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Turning Theology into Life: The Experience of Communion at the Heart of Ecumenism

Summary

1. This paper illustrates some of the thinking of the Joint Covenant Advocacy and Monitoring Group (JCAMG). It indicates an ecumenical methodology with broad implications, and which excited the members of JCAMG.
2. The paper's call to a relational spirituality to be put at the heart of ecumenical practice, which emerged as a vital strand of work to support the Anglican-Methodist Covenant during conversations in JCAMG, does not only speak to the needs of Anglican-Methodist ecumenism. Nonetheless, while it may be a broader strategy for all ecumenical endeavour, it also has profound implications as Anglicans and Methodists seek to fulfil the pledge of the Covenant signed in 2003, committing their churches: 'as a priority, to work to overcome the remaining obstacles to the organic unity of our two churches, on the way to the full visible unity of Christ's Church.' (Commitment 1)

Introduction: Connecting with Experience

3. With a modicum of attention to our experience we can see that things work better when we cooperate with others. This apparently banal truism is deceptive. It can be so easily dismissed in favour of solidly grounded research, managerial techniques, the political necessity of conflict, or even questions of finance and resources. Of course, research, techniques, conflict, finance and resources cannot be ignored, and it would be foolish to do so. But the fact remains that a fundamental human experience is that high quality relationships offer the best chance of success in any endeavour, even when other key factors are absent or failing.
4. The deceptive simplicity of this perception is not just that, in the light of the complexities and challenges of life, it may look far too simple. We can also be deceived by the feeling that somehow high-quality relationships are an easy option because it does not take much to achieve them. Yet we know they are not easy. This too is a fact of common experience. Indeed it may well be that at times our thirst for insight through study, better organization, clever politics, and hard-nosed stewardship of our wealth can act as substitutes for the real hard work of building relationships. Again while not denying the need for these other things, perhaps it would be more efficient, as well as more effective, to focus on that real hard work. There is even a gospel verse that is especially apt here: 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matthew 6:33). What is especially helpful in this gospel verse is that it raises the question of human relationships to another level; they are a primary concern of the kingdom of God. The deceptively simple becomes spiritually challenging, the site of an unseen battle that must be fought in each human heart.

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5. All this is vital for ecumenism which is, before all else, a discipline rooted in human relationships. It is remarked upon time and again that relationships are essential to its success. This is true for any dialogues, be they official or informal; the point at which they begin to make headway is when genuine fellowship is established among the participants. It is true for practical cooperation, especially in the field of mission. It is enough to listen to the experience of those who began any new and creative approach, say in Cumbria with the formation of the ecumenical county, with its mission communities and the project *God for all*. It all starts with relationships, and especially relationships lived in God, and with listening to God together in prayer. It is true also in the negative. How often does one hear the tale of everything falling apart in a viable ecumenical concern when one minister moves on and another arrives unminded to pursue relationships with brothers and sisters of other churches!

The Focal Point of Creativity

6. Attentiveness to frequent ecumenical experience is particularly germane. It indicates that what is needed is not any old warm-hearted chumminess – not that that should be despised either. The spark of creativity is found in the quality of the relationships. Most especially it is in the divine quality of relationships. What often sets things alight is prayer and Bible reading together. But here too we need to be careful. There is something more fundamental, because it is not just any old praying and chatting, albeit with worthy aims. The fire is lit by the divine quality of the *interactions* among people.
7. This should not surprise us. In the great ‘ecumenical’ passage of the Bible, John 17, Jesus on the eve of his death, expressing as it were his last will and testament, prays for that very divine quality to be lived by his followers as they relate to one another: ‘Father, may they be one as we are one ... may they be one in us’ (see John 17:11; 21-23). The disciples of Jesus are called to practise a way of relating to one another that shares the inner life of God. It is indeed a *divine* quality of relationship.
8. Ecumenical document after ecumenical document points to this very fact. Take for instance paragraph 83 of the *Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England*:

[T]he *koinonia* that we experience in the Christian community is not only a fellowship one with another, but also a relationship of communion with God that is both personal and communal. *Koinonia* stands for a full communion with God (2 Corinthians 13:13 (14), a sharing in the very life of God (1 John 1:3), a partaking of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). This means that the Church should never be defined merely in terms of its activities as an institution, but always in terms of the character and purpose that it receives from God through grace.
9. It would be true to say that over the last century of ecumenical activity, *koinonia* has been recognized as both central to the nature of the Church and central to

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ecumenism. Furthermore, it is necessarily linked to the missional openness of ecumenism. To speak again of the Anglican-Methodist *Common Statement*, in paragraph 78, the link between unity and mission is described, while making reference to the report of the Anglican-Methodist International Commission, *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* in these words: 'Unity empowers mission, while mission manifests unity and so reveals the true nature of the Church before the world.'

10. The problem, however, is that most of the talk about koinonia tends to be, as it were, rather classy theology: deeply profound, incontrovertible, but somewhat abstract, or at most read in terms of an organizational or structural challenge that often, though not always, has the ultimate goal of benefitting mission. No doubt better organization and even full visible unity will benefit mission. But there is another more immediate lesson to be learned, one rooted in our experience. Real unity is more about how we relate to one another as persons than about how we organize ourselves institutionally. It is this real and living relationship that Jesus promised would have the effect of convincing the world, not other things, good, even vital, though they be.
11. The question therefore is how to revitalize our ecumenism to put at the centre of what we do this divine quality of relationship, namely, the unity Jesus actually prayed for – in contrast to the various other forms of unity, doctrinal, liturgical, ministerial, structural, legal, or missional, however indispensable they may be because they express and facilitate relational unity. This means taking the theology of koinonia and making it become spirituality, that is, making our thoughts something that can be lived.

The Real Presence

12. Perhaps the most important implication of koinonia, as sharing in the divine relationships, for a living experience of ecumenism is that this sharing is a real participation, in the here and now, in the absolute Real which God is. In this communion among human persons, created beings, the Uncreated is actively present in the history of the created. The effect of unity on mission becomes obvious as a result: in unity, since God is present and active, God gives witness to God. The effect on spirituality is perhaps even more dramatic. The emphasis shifts to giving primary place to building relationships among human beings, because it is with others, in the mutuality of a relatedness that partakes of the divine nature, that we meet God. In our relationships God is present, concretely, actively, effectively. No wonder we are asked in the Sermon on the Mount to set aside worship in order to be reconciled with others (Matt. 5:24).
13. The Sermon on the Mount, of course, is in Matthew. Another way of speaking about the concreteness of God in human relationships can be also found in Matthew's Gospel, which starts with the announcement of the birth of the One who is 'God with us' (Matt. 1:23) and ends, in its closing words, with the promise that he would be with us to the end of time (Matt. 28:20). In the midst of the Gospel, in

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Chapter 18 which speaks about how to conduct relationships within the Church, when focusing upon relationships of agreement in prayer, Jesus proclaims the principle behind this agreement: 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matt. 18:20). Jesus is really present in the community when there is the harmony implied by being 'gathered' in his name.

14. This real presence of Jesus among his disciples is also implied by the image of the body of Christ in Pauline literature. Here the Church is Christ's presence and action in the world, enabled to be so by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit who comes with his gifts. The reality of this presence is fundamental to a spirituality of relationships.

Truth is Relational

15. This highlights the necessity of achieving the right kind of relationships. The presence of Jesus is experienced where his disciples are gathered 'in his name', which means in his identity. In other words it means being and acting as he is and does. He who is God who is love in the world demands that we should be that love in the world. It is the same stress upon the quality of relationships that can be found in John 17. Matthew and John both look at the real presence of God among the followers of Jesus.
16. A primary consequence is the impact of this real presence upon the quest for understanding and the comprehension of reality. If Jesus is among us, then the truth is among us. Jesus, the Word of God, that is, God's expression of himself, contains in his person the entire truth of God. He is the one in whom and for whom all is made so he also contains in himself all that God has expressed outside of himself in his creation. For this reason Jesus, the *Logos* made flesh, can claim in John's Gospel to be 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), an affirmation with huge implications for questions of truth in its various forms, including praxis alongside cognition. One essential consequence, nevertheless, is that the truth is a person. When we grasp something that is true, therefore, we are discovering something of this person.
17. What this means for our relationships with one another is that we can none of us claim to have the whole truth. Since truth is a person, we find it through encounter with that person, who, although he dwells within us, is always also distinct from us. Therefore truth is always, in this sense, objective and outside us. We cannot possess it unless we identify, in a real participation, with this person.
18. This does not deny that each one of us has some grasp of reality; we have an idea of truth. But however true our idea may be, it is always partial. The complete truth is only in the person of Jesus. Thus, in this sense, truth is relational because our grasp of it depends upon our relationship with Jesus.
19. But truth is also relational in another sense. We grow in our relationship with Jesus, and the truth that he is, in our relationships with one another. Our dwelling in a

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living koinonia, with the real presence of Jesus, gives us access to the truth he is. This has many practical consequences.

20. First, any truth, including what we perceive, is only true insofar as it is owned by Jesus. We need to discover how what we are convinced is true relates to who Jesus is. Apart from the hard work of honest thought, this indicates a necessary role for our interaction with others in that discovery, because it is as we dwell with him that we come to know him. Second, since my grasp of truth is partial, the logical consequence is that I have to hold it in a way that is willing to listen to and comprehend the truth expressed by another person, a truth that is likewise partial but from which I can learn. Third, this tends to mutuality because we can learn from one another. Fourth, this requires me to strive to acquire deep humility, a capacity to let myself be taught because I always have something to learn, a seeking to be at ease with the fact that I do not know everything. This is rather more than the sensible ploy of realizing that I might be mistaken, because it affirms that even what I know correctly is partial. Fifth, for us to come to a clearer understanding of truth we do not only have to think more clearly (although the value of that cannot be denied), but we have to love more deeply. In the flow of love for one another the presence of God in Christ is active, enlightening minds, warming hearts, strengthening wills, inspiring insight. Indeed, our thinking itself must be love, and this is possible when we think together with others, so that listening with full attention or speaking with respect are two ways of loving, of dwelling in the living presence of God in our mutual relationship. Sixth, this is an attitude of radical trust, a practising of the heart and soul of faith, in which we make ourselves available to the activity of the living presence of Jesus.
21. There are two further attitudes that will be necessary to undergird this radical trust and make us available to the grasp of truth it brings. The first is an ability to live with discomfort and even fear. It can be deeply unsettling to realize the partial nature of what I think to be true. There may be a sense of liberation in this, of course. But what is being asked of us, both listening and speaking, is to imitate Christ in practising a form of love that 'denies self, takes up the cross, and follows him'. The second is a capacity for surprise. When the light dawns, and new, deeper perception of Jesus is achieved, it is likely not to be exactly as I thought or even as the other thought, but something new and unexpected. At the very least, even if what is seen together is as one of us had previously thought, we will perceive that truth in another light, more complete and, of course, more beautiful.

Conclusion: the Discipline of Relationship

22. It may be helpful to earth this spirituality in such a way as to make it clear that the truth it deals with is indeed a matter of praxis as well as cognition and show that it goes beyond high matters of doctrine or morals or even philosophical perceptions. Let us take the simple example of a group of people choosing a carpet. Here each person is likely to have an idea of what may be most suitable for the room. This is a partial truth in that it will be the case that that person will know that their kind of carpet is pleasing to them. To the extent that a beauty is recognized by that person

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this is a truth in that person's cognition. But when, living according to Jesus' teaching of love, each person hears the others, sees things from their point of view as well as their own, truth also becomes praxis; it is doing what Jesus teaches, thinking as love.

23. Since, in this example, all dwell together in this praxis of love for one another, they have the presence of Jesus among them, according to his Matthean promise. He brings with him the whole of the Godhead, hence the Holy Spirit gives light to the minds of those seeking to choose a carpet. Thus at a point when all have been sufficiently heard, and all have sufficiently expressed their thought, a surprise happens: the dawning of a light of something all agree upon, a shared perception of what is true, an understanding made possible by the truth in person in their midst. All the ins and outs of the conversation till then lead to this point.
24. We can take a step back and look at what is being lived out in this praxis. It is a love on the same pattern as Jesus' kenotic love in the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. Thus what takes place is a reciprocal living out of the injunction to 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself' (Phil 2:5-7a). It is a taking on in love, via each individual's self-emptying, of the perception, the truth, of the other person. Since this 'taking on' in love is mutual all are sharing in the same love, which is the life of God, and all meet, therefore, in that love, that life, which is God. In other words, they meet in Jesus who is among them.
25. Such an experience clearly has a mystical dimension. Together those who share in it are practising what Paul says when he proclaims, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 20:19b-20a), allowing this to become a living together as the body of Christ. It demands, however, an exacting spiritual discipline. It is rather more than an intention, or good will, or even an inchoate (but true) act of faith leading to a general wish to do good by others. It is faith that connects with Jesus, living as Jesus, loving according to his form of loving. This faith finds ways, therefore, of building relationships that are rooted in the koinonia of God's own self, with all the hard graft that a human being must face in being disciplined by Jesus.
26. If such a discipline of relationships is practised, it means entering the heart of ecumenism because it manages to live in the here and now, in our present history, in the unity Jesus prayed for. Should such a heart of ecumenism become common among Christians, their unity in other ways cannot but quickly follow. This means that doctrinal, liturgical, ministerial, structural, and legal forms of unity would be enabled by the urgency and enthusiasm generated by the existence of a living relationship. At the same time, the presence of Jesus, who is the truth, among his disciples will give greater light for the resolution of difficult questions. Thus the institutional dimension of Christians meeting together, the expression and form promoting and facilitating the koinonia of the assembly, the *ekklesia*, is given due

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place. Focusing on the heart of ecumenism in no way means ignoring the hard work needed to heal the divisions that exist at an institutional level. Yet prior to any institutional healing, anything undertaken in the meantime by Christians practising the discipline of relationships, whether by Anglicans and Methodists or by any other combination of ecclesial bodies, will be done in a living unity and lead to greater unity, swiftly overcoming centuries of obstacles to the full expression of koinonia among Christians that ought to be their hallmark.

27. For Anglicans and Methodists such a spirituality of relationships would offer the opportunity of making fully effective the Covenant signed in 2003, in the beauty of a shared life and the effectiveness of a convincing mission. Indeed the mission imperative is intrinsic to this kind of relationship which, since its discipline makes it bring together distinct and different persons in a way that reflects the oneness and distinction of the Father and Son (and implicitly of the Trinity), as Jesus prayed on the eve of his death, logically seeks to go out all who are outside this relationship. This is both because of the desire that others should share in the divine joy of koinonia and because uniting with otherness, hence making friends of strangers, is central to its inner logic.
28. There is a pressing need internal to the Christian community, however. This spirituality of relationships must go beyond the committed few and become the daily aspiration and lived experience of all the followers of Jesus but especially of Anglicans and Methodists who are brought together by the Covenant signed in 2003. As the relational dimension becomes more a lived experience, all obstacles to its existence including institutional barriers will become intolerable. The only thing left to be done would be to follow the light of the truth who is the person of Jesus dwelling in the koinonia of his followers wherever he may lead.

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