

# TOGETHER IN CHRIST

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## EDITORIAL

We bring you another full issue of *Together in Christ*. We hope it will give you plenty to pray about, think about and stimulate your own action for Christian Unity. Please keep the material flowing in.

Dr. Miller has kindly introduced us to *Le Groupe des Dombes*, including the topics studied and works published. May their work be better known and promulgated.

Thanks to Kitty Hart, we have a clear description of the excellent charitable work done in *Operation Sunshine*, which could inspire similar action. We are grateful to Sister Benedict for her report of the East-West Monastic meeting. Do contact her if you would like the papers from that meeting.

Congratulations to sister Katy Clapham for her taking part in the ceremony to receive the Royal Maundy money in Canterbury Cathedral – a great occasion indeed!

We have two interesting contributions from Rev. Dr. Shier-Jones and Rev. Deacon Austin Martin on the Anglican / Methodist Covenant. Responses to it are welcomed.

We hope you will be enlightened and inspired by the Holy Spirit to continue to pray earnestly and work whole heartedly towards the goal of Christian Unity.

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## COVENANT AND COMMITMENT

### *A secular alternative to ecumenism ?*

There are some things that are not said because it seems to be too politically incorrect to say them - which does not mean that they don't need or deserve to be said, just that it takes a little more courage to utter them. One of the best examples I can give of this is the very personal statement 'I do not approve of the Anglican Methodist Covenant.' David Carter's article in the last edition of *Together in Christ* seemed to suggest that all Methodists are in favour of the proposed covenant, that it is almost universally viewed as a positive step forward, a milestone in our historical relationship, a chance to heal past divisions etc. etc. To dare to suggest that this is not the case, is viewed in certain quarters as tantamount to ecumenical, if not denominational, heresy. It is true that Methodists have been and still are, by both belief and practice, staunch ecumenists. It is also true that we have traditionally been prepared to sacrifice a great deal for the sake of church unity. It does not necessarily follow however that what was true of the past, has remained true for subsequent generations of Methodists. It is quite possible to have learned something different from the past than how to reword the same worn out proposals for a means of achieving full visible organic unity. I certainly believe that to be the case. I would like to use this opportunity therefore to explain how it is perfectly possible to be a committed Methodist, a staunch ecumenist, and yet still not be prepared to sign up the proposed covenant.

The two words 'Covenant and Commitment' lie at the heart of the problem. For Methodists, the word covenant is important. As part of our faith vocabulary it refers to the binding relationship between God and the people of God. It is a word which encapsulates our understanding of call and service, of our willingness to participate fully in whatever future God has in store for us.

It is a word full of promise and potential. It is the only word which can give true spiritual meaning and value to its sister word commitment. To commit to a covenant relationship means being willing to give up all that you once were - to become all that you yet might be - as a direct result of the new relationship. It is about being a willing, trusting, part of something totally unknown new and different. It does not mean a

commitment to a 'process' - especially not to one of overcoming outstanding difficulties. The covenant relationship is not one which will lead to something else - it stands complete in its own right. God does not enter into covenant with us on the understanding that we commit ourselves to resolving our outstanding sinful tendencies, neither do we enter into covenant with God in the expectation that God will resolve our remaining doubts or worries. The covenant is complete and binding in Christ - our only choice is to commit to it or not.

The proposed covenantal relationship between the Church of England and the Methodist Church is not intended to be complete, lasting or even binding. The proposed covenant is, rather, a step towards full visible unity, one which will require of each denomination a commitment to work towards that very specific goal. I assume that once full visible unity is achieved - there will no longer be a need or an expectation of its people to be in covenant together. This is, it seems to me, a particularly secular way of viewing what it means to be in a committed covenant together. It is a way of saying, I can't possibly be one with you right now, but maybe later, when we've ironed out all our difficulties. It offers the same view of a covenant relationship as that of all too many modern marriages in which the vows are only made after the pre-nuptial contract has been signed.

I understand and appreciate that the reason that what is being proposed is a first step towards unity rather than unity itself is because there are some very real differences in theology, structure and ministry between the two denominations which would undoubtedly cause unity talks to falter if not fail. The idea is to take it in stages, to commit ourselves to overcoming the differences first. Again, to use the marriage analogy - its like saying: 'I will live with you until we have learned how to live together well enough for me to be confident that our marriage might succeed'. Statistically there are more divorces amongst those who have lived together first than there are amongst those who commit to one another - exactly as they are - in hope and trust.

So, I question the proposed covenant on the grounds that it is not a covenant in the way that I, and many Methodists understand the word. It is a way of conditionally committing the two denominations to a relationship from which it is hoped something more agreeable will emerge later. To coin a much used phrase - 'There is another way you know.'

I believe real commitment to unity entails a commitment to difference and diversity without division. The real sign of visible unity is the way in which Christians are able to respect one another's differences, not seek to change them or eradicate them. The text from John's gospel does indeed provide us with the key to how Jesus prays that we might be one even as He and the Father are one. It is our relationship to one another in Christ, the way in which we are enabled to do what we do for the kingdom in and through that relationship, that enable us to realise Christ's prayer for us. There should be no need for contracts (conditional or otherwise) to unite us in Christ. There is another model of ecumenism which accepts and gives thanks to God for the way in which He has knowingly created the various denominations and churches to work for the kingdom.

Consider the rainbow, the sign of God's promise and covenant. Christ is the light of the world. At its best, the Church acts as a prism - refracting that light) opening it up, and enabling it to be seen throughout the world in all its colour and majesty - each of the various denominations playing a part to make the rainbow complete and vibrant. The rainbow only exists when all the colours are there - in the right relationship to one another. The colours are not separate from one another, they are part of a complete whole. Now all we have to argue about is which colour we want to be.

*Rev. Dr. Angela Shier-Jones* is a Methodist minister with two Churches in Beckenham in the Bromley Circuit.

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

*By prayer and action* we, the Commission members, respond to our Lord's prayer that "all may be one". (John 17:11)

*To promote this ideal* we will try to use every appropriate occasion both to foster friendship among Christians, and to celebrate and work together.

*Our purpose is that*

everywhere the love of God will be known..

the followers of Jesus will grow more united.

the Good News will bring joy and contentment to all peoples.

## **The Anglican Methodist Covenant**

I was privileged to be present recently at a meeting at which the Bishop of Woolwich, Rev. Colin Buchanan, and the Chairman of the London South East District of the Methodist Church, Rev. Harvey Richardson discussed their positions upon the current Covenant between the two churches which is going forward for ratification shortly, and also to hear from Rev. Sheila Maxey, the secretary to the committee of the United Reformed Church which has been invited to take part in the discussions and possibly join in.

Bishop Colin indicated that to him the document was far too bland and did not tackle important issues that need addressing. His examples included

1. the problem of the mutual interchangeability of ministries
2. the role of women in Ministry
3. the problems inherent in bringing two structures (hierarchies?) together,
4. the Church of England's ambivalence with its relationship with the State.

Harvey Richardson talked about the problems of marrying two very different structures, the apparent ignorance of each other's terminology, the fact that as far as the Methodist Church was concerned, inclusiveness of women was non-negotiable i.e. a person's gender would have no significance upon their role in the Church, and that he would wish that the "Armenian" approach to Theology would apply, rather than the "Calvinist" - in other words that all are for salvation rather than there being an element of pre-determination. Later, the subject of Alcohol loomed its ugly head, but Harvey said this was changing slowly in emphasis and he did not think it to be an insurmountable barrier.

Sheila Maxey raised the role of Elders when considering the bolting-on of the U.R.C., and exploring what was meant by "Ordination". She felt sure that her church had no alternative other than to "go for it". She asked how "Large" listens to "Small", which to me implied that whilst two is company, three is a crowd. She said that diversity should not be lost in a merger, and that in some rural areas unity was very much about how Christ's Church could be properly represented.

All in all, there seemed general agreement that the document was so bland that it should easily be agreed, as there was so little content that was contentious that it would be impossible to find fault with it. I personally felt that it was a sad indictment of what should have been an enormous opportunity to move forward, but perhaps inevitable in view of my experience of the struggle to achieve unity.

*Austin Martin*

## LE GROUPE DES DOMBES

Abbé Paul Irène Couturier (1888-1953) is well known for his interest in the Ecumenical Movement and the foundation of a Triduum of prayer for Church unity in Lyons in 1933, followed in 1934 by an octave of prayer from 18 to 15 January - a development of the Church Unity Octave founded by two Anglicans in 1908. What is less well known in the English speaking world is *Le Groupe des Dombes*, a group of French speaking ecumenists, Protestant pastors and Catholic priests from France and Switzerland, who came together in 1937 at the instigation of Paul Couturier to address the question of Christian unity. Their meetings were often held at the Cistercian abbey of Notre Dame des Dombes, situated some 20 miles north of Lyons, hence the name for the group. The Dombes Group still meets once a year in early September and is made up of twenty Catholic and twenty Lutheran or Reformed theologians. Since 1997, they have been meeting at the Benedictine abbey of Pradines, near Roanne in the Loire Valley.

It is a private association, with no official church backing though the secretaries of the ecumenical division of the *Federation Protestante de France* and of the *French Episcopal Conference* are usually included in the membership. Anglican and Orthodox theologians are regularly invited to attend the sessions. They share a common theological interest, and a concern that through prayer and study, the historical divisions in the Christian Church may be overcome. Their goal is a reunion of the Christian Churches by a gradual removal of the obstacles to that union, and a reformulation of the common Christian faith. To that end they call for a willingness to acknowledge that there are faults and errors on both sides, and so call for a change of heart and mind, for mutual conversion. Their meetings are devoted to both study and prayer with a daily celebration of the liturgy - Catholic or Protestant. Currently the co-presidents of the Group are Pasteur Alain Blancy of Farges, and Père Maurice Jourjon of Lyons.

The Dombes Group studied such topics as justification, redemption, the sacraments, and the church, publishing the results as a series of monographs. The collected works appeared in one volume under the title, *Pour la communion des Eglises: L'Apport du Groupe des Dombes (1937-1987)*, (Paris: Le Centurion, 1988), and a second volume in 1991, entitled, *Pour la conversion des Eglises: Identite et changement dans la dynamique de la communion*, (Paris: Le Centurion).

From 1991 to 1997 the Group examined Mary's role in God's plan of salvation. The result of that consultation was published in 1999 as *Marie: Dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints*, (Paris: Bayard Editions/Le Centurion, 1999). An English translation followed in 2002, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints: toward a common Christian understanding*, with a Forward by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. The history of the Domes Group as recounted above has been gleaned from that Forward.

The main body of the work is presented in two Parts:

## **Part I An Ecumenical Reading of History and Scripture**

### **1. *The Lessons of History:***

Mary in the Early Church; in the Mediaeval Church; the Protestant Reformation; from the Catholic Reform to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Mary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **2. *The Testimony of Scripture and the Confession of Faith:***

Mary, Creature, Woman, and Daughter of Israel; Mary, Mother of Jesus; Mary in the Communion of Saints.

## **Part II Disputed Questions and Conversion of the Churches**

### **3. *Disputed Questions:***

The "Cooperation" in Salvation; The Perpetual Virginity of Mary in Reference to the Brothers and Sisters of the Gospels; The Catholic Dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption; Invocation of Mary and the Saints.

### **4. *Toward the Conversion of the Churches:***

A Catholic Conversion; A Protestant Conversion.

### **5. *Conclusion and Summary.***

The title of the document suggests a vertical and a horizontal dimension. *Mary in the plan of God* indicates her role in association with her Son's salvific work. *Mary in the Communion of Saints* seeks to establish her role in the church of heaven and of earth, and in the company

of the saints. "The Mother of God is the sister of believers". Mary is placed at the intersection of these two movements as witness and manifestation. Mary has never been a cause of separation between the churches, "On the contrary she has become a victim and even a virulent expression of such separations".

The Group realized that many misunderstandings have arisen from an ignorance of history and a controverted reading of scripture. Consequently

their adopted method was to take a topic, review the Scriptural and historical background, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and propose how convergence might be reached. Finally each church is called to conversion - a conversion of attitude, doctrine, and practice.

The first section, which considers Mary during the first millennium, focuses on the confessions of faith, the main writings of the Fathers of the Church, and finally on the New Testament apocrypha because of their influence on Marian devotion. In the Apostles' Creed Mary is linked to Pilate in that Mary recalls the birth, and Pilate recalls the death of Christ. When Mary is mentioned in the seven ecumenical councils it is primarily as a profession of faith in Jesus the Lord. Marian theology of the early church is in fact a Christology. The patristic texts depend on scripture and the faith of the apostles. Invocation of Mary as in the *Sub tuum* is slow to develop in contrast to invocation of the martyrs. In the Middle Ages theology and piety concentrate in the person of Mary, realities of heaven and earth in ambivalent language. Mary is both virgin and mother, parent and child of the Saviour reflecting the two natures of Christ and giving rise to theological tension. The growth in Marian devotion becomes one of the factors leading to a separation of East and West. At the beginning of the Protestant reformation Mary had a relatively important place in the minds of the reformers determined by the context of the times. This concern lessened due to confessional controversy. In the twentieth century there is a renewed interest due to ecumenical dialogue.

In the second section the testimony of Scripture is reviewed within the framework of the three principal articles of the Creed. The first article confesses God as almighty father and creator of all things. Mary is one of his creatures. The second article is devoted to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mary is his mother. The third article confesses our belief in the Holy Spirit and the church He sanctifies. Mary is a member of that church and of the communion of saints. Underlying this approach is the belief that the Scriptures are the inspired word of God whose full meaning becomes clear in the light of faith.

Part I with its "ecumenical reading of history and scripture" is an indispensable foundation for the understanding of the Disputed Questions which are examined in Part II. The issues in question are:

**1) *Mary's 'cooperation' with the saving work of Christ.***

This is a major point of doctrinal disagreement. The Catholic claim that Mary 'cooperated' in the salvation of the human race seems to run counter to the Reformers belief in justification by faith in Christ independently of



works. To the Protestant mind ‘cooperation’ and ‘coredemption’ convey the idea of a collaboration of the same order as that of Christ in our redemption. In the Catholic tradition it is understood that for a human creature to ‘cooperate’ always means to ‘respond’ in faith. Catholics believe that in the divine plan God gave Mary the grace which enabled her to give her ‘Yes’ but in such a way that it was a free human response. This ‘cooperation’ adds nothing to the work of Christ. Our salvation is entirely God’s initiative, God’s work through Christ in the Spirit.

## **2) *The perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary***

The gospels speak of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. An exact exegesis is not possible. The term ‘brothers’ (*adelphoi*) may be interpreted as cousins. However the difficulty in interpretation does not alter our faith in Christ, the first born of the Virgin.

## **3) *The Immaculate Conception (1854) and The Assumption (1950)***

The Roman Catholic Church has solemnly incorporated these two doctrines into the content of their faith. The Protestant confessions reject them and the Orthodox object that they have been defined in an illegitimate manner. The Group sets out to explain the two dogmas in a way that makes their meaning and intention intelligible even to those who do not accept them. The main objections are a lack of any explicit scriptural foundation, and, in the case of the Immaculate Conception, a dependence on western tradition and an Augustinian interpretation of original sin.

### ***Elements of a consensus:***

All churches are concerned to respect the sovereignty of Christ. Mary needed to be redeemed, and the Immaculate Conception is to be understood in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation. The positions of both traditions are based on a theology of grace. Salvation is the unqualified initiative of God in the gift of grace (*sola gratia*). The Immaculate Conception must be understood in the same light. Mary’s holiness is entirely the work of God who preserved her from all stain of sin from the moment of her conception in preparation for her vocation as Mother of his Son.

## **4) *The invocation of Mary in liturgical and popular devotion.***

The Council of Nicea II (787) clearly distinguished between legitimate veneration (*doulia*) of icons and adoration (*latría*) which is due to God alone. Strictly speaking we do not pray to Mary or the saints but invoke their intercession. Protestants and Catholics agree that we must, in accord with scripture, *venerate*, that is, love and honour the Virgin Mary, and praise God for her.

## ***Towards the Conversion of the Churches***

The Catholic Church is asked to re-examine some of its popular Marian devotions, e.g. a purification of some of the older hymns. To move away from unwholesome curiosity, regarding apparitions, and to move towards authentic conversion. Veneration of Mary should never lead to something which is in bad taste or exaggerated.

Catholics ask that those who wish to enter in to communion should respect the content of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption - not to judge them as contrary to the Gospel and the faith but to regard them as free and legitimate conclusions flowing from the Catholic consciousness. Perhaps adherence to these dogmas need not be an absolute requirement for entry into communion.

The Protestant Churches are asked to acknowledge that a brother or sister in the faith should be allowed to have devotion to Mary without breaking the communion of faith. To ask themselves if their silence regarding the Virgin Mary is consistent with the position of the sixteenth century Reformers. Has this silence enhanced or diminished their representation of Christ and His saving works. They need to restore to Mary a proper place both doctrinal and liturgical in the mystery of salvation, and the communion of saints. They are asked to validate the feast of the Communion of Saints, and to rediscover the joy associated with Marian feasts. Finally, to examine their restricted reading of the Scriptures.

The Dombes work concludes that, “at the end of our historical, biblical and doctrinal study, we do not find any irreducible incompatibilities, despite some real theological and practical divergences.” Finally, “our entire work has shown that nothing about Mary allows her to be made the symbol of what separates us”.

This work deserves to be better known and studied in ecumenical and academic circles.

John Desmond Miller

### ***References:***

1. Alain Blancy, Maurice Jourjon, and the Dombes Group.  
*Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints.*  
(Mahwah, N.J. Paulist Press, 2002). 162 pages. ISBN 0-8091-4069-1. \$18.95
2. Fr Thomas A. Thompson, S.M., Director of The Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio, presented a paper at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which he reviewed this book.
3. For a short review of the book see *The Marian Library News Letter*, No. 45 (New Series), Winter 2002-2003.

## TOGETHER IN FOLKESTONE

### *Operation Sunshine*

We have an excellent example of truly ecumenical activity in Folkestone, in the form of Operation Sunshine. This is a Christian charity whose object is “feeding the hungry and clothing the naked”. Its “mission-statement” says: “We work for the glory of God to take the love of Jesus to the poor and needy”. This reminds me of both the Jesuits, and St. Vincent de Paul. In our team we have helpers who are Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical, and those who belong to the United Reformed Church and the Christian Community churches. Our chairman tries to have representatives from all of these traditions on the Committee.

Operation Sunshine is based in Folkestone and has been sending aid to various countries in Africa for eighteen years. We send containers full of donated clothing, food, soap, tools, bicycles, medical items, candles, sewing machines, toys and other items to our partners who work in countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Mozambique and Tanzania. Although all the aid is donated, it costs an average of £4000 to send a container out to Africa. Fund-raising is therefore very important. We hold a big Christmas Fayre every year. This year it raised nearly £2,500. Many people help, with coffee mornings, strawberry teas, sponsored runs, knit-ins, and we have one or two big garage sales each year. People also leave bequests to the Charity and, in one case, a long-term helper left the proceeds of the sale of her large house to Operation Sunshine!

When we have a container to pack we pray first for good weather so that mattresses and furniture won't be spoiled by the rain. When the doors are finally closed everyone who has helped with the packing, some thirty or forty people, come to lay hands on the container. We pray for its safe passage and arrival, and for the driver. Then we adjourn to the sorting room for a buffet lunch provided by the helpers which is always excellent. But first we give thanks to God for the container that has been filled with good things for those in need. We thank God for his bounty, and for the needy people in Africa.

Kathy Harding, who came to England from Zambia in 1978, and founded the charity after three years of prayer, spoke with great clarity and depth of feeling at the A.G.M. in November. She returned to Zambia in 1996, where she has been running the Letita Leprosy Hospital with very little in the way of equipment or supplies. The lepers are bandaged daily, and supplies are given out once a week. There are sixty-five lepers in the colony, and a hundred and twenty children. Kathy runs a soup kitchen at which five hundred are fed each day. Sometimes people will arrive whose last meal was eaten three days before. She has also started a school with two teachers.

Kathy is one of four women who form the management committee working for the National Agenda for Social Advancement (NASAD). An evangelist goes deep into the bush finding small settlements where the people are desperately poor. She brings them gifts of clothing and tells them “Jesus loves you”. A third member of the team looks after the babies abandoned by the roadside by mothers dying of AIDs. Up to the age of four months the babies, weak and often premature, are nursed at the House of Moses with its one incubator sent by Operation Sunshine. Between four months and five years the children are cared for at the Crisis Nursery, and as far as possible homes are found, mostly with grandparents, as Kathy does not want a proliferation of orphanages. In the AIDs pandemic, five thousand people are dying each week in Lusaka!

Kathy Harding will be presented with an MBE by the Queen on December 13th, in recognition of her work with the poor. She wrote, “It has taken much time for me to grasp the reality of such an honour and I feel deeply humble”. Before coming to England for the A.G.M., Kathy had gone to Ireland to visit her uncle, who had been very ill, and had even received the Last Sacraments. He is a Redemptorist priest of ninety-six, and has been with the Order for seventy-eight years! As a strange coincidence, he had done a lot of work with lepers in the Philippines in his earlier years.

Kitty Hart

*And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” Matt 10:42*