monarch' within the denomination. The Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox Churches are examples of this. In the presbyterian system, the denomination is governed by 'presbyters' or appointed leaders meeting in a 'synod' or 'conference' drawn from many congregations. With certain modifications, the Church of Scotland, the United Reformed Church, the Elim Church, and the Methodist Church are examples of this. In Independency, it is held that each local church has 'congregated' under the Headship of Christ alone and is, therefore, independent of all or any external human control, whether this be of the State or of any other church (or group of churches or church representatives). The Assemblies of God, the Baptist Churches, the Churches of a Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, are examples of this system of church order. Congregational Churches are (also) independent."

'Evangelical & Congregational', 1981, EFCC

They see the type or pattern for their Church Order firmly rooted in the style and ordering of the New Testament churches and having many things in common with churches which

would have been familiar to the early Fathers.

Congregational Independents take very seriously their Bible base, believing that God has preserved his requirements both for the individual Christian, the Christian church and Christian society, within the tenets of Holy Scripture. Ultimately there is no need to look further. No teaching or tradition which is inconsistent with Holy Scripture can be fully in accord with God's plan for the church and a distinction is therefore made between the visible church, the work of human processes in terms of membership and authority; and the invisible church, the work of the Holy Spirit, in which God alone knows his true church and all authority is his.

"He is supreme over every spiritual ruler and authority." (Col 2:10 Good News Bible)

Back in the sixteenth century the Revd Robert Browne MA of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and the pioneer of post-Reformation Congregationalism declared: "In all things we must first look what is the Lord's will and charge, and then what is the will of man ... And this freedom have all Christians." At Tyburn, as early as 1593, those other Cambridge graduates and Congregationalists Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood and John Penry all suffered martyrdom because they refused to recant that faith in which they offered sole obedience to the authority of God in Christ Jesus. Other Independents (the Pilgrim Fathers) were founders of the United States of America; Oliver Cromwell was an Independent and the army which removed arbitrary despotism was largely of the same inclination, and we owe our system of Parliamentary freedom to the Civil War. John Owen, the then Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University was an Independent, ranking as one of the greatest theologians England has produced. One hardly needs to mention Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge as no modern hymn book is complete without their theology set to music for all to sing.

The question of Christian freedom came to a head on 24 August 1662 (St Bartholomew's Day) when the Act of Uniformity came into force. Some two thousand clergymen of the Church of England surrendered their livings in the established church, joining others who had been leaving prior to the day itself, because they were not willing to bow to a law of the land, even though enacted by Parliament, which required them to conduct worship by no other form than that prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. Many Congregational Churches today date their foundation from 1662, as gathered companies of believers met together for free worship, independent of Parliamentary or other external human authority.

Over the years entrenched attitudes do soften but Congregational Independents, in common with other Free Churches and no doubt Roman Catholics too, still find it unacceptable that any potentially non-Christian Parliament however well-intentioned or indeed a non-believing Prime Minister, should be able to have any influence, let alone actual legislative control, over the style and content of worship of the Christian church and the appointment of its leaders. Christian freedom is not a licence to act irresponsibly but is a liberty given by God to his people, to be exercised with vigilance and loving care. Robert Browne put it well when he said: "It is the conscience, and not the power of man, that will drive us to seek the Lord's kingdom."

Congregational Independents, in taking seriously the words of Matthew 18:15–20, feel that biblical framework indicates that logically only Congregational Churches fully meet the demands of the New Testament for a true church. R W Dale LLD expounded this in his book entitled 'Manual of Congregational Principles' (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1884) under the following principles:

- "1. It is the Will of Christ that all those who believe in Him should be organised into Churches.
- 2. In every Christian Church the Will of Christ is the Supreme Authority.
- It is the Will of Christ that all the Members of a Christian Church should be Christians.
 - This means that (a) The Church is constituted where there are even so few as two or three gathered together in the name of Jesus.
 - (b) The function of discipline within the community of faith must be committed exclusively to those who are believers.
 - (c) The power of binding and loosing implies that the members of the society are loyal to Christ.
 - (d) The privilege of His presence is assured to those who are His by faith.
- 4. By the Will of Christ all the Members of a Christian Church are directly responsible to Him for maintaining His Authority in the Church.
- By the Will of Christ every Society of Christians organised for Christian Worship, Instruction, and Fellowship is a Christian Church, and is Independent of External Control."

All of these principles are seen at work in the church meeting by and through which theocratic (not democratic) principles operate, since the gathered company of believers seek the will of God and his concerns as King of Kings. This is the great responsibility and privilege of every individual believer. It cannot be delegated to some external authority, be that a Pope or Diocesan Bishop, Synod, General Assembly or Council, no matter how well-disposed. The crown rights of the Redeemer cannot be usurped, no matter how convenient or indeed expedient such action may appear to be.

"The word 'church' is used in the New Testament either of a simple, local assembly or of the whole community of believers everywhere. St Paul refers to the churches of Macedonia, the churches of Galatia, the churches throughout Syria and Cilicia. St John addresses the seven churches of Asia. Never is a church acknowledged that stands between the Church universal and the church local.

All will recognise the frailty of human nature and how this may affect a local church. To some it might appear that things would be better if the churches surrendered their authority to a more spiritual and educated body: But as soon as such a surrender is made ... the local church has ceased to be a New Testament church ..."

(quoted from the EFCC publication mentioned earlier)

This paper is perhaps not the place to go into detail about every aspect of concern contained in the World Council of Churches paper entitled 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' but in the case of Ministry a short mention of the Congregational Independent viewpoint would be appropriate. CI's recognize in general that there need to be leaders in the church but they strongly affirm the 'priesthood of all believers'.

The New Testament seems to indicate that the same church officers are under discussion when they are mentioned in various places as 'elders', 'bishops', 'pastors and teachers', 'presidents', 'rulers', 'presbyters', 'overseers', even 'shepherds' and Congregational Independents raise no objections to any such title being used in any church as long as their equivalence is recognised and a preference for plurality of appointees is the norm. No objection would be raised to the acknowledgement within the local congregation that some sort of local seniority existed: based perhaps on recognised wisdom, character, zeal, eminence, profound knowledge of Christian truth, even eloquence but not necessarily mere time-serving or even popular election and certainly not external appointment! One sees here however, no "priests" as a separate order or minor order below elders/ bishops etc. simply because no mention of such an order exists in the New Testament, Current discussions within the Church of England as to whether a woman could be ordained a priest (since, it is claimed by some, a priest stands 'in place' at an altar of the male Christ) seem irrelevant: the simple solution it appears would be to revert to New Testament practice and cease to ordain men to such a position!

Deacons are, of course, another matter and the New Testament indicates that the churches had such individuals and their functions appear to have been of an administrative and executive kind and not merely some first or probationary stage towards a pastorate. Women were and still are eligible to become

deacons. In the present century the moves towards the appointment of women as elders/bishops seem correct, in the same way that the very existence of slaves (though seen in the societies during New Testament times) is now seen to be fundamentally at variance with the divine plan. St Paul makes the point that in Christ there is no difference ". . . between slaves and free men, between men and women . . ." (*Gal* 3:28).

It is therefore against all of this background (which might be called tradition and experience, but which Congregational Independents would say are New Testament principles) that CI's understand the nature and purpose of the church in relation to other Christian denominations and as together we share in God's mission to the world.

Congregational Independents' Understanding of the Church, Denominations and God's Mission

Dr Dale's comments from his book mentioned earlier, though written 100 years ago still ring true:

"At a time when Christendom is agitated by controversies reaching to the very roots of the Christian Faith, and when all Churches are struggling with practical duties which are beyond their strength, questions of ecclesiastical polity may appear to have no claim to consideration.

We have to assert the authority and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ against all the assaults of speculative unbelief. We have to preach the Gospel to those who have never heard it. We have to lessen the miseries as well as the sins of mankind. There are hundreds of millions of heathen, men to whom the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ is altogether unknown; there are vast numbers of our own countrymen who have drifted beyond the reach of all the ordinary institutions of Christian instruction and worship; there are the hungry to be fed and the naked to be clothed; there are miserable homes to be made decent and healthy; there are low conceptions of morality in domestic, commercial, and public life which the Church ought to elevate; there is selfishness in the Church itself which ought to be inspired with the charity of Christ, indolence which ought to be set on fire by the zeal of Christ for the honour of God and the righteousness and happiness of mankind. It may be thought that when these great tasks are done it will be time enough to consider whether Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, or Congregationalism is the best form of church polity."

The writer agrees with these sentiments and believes that Congregational Independents would also agree and would unite behind such a programme. We need to hear Jesus coming to us and saying:

36 OBSERVATIONS

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Let's just get on with it - TOGETHER.

Postscript

Congregational Independents respect the independence and sacramental integrity of all those churches who "Love the Lord" and would want, whenever possible, to work alongside them. They would only ask that their independence should also be respected. It is a cause of much regret to many CI's that membership (and hence consultation) of bodies such as the British & the World Council of Churches tends to be restricted to nationally organised assemblies of churches to the extent that numbers of members is an important qualification for membership and consultation (either full or associate). Independent churches therefore tend to be ignored as if they were of little or no importance and not worthy of consultation. Yet where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is there: surely his voice from amongst them should be listened to?

Rt. Revd. Graham St. John-Willey Bishop in the Disciples Congregational Church, Northampton. August 1986

House Churches

A perspective on the Church, the Kingdom and its mission

It is important to state that the views expressed in this document are not necessarily those held by all sections of the 'House Churches'. Because of the spontaneity and diversity of the growth of these churches it would be extremely difficult to summarise how the House Churches view the church, the Kingdom, and its mission in the world.

The Church is primarily seen as the living Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–30 etc) and as such would be seen in two different ways.

1. The universal church, the body to which all believers belong.

2. The local church, the visible, local expression of the body of Christ to which believers in a locality belong.

The implications of this view can be seen in the following manner:

- 1. The recognition and respect for all believers regardless of their beliefs and denominational traditions.
- 2. A desire to work out in practice what it means to be part of a local, visible expression of Christ.
- 3. The local church is bigger than local congregations which could gather in smaller groupings for worship etc. (1 Cor 6:19).
- 4. Membership of the Body is seen in charismatic rather than institutional terms: that is through the gift of God's grace (*Eph* 2:8) and initiation into the Body through repentance, baptism, usually by total immersion, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 2:28). Leadership within the church would again be seen in charismatic terms rather than institutional. Those qualified for it would be such by character, gift and calling, irrespective of schooling or formal training. House Churches would also be charismatic in the popular sense, believing in the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor* 12:7–11).
- 5. As the Body of Christ, the church is seen as an organism rather than an organisation. This would mean that more

attention would be given to the things associated with an organism: life, flexibility, diversity, relationships etc, rather than those things which can characterise an organisation: uniformity, rigidity, bureaucracy and structure.

6. As members of the Body, emphasis would be put on recognising one's place in the Body, fulfilling our role within the Body, and our relationship to other members of the Body (1 Cor 12: 12–30). Because of this it would be expected that, in worship and other aspects of Church life and activity, there would be participation by the many rather than the few (1 Cor 14:26), also a diversity of gifts and a plurality of leadership (Eph 4:11, 1 Cor 12:27–30).

The Church would also be seen as a community of God's people rather than simply a congregation of God's people. As a community there would be an interaction of life together (*Acts* 2:42–47), as opposed to church being a place or an event that Christians attended. In these terms church would be seen as anything that Christians did together, worship, eat meals, play games or work. As a community of God's people the church is seen as what the believers are rather than what they do or an event to which they attend. Christians cannot go to church, they are the church. It would also mean that there would not be a distinction between church and para-church.

The House Churches' relationship to denominations

This would vary according to the different streams within the House Churches. One extreme of the House Churches would give a tacit recognition of the denominations but with very little practical involvement with these churches. It would see such denominations as 'not being of God' and would see the future of the church as outside of traditional denominations. The other extreme would be a recognition of God's Spirit working within the denominational churches and a practical involvement and co-operation with them.

The Kingdom of God

The term, 'Kingdom of God', is one that is used a great deal in the House Churches today. It must be said that there is a great deal of ambiguity about its use. For some it is little more than an expression to cover church activities, for others the Kingdom is only seen in terms of the church, making church synonymous with the Kingdom of God.

- 1. The Kingdom is to be seen as 'those over whom the King rules'. The Lordship of Jesus and submission to his Lordship would be a strong emphasis.
- The Kingdom is to be extended and since Jesus is Lord over all and will rule on this earth then there would be seen a need to extend the Kingdom into every area of the world and the world's activities.
- 3. Since Jesus is already Lord over all there would be a strong sense of victory over the forces of Satan and having authority and power in the name of Jesus. There would be found among those in the House Churches a sense of triumphalism and feeling that we are going to take on the world and win it for Jesus.
- 3. There would be those who would see the Kingdom as being bigger than the church although it would include the church.
- 4. Seeing the Kingdom as having come, "The Kingdom is among you", and yet as still to come, "Your Kingdom come". The Kingdom will be completed with the coming of Christ to reign.

The House Churches' approach to their mission

Broadly speaking mission would be interpreted as 'seeking to establish God's kingdom'. This would be seen as more than saving souls or indeed as setting up an alternative society. It would be seen more as driving back the forces of Satan in all areas of the world and society, and reclaiming or redeeming those areas for Christ, for example in education, the arts and commerce. This is a logical consequence of seeing the Lordship of Christ affecting every area of one's personal life and demolishing the philosophy and practice of a dual existence to life, i.e. sacred/secular.

Philip Vogel September 1986

British Evangelical Council

This response on the topic 'What is the Church and what is it for?' is offered to the 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims' Inter-Church Process. Its paragraphs represent our views on three aspects of the question, 'In your tradition and experience how do you understand the nature and purpose of your church (or churches) in relation to other Christian denominations and as together we share in God's mission to the world?'

Introduction

The British Evangelical Council (BEC) represents evangelical churches outside the usual range of ecumenical life. The fact that we are making this submission does not reflect any change in our conviction that ecumenicity that is not based on vital Christian truth is actually a danger to Christian people as it obscures the distinctives of the Gospel. We regret that many ecumenical statements do not recognise the conscientious separation of a significant number of evangelical churches when they imprecisely refer to a particular project involving 'all the churches'. We do, however, value this opportunity to bear witness to a positive experience of unity which does exist within authentic evangelism.

1. The Nature and Purpose of the Church

a) The Nature of the Church

It is our understanding that the Church belongs to God: in conception, creation and purpose it is His. The Church belongs to the Triune God: it is the Father who elects its members, the Son who redeems them and the Spirit who sanctifies them. As to its fundamental nature the Church is not an institution. It is above all else a spiritual company of redeemed people. This fact needs to be remembered when many seem to be pre-occupied with institutional re-organisation and re-alignment. It is therefore in the following theological terms that we would see the nature of the Church delineated.

(i) The Church and Scripture
The authority for the very existence of the Church is the

Lord Jesus Christ and Scripture is the witness to Christ in words. The revelation of God in the person of Christ must not be seen as inconsistent with the revelation of God in propositional form in the Bible. Scripture's God-breathed origin ensures its authority, infallibility and inerrancy. We affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, that nothing is to be required as essential to the Church which is not found there. The Bible stands above all Church tradition, human reason and contemporary prophetic utterance as the final arbiter of truth. Its timeless principles do need to be expressed in each appropriate cultural context as the Church is called to confess and expound the truth. In so doing we seek to be ruled by Scripture's own principles of interpretation.

(ii) The Church and the Mediator

In the mystery of the eternal Trinity, God covenanted to save the Church. The incarnate Christ became the Mediator of God's covenant people. The Church is a New Testament reality resulting from the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The pictures of the Church are related to Him; e.g. His flock, His temple, His body. He fulfilled covenant obligations, underwent the penalty of a broken covenant and secured covenant blessings for the people of God and for them only. This fact must close the door to all notions about universal salvation.

(iii) The Church and the Gospel

The Saviour calls sinners to repentance and faith by His Spirit through the Gospel. The Good News is Christ Himself, the objective facts of history concerning Him, e.g. His virgin birth and bodily resurrection, and the significance of these revealed in the Bible. His atoning sacrifice was essential for the propitiation of God and the reconciling of fallen man. 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3). When God regenerates the spiritually dead, that new life is expressed by their confessing faith in Christ and giving evidence of holiness. Justification is God's forensic act of declaring righteous those who trust in Christ and is not a process conditional upon the sanctified life.

(iv) The Corporate Life of the Church

All those united to Christ inwardly by the regenerating work of the Spirit are joined to His Body, the Church. Its corporate life will reflect the diversity of ministries and gifts of those who have experienced God's grace in Christ. Christ, who alone is the head of the Church, instituted only two sacraments or ordinances, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The observance of those cannot automatically convey grace but calls for their reception in faith with the blessing of Christ. The Lord's Supper is never to be considered a sacrifice for sin, nor is there ever any change in the substance of the bread and wine. Christ also ordained offices for the ministry of His Word and the oversight of His flock. We recognise there are differences in understanding the present structure of those ministries but cannot accept that the 'historic episcopate' with its claim to apostolic succession and its hierarchical structure is essential to the nature or unity of the visible church.

(v) The Historical Continuity of the Church

The church is the central focus of God's purpose in history. Christ is appointed 'to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills everything in every way' (Ephesians 1:22-23). Throughout history and in a wide range of cultures the true Church of Christ has been sustained by His grace. All local fellowships of His Church display a reality which everyone born of the Spirit rejoices to see. Regrettably there are churches retaining outward forms of order and confession which are apostate as to truth and life and have ceased to be churches in the New Testament sense of the word. To use Scriptural standards to discern whether a particular church bears the marks of genuine spiritual reality is not a search for an unrealisable perfection in this age. Consequently every church needs constantly to be reforming itself according to God's word in the Bible. Nevertheless, we do recognise an urgent need for the whole church today to seek God's face for that recovery of His manifested presence and power which characterised periods of revival in former times.

b) The Purpose of the Church

Since the church is 'a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit' (*Ephesians 2:22*) and 'the pillar and foundation of the truth' (*1 Timothy 3:15*) we believe it is altogether inappropriate to accept secular categories of what the world expects of the church and adapt her programmes to meet man-made goals. God has made the church what she is because of His purpose for her, purposes which extend into eternity. These are firstly godward in worship and then manward in edification, mission and sociable concern.

(i) Worship

The church is the new creation of God, 'that you may declare the praise of Him' (1 Peter 2:9). The vertical purpose of doing everything for the glory of God is primary. The gratitude of the redeemed motivates their dedication of life to Him for whom no sacrifice is too great. That which is imperfectly offered in this life will be gloriously expressed in heaven.

(ii) Edification

The ascended Lord has given gifts to every member 'to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up' (*Ephesians 4:12*). Maturity in holiness means developing in usefulness. One aspect of this progressive sanctification is that unfolding one-ness which the Spirit of God creates. 'May they be brought to complete unity' (*John 17:23*).

(iii) Mission

That worship which consists in obedience of God's commands and the purpose for which she is built up prepares the church to be sent out into the world. (A fuller treatment is given under Section 3).

(iv) Social Concern

We welcome renewed interest among Christians in reflecting God's righteousness and Christ's compassion in the face of man's desperate temporal needs. Whilst recognising the church's calling to bring in Christ's Kingdom we deny that this can be done by changing social structures because 'unless a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God' (John 3:3). However, given a change in human nature

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the structures in which men are involved will be affected for good. We view with deep concern the adoption of humanist, even Marxist, pre-suppositions by some Christians today in their giving priority to social rather than eternal issues.

2. Church Relationships

We cannot conceive that any church is so independent that it has no need of support and help from the gifts displayed in others outside that church but equally part of the universal body of Christ. The New Testament assumes that relationships between churches will exist and directs us to the principles by which their mutual fellowship is to be fostered.

a) Unity

Christians are charged to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit' (*Ephesians 4:3*). What God has created we are to express and preserve. There is a valid ecumenicity in the communion of saints. Wherever possible this unity must be exemplified in personal, parachurch, denominational and inter-denominational co-operation. The BEC is not an anti-ecumenical body but it represents the kind of ecumenicity which takes evangelical principles seriously. We understand 'evangelical' to denote that Christianity which affirms the historicity of the New Testament accounts of the life and work of Christ, the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the necessity of a supernatural, personal experience of the living Christ today. These are the unifying factors and church relationships need to be governed by the authority of Scripture and its constraints.

b) Separation

However reluctantly expressed, there is need for separation from error in the world, false teaching in the church and those supporting either. This would include for us separation from that form of ecumenicity which embraces those who deny Gospel essentials. This duty is commanded in Scripture and is necessary in order to bear positive witness to the truth. This necessarily limits realistic co-operation to those sharing the same convictions on Gospel essentials and precludes

those substituting subjective or pragmatic re-interpretations of the clear teaching of Christ, the Bible and orthodox Christians throughout church history.

c) Contacts

Separation does not imply monastic isolation without any human contact with other Christians or churches. We respect the sincerity of those holding other convictions in professing churches as we respect the consciences of those of other faiths in a pluralist society. Only by retaining personal friendships can we fulfil our calling to share any light God has given us and do any good to our fellows. We rejoice that there are many Christians outside the BEC who speak His truth in the spirit of His love. We regret what separates us from them and especially those alliances some evangelicals retain with those in error which limit their closer association with us.

3. The Church's Mission

We understand the task for which God has called His Church into being to be consonant with its spiritual nature. Essentially it is to glorify God and to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ by proclaiming to the whole world the Gospel of Salvation through faith in Him.

a) The Great Commission

Our Lord's charge to the Church (*Matthew* 28:18–20) retains an abiding relevance even in this age of religious pluralism. Its world-wide scope is grounded in Christ's universal Lordship; it commits us to the primacy of preaching; it involves incorporation into the visible church; it requires practical Christian living and it is reliant on the continuing presence of Christ in a work which will not be complete until His return at the end of this age. His future Kingdom is the goal of our mission, with the awesome challenge that every child of Adam must spend eternity, either in heaven with Christ or in hell without Him.

b) Co-operation

The assumption in the specific question being addressed that 'together we share in God's mission' needs to be queried. Co-operation is only possible where the same Gospel is

preached and the same priorities observed. It would be unrealistic to assume otherwise. There are so-called churches which have embraced such a syncretistic ideology and others which give such priority to a political programme that we cannot identify with them.

For thirty years the BEC has sought to exemplify co-operation between churches and church-bodies differing on matters not essential to salvation but united in evangelical principles and priorities.

c) Humanitarian Projects

The same Gospel which requires us to 'render to God' requires us also to 'render to Cæsar'. We are committed to civic responsibility, to seeking the good of our fellow men and to the stewardship of natural resources for the relief of material needs. It is right to recognise that other agencies are involved in similar humanitarian projects on grounds different from our own. Although there may be times when it is possible to co-operate with them, for us to be officially identified with such could confuse our testimony to spiritual distinctives.

Conclusion

The Executive Council of the British Evangelical Council cannot recommend that constituent churches should have any involvement in the local level of the Inter-Church Process either at Phase I or Phase II. Neither would there seem to be any value in our being involved at National Level in Phase II. We would, however, be willing to amplify, clarify or justify any of the points in this submission if those responsible for the 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims' Inter-Church Process so desired.

February 1986 British Evangelical Council

Evangelical Alliance

What the Church is

We all agree that the New Testament is hugely concerned with the doctrine of the Church. New Testament religion is personal but not individualistic. Salvation is into the church, gifts are for the church, sanctification is with the church (we grow together). The Holy Spirit himself is a shared, and not just an individual, experience. (2 Cor 13:14 & Phil 2:1)

Moreover, we acknowledge that the unity of the church is, in the New Testament, a fundamental presupposition rather than a desirable goal and is laid down as a spiritual fact to be developed rather than an organisational goal to be achieved. We are to "maintain" the unity of the Spirit precisely because we share it from the moment we belong to the "one body" and "one Spirit" (*Eph 4:13—16*) through the various ministries given to the Church, including the "every member ministry" that is stimulated and guided by them.

What is this Church of which such wonderful things are true? The New Testament presents the doctrine of the church under two aspects: that of the Universal Church and that of the Local Church. Paul writes of the Universal Church in Ephesians and Colossians where it is "the body of Christ" (*Eph* 1:22—23). This "body" is universal in time and space, the totality of the people of God as they exist in Christ in the mind of God, the whole company of the elect in heaven and on earth, all regenerate persons whoever have been and whoever will be in heaven and on earth.

As such the church is the completion of Christ in his representative or mediatorial capacity and the great organism to which, by the Holy Spirit, he is forever united and through which he manifests his power, his grace and his glory. This is why the church lives on when all human organisations rise and fall, emerge and die; the church lives because Christ lives; his imperishable life in heaven is the source and guarantee of her unfailing life on earth.

However, Paul's most frequent use of the word 'ecclesia' (church) has regard to the local church, the Christian communities to whom he is writing. In his five early epistles (Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians) Paul consistently uses the term church in this way. At this point constituent and personal members of a broad alliance like Evangelical Alliance begin to differ in their understanding of these communities and their inter-relations.

Groupings such as Baptists, Brethren and Pentecostals, for instance, would see these local churches of the early New Testament period as gathered, confessional and exclusive societies of people. Many would emphasise their independent as well as their interdependent character, not out of isolationist tendencies, but out of a desire to stress their true, full and complete identity as churches. They would say that Paul does not see the local church as different in kind from the universal church and that he sees it as a microcosm of the larger reality, having not only the identity but also the dignity, and duty and resources of the whole.

Others, such as members of the Anglican communion or Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) would qualify notions of strict independency seeing the need in practice and the warrant in scripture and tradition of episcopal oversight or conciliar authority over groups of churches. They would maintain a third form of the church over and against its universal and local forms, namely, Regional, hence the "Church" of England, the "Church" of Scotland, etc.

Furthermore, while for some the confessional character of the local church demands personal individual faith before baptism and church membership, for others the precedent of the Old Testament system, the structure of the church and the efficacy of its sacraments, permit infants to be welcomed into the church under the faith of sponsors. The confessional status and character of such communions is regarded as maintained in doctrinal standards.

What the Church is for

The Church of God in Christ exists on earth to display the

character and mediate the grace of God as creator and redeemer. Her being and her doing are inseparably intertwined; she is to be holy and loving and righteous and she is to do works of goodness and mercy. Because she is holy, set apart for God and indwelt with the Spirit of Christ Jesus, she will be like him; substantially and increasingly. Because she is holy she will reflect both the kindness and the severity of God; denouncing sin without, discipling within, calling sinners of all kinds to repentance and holding out God's mercy and her own fellowship to those who do repent, seeking forgiveness and new life.

Her role and purpose in the world involves making known to all men the gospel of God concerning Jesus Christ, the good news of eternal life from God for men, the gospel of forgiveness for the guilty, reconciliation for the alienated, life for the spiritually dead. It will also involve clear warning about sin, righteousness and judgment to come. She is to do this by word and deed. We believe consequently that the church's role must be defined by truth and action, proclamation (not merely personal opinion) and performance (not "in word only"). This demands a clear standard and statement of gospel truth and corresponding activity. These evangelical fundamentals for us involve, as written in the Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith:

Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith

- 1. Evangelical Christians accept the revelation of the triune God given in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and confess the historic faith of the Gospel therein set forth. They here assert doctrines which they regard as crucial to the understanding of the faith and which should issue in mutual love, practical Christian service and evangelistic concern.
- 2. The sovereignty and grace of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in creation, providence, revelation, redemption and final judgement.
- 3. The divine inspiration of the Holy Scripture and its consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.
- 4. The universal sinfulness and guilt of fallen man, making him subject to God's wrath and condemnation.

- 5. The substitutionary sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God as the sole and all-sufficient ground of redemption from the guilt and power of sin, and from its eternal consequences.
- 6. The justification of the sinner solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ crucified and risen from the dead.
- 7. The illuminating, regenerating, indwelling and sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit.
- 8. The priesthood of all believers, who form the universal Church, the Body of which Christ is the head, and which is committed by his command to the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world.
- 9. The expectation of the personal, visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory.

The church as the servant of the God of truth cannot live apart from this truth or please Him who sent her if she is silent about this truth. Salvation is by grace alone, in Christ alone and through faith alone. Hence the truths of the gospel must be made known or men will perish eternally. For evangelicals the gospel fundamentals are necessary conditions of all visible unity precisely because they are the necessary condition for the authentic being of the church and the effectiveness and value of mission in the world.

The Church and the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is the rule of God in the reign of grace. It is sovereignty acting savingly in the world through the Christian by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; reaching men, arresting, drawing, and reconciling them. The church is the product of the Kingdom; living in its power, living according to its laws and standards, living to effect the purposes of its King, Jesus the Son of God.

The Church and the World

The church is not the world since the world, as scripture views it, is human society organised apart from God and without subjection to Him. The church is chosen people called out from the world and set apart for God, a company of pilgrims who are in the world but not of it. yet they are clearly related to the world by many ties and responsibilities in the society in which they live

at many levels. The church exists to evangelise that world and society by word and deed and through her members "in the world" to leaven it; to be salt and light in every department of life that profoundly affects man and his duty and purpose before God in God's world.

The Church and other religions

The church must also understand her position vis-a-vis other religions. Christianity is unique. It is also, in a vital sense, exclusive. Jesus did not say he was the best way but that He was the only way to God. "No-one comes to the Father but by me". His primary direction to His church-in-mission was to disciple all nations, to baptise men and women into the triune name of the only true God. Our conviction as an alliance of evangelical Christians is that only by faith in Jesus can we be justified before God and that no other religion than that in which Christ crucified and risen is at the centre can be saving.

The Church and the Churches

It is always difficult to give a clear and consistent scriptural response to a situation which is not found in Scripture. 'Denominations' are not in the New Testament. However, the unbelief, pride and folly which multiplies them is! Unnecessary separation, needless estrangement, suspicion, ignorance and jealousy are features of a fallen world which have penetrated a redeemed community. They are as much the enemies of the church as unbelief, hostility and open persecution and the churches should declare open and constant war against them.

On the other hand, the desire to honour Scripture as the revealed will and written word of God; freedom of conscience and worship amongst those in whom the Spirit of God dwells as in a Kingdom of Priests; the clear precedent of apostolic authority, that error which threatens the very existence of the gospel in the world must be anathematised if it cannot be reformed (*Gal* 1:8–9, 2 *Tim* 1:13–14); all go to show that church groupings and even divisions are not necessarily and of themselves, wrong. Sometimes important aspects of truth, at times even truth itself, have been maintained in the world by such separations. It is not simply divisions but divisiveness and the things that cause divisiveness which is the great enemy. One Welsh preacher spoke

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wisely as well as graphically when he said, "It is not so much the walls of denominationalism that do harm but the broken glass at the top!".

The Evangelical Alliance exists to respect the walls and chip away the glass. Chiefly its concern is to preserve evangelical truth and to demonstrate that such truth alone is properly sufficient to unite Christians of differing denominational convictions in order that they may, in turn, learn from and act together with one another. Where differences occur, in church government and matters of baptismal administration for instance, a community of convictions about the principal articles of faith can yet be built up and built upon. Firm on such principal truths a united church can go out into the world to fulfil her Great Commission. This has been our experience for over one hundred and forty years.

Evangelical Alliance September 1986

Jim Wallis

I consider the Jim Wallis¹ tour (June 1986) to have been one of the most worthwhile ventures with which I have been associated during my eight years of work on peace and human rights at the BCC. In the month of watching and listening, I have found Jim Wallis (of the Sojourners Community in the U.S.A.) to be a deeply committed radical evangelical preacher, a warm-hearted pastor, a great encourager and a good friend. In terms of the message preached, the numbers who heard it, the local organisation and the new ground broken, I consider the tour to have been an important event in the life of the British churches, and very relevant indeed to the Inter-Church Process 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims' as it looks afresh at the nature and purpose of the church in the light of its mission.

The tour was truly ecumenical. The sponsoring agencies, as well as the BCC, included missionary societies like CMS, aid agencies like Christian Aid and Traidcraft, evangelical organisations like the West Indian Evangelical Alliance, the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, Evangelical Peacemakers and Frontier Youth Trust, and Christian peace groups like Christian CND and Pax Christi. The Evangelical Alliance also arranged a seminar for church leaders. The Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament (CCADD) arranged a meeting in Westminster for their members and Christian Members of Parliament.

A different kind of 'American Voice'

Both in terms of religion and social concern the style and content of this tour differed sharply from the evangelistic tours of Billy Graham and Luis Palau and even more sharply from the social and foreign policy of the Reagan Administration. Jim Wallis is convinced that the gospel has to be preached in the context of the current historical crisis. This requires not only preaching the need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, but also to de-throne the cultural idols of "wealth and weapons". The good news is

Note 1. For further reading: The Call to Conversion – Jim Wallis (Lion £1.95) The New Radical – Jim Wallis (Lion £1.95) Agenda for Biblical People – Jim Wallis (Triangle Books £1.95) "always personal but never private." It is not preaching which talks about what to believe about Jesus, but a call to costly disciple-ship, to follow Him. Jesus is to be found among the poor, the threatened and the most vulnerable, those who are lowest on everyone's list of priorities. As preached and lived by Jim Wallis this gospel requires an almost inevitable controversy and conflict with the American powers that be.

An undivided gospel

This uncompromising gospel is a challenge both to evangelicalism which stresses individual salvation, and a 'social action' gospel with no room for the activity of God. The wide range of church and Christian organisations which identified with enough of the message to become involved is an impressive spectrum. I cannot think of any other impulse which would have brought together a spectrum involving so many different Christian groups. How can this glimpse of the wholeness of God's Kingdom be further developed?

Evangelical involvement

It was highly significant to what extent the congregations and audiences came from an evangelical background. Jim Wallis is particularly effective when describing his pilgrimage to evangelicals. A constant theme was the "Bible full of holes" from all that we have cut out or ignored about the poor (Amos, Isaiah 58, Luke 4, Matthew 25). Those who are evangelicals and biblically-based Christians experience the compelling logic of this presentation.

The black-led churches, including the West Indian Evangelical Alliance, played an important part in the tour. The Evangelical Alliance arranged a morning teach-in which was well attended.

Other groups which identify themselves as evangelical (Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, Evangelical Peacemakers, Frontier Youth Trust) played a central part in sponsoring the tour. It is highly encouraging that 'evangelicals' and 'ecumenicals' could work together at the various different levels, both locally and nationally.

Black-led church involvement

In November 1985 when Jim Wallis met two black Christian

leaders, Revd. Kennedy Bedford and Revd. Io Smith at the British Council of Churches there was little involvement of the black-led churches or black Christian leaders. By the time of the tour a number of events had been planned and sponsored by black Christian leaders and participation at all levels by black Christian leaders and congregations had been assured. Clearly this is not a cause for complacency, much rather a tribute yet again to black Christian leaders in their willingness and determination to work ecumenically even when they have not been consulted and involved at an early stage in the planning. Jim Wallis himself was profoundly encouraged by the main event planned by the black-led churches in the New Testament Assembly in Tooting and described it as one of the high points of the tour. The Revd. Io Smith and the Revd. Philip Mohabir (West Indian Evangelical Alliance) were prime movers and motivators for this event and for much else in terms of black-led church involvement in the tour. Jim Wallis said at Tooting at the beginning of his sermon to the 600 - 700 strong congregation, half black and half white, "You yourselves are part of the sermon, this is how the church of the future will be in Britain."

He returned to this theme in Stepney on the last evening of the tour saying to a packed congregation, "There would be only one better form of good news than this congregation tonight, if the church in Britain could become good news to those for whom it has been bad news for so long; the unemployed the marginalized, black people, the working class, the single parent families. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to the poor. Any gospel which is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Social and political issues

Another emphasis in the message preached is that social and political issues are not just social and political issues. "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thong of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless and poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your

healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer: you shall cry, and he will say 'Here I am'." (*Isaiah 58: 6–9*) Jim Wallis regularly referred to this passage and others in a similar vein (*Luke 4, Matthew 25*). To find Jesus and to know Jesus, one has to find and serve him in "the least of these", to visit those in prison and to "set at liberty the captive".

For Jim Wallis that means to seek out and stand by those who are on the receiving end of the American way of life (or death). For him, American prosperity (6% of the world's population using 50% of the world's resources) is not a sign of God's favour but rather evidence of "organized theft on a global scale". Jim spoke constantly of the victims of the war of the Contras in Nicaragua "a terrorist force financed and created by my government." He recounted the experience of hearing first hand from mothers what it is like to retrieve the body of your thirteen-yearold daughter who has been decapitated by a mortar shell with an inscription "United States" on the side. He spoke of the struggle of the Sanctuary Movement in which over three hundred churches have taken in immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador in a "conspiracy of compassion." On the day after Jim Wallis's departure the suspended jail sentences against leaders of the movement were announced. The Sanctuary Movement has placed those who take in the illegal immigrants on a collision course with U.S. government and it is likely that the next compassionate criminals will be more harshly dealt with. Evidence for the trial was obtained by "bugging Bible Studies and surveillance of prayer meetings".

The "official abandonment of the poor", the policy whereby "when the U.S. or U.K. government tighten their belts, it is always round the necks of the poor people," was another constant theme. Jim Wallis emphasized the historic role of the black churches in the U.S.A. as the bearers of hope and the source of "the most powerful spirituality my country has ever known". He stressed the sustaining role of the spirituals, the nurturing through the leadership of Christian civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King (the best friend White Americans ever had) and Fanny Lou Hamer. Many of those who worked in the Civil

Rights Movement are now in the Free South Africa Campaign, which began when the black Baptist Congressman Walter Fauntroy and two others went into the South African Embassy and refused to leave. Since then thousands have followed this lead and expressed their opposition to apartheid using the non-violent techniques of civil disobedience which were so much a part of the civil rights struggle.

Through the tour, South Africa was very much on our minds, in our prayers and thoughts. South Africa was ever present, whether it was through gleaning the sparse information on the early days of the new "State of Emergency", kneeling in prayer during the vigil in St Michael-le-Belfry, York (David Watson's old church), or the 10th Anniversary of the Soweto Massacres, or singing "We Shall Overcome" as a sign of hope as we finished many of the meetings with South Africa in our prayers. Jim Wallis often told of his meetings with Dorothy and Allan Boesak - how Dorothy recounted to him the death threats against the family and especially their children and how Allan sank his head in his hands and cried – and how the next day Dorothy had met with Coretta Scott King, who had told her "We always knew Martin would be killed, but we were able to take each day together as a gift from God". Jim said that Allan and Dorothy are able to carry on in this highly dangerous and responsible position of leadership because "above the cries of suffering of the black townships, they hear another voice saying 'as you have done it for the least of these you have done it for me'."

Jim also spoke of the cost of opposition to the policies of "wealth and weapons". He recounted how after Peace Pentecost 1983, they moved the "geography of prayer and witness" from the upper room (in this case the National Cathedral) to the streets and the places of power. On the day that the MX missile was debated, two hundred and forty two Christians were arrested in the largest act of mass civil disobedience since the Vietnam War for praying and reading the statements of the churches in the Rotunda of Congress.

In a powerful passage which he used on the cost of discipleship, Jim talked of being peacemakers as opposed to peacelovers, of an occupation of the tracks at Rocky Flats Nevada in order to stop the 'white train' which carries up to 200 nuclear missile triggers at a time in the "deadliest cargo in the history of transport". Shivering in the sleet and the rain he spoke of counting the cost. "Those who make war and prepare for war do so with complete commitment and dedication. Generations of soldiers have left safety, loved ones, good career prospects, their homes to suffer in the worst of conditions. That is the price of war. Will the price of peace be any less?"

In private conversation, Jim challenged me personally about the responsibility of all who are in any kind of leadership position in the churches. He is due to participate in the autumn of 1986 in a retreat for U.S. church leaders on the next stages in the work against the arms race. His question to me and to those church leaders is: "Do you believe that the arms race can be stopped by doing more of what has been done before - educational programmes, debates, resolutions – or is a deeper level of commitment needed?" It is quite clear that the publication of more church statements is not going to stop the arms race, so what are the British churches going to do? Are church leaders going to leave the more costly forms of action to the members of the congregations or are they going to exercise leadership? What are the right approaches? Do we really want to stop the arms race or are we content to publish studies indicating a preference that it be stopped? Jim Wallis is determined to stop the arms race. He has developed an analysis and a political praxis which seems almost inevitably to lead him into costly confrontation with the government of the richest and most powerful nation in humanity. I am challenged and frightened by the commitment required to be determined to stop the arms race rather than merely expressing disapproval of it. One can discuss the transferability or applicability of Jim Wallis's methods. His sincerity, conviction and leadership ability are beyond doubt and are commodities in short supply among us. I am also convinced that he is prepared to engage in non-violent resistance at great personal cost. He is a follower of Christ by conviction, his political lineage can be traced through St. Francis, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. He is deeply committed, warm and humane person, not a fanatic who urges others to pay the cost of suffering for his vision of the future.

Points from the Evaluation by the National Steering Committee with Jim Wallis

There had been a much greater interest than had been anticipated. In a number of the cities and regions visited people commented that "something is bubbling up" within the churches. There was a great diversity of church affiliation and membership represented everywhere. The constant question was "What should I do?" or "Where do we go from here?" There is a real searching among people in the churches for a realistic, authentic gospel which gets to grips with the problems of the world and the areas of suffering. The tour started many people off on a journey of exploration but also drew out and drew together many who have already gone a good way in identification but had grown isolated, become burnt out and disillusioned because of the intractability of the problems. In a global context, there does seem to be a 'Kairos' in South Africa, the Philippines, Latin America and elsewhere, there is a challenge to which parts of the church are responding. The challenge which Jim Wallis brought is to a church and political situation characterised by a lack of hope.

The tour did something to encourage those who are anticipating or already working on this challenge. Ian Fraser, the National Moderator of the tour told us that Clodovis Boff (Brazilian Theologian and brother of Leonardo) had also used the expression "bubbling up" about the communities, groups and movements in Western Europe, like water just before boiling point as the first bubbles break the surface.

There is clearly hunger, hope and insecurity. The key task now is for a network of fellowship and support to be developed to provide sustenance strong enough to support the networks and movements who feel impelled forward into a more costly discipleship and to nurture those who want to know more. The danger is that unless this happens we will fall prey to the "rich young ruler" and "sheep without a shepherd" situations so familiar to Jesus himself.

Dr. Roger Williamson British Council of Churches

The British Council of Churches Division of Community Affairs

The Board welcomes the open invitation to make submissions to the Inter-Church Process and the wide consultation through the Lent 86 groups. It must nevertheless point to one limitation in the planning process for which it hopes allowance has been made. Although the stated intention is to approach the ecumenical task with a fresh vision of the church's mission in the world much of the detailed work thus far has been carried out in a way which reveals a great many 'Faith and Order' assumptions. The way questions are put often determines the answers. In order to make people come to the process with a new vision of the church and its unity the questions need to lead our thoughts into the topics of mission and evangelism in a way that takes the experience of being human outside the institutions of the church rather more seriously. We do not believe that an adequate theology of our unity, let alone a new ecumenical instrument, will emerge from the process if it does not allow more prominence to what used to be thought of as 'the social witness of the church' but which is now much more closely concerned with the mission and evangelism appropriate to the Gospel.

How do we hear the Word of God addressed to us? This is a fundamental theological question in all our work, which we assume we share with those charged with interpreting the Inter-Church process. For us the answers are to be found not only by a close and prayerful examination of the ecclesiology of the church, and not even by rigorous testing of the effectiveness of the church's mission, measured by whatever criteria seem appropriate. We find the word of God by studying the interpenetration of the revelation of Jesus Christ and our life in the world. The revelation is an historic one and cannot be separated from the world. The Jesus of history exists in the corporate

memory of the church as represented by scripture and tradition. He reveals the love of God, illuminating the biblical record which precedes his ministry. His passion and death are historic events, witnessed by believers and unbelievers. His resurrection and ascension transcend human experience. The power of his Spirit is always at work in the world. Through him we have seen the fullness of God, and come face to face with the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God, the creator and originator, is the saviour and redeemer, the one who is intimately involved with all our experience of life, by whose power we are sustained from day to day. This faith in God by which we live is built not only on past history but also on experience of him in the present. Therefore we resist dualism which considers the world as an evil place where we do not belong and from which we must draw apart in order to find righteousness. Of course there is all too much evidence of sin in our world and of course Christians need time to reflect in retreat from the business of the world, but the word of God in Jesus Christ is to be seen and heard in the totality of our human experience for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

This leads to a second fundamental theological question which underlies both our work and the Inter-Church process. How does the Church exist in a humanity of which it is a part but in which it is distinct? The presence of people of other faiths in our country sharpens the question which is already posed by our predominately secular culture. Christian triumphalism may have provided an answer once but it does so no longer. If one assumes that the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea through the action of Western Christian mission agencies, as some church members appear still to do, one does violence to the original scripture as well as shutting one's eyes to the realities of our world. How did Israel come to understand its vocation under God? How did Iesus see the calling of a new people? How today do we understand the calling of Judaism or the other great world faiths in relation to our own? We will need to keep a clear distinction between the Church as an institution and the Church as the great company of the redeemed throughout time and space. The understanding of our calling is fundamental to the structuring of the institutions of the Church. If we are called to be a witnessing and serving community this has profound implications for the way we order ministry or observe the sacraments. We would simply observe that the points of ecumenical growth, in the sense of the resolution of rivalries and conflicts in local churches and the acceptance of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, is commonly associated with a diaconal ministry to the surrounding community, dialogue with those of other faiths and ideologies and a commitment to influence secular institutions and opinion. To concentrate some attention on what it is that distinguishes the church from the rest of humanity may give some fresh insight into how our unity as Christians is to be expressed.

One point of challenge and growth is to attempt to define what we mean by community, or even neighbourhood. The parochial system is rooted in social and economic realities of a former age. Many so-called 'parish' churches are in fact eclectic, gathering to their worship those of a like mind. Similarly, many of those local churches standing in the reformed tradition now reject the traditional understanding of a gathered church and seek to minister to a defined geographical area and its population. Muddle and confusion result. If this were simply a matter of ecclesiastical untidiness it would be simply annoying. It will take time but we can, given good will, resolve the problem of where we draw lines on maps. Much more fundamentally, it is the result of a lack of clarity about the mission of the church. Our disunity is rooted as much in this as in our historic divisions. The theological question about the distinctiveness of the church is not merely an abstract one. It remains to be resolved by British Christians wherever they meet as a Christian community. Only when we understand what we mean by community can we address the task of mission. Consider the historic experience of conversion, from the baptism of whole households or tribes in the past to the common image of evangelism today as winning souls for Christ one by one. The former emphasises mission to the whole community, however it is defined, and the latter the distinctiveness of the Christian community within a wider one. 'Community' in a Christian sense is surely expressive of something more than geographical proximity. We need to come to a clearer understanding of what it means to be united in Christ

and what it means to be united in the human family, not only on the grand scale, but in the area of our immediate experience. The word 'neighbourhood' would also repay closer study. This is even more commonly used to denote a given area of territory instead of describing a condition of neighbourliness. Our Christian understanding of the law of God is summarised as loving God and our neighbour. This is usually given a highly individualist interpretation. What is and what should be the realtionship between a local church and its 'neighbours'?

Our own understanding of 'community' in the Division over the last few years has been enriched from both religious and secular sources. A community living at peace with itself is somehow greater than the sum of its parts. It is a place where individuals find fulfillment in mutual service, sensitive to each other's feelings and attentive to each others' needs. It is a place where power is shared, because leadership is not concentrated in the hands of a few, nor seen as desirable because of the prestige it bestows. Leadership is genuinely seen as costly service for the good of all. A community has an organic life of change, growth and development. It fosters mutual prosperity. Everyone's talents are employed and varieties of wealth are generated. It is evident that defining such communities in Britain today is much more difficult than in a rural agrarian economy. It may be that an individual belongs in more than one community. It may be that the community in which we share for the purposes of leisure and education merges with others to make a larger community for sharing resources of energy or technology. However, we believe that the same principles hold good; that everyone needs to know they belong in an identifiable community; and that the church has a particular responsibility to practise models of community directed by Christian teaching and influential in other communities. Our limited experience in the Division of sharing money with small groups of people in a variety of communities has reminded us of the seductions of power but also heartened and encouraged us when we hear of how much has been achieved with slender resources. In the consideration of the nature and purpose of the church, and in any planning of a new ecumenical instrument, we would emphasise the importance of the community principles set out here.

This proper attention to the health of the Christian community, must not blind us to a further dimension of all this, that is, the role of individual Christians in the neighbourhoods and communities where they live and work and form relationships. To what extent does the church call and equip its members for their ministry in these places? Does its worship gather together the richness of all this experience in an offering to God? Does its teaching enlighten Christians so that they may discern the word of God in all their varieties of experience and better understand his will? Does its fellowship sustain and support Christians who are bearing the loads of care and responsibility in other places? Some of these questions have been asked repeatedly in recent years but many local churches seem no nearer to answering them. Can this be because we have yet to reshape the institution so that these functions are given greater prominence? Is the teaching role of the stipendiary ministry properly developed? Is sufficient responsibility given to the laity in ways that make the institution responsive to their real needs, as against those perceived by ministers and clergy? Some people have wearied of asking such questions, but there are signs that the institution has begun to change to take them into account. The lack of progress is sometimes to be traced to a lack of proper preparation and training for change, which then results in failure and frustration. The nature of our work in the Division is to spend much of our time forming and expressing opinions on current affairs. At worst this becomes empty moralising. At best it brings into creative synthesis our observation and experience of the world in which we live and the faith which we hold. Talking and writing about unemployment, race relations, medical ethics, voluntary work, technology, the law, the media and a host of other topics we know that it is the stuff of everyone's daily life. Like all Christians we face the daunting task of developing our faith by seeking the living God and his purpose in all these things. It is exciting and sometimes controversial work. The hermeneutic problems that New Testament scholars have wrestled with throughout this century come home with peculiar force when moving from the pages of the New Testament to the New Scientist. How are we to find categories for the dialogue between our tradition and our present experience? Yet at the heart of those problems lies the

way to a deepening of our spiritual life and broadening of our faith. For us the greatest task in the Church today is how we can make that deepening and broadening happen for people who are otherwise secularised. The full resources of all our doctrinal, liturgical and ecclesiological experiences need to be brought together to assist us in the task. More than that, we need a more complete unity of faith, which is to be found in our common pilgrimage, if we are to sustain our mission in the world.

Stephen Orchard 6 May 86

Secular Agencies

Introduction: Who and Why

Twenty-five people accepted an invitation by the Division of Community Affairs, on behalf of the Inter-Church Process, to a meeting in Hammersmith Town Hall on Monday, 28th July 1986. The invitations were spread over a range of individuals or groups known to staff of the DCA in an attempt to hear the views of secular agencies and people not employed by the churches about the 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims' programme and to answer the question of what the Church is for. There was a high degree of personal commitment to the discussion by those who came and several wrote afterwards to thank us or to add further reflections. Some who were unable to come also sent views. Some of those who came were deeply committed to church membership, some had lapsed, some had other faiths or none, but they all recognised the importance of the Christian churches as institutions within British society. Few of them had any specialist knowledge of the churches to inform their judgments so the prevailing tone was subjective and in terms of personal experience. The selection was arbitrary and the group consisted of those who wished to come. Nevertheless, the opinions which emerged support some of those coming from the Lent groups and need to be taken seriously. The report that follows is composed from the notes kept by the four members of the Steering Group for the Inter-Church Process, who came to listen to the groups talking and to prompt the discussion.

The Overall Message

It was very difficult to interest the groups in the questions of changes in the church structures in Britain, even if these were phrased, "What kinds of national church structures would be most helpful to you or your agency in your work?" They were less concerned with structural disunity in the church than with what they saw as failures in mission. This was either in terms of outright failure to convert people or in terms of missed opportunities. Faith, the Gospel, Christian values and spirituality, Christian service and so on, were all seen as treasures which

were hidden by poor communication or lack of confidence and urgency.

Criticisms

These were voiced in various ways by various members of the group. They were not directed against the broad objective of the church but at its failures to fulfil expectations. It was a 'more in sorrow than in anger' sort of feeling. People said the church has not responded to changing conditions. We have created a society in Britain which is nasty, violent and materialist, concerned with rights rather than obligations. Families are torn apart by unemployment and other pressures. People are desperately seeking personal identity, improved personal and communal relationships, and know intuitively that spiritual help is needed. The church has failed to act positively. Many are alienated from churches by upbringing and inertia rather than conscious choice. The churches are withdrawing from public involvement even in schooling and they have never been comfortable with industry and modern business. Their public relations are abysmal. Like the police, they are remote and make their own judgments about what the public needs. Clergy are badly paid but wellhoused, which creates role confusion for them and the public. Churches are good at debate but poor on action. Above all they talk a language which sets them apart from the rest of society. This makes it hard even for committed Christians to relate the church sector of their lives to the rest and almost impossible for the outsider to realise the importance of the Christian faith. Again and again this question of communication was raised.

Ouotes

"Churches are engaged in second rate politics".

"Churches should say less/more on public questions".

"The Church is still plugged in to the literary era. It has an inadequate involvement in modern media systems. The Church is only concerned about the media when it wants something from them".

"Too many clergy attempt to be all things to all people".

"The major decline in the church's resource of people over the last twenty years has coincided with a time when more demands are made on it by the increased complexity of society".

"I see many vicars I wouldn't buy a second-hand car from".

Expectations

Those who were present, whether churchgoers or not, clearly had high expectations of the church and expected it to exercise an influence for good. They felt that the Church can bring renewal and transformation to communities and individuals. At the neighbourhood level it is still one of the prime promoters of community, both in its resources of people and buildings. The trend of opening up churches for drop-in centres, community programmes, youth work, lunch clubs, etc., was welcome and should be fostered. Although we live in a plural society and Christendom is irrecoverable the church must nurture a personal faith which enables people to relate within that society and work together for its good. The personal skills of local clergy and church workers are crucial for this, since one bad experience forfeits people's confidence for a long time. Some people want authority figures but many more want a sympathetic hearing and help in self-awareness and change. The church can provide safe ground on which different groups can meet for dialogue or co-operation. It should not attempt to become too specialised as a social service agency but work with others. It is in a position to challenge values and assumptions. It is able to kindle hope and affirm what is good. Though these tasks are hard to define and discipline they are essential for the health of communities and individuals. This is an area of prime responsibility for the church, a task which if it is laid down by the church may not be taken up by anyone else.

Hopes

Quite apart from expectations there were many comments which expressed hope about future developments and change in the style of church life and the effectiveness of its mission. Expressed in positive terms the future might look like this. The church will become much more effective at equipping and inspiring its existing members to be articulate in the faith and to be better disciples. This will happen in secular as well as church context. We will help the average 'punter in the nave' to take part in real theological discussion. We shall bridge the gap between sacred and secular terminology. The defensiveness which chur-

chy language conceals will be abandoned and we shall be more confident that the message the church has to deliver is relevant and welcome. This is not a question of service books and Bible translations but in matching the insights of the Gospel to the language and feelings of people today who face theological and spiritual questions without help, even when they know they need it. We may find our Bob Geldof. We shall build on analyses such as *Faith in the City* a programme of action. The church will be a centre of spirituality. It will be less defensive and come out of its corner fighting. The church will continue to be compassionate and open but it will also be confident.

Conclusions

The group would have been hard pressed to agree the content of the Gospel in any but the broadest terms. It was a popular rather than an ecclesiastical response to the questions of the Inter-Church Process; but there was a high sense of expectation and hope about the value of the Christian faith and its capacity to contribute to British life if the churches could organise themselves more in terms of their mission than in terms of good church order.

Stephen Orchard 11 September 86

Christian Aid

What on Earth is the Church for?

The Inter-Church Process invited contributions to a debate about the nature and purpose of the church. This particular one is not an official statement of the views of Christian Aid. It is written by one person but takes account of discussions with his colleagues. It is therefore a personal statement which benefits from the insights of others and, at many though not all points, carries their approval.

Faith and Order, Life and Work

Christian Aid with its commitment to development might well be expected to keep a sharp look-out for any overemphasis on 'Faith and Order' to the neglect of 'Life and Work' in a discussion about the raison d'être of the church. There is evidence of just such an over-emphasis in the study/resource book prepared for the Lent '86 course 'What on Earth is the Church for?' Much of the material deals with Christian doctrine and a somewhat ecclesiastical form of ecumenism (one Christian church rather than one world of many faiths), and in a section on Mission the church's 'deeds' are dealt with on one page alongside others on its 'presence' 'words' and 'suffering'. Any reaction must avoid two mistakes.

First it must not see 'Faith and Order' (especially faith) and 'Life and Work' as opposed to one another or as discrete entities. If we ask for example what in the end makes Christian Aid 'Christian' it is not any particular merit over other forms of aid, or the need to arrive at distinctive conclusions or always go about a task in a distinctive way; or simply that it is the development arm of the churches. It is Christian because it has, or constantly seeks to discover, a Christian faith to live by and endeavours to live and work by that faith. There is, or ought to be, constant interaction and the attempt to achieve integrity between what it believes and what it does.

Second where Christian Aid judges that its concerns are

neglected or marginalised in favour for example of introverted institutional concerns, it must not absolutise its own responsibilities and mistake its part for the whole. It is tempting to say that 'development' is not a department of the church's ordered life and work, one amongst many practical implications of its faith; it is, rather, what the church's existence is all about and offers the enquirer the best clue as to how it may be justified. That sounds however like one more experiment in allowing a single limited word to become so inclusive that it is evacuated of meaning: 'all is mission' 'all is prayer' 'all is worship' 'all is development'! It is up to others to decide whether the following brief answer to the question: what on earth is the church for?, the faith by which Christian Aid might be said to live, is just such an exercise.

Making a World

Christians, especially in the Protestant world, have all too often characterised God as mainly a mender or redeemer, in the business of restoring a fallen world and a sinful humanity to what it once was and was intended to be. Without denying that there is much about the world which is sinful and needs to be put right and which makes God's task more difficult, the God who redeems is primarily to be understood as a creator, making a world which does not yet exist, out of materials which can be as puzzling and troublesome to God as they are to us. God does not pursue this creative work alone, but invites us to be colleagues in a joint, two-natured, divine and human creative adventure. In the history of Jesus of Nazareth, Christians have their most revealing clue to its nature: the kind of world God might want to create and the costly and generous manner by which it will be achieved. Jesus exemplifies for us what is always true about God's creative endeavour with us and on our behalf.

The church is not the only colleague of the God we characterise as Christlike, since all women and men are creative beings made in God's image. It is not therefore alone, and it cannot adequately rise to God's invitation to be creative without the other members of the human community. Neither does the church know the outcome in the middle. It does not yet appear what we shall be. The enterprise is genuinely creative which

means it has as much to do with discovering what it would be like to be fully human and of God in a world or universe which is also human and of God, as with achieving it. Recognising its need of others and that there is much it does not know, the church nevertheless believes that in the light of Jesus it understands something of what is happening to human existence to which it must be true in its discipleship and obedience, and which it must try to share with others and contribute to the creative search and struggle of God in all humanity. This is the faith by which it lives and works: that all are not only being mended but being made, becoming what it is in us to be, developing, with Christ and God; and this is the purpose or mission for which the church orders its existence.

It is in terms of some such over-arching vision that Christian Aid would want to see the relative importance of its own and other people's sectional or particular concerns. Those who are denied a livelihood, a measure of freedom and any control over what happens to them, however gifted, have little chance to flourish and grow. Christian Aid may do little more than help provide that chance. Its action with the poorest and powerless may often be more redemptive than creative, establishing the primary base for human flourishing. Its small part is not the whole, but it contributes to what it believes to be the whole, and Christian Aid will look to others for reassurance that their ecclesiastical activities contribute to human flourishing as well. There has been tension in the past, as there will doubtless be in the future, between Christian Aid and the churches because that reassurance has not always been forthcoming.

An International Perspective

Besides its leaning towards 'Life and Work' Christian Aid might also be expected to add an international perspective to any discussion about the church, being in constant touch as it is with Christians in many parts of the world. Often they challenge and rebuke us with their clear-eyed vision of justice and liberation and their option for the poor. Equally often they betray their inheritance from the churches and missionary movements of the West and reflect our own confusions over priorities and our habit of allowing a church which should be following the way of

Christ to get in the way of God's creative task. These Christians in other lands must however be allowed to speak for themselves, a point to which we shall return.

Christian Aid cannot speak for others but only out of its experience of trying to work with others. Three such experiences do not lead to authoritative answers but certainly to further reflections on what on earth the church is for.

The search of faith

The presence of people of other faiths has only recently become a reality for the churches in Britain. It has long been a reality for churches overseas many of whom are the partners of Christian Aid. Where they represent a tiny minority of the population (in India and Thailand for example) it can be overwhelming.

These churches often speak and act as if their task on earth is to make as many Christians out of their fellow human beings as they can. One explanation for this is completely understandable. They wish to strengthen their institutions; affirm their identity over against the rest of society; increase their chances of survival in an inhospitable environment, at times openly hostile. They display something of a siege mentality, comparable to that of small communities of other faiths in our own country. Just as an enlightened view would wish to be supportive of such minority groups at home and their right to exist, so we should be supportive of Christians in minority situations abroad.

A 'siege mentality' is hardly the main reason however why churches seek to win the world for Christ. Many regard it as an essential ingredient of Christian mission. Any traveller on behalf of Christian Aid to the great strongholds of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism can't help but feel that it is, nevertheless, totally unrealistic. One has only to experience the organic links between a culture and a religion, the resistance of one religion in the face of another, the ease with which even humanitarian relief and development work can be seen as cover for proselytism, to realise why, and to be forced to ask whether winning all the world into membership can really be the church's task. If not, what are we to say? Experience may not offer many answers, but it certainly provokes one into pressing the question! To question a familiar goal of the church's mission is not to

question the importance of the spiritual dimension of our lives.

Against the background of the tension which can arise between so-called 'development agencies' like Christian Aid and 'missionary agencies' it is important to stress that a commitment to development and the attempt to provide the basic wherewithal which allows a human being to survive and sustain life and grow, does not imply an indifference to humanity's spiritual needs. Providing the basic wherewithal is of course itself a spritual pursuit insofar as we believe it is what God wants and is therefore of the Spirit (not the flesh, to use Paul's terminology), but a comprehensive or holistic understanding of development and mission will readily appreciate that humans are physical, mental and spiritual beings, able to love God with 'heart and soul and mind and strength', and to be regarded as individuals but also as members one of another only truly themselves as they lose and find themselves in others.

There remains however a difference between insisting that life is more than food and insisting that its needs can only be properly met and its potential achieved by conversion to Christianity. Is that realistic? If not, can it really be true?

Too often Christianity turns out to be our version of it, and the attempt to convert others the desire to make them more or less like us. This is borne out by the way in which Christians in other lands have criticised our tendency to equate Christianity with Western culture, values and ways of life, and by the felt need of the younger churches to question much of what they received and discover their own contextual forms of Christian faith and obedience. Even if we accept that Christianity will take many different forms, does the church exist to make everyone on earth accept some form of it?

We may insist, indeed we should be untrue to our convictions if we did not, that the creative search to discover the nature of human development and achieve it can never be completely successful if it ignores Christian insights, and that the outcome can never be contrary to the best we know in Christ. On the other hand we should be equally untrue to ourselves if we expected people of other faiths to abandon their insights for ours or denied that we ourselves have grounds for thinking

there is much in them of great value. That is one reason why Christian Aid, along with others, likes to talk about 'resource sharing'. It knows well that there are riches in other people, other churches and in other faiths which we need to receive. God's creative activities and invitations do not appear to be confined to Christian circles.

Experience therefore suggests that what we are left with is not a known, universal faith but a quest, the outcome of which is as yet unknown. It gathers to itself the insights of many peoples. One of its essential features is the sharing of faiths; and it requires not that all shall be converted or conform to any existing faith, Christian or otherwise, but that we grow up out of them all and into a faith which transcends the already known. The church might therefore be on earth to make known and share a faith (or faiths) inspired by Jesus Christ, not to lord it over the rest or impose anything on the rest, but as a partner with the rest in a common search.

A community of disagreement

The word 'partner' brings us to a second experience which stimulates some reflections on what the church is for. In Christian Aid there is a good deal of talk about working with rather than for people, in this case the poorest peoople in the world as represented by the churches and non-government organisations in the Third World; and we try to be true to what we say. This emphasis arises out of considerations which have to do with justice and self-reliance; but it also recognises our very real limitations and once again their very real gifts. We do not possess all the resources needed for their development, least of all the best understanding of their needs and how best they can be met; and they, contrary to popular opinion, have much to contribute out of their skills and knowledge and faith and character to their own development and to ours. We cannot go it alone.

We need to be in partnership. As that partnership matures it is able to accept that the reverse is equally true. They have real limitations and we have real gifts. It is not always easy to admit to this in a relaxed way at the beginning. Our largesse and advice is either the occasion of deference and dependence or is rightly regarded with suspicion. Their failures may be hidden

rather than frankly shared for fear of putting the partnership in jeopardy. But in time maturity not only allows the sharing of resources in two directions rather than one, but fosters a mutuality which recognises in each other both grounds for trust and grounds for not trusting too much.

This experience of partnership has its counterpart in Christian doctrine which speaks of our creativity as human beings 'made in the image of God' and of our finitude and our sin. Our ability to achieve what is good and beautiful and true is limited and the outcome is marred. This applies to all forms of Christianity, faith and order, life and work, as much as it applies to anything else. All of them have their limitations. A modern way of putting this is to speak of their 'relativity'. They are profoundly influenced though not wholly determined by the people who fashion them, the cultures and circumstances out of which they come. Change any of these relative factors and you will have a different form of Christianity. All inevitably see things from a limited, human point of view. They also fall short because they are to a greater or lesser extent perverse, distorted by fear and selfinterest. We believe what we believe and do what we do for some admirable reasons but also because such beliefs and actions serve our purposes. Our differences have to do not only with what is inadequate but what is unjust, with our sin as well as our fallibility. These shortcomings and the inevitable perversity which mark all forms of Christianity mean that even if some gain more respect than others, none can be absolutised and given as it were the accolade of God's unquestioning sponsorship. If unanimity will always be hard to achieve, not least on what the church on earth is for, there are grounds for unease when unanimity becomes too widespread.

These reasons for respecting but never totally respecting human achievements, which underlie Christian Aid's experience and practice of partnership, have implications for what might be called the 'internal' and 'external' ecumenism of the church. Insofar as the church is on earth for the sake of truth, its internal ecumenism, that is the relations between Christian churches, might be understood as the search for unity in agreement. Some such understanding is reflected for example in contemporary discussions about Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

Agreement is of course necessary on certain matters if there is to be a common life and common action, though on which matters remains debatable; and we cannot rest content with our differences if truth is one however diverse. We are misled however if we imagine that once we have arrived at agreement we have arrived at truth, since any such agreement is subject to exactly the same limitations and perversities of which we have spoken.

In the interests of what is just and true, internal ecumenism would do better to seek not unity in agreement so much as a 'community of disagreement' where being together and being at odds are not seen as mutually exclusive but equally necessary. Such community fosters partnership and mutuality and the fullest and freest contacts possible between all the diverse forms of Christianity so that they can correct and complement one another. It is not a bland tolerance. It does not say that everything though equally questionable is equally acceptable. It knows the pain as well as the promise of such encounters which go beyond differences of opinion to struggle after righteousness. It is essentially a permanent conciliar unity of partial, provisional and perverse expressions of Christian faith and obedience, attempting to save each other from the worst forms of arrogance, myopia and spiritual poverty by staying together, and forming temporary alliances for joint action where the commonality required for it is discovered.

This internal ecumenism must be matched by external ecumenism as the church shares in the struggle to create the unity of all humankind, and here it may offer its own 'conciliar unity in disagreement' as a model of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a word often on the lips of Christians and sometimes elevated to be the all-purpose answer to our question about what on earth the church is for. It speaks of being together rather than apart; but once again it does not need to be equated, and on our understanding of the limitations and perversity of all things human, should not be equated with persuading people to adopt similar faiths, ideologies and ways of life, Christian, Western or otherwise. Rather the work of reconciliation is the work of developing international relations where acceptance does not mean approval but recognises our need to submit to one another's mutual correction and completion.

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Externally and internally the church will bear witness to its own convictions, but would be wrong to understand reconciliation in Christ as the ascendancy of one ideology over all the rest. Confident in the creativity of God in us and aware of our failures and fallibility it will foster secure arrangements which allow and encourage our differences to interact.

To support the few

These somewhat idealistic reflections, which assume amongst other things that most human beings are willing to stop short of absolutising their point of veiw and adopt the modesty and tolerance which partnership requires, lead us to mention a third and more sombre experience. As understanding grows about the causes of poverty, the need to be involved in fundamental social, political and economic change becomes increasingly apparent; without it there can be no integrity about saying we must put an end to it. This is a difficult task, far more difficult than raising money for famine relief, or helping local communities to reorganise their lives through small-scale development projects. Structural changes which redistribute land for example or power over resources, or alter the patterns of world trade and re-order its economy, require seemingly endless patience, persistence born of indomitable hope, and more. Powerful vested interests are often challenged, opposition is aroused, and people suffer not only from poverty but in the cause of right.

None of this is in one sense surprising. As we have said, in Jesus Christians believe they have their best clue to the nature of God's activities and the manner in which God not only redeems but creates with us the world and humankind. Jesus is a radical character not content with superficial or conventional solutions, and his is clearly a costly endeavour. He too challenges vested interests, arouses opposition, and ends up suffering and dying on a Roman cross. This is not only his way and the way of the world, it is the way of God.

If the church is called to follow in the way of Jesus, that way would seem to be by a narrow gate rather than a broad road, too strenuous and dangerous ever to attract many people. Where they are attracted that may well be because what is offered is no

longer the way of Jesus. That in turn suggests that if the church exists to make a peculiarly Christlike contribution to God's creative work it may have to determine afresh to support and strengthen and sometimes shatter small numbers of highly committed women and men, the salt of the earth, the leaven in the bread, rather than attempt to deal with large numbers. It would not wish to give the majority the slightest impression that they are excluded from the love and concern of God, quite the reverse, but it would not set out to enlist or accommodate them.

Such views on what on earth the church is for are clearly opposed to others. many for example assume that the church is meant to grow, an assumption often justified by the dominical instruction to make disciples of all nations, and the spectacular expansion of the early church. Again there are forms of Christianity, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, which for centuries have embraced the mass of the people. And are we to be dismissive of the wider community of Christian believers who see themselves as following Christ but whose service is less dramatic and more conservative than phrases such as 'radical discipleship' imply?

Here maybe we come across the community of disagreement and the need not to blunt the edge of our differences but allow them to live together and discomfort one another. It is true that the boundaries of God's family are wide. God's people are not an elite. The edges of the church are quite properly blurred. God comes to us as gift as well as demand. Looking at the life and work of Jesus however, there seems no denying that an authentic note is struck by those who suffer because they hunger and thirst and are persecuted for what is right, that discipleship is costly, and that the quality of Christian obedience and what lays claim to the church's support, had better be judged in that demanding light.

More of a Test than an Answer

What on earth is the church for? No attempt has been made to give a comprehensive answer only to state clearly a number of convictions against which all the church's actions must be tested. It is here to make a world. It has resources but they are

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not self-sufficient. It can achieve nothing on the cheap. Where it bows or expects others to bow to a single view of God's truth, where it basks in approval but does not suffer, where it has no need of those whose faith differs from its own, above all, where it does not intend to fashion a new world ordered by wisdom, by justice and by love, but maintains the world as it is, it denies its true self and bends its energies to no good purpose.

Because we are here as God's people to develop a universe in which all can flourish, we must ask of any move we make whether it is a step towards that end, not least for those who appear to have little or no chance to flourish at all.

Michael H. Taylor DIRECTOR July 1986

Catholic Fund for Overseas Development

A perspective from CAFOD on the nature and purpose of the Church must draw on two streams of experience. On the one hand CAFOD'S role within the Roman Catholic community in England and Wales and on the other its manifold contact with the churches in the Third World and its involvement in their life and struggle for a better world.

CAFOD in England and Wales

CAFOD was born out of the concern of lay people to respond effectively to the needs of the poor in the developing world. It seeks to serve the poor of the Third World with compassion and promote human development and justice, and to involve the whole Roman Catholic community in England and Wales in the process. Its work is integral to the evangelising mission of the church. Evangelisation demands that we simultaneously proclaim the 'Good News of the Kingdom' and begin to make it a reality in people's lives, especially poor people. (cf Evangelii Nuntiandi).

To describe CAFOD as 'an aid agency', could be to give the impression that it is merely an adjunct, a peripheral or optional extra in the life of the church in England and Wales. We must strongly affirm the contrary. In its social teaching the Roman Catholic Church insists that the active promotion of justice and development is a constitutive dimension of teaching and living the Gospel. The work of CAFOD is therefore one of the principal means through which this precept is put into practice. It is a crucial aspect of the church's life and is increasingly being embraced as such by the Roman Catholic community.

CAFOD was rooted from the outset in the scriptural injunction to pray, fast and give alms. Constantly linked together in the Bible, the three are clearly intended to be part of the Christian life and CAFOD brings them into the lives of communities, schools and congregations through the practice of Family Fast

Day.

Although it is not essential directly to link self-denial with the plight of the poor, the realisation that there is a connection between third world poverty and first world affluence has made the Catholic community increasingly aware of its own materialism and hence enabled it to rediscover and revalue the practice of fasting linked to prayer and the sharing of resources. The place of prayer in this process is fundamental since this helps us to appreciate the need to render stewardship for all that we possess.

CAFOD's experience demonstrates that the whole ministry of justice and development is a fruitful area for ecumenical cooperation. Although it is mediated through different traditions, the Christian vision shared by agencies seeking to build up the kingdom has been the source of a great deal of joint creative work in the Third World, which in its turn has enabled the various denominations to understand and respect one another in a new way.

Furthermore, we reach out to people in need, regardless of their creed or ideology, and this is to reaffirm that every human person is a son or daughter of God. In the parable Jesus told in response to the question "who is my neighbour?" the Good Samaritan did not ask the man beaten up by bandits to which church or political party he belonged. To-day, unfortunately we need constantly to resist the temptation to see the image of God only in suffering fellow Christians, while being blind to his presence in those of other faiths or none. And resist too the pressure to restrict or deny aid to people who live under regimes whose politics we may find distasteful. Our responsibility is to reach out to the poor wherever they are, be it in Ethiopia or Argentina, Nicaragua or South Africa, and in so doing help to reconcile and unite. If our service is instrumental in maintaining or fostering division, it becomes a scandal.

Underpinning all CAFOD's work is the concept of 'partnership' between the Roman Catholic community in England and Wales and Christian communities in the Third World. Partnership postulates a two way relationship. The concept and terminology of donors and recipients, whether of cash, materials or missionary personnel, is set aside in favour of a concept of mutual sharing of resources and experiences. The flow of financial resources to the Third World is matched by a reverse flow of experience, analyses, and reflections on being poor and being church in a poor world. These, along with the reports of returning missionairies and third world visitors can, and should provoke, challenge, educate and stimulate our own ecclesial life. We reject the idea that the North is the source of all knowlege and worth, realising instead that we belong to one interdependent world. We humbly accept (or try to) that the people of the South have a great deal to teach us and to offer us for our growth and enrichment as church and as members of the wider community. This is what Jesus meant when he prayed that all might be one, for unity of the churches only makes sense as part of the vision of one world.

Experience of Church in the Third World

In so many parts of the Third World the church has fashioned a new synthesis between the concerns of the here-and-now, and the concern for eternal life, between the immanent and the transcendent. The problems and struggles of daily life are integrated in a holistic way into the prayer and worship of the Christian community. The artificial division between faith and life, between things spiritual and things temporal is being increasingly rejected, whether it manifests itself through an old-fashioned pietistic form of Christianity or through the more worrying spread of fundamentalist sects. The prophetic witness of the church in the face of injustice is accepted with all that implies in terms of crossing new political thresholds.

Stirred to action by the oppression and poverty of the majority of people in the Third World, groups and individuals are taking great risks in order to help them to improve their lot and to struggle for a fuller life. Many such groups and individuals are church-based and have come together in basic Christian communities. They have learned how to examine their situation through the lenses of the scriptures and to draw up programmes of action. They have come together for mutual support and real celebrations. In many countries these communities have begun to transform both the church and the wider society in which they

live. These communities, therefore, are beginning to show us a new ways of being church, a church that:

is based on small grassroots communities,

is inspired by the Bible,

celebrates its faith in common especially in the Eucharist, reflects on its social reality,

is therefore committed to transforming society.

We realise that deeper social analysis and biblical reflection are needed before programmes of pastoral action can be drawn up in this country. The model used in the Third World could be widely applied in grassroots communities in this country.

As we listen to the church in Africa, Asia and Latin America we realise that on the whole it is not by accident that the living standards of people in these parts of the world are going down. Often it is the result of the choices and decisions of policy makers in the First World. Decisions made in the First World regarding trade, debt repayments, or technology, can be directly responsible for keeping poor people poor. We are being invited by the church in the Third World to be prophetic in our own land and to realise that private compassion is not enough — what is needed is international justice. The cries of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophets are still relevant today.

The agenda for the Church has changed everywhere. In the Third World it has learned to recognise the importance of the voice of the poor. In this country, too, the church needs to acquire the skill of drawing close to, listening to, and cooperating with the poor.

Finally, one of the distinctive marks of the church in the Third World is its pluriformity. The experience of pluriformity enables CAFOD to be patient and painstaking in this part of the world. We have to understand that differences need not be divisive. On the contrary they are a rich source from which we can all gain.

Julian Filochowski DIRECTOR September 1986

Third World Churches

What follows is a summary of 'third-world perceptions' on the nature and purpose of the church in the light of its mission, received by the BCC Conference for World Mission through its member bodies, as requested by the Inter Church Process 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims', supplemented by brief reports on an inter-denominational visit to China, May 1986. Responses to the Secretary's letter were noted from United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, United Reformed Church, Methodist Church Overseas Division, Church Missionary Society, Church of Scotland, and Christians Abroad. From these responses, the following distinctive insights from overseas partners and churches on "the nature and purpose of the church in the light of its mission" were noted.

Witness

Willingness to plan national programmes of Gospel proclamation and church growth with targets (eg Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, Churches in Korea, etc.). This is not just a big business approach towards numerical church growth but acknowledges that specific aims can be stimulating.

A corporate approach to evangelism, not just extending the Kingdom one by one (eg evangelistic styles from Indonesia; the Masai).

Awareness of the common commitment to mission which leads to a sense of urgency in moving to unity (eg South India).

Gossipping the Gospel - ie the Good News as part of our daily conversation with family, friends and neighbours.

A recognition of the power of forgiveness under persecution (eg Iran, other Middle East Churches, Uganda).

Valuing the contribution of the Orthodox Church especially recognising its survival and the authenticity of its Christian witness under the pressures from the environments of the Muslim Middle East and the Marxist Eastern Europe (Egypt, Gulf States, Russia etc.).

Holistic and Mutual Service

Seeing the complementarity of evangelism and service which leads to a holistic approach to mission. Christians expressing their faith in service is a natural part of the witness of the church but the confusion of service as merely a pretext for evangelism must be avoided (eg Presbyterian Church in Burma, Church of South India, Church of the Province of Kenya).

Recognition of Diaconal Ministry to the disadvantaged as in many European countries (eg Hungary). This is shown in specifically church run programmes of service but it is also important to recognise the service of lay Christians in secular or state programmes. The need for mutuality in giving, in receiving, and in power sharing.

Acknowledging Plurality

Seeking allies among those of other faiths for necessary community work. Practical working together to achieve community goals rather than mere consultation in Inter-faith committees (eg some projects of the Church of South India).

The ability to relate church life to the variety of cultures within a nation and to recognise the enrichment of our church life that is possible from the multicultural setting (eg Caribbean Churches).

There are varieties of different modes of cooperation with Roman Catholic and Evangelical Christians and the experience of these inspires hope and confidence for our own searching (eg Nigeria, where there is a Christian Council of Nigeria, not including either group and a Christian Association of Nigeria which includes both).

There is an effectiveness often shown by Christian minorities and also a willingness to cooperate with each other which should defuse our fear of being seen as a minority (eg Nigeria).

Sense of Community

An awareness of the strong impact of lifestyle and witness of ordinary Christians as they go about their daily business and leisure. An emphasis on 'being', on being in community, being a sign of hope and an expression of God's universal kingdom, being a Christ centred community but in dialogue with people of other faiths, being an alternative model of what society should be like (eg Nicaragua, Philippines, South Africa), being multicultural, multiracial, multilingual in nations which may be divided by these things (eg Sri Lanka, India), being a community in which people can grow continually. In the context of 'Gossipping the Gospel' the importance of family groupings for Christian Mission.

The attitude to death and bereavement which reveals itself in celebration of the confidence of resurrection and in the support of the local community for a bereaved family (eg Caribbean).

Justice

Practical Christian political awareness as in Latin America. There is an emphasis on orthopraxis (right doing) rather than orthodoxy. This seems to be linked with the relevance of bible study and people's understanding of their Christian faith in their national and local contexts (eg basic Christian communities, South and Central America, Caribbean).

A challenge to re-examine our commitment to 'reconciliation' as an over-riding Christian principle in politics, without a prior or equal commitment to repentance and justice (eg the Kairos document from South Africa).

There is a challenge to the preoccupations of British Churches with security and a reluctance to take risks for the sake of the Gospel (eg Central America, basic Christian communities in Italy, USSR, South Africa).

Theological Education for All and Spirituality

Theological education with and by the people finds its spiritual dynamic from and within local Christian communities. There is a liveliness about the Theological Education by Extension courses, probably stemming from the relevance of their theology to people's everyday life. There is also an acknowledgement that centres of theology teaching have a responsibility in sharing widely their knowledge and fresh thinking (e.g. Presbytery of Lanka, Mindolo, University College of Zambia, Theological Education by Extension, South America, Taiwan Theological

College, Malawi etc.).

Praying through issues that are otherwise likely to divide the Church and community (e.g. Presbyterian Churches in Malawi, Korea, South Africa). Exuberant and eager bible study, prayer and worship (eg churches in Ghana, Nicaragua, Brazil).

An awareness of the communion of saints. The naturalness of this communion affecting our life and worship. Experience of resurrection and the survivability of faith and life under repression and persecution (eg China, Eastern Europe, Nepal).

From China

"We have something like Easter", they told us when we met representatives of the Beijing Christian Church at Chongwenmen. "During the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1979, all churches were closed. After Easter 1979 the church suddenly began again. It is now one church. There are different customs among us because of our previous denominations; different ways of expressing love to God. But the spirit of unity binds us. No one can embrace all truth, for the embrace of God is so rich. So we all try to contribute what we have received. The fundamental thing we have in common. The rest is not so important. We accept each other in Christ and our members are happy with this unity. Since 1979 Christians seem to be full of love for God and hothearted. When we put up the notice board: 'Beijing Christian Church', one old Christian wept and kissed the board, saying: 'This has been my prayer for many years!'"

In answer to questions about whether the urge to unity was a result of the repression, the Chongwenmen people said that there had been a process towards unity before Liberation (1949) but that it was when finance from overseas was cut off after Liberation that Christains knew they must come together. This unity was accelerated by the Three Self Movement towards "self-government, self-support and self-propagation". Moreover, the church which had previously, under foreign influence, been "too heavenly" now began to call its members to love their church and love their country at the same time. Elsewhere this was expressed to us by the slogan "Glorify God and serve the people". With such motivation, as we heard in Fuzhou

from "a retired Methodist", Chen Hoai Zhen, "people are not interested in differences".

Though Christians did not begin their meetings with us anywhere by recounting the years of the official ban on the church, what they did mention in reply to our questions reminded us of some of the true marks of martyrdom, in the sense of witness with suffering. Firstly, there was no rancour in their speech. Pastors, declared jobless, had been sent to work in factories or on farms. Pastor Lau of the Zhu-Shotang (Bamboo) Church in Xiamen had been made to wear a fool's cap and a placard on his chest as he was led through the streets. There was no hint of bitterness in him or in those who told us how he had suffered. We find a similar selflessness in victims of South African oppression, as also in Argentine sufferers under the Galtieri junta.

Secondly, we heard people blaming themselves for undervaluing the Christian life in the period before the Cultural Revolution. "When we had the opportunity to worship every Sunday, we didn't realise how precious it was." Here was a reminder that the good life for Christians is not to be equated with outward ease and freedom from disturbance, but rather with the blessings of fellowship received when, as they told us in Beijing, "Christians stand firm".

Thus I found a third mark of the living church: that such faithfulness in prayer, in love and in right relations served to revive the faith of people of different denominations and to promote practical ecumenism as they came out of the shadows and sought each other in love, without reference to which fragment of the church they had previously belonged.

Fourthly, we were not hearing a success story. When we asked about the prospect of a continued growth in unity, we were told in Chongwenmen and elsewhere that they knew much had still to be done, that out of their experience of sharing, they had a keener sense of "hunger". This "hunger", of which they said "we get it from Paul", itself nourished them as they found happiness in mutual respect. "We must humble ourselves in order to be ready to love others better."

For me, our encounters thus had an authentic New Testament quality, reminding me of the condition of those Aegean congre-

gations to whom Paul addressed his letter. "Because there is one Father, we must unite", said a young woman seminarian in Beijing. "The denominational background has fallen away. And so my parents and grandparents rejoice in the unity of the church." A senior man with a beatific smile endorsed this: "Young people have no sense of denominations which had come from abroad". In different encounters we heard a clear affirmation that "Christians have something special to give to their fellow citizens. "People need God", they told us in Quanzhou, "and so the main emphasis of the life of the church is that all must pass on faith. For Jesus said that he had come to give people 'abundant life' ". In answer to our question about how they understood the nature and task of the Church in the light of its mission" (the theme of the Inter-Church Process), we were given their understanding that "the Spirit is doing a wonderful thing and the church is a receiving of the Spirit". This experience of "life in the Spirit" gave them new respect for one another, and for other religions, and also made them ready to cooperate with local and central government for social development. The influence of Christian lives as "salt of the Earth" was thus underlined, "for since there is no public preaching (ie open air missions) people must see Jesus in us".

Specific examples of new life were quoted in our long conversation in Quanzhou: the young man whose poor behaviour and careless work gave way to a completely new character after he joined the church fellowship. So, too, the quarrelsome woman who ill-treated her husband until, under the influence of the Spirit, she became a kind and gentle person. The "bodyhood" of the church was assumed as vital. To the question, "what is the most important element in your relationships now?", the people of Fuzhou's Flower Lane (Hwa Xang) congregation answered "mutual prayer".

Anywhere in the world, questions about ecumenical growth must raise the issue of relations with Roman Catholics. The China Study Project's Bulletin No. 29, January 1986, carried an article on this subject by Sister Goretti Lau. On our visit we did not hear many comments on the present state of Roman Catholicism in China. Bishop Moses Hsieh told us that in Fuzhou relations between the post-denominational church and Roman

Catholics were now "improving". But elsewhere we heard that people recognised six religions: Buddhism the largest, Conficianism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity and Roman Catholicism! The continuing split between Roman Catholics who reject papal authority and those who remain loyal may well make closer association between Roman Catholics and the rest of the church less easy.

Fergus MacPherson August 1986

International Dialogues

International Dialogues concerned with steps towards Christian Unity have increased in number in recent years, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Reformed and others have engaged in conversations in pairs and in wider groupings. A complex network of relationships has developed between these different World Communions. Their discussions have covered many subjects (for a full account see Confessions in Dialogue by N. Ehrenstrom and G. Gassmann WCC 1975, subsequent reports of the Forum on Bi-lateral Conversations and Growth in Agreement edited by H. Meyer and L. Vischer WCC 1984), but our particular concern here is to discover what light they may throw on our debate together in Britain on the nature and purpose of the church. The following report is the product of a consultation in London in June 1986 on 'The Church as seen in International Dialogues' chaired by Mary Tanner of the Church of England's Board for Mission and Unity.

The work of the various bi-lateral and multi-lateral interchurch dialogues can easily be regarded as rather remote from, or even detached from the process of ecumenism at grass-roots level. In this introductory section it is hoped that we can place these dialogues in perspective so that they can be seen as a relevant contribution to a movement towards unity involving the whole church at all levels. While recognising the inherent value in all of these dialogues, we would stress that they are merely one of the high profile facets of the ecumenical movement and they should be viewed as complementing and informing the ecumenical process which exists at other levels.

International dialogues which have resulted in formal statements or reports are of course by no means the only examples of dialogue which may be of value to the ecumenical movement. The unwritten agendas and dialogues of young people, the women's movement, and the minority churches can all benefit from, and hopefully contribute to the formal dialogues at international level. Nor are ecumenical dialogues restricted to the

so-called main stream churches.

By informing a wider audience about the conclusions and proposals put forward by these dialogues it is hoped that local ecumenism will benefit from the insights of an international perspective. This may be particularly helpful to members of church communions which are international by their very nature. In reporting and commenting on a wide selection of dialogues we hope to show that these dialogues do not take place in isolation from each other, indeed it is often the case that they complement each other and share common insights. By surveying a wide range of dialogues it will be observed that different images and priorities are sometimes preferred by the different ecclesial communities. However some recurring themes also emerge from several dialogues and so we are given a vision of an ecumenical process which goes much deeper than individual churches dialoguing with each other in a vacuum. It is hoped that by sharing the insights from such a wealth of Christian experience new light will be shed on ecumenical problems which hold back the movement towards unity. We are not setting out to prove that international dialogues are the panacea for all divisions in the churches, but it is hoped that the wider dissemination of information and shared experiences of faith will help in the process of healing the wounds of division.

THE CHURCH AS DESCRIBED IN INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUES

What are the key concepts of the church used by various multilateral and bi-lateral international dialogues? How do those engaged in dialogue understand these concepts and what consequences follow from using them? How far are various tensions taken into account, such as those between unity and division, the past and the future, holiness and sinfulness, or between the ideal and actual church? How far is the church's concern with moral and ethical issues affirmed through them? What model of unity and diversity are these dialogues working with, and how do they envisage attaining their goal?

In this section we shall look at a number of bi-lateral dialogues [chosen because they involve representatives from churches participating in the Interchurch Process 'Not Strangers But Pil-

grims'] and at the multi-lateral World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission's Lima Report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and the official responses to it by churches in Britain and Ireland, in order to see what answers can be given to these questions.

Baptist-Reformed Conversation, 19771

This exploratory dialogue uses three key concepts of the church: (a) 'the people of God' which underlines the continuity of God's purpose in the discontinuity of history, and the community of faith to which the believer belongs under the new covenant, which is more than the sum total of individual believers. This holds together the Baptist emphasis on personalism and the Reformed emphasis on community and describes the church as both community of salvation and community of mission. (b) 'the body of Christ' which "expresses the intimate unity of Christ and his church without obscuring the distinction of the church from Christ and its subordination to him". The body of Christ becomes manifest in the empirical church bodies, yet neither individually nor together are existing denominations simply identical with Christ's body. (c) the church as event, a description which sees it primarily not as an institution but as continually happening "where the Lord effectively exercises his rule and where this is recognised and accepted i.e. where the Word is proclaimed and believed, where the sacraments are administered and received, where the communion with the Lord and with each other is celebrated and upheld, and where the church in the name and in the power of the Lord goes out in witness and service."

The local church, which manifests and represents the 'One Church of Christ', 2 is necessarily related to other congregations; but the character of the true church is impaired if the local congregation is isolated. Through wider meetings however, the local church is encouraged and criticised and vice versa.

Use of these three concepts of the church together allows a pattern of unity and diversity to emerge, e.g. over baptismal practice, as well as a balance between the local and the universal, the gathered congregation and the wider councils of pre-

sbytery and synod, the visible and the invisible church, local ministry and 'superintending' ministry over a number of congregations.

Reformed-Roman Catholic Conversations 1977³

The key to this dialogue is its Christological approach to each issue. Its key concept of the church is the body of Christ existing through the Holy Spirit, but it also uses other images, such as bride of Christ and effective sign of Christ's presence in the world. This controlling approach leads for instance to the statement that the church has teaching authority "to the extent that it listens to the Word Christ speaks to it ever afresh". Whilst the church is described as "the privileged place of Christ's presence in the world", any "ecclesiastical monopoly" on Christ's presence is rejected.

The ethical dimension of the gospel and mission is acknowledged as extending to the realm of politics; and as a 'communio' the church is said to contradict the structures of the various sectors of the life of modern secular society, opposing exploitation, oppression, manipulation, intellectual and political pressures of all kinds.

The church catholic is really represented and exists in the local churches. "It is only by participating in the local community that we share in the life of the universal church, but the local community without universality ... runs the risk of becoming a ghetto or of being arbitrarily dominated by individuals". This dialogue promotes an 'ecumenism of convergence' which will concentrate on what is necessary without demanding uniformity or suppressing pluralism.

Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue, 19824

The key concept is *koinonia* translated 'communion' but given the wider meaning of 'union with God in Christ Jesus through the Spirit' which entails 'communion with one another'. "Koinonia is never equated with Church in the New Testament" but it "most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various New Testament images of the church." It requires visible expression; but the church is described as "the 'sacrament' of God's saving work" (in order to preserve freedom of movement

between "the ideal and the actual"), a "sign that God's purpose in Christ is being realised in the world by grace", and an "instrument for the accomplishment of this purpose" (in as much as it "proclaims the truth of the Gospel and witnesses to it by its life, thus entering more deeply into the mystery of the kingdom"). It is "the community of those reconciled with God and with each other ... it is also the reconciling community". "Our unity has not been destroyed ... but ... it has been impaired through separation".

The use of the concept of *koinonia* provides a framework within which Anglicans and Roman Catholics can put into words their growing respect for and recognition of each other. However they and their authorities have yet to decide on, and then to take the steps which would lead to "full visible communion" which would involve "mutual recognition of sacraments and ministry, together with the common acceptance of a universal primacy, at one with the episcopal college in the service of the *koinonia*."

Orthodox-Roman Catholic Dialogue, 19825

The primary emphasis here is on the church as a local reality; though "there is a 'Jerusalem from on high' which 'comes down from God', a communion which establishes the community itself." The church "which is in a given place manifests itself when it is assembled"; it is "fully assembled when it celebrates the Eucharist" and as it does so "a new unity is communicated which overcomes divisions and restores communion in the one body of Christ, a unity which transcends psychological, racial, socio-political or cultural unity."

This starting point makes it possible to move from the conviction, shared by Orthodox and Roman Catholics, that "the body of Christ is one; there exists then only one church of God", to the assertion that "each eucharistic assembly is truly the holy Church of God, the body of Christ, in communion with the first community of the disciples and with all who throughout the world celebrate and have celebrated the memorial of the Lord." It is then possible, by using the key concept of the mystery of the church (which is seen as a reality which finds expression in different local churches) to open the way to mutual recognition

between them. "Each should recognise in the others, through their individual features, the identity of the mystery of the church." However this is only possible through "communion in the same *kerygma*, and so in the same faith;... it also requires the will for communion in love and in service, not only in words but in deeds."

This is particularly important as a way forward for two churches which each claim to be "the one true church of Christ".

Anglican-Lutheran Dialogue 1982 & 19836

This dialogue draws on the ARCIC in describing the church as *koinonia* and with the Anglican-Reformed Dialogue speaks of the church as a sign and instrument of God's will for all humanity. In speaking of the Church as both divine and human, as constituted by the Triune God through his saving action in word and sacrament, and in confessing the church to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, this dialogue maintains the tension between it being the "first fruits of the Kingdom of God" and at the same time participating in all the ambiguities and frailties of the human condition and being always in need of reform and renewal.

As a result of Anglican-Lutheran Dialogue, resolutions have been passed in America setting up a new relationship of "Interim Eucharistic Communion" on the grounds that "we are mutually able to recognise the presence of the church of Jesus Christ in our respective communions ... even if there is not as yet complete agreement on the mutual expression of apostolicity." This "presses us on to move with urgency towards the fullest possible ecclesial recognition and the goal of full communion," which "implies a community of life, an exchange and a commitment to one another in respect of major decisions on questions of faith, order and morals. It implies, when churches are in the same geographical area, common worship, study, witness, evangelism and promotion of justice, peace and love."

Anglican-Reformed Dialogue, 19847

The Anglican-Reformed International Commission, perhaps because it began its work by looking at a series of failures and disappointments in the quest for unity, has placed Christian unity within the missionary and eschatological perspective of God's Kingdom and God's will and purpose for the world, and sees it as a means towards achieving the goal of human unity.

Its key concepts of the church are as "sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom." For to see it as an end in itself makes "the quest for ecclesiastical unity irrelevant to the great issues of God's rule of justice and peace".

It speaks of the church as "the embodiment of Christ's life in the life of an actual community" and of its "provisionality in relation to the Kingdom"; this enables it to hold together unity, evangelism, and justice and peace. It also speaks of the need for true believing (orthodoxy) to bear fruit in right action (orthopraxis), and of the need for "mutual correction and admonition" of sinners called to a school of holiness.

Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, 19848

Although members of the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission agree "that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, we are not agreed on the account to be given of the sinfulness and division which is to be observed in the life of Christian communities." Anglicans see "the struggle between grace and sin as characteristic of the church on earth". Orthodox however "believe that the Orthodox Church is the one true church of Christ which as his body is not and cannot be divided." Nevertheless both say that "the mystery of the church cannot be defined or fully described." It is a "lived experience", about which the New Testament speaks primarily in images: body of Christ, messianic gathering, new Israel, holy temple of God, spiritual house, royal priesthood, bride of Christ. They also emphasise the "abnormal situation" of "a disrupted Christian people seeking to restore our unity" which is damaged but not destroyed by our divisions. They speak of the church as 'sign, instrument and firstfruits of the Kingdom of God", but have not yet spelt out the implications of this as a means of holding the tension between the holiness of the Church and the sinfulness of its members.

Methodist-Roman Catholic Dialogue, 19859

Members of this dialogue write: "We have found that *koinonia* both as a concept and an experience, is more important than any particular model of church union that we are yet able to propose." Their second key concept is of "the church as a kind of sacrament, both as an outward manifestation of God's grace among us and as signifying in some way the grace and call to salvation addressed by God to the whole human race."

Koinonia is embodied within the tensions of the in-between times, describes the pilgrim people in tension between sin and holiness, allows and encourages diversity within unity and does not imply uniformity or suppression of gifts, though there have to be limits to variety to "exclude whatever would disrupt communion in faith, order and sacramental life."

A universal primacy might well serve as focus of and ministry for the unity of the whole church.

The Lima Report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and responses to it by British and Irish Churches. 10

The key concepts of the church¹¹ used in the Lima report are:

community of the new Covenant, of faith and life, of baptized believers,

eucharistic community,

body of Christ,

communion with God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, proclamation, prefiguration and foretaste of God's Kingdom,

the life of new creation given by the Spirit,

a priesthood serving the whole of humanity by proclamation, intercession and service,

the whole people of God.

Support for these concepts is found for example in the Church of England's identification of Lima on baptism as implying a view of the church "as a continuing, historic and worldwide community of faith", in the Society of Friends' sense of having a high calling "to be the body of Christ", or in the welcome by the Salvation Army for "the basis for true Christian Unity" being "the common calling of the people of God" although the Union

of Welsh Independents is disappointed that the section on Ministry "does not succeed in being consistent with [this] fundamental principle."

A considerable challenge comes to the concept of the church as "the eucharistic community", not least from the Society of Friends who feel this implies that they and the Salvation Army "are not part of the local Christian Community"; from the Salvation Army who regret this change of emphasis "from the church as the body of Christ to a group of baptized people who observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper"; from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland who find it an "unacceptable view of the church" to portray a "sacramental liturgy and life as its main feature".

The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland feels the implicit doctrine of the church in the Ministry section is incompatible with their "convictions as to the centrality of the local congregation of gathered believers and the place of ordained ministry in relation thereto."

The Church of Scotland fears that such attention to old 'neuralgic points' not only exaggerates their importance but might possibly obscure more fundamental questions about the nature and calling of the church.

On moral issues, the Lima Report itself speaks of the baptized being "given a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit "and a motivation towards realising "the will of God in all realms of life"; of "a constant challenge to the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life"; and of a radical challenge to "all kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom" when we share in the body and blood of Christ. The Methodist Church echoes this need for the Apostolic Faith to speak to issues of justice, righteousness and peace.

On the Vision of Unity, the United Reformed Church points out that "we live in a constant tension between awareness of a unity which transcends our divisions and awareness of a division which mars our unity. Too great an emphasis on either will suggest either that nothing needs to be done or that everything must be changed." It recommends that we should set "the

experience of churches which have moved into union alongside that of churches which understand unity in terms of unbroken continuity."

The Society of Friends is "anxious lest 'visible unity' should be equated with 'organic unity'". Not least since it feels that "statements of doctrine can never in themselves be regarded as a satisfactory basis for union." The Salvation Army is clear that "we are already one in Christ, our task is how this can be realised and made visible in relations between and within the churches." Baptists in Scotland question the goal of visible unity, since they believe "in the spiritual unity of all who belong to Christ" which is more important than the organisational oneness of church structures". Baptists (G.B. and Ireland) feel "unease that the model of unity assumed, and the nature of consensus sought make inadequate allowance for a diversity which is arguably compatible with living in communion one another."

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland feels the Lima report "tends to make Christian unity and church fellowship depend upon agreeing sufficiently ambiguous consensus formulae, rather than frankly accepting differences which need not divide us in Christ." However, the Scottish Episcopal Church concludes: "The visible unity of all Christian people sharing the life of Christ and sent that the world may believe, points beyond the ecumenical movement to God's intention to unite the whole human race, renewed in the image of his Son. This vision ought to be kept in mind throughout our ecumenical endeavours."

Notes

- (1) Report of Theological conversations sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Baptist World Alliance, 1977 in *Growth in Agreement* ed. H. Meyer and L. Vischer, Paulist Press/WCC 1984. pp131 ff.
- (2) Here the report quotes the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium 26* "The Church of Christ is truly present in all local gatherings of believers."
- (3) The Presence of Christ in Church and World. Final Report of the dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed

Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity 1977, in *Growth in Agreement* pp.433 ff.

- (4) Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue: *The Final Report*, London CTS/SPCK 1982.
- (5) The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: The First Statement of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, Munich 1982: SPCU Information Service No.46 pp. 107ff; One in Christ 1983 No.2. pp. 188ff; Archdiocese of Thyateira & Great Britain/CTS 1984.
- (6) Anglican-Lutheran dialogue. The Report of the Anglican-Lutheran European Regional Commission Helsinki 1982, SPCK 1983. Anglican-Lutheran Relations: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Joint Working Group 1983 ACC/LWF 1983.
- (7) God's Reign and Our Unity. The Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission 1984, SPCK/St. Andrew Press 1984.
- (8) Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue. The Dublin Agreed Statement 1984, SPCK 1984.
- (9) Towards a Statement on the Church. Report of Joint Commisson between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, Nairobi 1985.
- (10) Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111 WCC Geneva 1982.
- (11) Churches respond to BEM: official responses to the 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' text vol.1. Faith and Order Paper No. 129. WCC Geneva 1986. pp7-8.

REFLECTIONS

What contribution can these dialogues make to our understanding of what we are doing in the Inter-Church Process, 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims'? In this section we will reflect on these international dialogues to draw on them for insight into our own endeavour. There are five sections dealing with particular aspects of ecumenical dialogue and a final section in which some important questions are raised.

The basis of unity

The new quest for Christian unity has had to develop a new language and the dialogues have increasingly resorted to the New Testament Greek term koinonia as a means of understanding the churches' experience of growth in unity. It expresses "participation in God through Christ in the Spirit by which believers become adopted children of the same God and members of the one body of Christ sharing the same Spirit. It includes deep fellowship among participants, a fellowship which is both visible and invisible, finding expression in faith and order, in prayer and sacrament, in mission and service". (Towards a Statement on the Church, Roman Catholic/Methodist dialogue, 1985, p.23.)

Koinonia is not merely a static notion, describing the structure of ecclesial organisation; but rather it points to the mystery of the Christian's life in relation to the Father, the crucified and risen Lord, and the Paraclete. *Koinonia* is not merely a concept. It is an experience. As God in his merciful love draws us closer to himself and to one another so we experience this koinonia more richly. Indeed it causes us to seek more urgently a full expression of that communion in our lives despite the fact that there are many obstacles to be overcome in our understandings of one another and the ways we live.

Nevertheless, those who pray together for Christian unity know the beauty and peace of that koinonia in united worship. Those who work in local ecumenical projects and those who work in ecumenical dialogues at all levels have known the truth of this communion. It is in these moments that God consoles us and encourages us to persevere in faith and hope, letting nothing stand in the way of our pursuit of truth in charity.

Dialogue undertaken "in the light of the mystery of the Holy

Trinity" (as, for example, between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches) can help us reach a deeper understanding of unity and diversity in *koinonia*. Dialogue undertaken from a specifically Christological perspective (as for example, that between the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches) can help us discover the meaning of belonging together as members of the Body of Christ as well as helping our understanding of the sacramental nature of the church. It is instructive to take the fruits of these dialogue and study them together, placing them, as it were, side by side. Such an exercise can immeasurably deepen our understanding of *koinonia*. The *koinonia* experienced by the Christian community expresses itself in the world. Through Christ, with him and in him, Christians take up the work of witness, mission and service in the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Concepts of the church

Koinonia, then, has emerged as an important term in some ecumenical dialogues to describe the experience of the church but they use many other terms too. Some, though not all of these are images taken from the New Testament. They include, for example, people of God, bride of Christ, temple of the Spirit, herald, event, eucharistic community, pilgrim people, foretaste of the Kingdom. The dialogues choose to employ these different concepts or images of the church at different times in the course of their work, and for different reasons.

Sometimes one concept is particularly helpful in holding together several aspects of church life in a fruitful way. For example, the Baptist-Reformed dialogue found that the concept of people of God allowed them creatively to maintain the Baptist stress on personalism and the Reformed stress on community. The church as mystery points to its internal reality as well as its external manifestation. The church as sign holds together the relation of the church to the world while pointing to the inclusion of the whole world into the Kingdom of God. The idea of the church as instrument helps us understand the nature and the purpose of the church for mission. Understanding the church as event helps us appreciate the present experience of the power of Christ as he calls for the church to exist in the world.

Some concepts which have been found to be especially helpful seem to undergo development as one dialogue builds upon the work previously done by another gone. Thus, for instance, the key term of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue koinonia has recently been developed in the talks between the Roman Catholics and the Methodists. The description of the mission of the church in this last dialogue (that it serves as a sign, sacrament and harbinger of the Kingdom of God) owes much to the work of the Anglican-Reformed conversations, whose influence is also evident in the work of the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue. No one concept will serve on its own. Often the images used are partly overlapping, partly complementary.

Not all concepts of the church are equally helpful. What may seem especially appropriate for expressing the situation of one church might be very alien to another. Thus, for instance, the description of the church as a eucharistic community would mean a lot to a Roman Catholic or Orthodox but would cause difficulties for members of the Salvation Army and the Society of Freinds. 'Sacrament' is another example of a term which could be happily used by one church but which would be an imposition on the spiritual life of another.

The dialogues recognise that these concepts are partial and provisional. None can adequately articulate the full richness of ecclesial experience. However, they can provide sufficiently flexible means for expressing the nature of the church and the relations of the churches as they seek unity together.

In the Inter-Church Process, the church has primarily been described as "the pilgrim people". It may be that as we British Christians explore together the nature and purpose of the church we may find that the work of the international dialogues feeds our understanding. Some of their images may speak clearly to our own experience. For example, those working in local ecumenical projects may find the image of the church as 'event' helpful for exploring and articulating their experience as they move closer to Christians of other traditions and share a common life.

Emerging contours of visible unity

In this search for unity the Churches understand that perfect

union will be achieved only in the world to come when Christ will be "all in all". In the meantime the aim of the Churches is to manifest the visible dimension of our communion of life in Christ. This aim is often called "full visible unity" or "full communion".

Such visible unity would exhibit certain features appropriate to such a degree of unanimity. In 1983, the World Council of Churches at Vancouver outlined three such features of the united church, "First, the churches would share a common understanding of the apostolic faith, and be able to confess this message together in ways understandable, reconciling and liberating to their contemporaries. Living this apostolic faith together, the churches help the world to realize God's design for creation. Second, confessing the apostolic faith together, the churches would share a full mutual recognition of baptism, the eucharist and ministry and be able through their visible communion to let the healing and uniting power of these gifts become more evident amidst the divisions of humankind. Third the churches would agree on common ways of decision-making and ways of teaching authoritatively, and be demonstrate qualities of communion, participation and corporate responsibility which could shed healing light in a world of conflict." (Gathered for Life, Official Report VI Assembly WCC p.45.

These features emerge in different ways in other international dialogues. The Anglican-Roman Catholic *Final Report* lists the following as requirements for visible unity: "mutual recognition of sacraments and ministry and the common acceptance of a universal primacy at one with the episcopal college" (Introduction, paragraph 9). Again, the Roman Catholic-Methodist conversations envisage full unity in faith, mission and sacramental life (even countenancing a universal primacy) as features of full visible unity.

Not all dialogues go so far as to explicitate such marks of uniting churches, but it is not insignificant that these or related characteristics tend to figure prominently on the agenda of international ecumenical converations. The Baptist-Reformed dialogue considers agreement on baptism and also on a local and superintending ministry as well as councils at a wider level as being characteristic of visible church unity.

Another aspect of the life of the churches as they grow in unity, an aspect which can indeed be found in the international dialogues, but one which can be over-looked, is the Churches' commitment to observe the moral, ethical and political demands of the Gospel in support of peace, justice and full human development, as well as a determination to improve the moral integrity of church structures themselves. Such a commitment is felt by some, and especially by young people, to be an authentic characteristic of the church in true koinonia. While it is not clear whether this should be listed as a separate feature of visible unity (although it belongs to the missionary implications of a common profession of faith etc.) it nonetheless merits highlighting because of its relevance to the contemporary situation and the apparent inability of the divided churches to act effectively with and for the poor and oppressed in so many parts of the world.

These features have been mentioned in certain conversations as being characteristics of full unity. No agreement has been reached over whether all these marks are essential to the full visible unity of the church. However, some of them are already being developed in local ecumenical projects and in the ecumenical sharing of ecclesial oversight.

A matter of process

What can the international dialogues tell us about the nature of dialogue itself? Can they throw light on the nature of the Inter-Church Process? It is worth pointing out that the very fact that there is an Inter-Church Process (and that we are considering the work of a large number of international ecumenical conversations) is itself significant. Interchurch dialogues now move at a new depth because the relationship between the churches is changing and the dialogues themselves are a summons to further change.

What is dialogue? Dialogue is a commitment to the future. It only happens because the churches have begun to move from old isolations towards new commitments. It runs the risk of possible disappointment, but once begun it cannot stop without a deterioration in relationships.

It is possible to recognise four different types of ecumenical

dialogue. 1. exploratory; example the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue. 2. the common rediscovery of vision and hope; example, the opening section of *God's Reign and Our Unity*. 3. the acknowledgement of convergence; example, the Lima text. 4. the movement to consensus; example, the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue. The four categories are not mutually exclusive. The Methodist-Roman Catholic conversations began as explorations but now seem to be expressing at least convergence.

Directly or indirectly dialogue always raises the question of further action. Ecumenical conversations are often concerned that progress be made in areas of practical co-operation. It can happen that a church which is engaged in a number of ecumenical dialogues has to be careful to preserve consistency in its dealings with its several partners.

To be effective, common statements must be received into the whole life of the churches involved, as well as being officially adopted by church leaders. The Lima statement in particular asks the Churches to judge whether its text expresses the faith of the Church through the ages, to ask themselves how its findings ought to affect their relations with other churches, to examine their ways of worship and teaching in its light, and to guide the future work of Faith and Order. The *Final Report* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, as presented to the two participating churches by its co-chairmen, asks Roman Catholics and Anglicans whether its findings are consonant with the faith of Roman Catholics and Anglicans, and whether or not the claimed agreement constitutes the basis for further steps towards the reconciliation of these churches.

Is this reconciliation more than mutual "recognition"? Churches that have been divided from one another may come to recognize one another as true parts of the one catholic church, or as bodies within which the church of Christ is truly present, or within which the apostolic Gospel is preached. Part of such recognition is the recognition of the ordained ministries of the churches and recognition may, in the case of a specific scheme, involve a new relationship in which lines of ministerial succession are integrated.

Recognition in its various senses is obviously indispensable to a reconciliation in effective fellowship of separated churches. Some dialogues have shown it to be a feature which is characteristic of growth in visible unity. Is recognition enough? It is one thing to admit, however whole-heartedly, that your church is a church as real as mine; it is something else again to overcome the lethargy of inherited fear and mistrust and to live together in the costly discipleship of shared mission.

The international dialogues remind us that agreement in faith is a necessary part of the movement towards the healing of divisions between the churches. The work of these bi-lateral and multi-lateral conversations provide a basis for the continuing movement towards unity amongst the British churches. We can use the international dialogues to help us identify what the true goal of ecumenism is.

The goal

There are deep divisions in the church but our hope is in God. The Gospel message proclaims that God is active in the world, healing its divisions, building up what was broken down, reconciling peoples to one another and to himself. The search for unity between the churches belongs to this work of God. God is healing the church as he is healing the world. The reconciliation of estranged Christians and the growth of the churches in recognisable visible unity belongs to the work of God establishing his Kingdom.

The Anglican-Orthodox agreed statement begins by acknowledging the deeply divided state of the world. Christian disunity is an aspect of this and indeed contributes to it. What should the church be doing in this world? How should it serve the world in its great need? The statement takes the words of the Anglican-Reformed commission to describe the church as being sent to the world as a "sign, instrument and firstfruits of the Kingdom." This has also been developed in other dialogues (Anglican-Lutheran; Reformed-Roman Catholic, 1977; the Lima statement, Ministry, 4).

What is the Kingdom of God? In the New Testament it is a complex idea. It is an eschatological term, that is, it refers to the future fulfillment of God's purpose for the world, even the end of history. Yet the Kingdom is also already begun in the preaching and the acts of Jesus. The idea of the Kingdom is wider than that of the church, yet is closely related to it. The church proclaims the Kingdom as its herald. Understanding the church in this way allows us to see that the work for church unity is not an end in itself. Repentance, mutual forgiveness and reconciliation are the foundations of church unity, but only in that they are primary experiences of the Kingdom.

It is important that we recognise the visible characteristics of the churches as they grow in unity for such recognition reflects the church's submission to God's reign, in a unity of mind, heart and will with the Lord. The achievement of church unity is essential if the church is to be truly a foretaste and embodiment of the Kingdom. The dialogues, therefore, challenge us to broaden our vision of unity.

Open questions

How can ecumenical dialogue, at both national and international levels, maintain its relevance to the lived experience of Christians in local communities? The international dialogues must be in touch with the local experience and locally-based Christians should try to appreciate what the international dialogues are trying to accomplish. Without this two-way communication dialogues become redundant. The Lima document seemed to realize this when it commented that "perhaps even more influential than the official studies are the changes which are talking place within the lives of the churches themselves".

There are still some questions that have to be put and which have arisen from the method and content of the international dialogues under discussion. They are included here to indicate areas of concern related to ecumenical dialogue.

How representative are these Commissions of their own church members? How much consultation takes place before their appointment? Why is it that the Commissions tend to be male and clergy-dominated? To what extent does this reflect the male- and clergy-domination in many of the big churches? There is a wider question of representation. Why do certain churches appear to be excluded from international dialogues? Are such exercises the prerogative of relatively rich institutional bodies?

Can we clarify the relation between the work for unity in the churches and work for unity in the world? When churches enter into dialogue it is hoped that they will go beyond doctrinal agreement into the sphere of proclamation of the Gospel, the liberating message, and work for justice and peace. This is very much the concern of the young people of the world who, insofar as they experience unity, typically experience it in the pursuit of justice. Often the concentration on this theme means that ecumenism is seen to be not merely a Christian enterprise but one for all people struggling for justice. Although young people are excluded from the official bilateral dialogues their unofficial dialogues are particularly open to that unity offered by the Gospel and God's preferential love for the poor and oppressed. Can dialogue be more prophetic?

It is very evident that in their prayer-life together the participants in some ecumenical dialogues have reached great depths in their sense of communion. 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims' is not only a theological debate. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, "a process of prayer and reflection". How can the spirit of prayer be fostered in all our ecumenical dialogues?

Have we the courage to work through our limitations for the sake of the Kingdom? Do we succumb to the temptation to give up in the face of obstacles? Do we misunderstand the imperfections of the church and let them divert us from the true end of unity, the promotion of the Kingdom? Can we constantly be renewed: to be open to guidance, to accept the cross by which we have been reconciled? Can we accept the call to promote God's rule of justice as an essential feature of the uniting church?

> Kieron O'Brien Colin Davey Michael Jackson Iune 1986.

112 OBSERVATIONS

Observations is a collection of views on the church from Britain and abroad by people and groups within, on the fringe of, or outside the churches in England, Scotland and Wales taking part in the inter-church process 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims'. They include comments from young adults, women and theological college staff and students; questions from House Churches and from Christian Communities and Networks; statements from Evangelical bodies and from a visiting evangelist; reports from people concerned with community work and social issues and from the secular and professional world; insights from Aid agencies, from churches abroad and from international inter-church conversations. Together they offer a variety of perspectives and challenges to the churches in Britain.

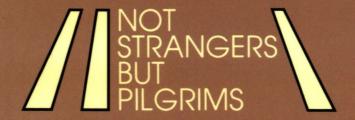
Observations is one of a series of books and audio visual material published as part of the inter-church process 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims'.

The series also includes:

Reflections - how churches view their life and mission.

Views from the Pews - a popular evaluation of Lent '86 and local ecumenism.

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