

AN ANGLICAN–METHODIST COVENANT
Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the
Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of
England (GS 1409)

**A REPORT BY THE COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN
UNITY**

1. The proposed Covenant between the Church of England and the Methodist Church attempts to heal some of the wounds of the divided Body of Christ in this land. It sets out to resolve some of the ‘unfinished business’ between our two churches and to draw closer together two Christian communities that began to drift apart more than two centuries ago. It builds on extensive local sharing of life and mission and on the excellent relations that Anglicans and Methodists, lay and ordained, enjoy in many places and to aims to reflect this at a national level. The Covenant will create a new situation in which further steps, involving some challenging issues, both theological and structural, can be worked out.
2. The Formal Conversations were set up by the General Synod and the Methodist Conference in 1997-98, following their consideration of the report of Informal Conversations, *Commitment to Mission and Unity* (GS Misc 477). The mandate given to the conversations in GS 1266 paragraphs 30 and 31, approved by General Synod in November 1997 (*Report of Proceedings* 28:2, p.632) was to propose the basis for a new relationship between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. They were not tasked with constructing a unity scheme but rather with taking a

significant bilateral step towards the ultimate goal of the full visible unity of Christ's Church. The common statement sets out, in the form of a national covenant, a fresh stage in the relationship between our two churches.

3. The deeper background to this relationship is outlined in the common statement. It begins with the itinerant preaching ministry of John Wesley, a clergyman of the Church of England. It traces the mainly unintended ways in which a movement of renewal and evangelisation within the Church of England evolved into a church. It notes a series of Anglican and Methodist initiatives that led, through the unity talks of the 1960s and their final failure in the General Synod in 1972, to a new approach from the Methodists in 1994.
4. The common statement follows, as the conversations were mandated to do, the tried and tested Meissen model of seeking unity by stages (which is also seen in the Fetter Lane and Reuilly agreements), but it is distinctive in several ways.
 - First, it clarifies and develops this model, particularly its theological basis and the language of acknowledgement and commitment.
 - Second, it holds together the themes of unity and mission throughout and it is the inseparable connection between the two that provides the guiding thread of the statement. The aim of the covenant is to strengthen united witness and shared ministry.
 - Third, it pays close attention to existing local, regional and national experiences of Anglican–Methodist fellowship.

Local unity initiatives will be affirmed by the Covenant. *Releasing Energy* (GS Misc 599) provides models of good practice in this area. The wider ecumenical fellowship was also recognised by the participation of representatives of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Moravian Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the United Reformed Church.

- Fourth, attention is given to the need for the healing and reconciliation of the collective memories that the two churches hold of each other, so that mutual stereotyping can be overcome. The statement tells the chequered story of Anglican–Methodist relations over the past two and half centuries.
 - Finally, the common statement is marked by a frankness and realism about the remaining differences between our two churches and the need for further convergence on various issues before we can move beyond the proposed next stage.
1. The Covenant is intended to bring about a significant step in the direction of greater visible unity and closer collaboration in mission between our two churches. This is intended to lead into a further phase of dialogue on issues that the Formal Conversations were not expected to resolve, including the conditions that would make possible interchangeability of ministries. The covenantal relationship will provide the necessary context and framework for the developing relationship between our two churches.
 5. The language of covenant is central. It echoes the many covenanted relationships between Church of England

parishes and Methodist (and other) local churches. But ecumenical covenants are entered into within the New Covenant between God and his people that Christ's saving work has brought about. As the Foreword puts it: 'In Scripture, God's covenant with his people is made by grace. It includes forgiveness and healing. It survives the ups and downs of human nature and human experience, for it is God who calls and enables and God keeps faith.'

6. Alongside the bilateral Formal Conversations ran trilateral informal conversations between the United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church and the Church of England. There had been previously a set of informal conversations between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church in the mid-1990s. Informal conversations report to the Council for Christian Unity. The two recent sets of conversations had an overlapping membership and attempted to create a common circle of confidentiality and a common pool of resources by sharing their minutes and making papers available to each other at a suitable stage of maturity. The trilateral conversations explored two themes requested by the United Reformed Church: the conciliarity of the Church and the ministry of the elders. But their agenda broadened into issues of visible unity. Striking convergences of principle were discovered and the United Reformed Church's commitment to the quest for the full visible unity of the Church was reaffirmed. The report of the trilateral conversations was published in the Autumn of 2001 as *Conversations on the Way to Unity* and was circulated to General Synod members for information. The Council for Christian Unity endorses the agreed Recommendations (paragraph 74) of the report. The motion before Synod on the *Anglican-Methodist Covenant* includes a formal reference to the United Reformed Church,

as recommended by the common statement as part of an ongoing three-way conversation. The Council for Christian Unity will no doubt wish to continue its dialogue with the United Reformed Church and to build on the conversations that have already taken place.

7. *An Anglican–Methodist Covenant*, which has been available since December 2001, has been criticised both for not going far enough in the relationship that it proposes and for going too far in some of its sentiments. The CCU believes that the Formal Conversations fulfilled precisely their mandate from both churches. The proposals of the covenant are constructive, realistic and attainable. Both churches have questions and concerns about some aspects of each other’s life and practice. The new relationship needs to be put in place before these issues can be discussed together in the best spirit.
8. The covenant itself (paragraph 194) consists of a pre-amble that recapitulates what has gone before and sets the context for what follows; a series of mutual affirmations of the ecclesial authenticity of each other’s churches, ministries and sacraments; and a set of commitments for the future, including a re-affirmation of what is already possible, a resolve to address outstanding issues and an intention to work together in mission.
9. One Anglican member of the Formal Conversations, the Revd Angus MacLeay wishes to register his dissent from the common statement as a whole. Mr MacLeay was uncomfortable with aspects of the model of visible unity that was being followed and with parts of the draft text as it progressed (particularly in relation to issues concerning episcopacy, predestination, etc., and ‘Christian perfection’).

The conversations attempted to address his concerns and the final shape of the text reflects this in places. Mr MacLeay has set out the issues that mainly concern him in an article in the June 2002 issue of the CCU's *Unity Digest* (which was circulated in June to all members of General Synod), where there is also a response from Dr Martin Davie, the Theological Secretary of the CCU, who was also a member of the conversations.

10. The General Synod is being asked to give initial consideration to *An Anglican–Methodist Covenant*. The Synod is being asked to encourage a process of study and evaluation within the dioceses that is already well under way, assisted by jointly produced study and presentation resources. Diocesan Synods are requested to promote the study of the common statement throughout the diocese, then to debate the Covenant (paragraph 194) themselves and to report (with voting figures) the result of the debate to the CCU. Dioceses have been aware since early Autumn 2001 of the proposed schedule for this process, which has been agreed jointly with the Methodist Church, and of a suggested method of facilitating it within the time available. The CCU will collate the diocesan responses and report to the Synod when (if Synod agrees the process) the covenant returns for a final decision in July 2003.
11. Following advice from the legal department and consideration by the Business Committee, and after consultation with the Presidents, the covenant is not designated Article 8 business. It is not a scheme for union and has no direct legislative implications. The draft text has been discussed by the House of Bishops and by its Theological Group, as well as by the Faith and Order Advisory Group and the CCU, all of which (together with

the appropriate Methodist bodies) have had significant input into the final form of the text. The covenant will have its effect in the realm of moral and pastoral commitment and in the quality of the relationship between our two churches in the years to come.

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