

Covenant Council Report to General Synod 2005
Proposed by the Rt Rev Harold Miller

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Two and a half years ago, I had the pleasure of being present at Chrome Hill in Lambeg at the Signing of the Methodist/Church of Ireland Covenant by the Primate and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. This was the place where John Wesley, on one of his preaching tours of Ireland, is reputed to have intertwined two saplings which have now grown into one tree with two trunks! – a very powerful image of the Covenant.

A year later, always a little behind, the Church of England and the Methodist Church in Britain entered into a similar covenant.

This particular covenant was entered into by the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in 2002 with a real sense of the support of the entire Synod. To vote against it would almost have felt like voting for sin! But the question which emerges two and a half years later is whether we are truly committed together to make the contents of the covenant real at every level of our two churches. The reality of the situation is that it is often harder to do things together within our institutional structures than it is to do things separately. For example: How many local parishes are, as we have committed ourselves to in the Covenant, availing of every opportunity to worship together? How many are sharing resources in order to strengthen the mission of the church? How many of our central committees have invited Methodists to be present? And where are we in relation to enabling a measure of joint training for ministry or (easier still) lay readers and local preachers?

Last year's report, which was the first by the new Covenant Council was in a sense a 'holding operation' as the new Council began to establish itself, recognize the 'geography' of what it was required to do, get to know each other's concerns, and begin to tackle some of the major issues which are raised by our new closeness. After the short report to the Synod in 2004, I was pleasantly surprised by two things:

1. The number of people who were disappointed that there hadn't been more progress, and expressed that to me.
2. The number of occasions in the course of the other debates in Synod, when people gave examples or testimony of their positive experience with the Methodists.

In our work as a covenant council, we have been exploring all sorts of areas, some of which may seem like a blast from the past, but are actually still around in our relating as two Churches; for example our differences of opinion on issues like predestination and perfect holiness! Two 'levels' on which we need to move forward, and have promised to work on in particular are focal to our report this year.

The first of these is the whole question of how we enable local churches to work together within the Covenant. The Council is therefore bringing before the General Synod a document on Local Covenant Partnerships, and I would like to thank Peter Thompson in

particular for the painstaking work he has done on this. Much of the document is based on the protocols for LEP's in England, and we are aware that the two situations are different. Rather than present this document directly to the General Synod, we have invited the Standing Committee to examine it first, and in the light of that, it is being presented as a First Draft, with the opportunity for comments to be fed back to the Covenant Council by 30 November. Our hope is then to bring a revised document for ratification in 2006. The seconder of the report will say more about this area.

The second level on which we are working is the makro level of the theology of episcopate. This is one of the most difficult areas in our relationships, and we are aware of a whole range of opinions on bishops, not least in the Church of Ireland itself. As an initial canter this year, we have agreed ten propositions as a council which are to be found on p. 308. These, we feel, are relatively uncontroversial, and could rightly be criticized for not dealing with the contentious issues, or for not covering the whole area of episcopate. But it is our conviction that there is a value in charting the areas of agreement first (a well proven ecumenical method), so that we can see the wood for the trees, and focus down on the areas which may need to be sorted out in the future. It is our conviction that the interchangeability of ministries must be high on our agenda, if the Covenant is not to become 'stuck'.

We would, of course, value comment on these points and on other aspects which need to be dealt with.

We are hoping to hold a special overnight meeting in the autumn to which we will be inviting the primate and the president, to see if we can progress in this area. The last time such a high-level meeting took place, it resulted in the Covenant, so watch this space