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PILGRIMS TOGETHER - HAS DISSENT BECOME CONSENT? The Free Churches and the Inter Church Process*

A few months after I took up the post of General Secretary of the Free Church Federal Council, I found myself in the lunch queue at a Ministers' Retreat next to a friend of many years standing. He expressed surprise at my appointment. Then he added, 'I never imagined *you* would be banging the Free Church drum!' The question that posed for me is this - is it still our task today to be banging the Free Church drum? to be shouting about our non-conformity? to be vocal in dissent? To what extent are we still dissenters? To what extent has dissent now become consent?

Dissent is often seen as negative. Yet it began as a positive witness, the Latin word for which gave us the word 'protest'. But that positive witness necessarily involved dissent from those who took other views. So for many of our forefathers and mothers, dissent involved opposition, and in particular opposition to the Established Church of England. In his history of the *Protestant Dissenting Deputies* Bernard Manning even refers to that opposition as war.

The origins of English Dissent are to be found among those radical Puritans who were unhappy with some aspects of the life and doctrine of the State Church, which seemed to them to offer only a partial reformation. For some, the objection was to the Prayer Book and the requirement of uniformity of worship as there set out. Nearly all objected to the Established Church's episcopal government and the moderated apostolic succession that many believed it implied. Some found its Erastian dependency upon secular authority objectionable, as hostile to any concept of a gathered church defined by the faith-commitment of its members. The development of a specifically Anglican theology, though not defined by statute, was too broad for some, whilst too narrow for others, for the new dissenters were themselves divided in the classic debate on grace, works and human responsibility. Finally, ideas of priesthood and laity, and sacramental discipline and practice, further provoked dissent and nonconformity, that being least extensive among Presbyterians and much more extensive among Baptists.

DISSENT SEEKING REDRESS

Ernest Payne, in an essay on *Access to the Throne*,¹ describes the way in which the ministers of the Three Denominations (Presbyterian, Baptist and Independent) waited first upon William III and then three weeks later upon his Queen with addresses of welcome. But the link between those addresses in 1688 and the Toleration Act of 1689 strongly suggests that the purpose was in part to secure support against the oppressive legislation of the 1660s which not only entrenched the Church of England as the Established Church, but forced the Nonconformists into a second class citizenship. For some 40 years, it was this General Body of Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations residing in and about the Cities of London and Westminster which sought to safeguard the interests of those denominations, often by approaches to the Throne.

* Annual Lecture to the Protestant Dissenting Ministers and Deputies, 14 November 1991

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Then in 1732, it 'called into existence the Dissenting Deputies, a lay body charged with the defence and extension of the civil rights of Nonconformists and based on the congregations from which the ministers came.' The Minutes (17 March 1823) describe it 'as a permanent Guardian of the civil interests of the Dissenting Body to which recourse might be had for Assistance in procuring Redress of Grievances.'

Christopher Ikin, in an unsigned pamphlet² recently written for the two bodies, says:

The fact of the existence of the Protestant Dissenting Deputies led nonconformists who were in trouble of any kind to appeal for their help and advice. Since the Deputies included people skilled in the law, they were often able to help those, especially in the country districts, who did not know their rights or were subject to petty local persecution over the registration of chapels and meeting-houses, tithes and church-rates, and especially over burial laws. They campaigned for the opening of new Universities without religious tests, and for the removal of these at Oxford and Cambridge. During the nineteenth century, they took part in the campaigning for the disestablishment of the Church of England; but they never sponsored it. Their approach was practical rather than doctrinaire.

THE TASKS OF CLASSIC DISSENT

Dissent then involved opposition in order to secure civil rights for nonconformists. It had to seek to reverse the disabilities imposed on the Dissenters by 'the penal [Clarendon] code imposed by the victorious Royalists returning to power with Charles II in 1660', (that code included the Corporation Act, the Act of Uniformity, the Conventicle Act, the Five Mile Act and later the Test Act).³ As a result, 'Dissent was now recognized for the first time as lawful; but it was depressed to a position of disadvantage'.⁴ Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists might now be permitted to have their own forms of church life and government, but they were not permitted to accept public office, or to build their churches and chapels within five miles of towns (or indeed for their ministers to reside within the same limits). Their baptism was not recognized (so that they could not bury or be buried in parish churchyards). Later (1753) they were not even allowed to conduct weddings in their own chapels, and have those marriages legally recognized. They were also barred from entry to the ancient Universities which, as exclusively Anglican institutions, were only prepared to grant degrees to those who conformed to credal tests.

Over the course of a century and a half, many of these problems were overcome, though some disabilities still remained. Some indeed still do. We are, for instance, still seeking to change the position which exists as a result of the Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533. Under this, only the Archbishop of Canterbury can grant a licence for a marriage to take place in certain college and hospital chapels, and in guild or borough chapels (such as that at Stratford upon Avon), and then only an Anglican priest may conduct the ceremony and register the wedding in the registers of the local parish church.

There is also one matter where the Established Church now has greater freedom than the Dissenting Free Churches in the conduct of its worship. The Alternative Service Book of the Church of England now enables modern English to be used in the wedding service. All other churches (Quakers and Jews excepted) and civil registrars are bound by law to use the Elizabethan 'thee' - 'I, A. . . , do take thee, C. . . D. . . to be my lawful wedded wife/husband . . .' - a small thing perhaps, but one which causes much

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resentment from young couples, many of whom prefer to use language that comes more naturally to them.

CHANGES IN THE WAY DISSENT OPERATED

One of the unresolved difficulties after the first hundred years of the Dissenting Deputies' existence was Education. It was one of the Deputies' major concerns during the nineteenth century. In 1843 they successfully opposed the educational clauses of the Factory Bill. The clauses would *de facto* have brought in 'compulsory education for factory children under the direction of the Church' (i.e. the Church of England).⁵

After 1843, as Bernard Manning records,⁶ the Deputies' position in the Education debate was taken over by others:

The primary responsibility of fighting the battle for religious equality in education passed from the Deputies to the national organizations of the Free Churches. The denominational unions, almost untried in 1843, were in 1870 able to assert themselves (the Congregational and Baptist Unions, for example, date from 1832).

By the 1890s, when the education debate flared up yet again, there was a further development. This time, groups of Free Churches, in various cities and towns, were in the forefront. This led to the formation of many local Free Church Councils. These then met together in a Congress in Manchester in 1892, as a result of which the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches came into being. This was a federation of local Councils. The next major development came in 1919, largely at the instigation of Dr J. H. Shakespeare, the General Secretary of the Baptist Union; another body was created as a federation of the Councils of the various Free Church Denominations (the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches of England). These two federations, one of local Free Church Councils, one of the denominational Councils at national level, continued to run on parallel lines for 20 years.⁷ Commonsense, however, prevailed in 1940, when the two bodies merged (E. K. H. Jordan uses the word 'converged') to become the Free Church Federal Council, which is still today involved in the ongoing education debate.

Perhaps some future lecturer on this annual occasion may research more widely into the way in which the denominations and the Free Church Federal Council have taken on to their agenda those things which were once dealt with exclusively by the Deputies. Such research might well indicate how appropriate, as well as convenient, it is for the Ministers and Deputies not only to meet in the Council Chamber of the Free Church Federal Council, but also to have their business conducted from this office.

Indeed, such research might raise other questions concerning the Protestant Dissenting Deputies and the Free Church Federal Council. Bernard Manning writes:

One other body needs to be mentioned, though it needs little more than mention - the National Free Church Council. The Deputies welcomed the foundation of the new body and have maintained amicable relations with it, without ever facing, up to the present, the problem created by this new body, which with its national and federal basis must now inevitably fulfil some of the purposes originally discharged by the Deputies. The Deputies, however, continue to feel, though without defining spheres, that there remains a special field for their own activities, and that a

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constitution whose flexibility has stood the test of two hundred years is not to be lightly abandoned.⁸ (*N.B. the date of the writing of this paragraph is not known.*)

What is that 'special field?' What spheres might be defined? How many of our Free Church people are actually aware of the Protestant Dissenting Bodies, and their responsibilities and boundaries? Or, to put it more bluntly, when the Government brought in legislation concerning the Community Charge, to the disadvantage of the Churches; when it brought forward an Education Reform Bill, which failed to give any proper place to Religious Education; or when it issued a white paper on *Registration: Proposals for Change* (which proposes alterations affecting our Free Church weddings): whose task was it to discuss, debate, remonstrate, oppose and seek to amend? In previous generations, these were matters for the Deputies. What about now?

IS DISSENT STILL RELEVANT?

In view of the achievements of the Deputies, and others, in the amelioration of so many of the Dissenters' disadvantages and disabilities, does Dissent still necessitate opposition? I note that my dictionary, under 'Dissent', uses words like 'difference of opinion,' 'disagreement', and 'separation from' but does not refer to opposition. In politics, we have in this country a set-up which is confrontational, government *versus* opposition. Does this have to be the continuing pattern of Church life as well (or is that merely to allow our cultural environment to dictate our behaviour and attitudes)?

It needs to be noted that the earlier Dissenters' opposition was not against the Church of England as such. When the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts was finally achieved in 1828, the United Committee of the Dissenting Deputies and others which had campaigned for this repeal, organised a Public Dinner by way of celebration. The proposed menu was:

Turtle, Turbots, Salmon, Salmon Trout, Stewed Eels, Fillet Mutton with Cucumber stewed, Stewed Rumps Beef, Roast and Boiled Lamb, Roast Beef, Chickens with white sauce, Hams, Tongues, Stewed Veal and Peas, Pigeon Pies, Giblet Pies, Raised French Pies, Pullets Roast, Turkey Poults, Guinea Fowls, Ducks, Geese, Jellies, Gooseberry Tarts, Tourtes, Pudding Peas, Cauliflowers, Potatoes, Salads, French Beans, Garden Beans . . .

The toasts (over twenty of them) included one given by the Revd Dr F. A. Cox, Baptist minister in Hackney, 'to the Archbishops, Bishops, and other members of the Established Church', and the final report to the Deputies concerning the repeal of the two acts stressed the harmony among those who 'on the most essential points hold the Common Faith of Christians', adding:

We did not seek a triumph over enemies but an admission to the common advantages of Fellow Subjects and Friends.⁹

Let me, however, illustrate from personal experience why I now question whether dissent, in the form of opposition to the Established Church, is still relevant. My introduction to ecumenical matters was at a Youth Conference at Bangor in 1951. It was the first such conference organised by the (now defunct) British Council of Churches. Memory suggests that the Baptist delegation numbered about fifty. While there were

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similar numbers of Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian young people, the overwhelming majority present were Anglican. At that time, there would only have been one or two, if any, Roman Catholic observers. The denial of the bread and the wine to the Free Church members at the Anglican Eucharist caused an uproar. Rarely since have I heard the Free Church case so forcefully and persuasively put. The debate raged for two days, and invaded every discussion, whether in small group or in plenary. In the end, it was Douglas Stewart and Edwin Robertson (both of whom served for periods on the Religious Broadcasting Staff of the BBC, and both of whom have pastored Heath Street Baptist Church, Hampstead), who took us Baptist youngsters on one side and tried to get us to understand two things - (i) you have won your point and the Anglican young people now agree with you, and (ii) keeping on about it will be totally counter-productive. It took a quarter of a century, but now, the Anglican table is open to us, and it is the Anglican who joins us in debate at the Roman Catholic denial of the bread and wine. *Plus ça change!*

A CHANGING PATTERN

The old pattern is changing. In 1833, the Deputies listed six outstanding grievances¹⁰:

compulsory conformity to the Prayer Book in Marriage; the want of a legal registration of Dissenters' births and deaths; liability to Church Rates and other ecclesiastical demands; alleged liability of places of worship to poor rates; denial of the right of burial by their own ministers in parochial churchyards; and virtual exclusion from the benefits of Oxford and Cambridge.

Today, none of those grievances remain. They have long since been met. High public office is now not only open to, but often reached by, our members. From the Free Churches (I include the Methodists as well as the 'Dissenters') have come Prime Ministers and Speakers of the House of Commons. We have denominational colleges in both Oxford (Regent's Park and Mansfield) and Cambridge (Westminster/Cheshunt and Wesley House), and students from the Free Churches are to be found also in the other colleges in both places, whilst Oxbridge now accounts for but a small part of the provision of Higher Education in England.

Other matters of debate are not so much the exclusive concern of the Dissenting Free Churches. We have allies among our former opponents. It may well be argued that our influence has spread. Roman Catholics emphasise the importance of the local Church (their word is 'subsidiarity'). They place a similar emphasis upon the Scriptures and personal faith. A recent editorial in *The Month* illustrates this:

We are presuming that we have something valuable to say to non-believers, and indeed we have: salvation for the nations under the mercy of God. And how was that salvation accomplished? We know full well: through the death of Jesus, in which he took upon himself the violent sinfulness of the world, broke the cycle of evil, and poured out his forgiving love on those who sin against God. In his self-emptying even unto death, he rejected the use of force and retribution . . . This is the heart of our faith, both morally and doctrinally enjoined by Jesus, exemplified in his life and death, and central to the renewal of human relations which the Kingdom of God brings.¹¹

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Anglicans increasingly accept that this country, far from being a Christendom where every resident of every parish is a Christian, is now a mission field to be evangelised. Often their Bishops and Synods express stronger dissent from Government opinions than we would have ever thought possible at that conference forty years ago. *Faith in the City* and David Sheppard's emphasis on the *Bias to the Poor* ring bells in our hearts and minds. If the point is so largely won, may it not be counter-productive to persist in vocal opposition?

A recent editorial in the *Baptist Quarterly* emphasizes this change of view:

'We are all dissenters now' it might be said. It can no longer be affirmed that the Church of England is the Tory Party at Prayer. Rather the churches together, often led by the leadership of the Church of England, have become the most consistent and persistent of government critics, seen particularly in the refusal of the Archbishop of Canterbury to engage in a triumphalistic celebration of victory in the Falkland Islands War, and the tough analysis of urban deprivation contained within the *Faith in the City* Report.¹²

MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE

Two factors may help to point out why that editorial comment in the *Baptist Quarterly* is correct. One is our contemporary readiness to accept as fellow-Christians those from denominations and traditions other than our own. In the hey-day of Dissent, few Dissenters accepted those in the Established Church as fellow-Christians, and the non-acceptance was mutual. Today, perhaps because of the secularization of society, very few Free Church people would continue to hold that position, expecting in heaven to find only their fellow Free Church people. Indeed, many of our Churches are now LEPs (Local Ecumenical Projects), where members of different denominations, including Anglican and Roman Catholic, share buildings, ministry and congregational life. Many more of our churches keep membership rolls which are open to all Christian people without any question of denominational allegiance. We have learned to accept each other in Christ, to work together for Christ, and to trust one another to such an extent that our differences are held in fellowship rather than in opposition to each other. Our dissent then becomes a joint one, in that our dissent from customary secular morality and behaviour, often as exemplified in Government legislation, is made together with those from whom we formerly dissented. Our dissent has now become consent, that is consent among Christians of all traditions in offering a critique of government, culture and behaviour.

AUTHORITY

The other factor is to be seen in the fact that dissent also has to do with authority, and perceptions of authority have both changed and converged. In previous generations, our dissent was in part against a hierarchical structure. Today, hierarchy in the Church of England is balanced by synodical government; the bishop consults his diocesan synod and the priest his Parochial Church Council. Both the *Meissen Agreement* (between the Church of England and two Lutheran Churches in Germany, one episcopal and one non-episcopal) and the Archbishops' Commission Report on *Episcopacy* stress that the authority of the bishop stems in part from the people of God in the Diocese.

Christ's ministry is entrusted to the whole people of God, to all the

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baptised; episcopal ministry is called by the Holy Spirit from within that community and with the consent of that community; it is a ministry exercised in relation to the community and with the support of the community. There is a mutuality of relation between bishop and people; he gives to his people but also receives from them. In the same way the people receive from their bishop but also give to him . . . The bishop is to be with and among his people: they are to act and think together.¹³

Even Roman Catholic bishops will admit in private that they cannot rule by fiat and dictate what shall or shall not be. They too consult, and increasingly listen. That from which we once dissented has changed. Today what most denominations have in practice is an authority structure which is simultaneously from the top and from the bottom. Our denominational Free Church General Secretaries are expected to give a lead. But that lead depends upon the confidence and support of our people. Authority is both from above and below.

If that analysis of authority in the various denominations is in any way correct, we do not need still to dissent, when that from which we have in the past dissented now bears so much similarity to what we ourselves practise.

THE INTER-CHURCH PROCESS

The most forcible illustration of all this, however, is what has become known as 'The Inter Church Process',¹⁴ of which the starting-date is a matter of discussion. In various publications concerning the Process we are offered different dates. John Habgood, Archbishop of York and Chairman of the Inter Church Meeting, gives 1985 as the starting date. Derek Worlock, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool, gives 1984. Derek Palmer, one of the Associate Secretaries of the Process, gives 1982.

More broadly, debate about ecumenical relations in post Second World War Britain dates from 23 November 1946, when Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher preached his Cambridge University Sermon inviting the Free Churches to 'take episcopacy into their system and work it out'. Geoffrey Fisher's sermon was followed by thirty-six years of talks, discussions, debates and negotiations. At one time, it looked as though the union of the Church of England and the Methodist Church might be achieved, but at the last hurdle, the Church Assembly refused. Although the Presbyterian Church of England and a large part of the Congregational Church (formerly Union) united to become the United Reformed Church in 1972, to be joined in 1981 by some of the Churches of Christ, no other union reached fruition.

Short of union, there were discussions about the 10 Propositions, which, if agreed by the Churches in England, could have been the basis for further unity talks. Only the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Moravians agreed to pursue the matter further in the Churches' Council for Covenanting, (though Baptists and Roman Catholics both remained as Observers), but in 1982 it was once again the Church of England which in its General Synod turned down the resulting proposals. That rejection, bringing to an end over thirty years of work begun by Geoffrey Fisher's initiative, brought gloom and despondency to many of those committed to closer ecumenical relationships. Derek Palmer uses the words 'great sorrow and bitterness'.

Throughout this period, the Baptists, and those Congregationalists who opted not to go in to the United Reformed Church, found themselves at a disadvantage. They felt

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that little account was being taken of their particular ecclesiology. They insisted on the autonomy of the local Church, and its competence under God, in due fellowship and association with other local churches, to manage its own affairs. The form of episcopacy being offered excluded this form of Church Government and therefore excluded those to whom this particular insight was precious.

But at that point in 1982 when there was so much gloom and despair, a ray of hope shone from what to many was an unexpected quarter. The visit of Pope John Paul II paved the way for a greater Roman Catholic involvement in ecumenical affairs in this country. That Church had not found itself able to join the British Council of Churches, which it saw, not without justification, as a body going its own way and not always answerable to the Churches who belonged to it. Yet at Canterbury, the Archbishop and the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council (Revd Dr Kenneth Greet) knelt together with the Pope to renew their baptismal vows, and in Glasgow a few days later the Pope posed the question to all Christians in these islands, and not just his own members, 'For the future can we not make our pilgrimage together, hand in hand?'¹⁵

The way was thus paved for an initiative from Cardinal Basil Hume and his colleagues in the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference. Two or three leaders from each of the denominations, including many of the smaller and of the 'black-led' ones, were invited to join with the Bishops' Conference at one of their meetings. The agenda was open. The main object was to meet, to worship and pray together, and in that atmosphere see if some way forward could be found. At a subsequent meeting at Lambeth Palace, on 7 May 1985, more detailed plans were made, and 'the leaders of thirty-two Churches in England, Scotland and Wales . . . agreed to launch a "three year Inter-Church Process of prayer, reflection and debate together on the nature and purpose of the Church in the light of its mission".'¹⁶ The launch took place on 8 November, and with a sideways glance at the Pope's question to the congregation at the Glasgow Mass, the title offered for the whole Process was 'Not Strangers but Pilgrims'.

There was a determination to avoid one of the traps into which earlier negotiations had fallen, that of having all the discussion at the top level, and only bringing in ordinary members of the Churches when all the decisions of detail had been made. In Lent 1986, there was a massive programme of Ecumenical Study Groups in local churches all over the country on the theme of 'What on earth is the Church for?' The records show that over a million people took part, in some 60,000 to 70,000 study groups, and no fewer than fifty-seven local radio stations broadcast programmes for it. Over 100,000 participants returned the published questionnaire afterwards, and 10 per cent of those were analysed by Trumedia at Oxford Polytechnic. The results were published as *Views from the Pews*.¹⁴

Over the same period, there had been opportunities for the various Churches to offer their official and considered opinions on their life and mission, published as *Reflections*, and other groups, including secular agencies, also made their *Observations* on the Church.¹⁴ What was clear from *Views from the Pews* was that there was a much stronger groundswell in favour of closer ecumenical relationships than had ever before been established. It also became clear that very few people in the pews believed that it was differences of doctrine and practice which kept the Churches divided from one another. A common perception was that the main hindrance to unity was the established leaderships of the Churches. Yet it was this wide expression of opinion which first gave to those leaderships the encouragement to move ahead faster.

Meanwhile one key decision had been taken by the British Council of Churches. It

was decided to give all staff on five-year contracts notice that their employment could not be guaranteed beyond 31 August 1990. This was done in order to pave the way for whatever might emerge from the Inter-Church Process. In turn this decision brought pressure on the representatives of all the Churches in the Inter-Church Meeting, which was the heart of the Process. They realised that the new 'Instruments' (a word chosen to avoid the implications of words like Council or Synod) would need to be in place no later than 1 September 1990; that there would have to be change; and that there could be no recourse to a policy of retaining the *status quo*.

In the Spring of 1987, three national conferences considered the results of all the consultations published in *Views from the Pews, Reflections* and *Observations*. At Nottingham, Bangor and St. Andrews, representatives from the churches met, worshipped and discussed. The representation was wide. Attempts had been made to ensure a not unreasonable balance of lay and ordained, of age, gender and ethnic origin, as well as of religious tradition. The order of 'met, worshipped and discussed' is deliberately chosen, because it was in the context of our sharing of worship that we learned more about each other and prepared for our discussion.

The results from the three national conferences were passed to a further conference at Swanwick from Monday 31 August to Friday 4 September 1987. It was, as the conference declaration says 'the broadest assembly of British and Irish churches ever to meet in these islands'. That it 'reached a common mind' can only be interpreted as the work of the Holy Spirit. Those present declared their 'readiness to commit ourselves to each other under God' and therefore asked the churches 'as a matter of policy at all levels and in all places', to 'move from cooperation to clear commitment to each other, in search of the unity for which Christ prayed and in common evangelism and service of the world.' It is unfortunate that this has often been quoted with the last nine words omitted, an omission which twists the thinking and intentions of those involved.

The vision was there. Those of us who were present will never forget the experience. But the difficulty with visions is that to make them into reality requires detailed consideration of nuts and bolts. When the subsequent working parties produced their blueprints for the new ecumenical instruments, published as 'indicative' reports in 1988, there were some who bemoaned the loss of the vision. In my view, this could only be said because they looked only at the blueprints, without seeing them as they had been asked to see them, against the background of all that had happened at Swanwick.

At this point in the Process, the various Churches demonstrated their various ecclesiologies by the way in which they handled the material and sought to come to a denominational decision about it. It is in my view unfortunate (but then I am Baptist) that a Process which had early on had such a massive consultation with those in the pews did not at this later stage consult them again. While Baptist and Congregationalists sent the material to each local Church, other denominations only sent it to Diocesan or District level. In more than one Free Church Regional Conference over the next twelve months, when we tried to explain how the proposals would affect our Council and the Free Churches generally, we were bombarded with questions from those not consulted and had to try to inform those whose concern and interest had not been met.

Towards the end of 1989, with most, if not all of the responses in from the denominations, it was possible to begin work on a definitive report. *Churches Together In Pilgrimage*, with its definitive proposals for the next steps of the Process, was published at the end of 1989. Each Church/Denomination was asked to pass a resolution in identical format, indicating its agreement to participate and authorising the Inter-

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Church Meeting to make any necessary adjustments, set up Commissioning Committees, and seek finance for the period when old and new would overlap. The response was overwhelmingly in favour.

It has to be said, that while there were often considerable discussions, there was a remarkable degree of unanimity in the Inter-Church Meeting throughout these years, and not least in the final busy period leading up to the change-over. The fact that virtually every denomination which had been involved in the Process agreed to take up membership in the appropriate new instruments bears witness to the quality of the work which had been done in preparation.

Accordingly on 1 September 1990, inaugural services were held in London (Southwark) for Churches Together in England, in Aberystwyth for CYTUN (Churches Together in Wales), in Dunblane for ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland), and the following Saturday in the two Cathedrals in Liverpool for the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland.

But what difference does it all make? One difference is to be found in the change of the prayer used throughout the Process. We do not now pray to be 'strangers no longer, but pilgrims together'. We offer the prayer because 'we are strangers no longer, but pilgrims together on the way to your Kingdom'.

Another difference is the move from co-operation to commitment. In the 1970s, reference was often made to a 'C Scale' in ecumenical relationships - Competition, Co-existence, Co-operation, Commitment, Communion. What the move from co-operation to commitment means in practice, we have still fully to discover. But gradually, if not instantaneously, the Churches nationally are finding ways of working together, with one Church, or a group of Churches (and their staffs), doing particular pieces of work on behalf of some or all of the others, thus avoiding duplication and overlapping. The Lund Principle (it was actually a question) is at last being taken seriously - 'should not our churches ask themselves.....whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?' Morris West writes that 'it was a principle to be applied to the ongoing, day-to-day life of the churches. Answered affirmatively, the question was intended to face the churches - whether nationally or locally - with questions of permanent change. There are signs that this is, at last, beginning to happen . . .'¹⁷

A third difference is in the method by which the Churches work together. The authority structure in Churches Together in England and the other instruments remains in the constituent Churches, which are therefore responsible for the decisions and must own them as their own. Only those involved in the British Council of Churches prior to 1990 can fully appreciate what a change this is. One snag is evident, and that is the difficulty of achieving a quick response to a situation which arises without warning. The outbreak of hostilities in the Gulf provides one illustration. It is now extremely difficult to respond on behalf of all the Churches with the media's desired immediacy.

The fourth difference brings me back to my general thesis. The Churches Together (whether in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland or all four) are no longer set in opposing camps. We are together facing a secular country and a secular world. Even though on some issues there may not be total agreement, (and we do not try to paper over the cracks - we know where we differ), what we share is so much greater that we can consent to work, worship, pray, study the Bible, theologize, evangelize and serve together.

Dissent in my view has now become consent, and we are truest to what our

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predecessors fought for, when we stand together with other Christian Churches, dissenting from the secular world around us.

Which is why the old friend, whom I referred to at the beginning, has not heard me banging the Free Church drum. I believe that my voice, and indeed that of the Free Churches and their Federal Council, on behalf of and true (I hope) to the dissenting tradition, is more likely to be effectively heard *within* the ecumenical debate, *together* with the other, historically non-dissenting, Churches. To shout from outside in vocal opposition may from time to time be required. But more often, effective dissent will be achieved by sharing in the debate, so that the Churches Together may express their combined dissent at that which is lacking or wrong in the state and its culture.

In *Better Together*,¹⁸ David Sheppard and Derek Worlock write of their work in Liverpool. The publisher's blurb runs thus:

They discuss the spiritual principles which have come to unite them, and assert that each Church must learn to work with the other, remaining mindful of those areas where disagreement will remain. The result is uniquely powerful: a common Christian witness to a troubled world.

Dissent today should take note of what disagreements remain and where. But in the face of the world as it is, that which we share and which unites us is far greater than the things over which we may dissent. God's will is surely that we are *Better Together*, or, in the word picture of the Inter Church Process, that we are *PILGRIMS TOGETHER*, consenting to share our dissent and speaking with a common voice.¹⁹

NOTES

- 1 E. A. Payne, 'Access to the Throne' in the *Free Church Chronicle* (Vol. XXXII no. 3) Autumn 1977.
- 2 Obtainable from the FCFC, 27 Tavistock Sq., London, WC1H 9HH (please send stamped and addressed 9" x 6" envelope).
- 3 See Bernard L. Manning *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies* (1952), P 2 and Part 1, Chapter 1 'Who they were'
- 4 See G N Clark, *The Later Stuarts 1660-1714* (1934), P 22.
- 5 See J. I. and B. Hammond *Lord Shaftesbury* 4th edition (1936), P 87.
- 6 Manning, op. cit. P 346
- 7 See E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity* (1956), P 135
- 8 Manning, op. cit. P 52
- 9 Manning, op. cit. Pp 246-252
- 10 Manning, op. cit. P 274
- 11 See Editorial Comment in *The Month* (April 1991). The Editor notes the results of a survey which found that 'of all religious groups, Roman Catholics were the most pro-(Gulf) war'. His editorial is a plea that dissenting voices within the Church (on the matter of whether war is just or not) must not be discouraged. The whole argument stems from the quoted paragraphs.
- 12 See editorial on 'Dissenters still?' in *The Baptist Quarterly* Volume XXXIII No. 5, January 1990.
- 13 See *Meissen Agreement* GS843 P 16 and *Episcopacy* GS944 P 162-163, (paragraph 356).
- 14 For the Inter Church Process see *Churches Together in Pilgrimage* published jointly by the British Council of Churches and the Catholic Truth Society (1989) (esp. John Habgood's Letter of Commendation to the Churches); also from the same joint publishers (1986) *Views from the Pews, Reflections and Observations*; and for the overall picture, Derek Palmer *Strangers no longer* (1990) (including a foreword by Derek Worlock).
- 15 Palmer, op. cit. P 9
- 16 Palmer, op. cit. P 37
- 17 Morris West in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* published by CCBI Publications and the WCC (1991) Pp 633-634
- 18 *Better Together* (1988)
- 19 This lecture is a revision and expansion of an article on 'Dissent Today' published in the July 1991 edition of *The Fraternal*.

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