

The Search for a Structure for the Uniting Church

An examination of the proposal of the Joint Commission on Church Union, that the uniting churches introduce a personal form of episcopacy into a united church.

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At the first meeting of the Joint Commission in November 1957, it was recognised that the Church throughout Christian history had used various forms of government and that those who designed them believed that they were essential for good order. It was concluded that further study would be required to determine the appropriateness of order in a re-united Church.(1) As McCaughey outlined in an article in the Ecumenical Review some years later, the Joint Commission had resolved that discussion about the ministry would be preceded by a consideration of the Church's nature, function and mission.(2) An episcopal order became attractive since it fitted into the ecumenical perspective of the Church's nature, function and mission. Principal of St Andrew's College, Alan Dougan, pointed out the main problem with this approach: most established denominations held traditional views that hampered them from developing an ecumenical perspective. Thus, while the view that the Church must look for the "great Biblical conception" is in line with ecumenical thought, it would stimulate debate on the scriptural and historical bases of episcopacy.(3)

In 1958 McCaughey stated that we could not expect the Anglicans to enter a Uniting Church which had no bishops.(4) McCaughey, and many other Presbyterians, held a particular view of Presbyterianism that depicted the minister as the representative of the corporate episcopate of the presbytery. This allowed for an expansion to the

concept of a Bishop in Presbytery.(5) The main discussion on this view centred around the size of the region over which the episcopacy would be exercised.(6) John Alexander, Co-Secretary of the Joint Commission, elaborated that the difference between this Presbyterian view and the Church of England position on episcopacy is also over the size of the region or diocese.(7)

The South Australian members of the Joint Commission worked on the structure of the emerging church. In the preliminary draft of the Second Report of August 1960, no place was given to bishops in the order of the Church.(8) As the draft was debated and revised for February 1961, a section was included in the "Ministry of the Church" that noted the historical base of bishops in "ecumenical mission".(9) As discussions continued, the personal aspect of episcopacy was increasingly stressed. Generally the Joint Commission considered that personal episcopacy was part of God's Will.(10) It was not clear however what form of episcopacy this would involve. The Joint Commission was encouraged by Anglican responses which gave an indication of what were still typical Anglican positions. One article in the Anglican noted that the Joint Commission had strongly affirmed three of four points of the Lambeth Quadrilateral and that the present work of the Commission indicated a hidden "hunger for the episcopate ...".(11) It was stressed that "whether or not episcopacy was of the essence of the church in the past is not the point; for us it is of the essence of the unity of the church today". It was pointed out that the concept of a pastor of pastors or bishop may have much to offer to the Commission.(12)

Only four weeks later on the 21st September 1961, an unofficial meeting between representatives of the Joint Commission and some Anglican representatives was held at Saint Andrew's College.(13) The importance of this is

clear as the Joint Commission was directly seeking information on the Anglican position on and response to a wider union. The personal friendship of J. Davis McCaughey and Archbishop Frank Woods of Melbourne had increased the range of contacts between the ecumenical figures. There was a strong ecumenically minded group in the Anglican Church who desired the formation of official ecumenical committees.(14) This mention of the possible introduction of episcopacy elucidated sympathetic reaction from those Anglicans who were interested in a wider union. The Anglicans also knew that any negotiations could only be conducted within the framework laid down by the Lambeth Quadrilateral and by the direction of the mother Church of England.(15)

The Draft of September 1961, which also included the proposed Basis of Union, did not mention a structure of episcopacy. At this stage a form of personal "oversight" was proposed. This oversight was related to special and occasional ministries and to groups charged through the call and appointment of ministries.(16) There was a discussion of bishops and their role in the early church but overall "discussions on this section were incomplete on the question of a Bishop in Presbytery.(17) It was concluded that further discussion on episcopacy would influence the final draft.(18) Future discussion was concerned with strengthening the first Proposed Basis which "... gave indication of a form of Conciliar Government but was vague in matters of membership, nature, function and powers of the Councils and their interrelationship".(19)

In 1962 Anglican division over the episcopal base was highlighted by the publication of an "open" letter of thirty two Angloican theologians to the Archbishop of Canterbury and York. The theologians stated that they did not agree with all the implications of the Lambeth Quadrilateral. The letter was relevant to the English Anglican-Presbyterian

conversations and questioned whether Anglicans should hold the view that only those ordained through historic succession should celebrate the Eucharist (Holy Communion).(20) The concessional framework of the letter promoted an awareness of the discussions on the Anglican Episcopal base and also the amount of oversight and care that occurs in the Presbyterian Church.(21)

One Joint Commission document was an article from David Chellappa, the Bishop in Madras. This outlined the position of episcopacy in the Church of South India. Episcopacy had come to be a symbol of unity and pastoral care. Most importantly it was noted that episcopacy was "... the form of ministry most likely to establish wider unity with other churches".(22) Chellappa outlined the biblical features which promoted an ecumenical awareness.

There was also debate about the issue from among the church's sources. An article on Congregationalist positions on the church's structure stated that "It is, we believe, wrong, for a church to be ruled from the outside by the state; or for a few of its members calling themselves bishops to arrogate to themselves the sacred powers that Christ has given to the whole flock".(23) This view however was not held by all Congregationalists. Geoff Barnes wrote a letter to the Joint Commission to clarify what he viewed as the contemporary Congregational position. He informed them that Congregationalism could readily adapt itself to the concept of a bishop in presbytery, but there was a need to ensure that the role of the local church was still emphasised.(24) Significantly the proposal to have bishops was eventually supported by all Congregationalists on the Joint Commission.(25) McCaughey commented that "on the whole that older men are against and the younger men are for", and the former were mainly from the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.(26)

The initial debate against the move to introduce episcopacy was stimulated by the Methodist President General Reverend Professor Hubert H. Triggs and Presbyterian Joint Commission member A. C. Watson. In a letter to Professor J. Davis McCaughey on April 10 1962, Watson gave notice of his opposition to the sections on episcopacy and his determination to draft alternative paragraphs.(27) In the new Draft Basis of Union of April 1962 bishops had been included in recognition of the form of government beyond the community that was necessary in modern times.(28) McCaughey replied to Watson and reaffirmed this Basis. He pointed out that the theological approach to union meant that bishops had to be discussed as part of the Commission's task to investigate the structure of the Church. McCaughey challenged the emotional objection of Presbyterians to the word "Bishop" and pointed out that most words are tainted and that in any case the draft proposed a "reformed Bishop". He stressed that it would be an example of unity if the uniting churches could bridge the gap of episcopacy and non-episcopacy before the Anglicans were in the debate.(29) This was a different opinion to J. F. Peter, a Presbyterian member of the Joint Commission, who had earlier written to the Joint Secretaries of the Joint Commission endorsing the episcopal proposal as a "courageous venture" but indicating "... that its result will be the calling off of the negotiations by the Presbyterian Church".(30) McCaughey was more concerned with an ecumenically orientated union and asked Watson: "Do you really expect to convert the world to Presbyterianism".(31) McCaughey knew that he had the support of the majority of the Joint Commission, who were looking for a way into union that followed the "rhythm of the gospel".(32) They believed that the gospel did not originate in one denomination, but was revealed by God the Father who is one with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The August 1962 Draft Report gave considerable outline of the proposed episcopacy. The Conciliar system of 1961 was now strengthened by episcopacy.(33) Where vague references to oversight had been used, bishops and their relationship to the church through personal episcopate was now illustrated as a reasonable order for a Uniting Church. The World Council of Churches Third Assembly in 1962 influenced this decision. The Draft Report noted the Assembly's statement which had acknowledged that episcopacy was a traditional and an ancient unity.(34) As Trigge mentioned in an article in the Methodist some months earlier however, the declaration from the Assembly had only outlined the two positions on episcopacy; some saw episcopacy as a necessity, while others denied that it was essential. The solution the Assembly gave to resolving the dispute was similar to the Joint Commission's emphasis. Discussions were guided by the Holy Spirit, as a true search of biblical, theological and historical patterns was undertaken.(35) Thus the draft mainly continued the emphasis of the Joint Commission's theological perspective. This stressed the institution of reformed bishops who would be a sign and stimulus for wider union.(36)

The Draft Report of August 1962 not only raised the question of the creation of the episcopacy, it also answered it.(37) During 1959 and 1960, when episcopacy was being discussed, the main supporters of the proposal had been considering methods and procedures to introduce it. The "new approach" of McCaughey and the influence of Father Herbert's writings on the area of ecumenical relationships are believed to be fundamental in directing the Joint Commission toward the proposal of a concordat with the Church of South India.(38) The emphasis on unity and the world mission in the first report had already been acknowledged to be due in part to the influence of united churches like the Church of South India.(39) Christian Unity Committees looked towards Asia for a common mission

in the one area.(40) The Joint Commission was drafting a report in an ecumenical era and was also advised by ecumenical leaders. Colin Williams, a prominent Methodist theologian,(41) and Lesslie Newbigin, a former missionary of the Church of Scotland and now a Bishop in the Church of South India, directly and indirectly influenced the framing of the Concordat as well as supporting the move for bishops.

It is acknowledged that Newbigin has influenced Church Union movements and individuals throughout the world, including "a number of the Australian negotiators".(42) In 1960 in Australia there were two events which stimulated ecumenical and episcopal discussion more than anything else: in January 1960 there was the announcement of the coming February visit of Lesslie Newbigin to Australia for The National Conference of Australian Churches, through the World Council of Churches in Australia.(43) Newbigin, like Bishop Sobrepna, the Chairman of the East Asia Christian Conference, was promulgating a united fellowship of life and mission.(44) On the 27th February 1960 Newbigin held a seminar at Wesley College. The Methodist reported this in glowing terms. "Since the arrival in Australia we have heard and read much of what the Bishop has written and spoken, but in the more intimate atmosphere of the seminar we felt the impact of his personality".(45) Newbigin exemplified the non-prelatical Bishop and servant of his people. In 1960, his A South India Diary was revised and The Reunion of the Church was re-printed, due to sufficient "demand".(46) When reading A South India Diary one feels that the dynamic, ecumenical and renewed Church of South India could leap out of the pages. There is a strong emphasis on practical theology and union. For Newbigin "It must be clear from the outset that a bishop is primarily a pastor, not a bureaucrat".(47) He also stresses the extinction of all the denominations. Rather than saying there is a need

to impress the authority of the church on Congregationalists, he says it is on ex-congregationalists.(48) The "Hope of the Churches in South India has always been that the union there would be the starting point for wider union".(49) Here, Newbigin emphasises the necessity of the Church of South India's parent churches not only noting the union in South India, but believing that their denomination have indeed died for the Church. This was something that the Joint Commission had already acknowledged.

The Reunion of the Church had been written in 1947 and was a defence of church union under the ecumenical questions of "What form of unity does God Will?" and "What is the method to be used?"(50) Newbigin stoutly defended the reprint of 1960 by elaborating on the continual need for Christians to be challenged by church union and a reformed episcopacy. He provides reasons for episcopacy that are similar to those used by the Joint Commission. A belief that there is both a biblical command and a need for a wider fellowship are strongly evident in his writing. Since the Church of South India had still not been fully recognised by the Anglican Communion he uses an interesting argument to justify all ministries as valid and his own as increasingly so. Newbigin believes that the Church should be episcopal not because that it is God's Will, but because the being of the Church depends upon the grace of God (justification by grace), who justifies the ungodly. The validity of non-episcopal churches is not denied. Episcopacy is the visible centre but not the excluding base.(51)

Newbigin and the Church of South India were influential in the development of Colin Williams' theological perspective. Williams and Newbigin were both on the select committee of World Council of Churches Commission and in July at Geneva were to help prepare in final form a paper on the "Theology of Mission".(52) The similar theological

perspective was illustrated at the August 1960 meeting of Joint Commission representatives on "The Order of the Church". Professor Williams introduced the topic: "How do we get from the New Testament Via Theology to Church Order", and outlined the office of bishop which he classified as being distinct from the Presbyter (elder). He acknowledges that the "threefold order" differentiates, unlike the Presbyterian one order of ministry which tries to maintain equality. Williams pressed strongly for a new form of government that was relevant to the position of the churches in Australia now. It was suggested that the form of the emerging church should be able to link in with the Anglican Church in a wider unity.(53) Williams' approach was deeply sociological. The influence on "the whole life and theology of John and Charles Wesley" had broadened his conception of the mission of the Church. John Alexander has elaborated on the influence of Methodism in the move to Anglican by drawing an analogy from Michelangelo's sculpture, The Prisoners, which portrayed half the human figures carved out and the rest, still undefined in stone. Methodism was half articulated as a separate church but was still deeply imbedded within Anglicanism. Some theologians like Williams thought that it was the Joint Commission's belief that "God has raised up the Church of South India as a sign to us of the first step we must take along the road to a unity-in-mission. For him the base of the ecumenical movement in Australia was unity through the Concordat, giving an impetus to world mission which would lead to renewal.(54) Whether this unity and recognition of episcopacy could be achieved was the question J. F. Peter posed to the Joint Commission in early 1962. Rather than rejecting the proposals he affirmed them. Nevertheless, he suggested that the Draft Report should include a statement endorsing the Church of South India as the true episcopate. This implied that the Anglicans would receive an increased depth to their episcopacy if there was union with the Uniting

Churches.(55) Williams had no doubt considered this and it would have been his belief that Anglican recognition of the Church of South India would increase and consequently the viability of the Australian proposals would gain strength.(56)

At the New Delhi Conference of the Faith and Order Commission there were discussions between Williams, McCaughey and Church of India representatives. This conference was a final influence on the rewriting of the Second Report(57) by Williams. Williams had been a consultant throughout the triennium and it was acknowledged by the Joint Commission that he had "... been largely responsible for the drafting of the report and Basis of Union".(58) Williams' influence is pointed to in Harold Wood's letter to the Spectator in June 1963. Wood, who was critical of the episcopal and Concordat scheme, referred to Williams' letter of 1st May. Williams' letter supported the proposals and Wood plainly inferred Williams' necessity to do this because "Professor Williams was the chief designer of this proposition".(59) John Alexander, one of the Presbyterian members of the Joint Commission, had stated that all the pages concerning bishops and the Church of South India Concordat were drafted by Williams, who was a keen supporter of the ecumenical theology of the Church of South India.(60) Alexander explains further that "... all Colin of course was doing was writing up the agreements that we had arrived at about recommending bishops ...".(61)

The importance of Williams and McCaughey in the framing of the report and basis is clear, but they were supported by the majority of the Joint Commission. The "new approach" of theological discussions first fostered direction by the predominant ecumenical theologians and consultants.(62) The final form of The Second Report was approved at the Joint Commission meeting in November, 1962

and the Report was printed in March 1963.(63) The report itself was a document for discussion and perusal while the Basis of Union was to be debated, voted upon and amended if necessary by the Joint Commission on the authorisation of the three churches.

The position of the majority on the episcopal proposal was reasonably clear at the Joint Commission Meeting held in November 1966. The negotiating churches had ensured that the amendments had been collated and the Methodists and Congregationalists were able to table reports and resolutions of their National Conferences. The Presbyterian State Assemblies had already met and it was essentially their statistics that were used to present the Presbyterian position.(64)

The Methodist General Conference was held in May 1966. There was division over the introduction of episcopacy and the concordat in the Basis of Union. The majority secured resolutions that toned down the controversial issues. It was recommended to the Joint Commission that the Church of South India proposal be replaced by a general commitment to unity. The Conference also resolved to "accept the principle of episcopacy as defined in the Basis of Union but if this be rejected by the Congregational or Presbyterian Church it not be insisted upon as a condition of union".(65) By allowing for any major possible change, the General Conference stressed that their desire for union ultimately outweighed any stand on these controversial issues. Their resolution left the ultimate decision on episcopacy for the other churches.

The Biennial Association of the Congregational Union of Australia also met in May 1966. The tabulation of the amendments revealed that there was a "general opposition" to the concordat. The proposal of bishops was also questioned, but there was no general objection to the type

of office. The amendments were concerned with the tenure of the office, authority and the title of the office. There was considerable objection to any position which linked the bishop's office to apostolic succession through episcopal ordination.(66) The acceptance of the episcopal base would only be recommended if there was an "understanding that it was a matter of church custom and not as a necessity of the gospel".(67) The older Congregationalist position on corporate episcopate and a desire for a firm union between the three churches influenced the decision which was based on the amendments from congregations and state unions. This did not mean that a wider union was no longer considered. It was considered best to conclude the union of the negotiating churches while still encouraging the Church of England to further participation, which could begin seriously after the Uniting Church had been founded.(68)

The Presbyterian State Assemblies voted overwhelmingly against the concordat. Four were against the proposal and one was indeterminate. There was only a majority of one Assembly on the issue of Bishops, but nearly four times as many Presbyterians were against the proposal as for.(69)

The rejection of the concordat was linked to the Presbyterian fear that there would be a denial of previous ministerial succession in Presbyterianism. Suspicions were aroused over the possibility of recognition being given to episcopal consecration only, which implied a downgrading of non-episcopal ordination. Basically, most Presbyterians thought that there was no need to include a proposal which implied that the Presbyterian ministry would be indebted to an episcopal church.(70)

In a summary of Presbyterian Amendments it was expressed that the Joint Commission should take note of the Assembly's recommendations. Notably these included the

deletion of all references to bishops and the concordat. The concordat would be replaced by a general statement on the relations to the Church universal.(71)

The Joint Commission followed the churches' recommendations in these areas and the concordat and the proposed personal "episcope" of bishops were eliminated from the proposed Basis of Union.

future drafts of the Basis of Union did not contain any concordat or reference to a personal episcopate exercised by bishops.

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