

Covenant Council Report

Proposer: The Revd Canon Dr Peter Thompson

Your Grace, members of Synod,

Sixteen years ago I submitted a piece of research to the Irish School of Ecumenics. We had just signed the covenant with the Methodist Church in Ireland, and I was attempting to engage with that, to analyse the historical relationships between Anglicanism and Methodism, with particular reference to the Irish context, to assess what had been agreed, and what the potential future was, looking at the models of other agreements internationally. I'm afraid to say my conclusions were that we would need a seismic shift to make further progress on a relationship between an episcopal polity and a connexional polity.

Ten years later we arrived at that moment of change, when we found a way through on the issue of interchangeability of ministries. I think many of us underestimate the enormity of that moment, and the far reaching international implications of that agreement for bilateral dialogue. The work we have engaged upon here in Ireland has become a template for discussions across the globe, and we have laid a firm foundation which others are building upon.

The Covenant Council has continued to build upon that work, advising on issues both practical and theological to allow our churches to grow closer together in mission and witness. At times we have been frustrated that progress is slow, but we are committed to ensuring that any proposals we bring to our churches are robust and fully explored. We are continuing to engage at a theological level as well as a canon law level, and at the more practical, nuts and bolts level of worshipping and witnessing together. In proposing this report, I do so with a sense of deep disappointment and some frustration that we often fail to grasp the opportunities of closer engagement with our Methodist brothers and sisters. For many decades there have been outstanding examples of sharing, long predating the covenant agreement, and these continue to grow and flourish, and we thank God for them. As a Synod we have adopted proposal after proposal and report after report, but we have not, as a church, allowed the covenant to become part of our DNA. We do not instinctively look to the Methodists as our closest ecumenical partners, nor do we afford them the status of a church with whom we are in communion. It is not that we intentionally exclude them, but more than we seem to overlook the importance of our formal agreements.

As a Council we exist to facilitate and resource the Covenant relationship, to advise and monitor, but also to encourage. So let us encourage you to make this relationship part of your DNA at every level in church life. Let us not simply adopt another report and nod in dull assent to another handful of proposals, but let us take to heart the call of Jesus that we all may be one, and make our intentionality towards the Covenant a step on that journey. Let us commit ourselves to finding the ways to make what is right for the kingdom right within the church.

Your Grace, it gives me great pleasure that the report of the Covenant Council be received.