The Unification of the Ministry in the Church of North India

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In the *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan* the Act of Unification of the Ministry has received perhaps more discussion than any other feature.[1] What is this Act supposed to do? Is it deliberately ambiguous so that people of inconsistent opinions can take part? Can a man, believing himself to be truly a minister of Christ's Church, conscientiously receive the laying-on of hands again as the Act provides? I shall consider briefly the conception of the ministry in the proposed united Church and in the Churches comprising it. Then I shall outline the development of the Act of Unification of the Ministry in the Union negotiations. Against this background I shall examine the Act and try to reach some positive understanding of what it is.

The Ministry in the United Church and the Separate Churches

The Plan of Union provides for a ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons in the Church of North India (as the united Church will be called).[2] It is made clear that the ministry is a function of the whole body of the Church and is meaningless in separation from that body. All ordinations are by prayer and the laying-on of hands. The bishop alone lays hands on deacons, the bishop and presbyters lay hands on presbyters, and at least three bishops lay hands on new bishops, with the provision that presbyters may also do so.[3] The episcopate is both constitutional and in historic continuity with the episcopate of the early Church. No one particular theological interpretation of episcopacy is laid down and freedom of interpretation explicitly guaranteed.[4]

This form of ministry is not chosen because it is the ministry of any of the participating Churches but because it is the ministry of the undivided Church. The different Churches have different

[1] See *Church Union News and Views*, the organ of the Negotiating Committee for Church Union in North India. I shall refer to this below as 'Church Union'.

[2] *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan*, Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1965, 4th Edition, Part I, Ch. IX, 3 (a).

[3] *Ibid.*, 3 (b).

[4] *Ibid.*, 5.

ministries and at union all are recognized as true ministries of the Word and Sacraments. I shall briefly note their different forms. For this purpose we may group the Baptist Churches, the Disciples of Christ and the Church of the Brethren together. They all stress the priesthood of the laity. With their emphasis on the autonomy of the local congregation they tend to regard the minister as deriving his authority from God through the local body. Equivalent terms for minister are pastor, elder and preacher, i.e. there are not different orders in the ministry. (Among the Brethern the term 'elder' is used to indicate an office of limited duration similar to 'moderator' in the Presbyterian tradition). Ordination is usually though not invariably through the laying-on of hands by those already ordained. It is clear that as regards the ministry these Churches stress God's present act in the local congregation rather than continuity with the ministry of the universal Church throughout the ages.

The Methodist Church also stresses the priesthood of all believers and sees the ordained ministry as essentially a function of the Church's corporate life.[5] Since 1836 ordination by the laying-on of hands of those already ordained has been the rule. Two Methodist Churches are participating in the North India Plan, and one of them, the Methodist Church in South Asia, has bishops due to its connection with the American Episcopal Methodists. In 1784 John Wesley 'set apart' T. Coke and others as Superintendents of Methodists in America. Coke took the title 'bishop' and since his time the Methodist bishops have followed the rule of bishops consecrating bishops though they do not claim to be part of the historic episcopate and the ordination of ministers is not exclusively in their hands. It should also be noted that bishops remain bishops for life.

The United Church of North India was formed in 1924 by the union of Presbyterian and Congregational Churches. The Congregational stress on the freedom of the local Church was balanced by a system of Church councils. The ministry has one order, minister or teaching elder, and ordination is invariably by the laying-on of hands by ministers. In fact, many writers of this Church have stressed the importance of presbyteral succession and claimed that episcopacy is exercised corporately by the presbyterate.[6]

The Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon (Anglican) has inherited the ministry of bishop, priest and deacon from the undivided Church. It has always maintained the rule of episcopal ordination only (though this does not imply that the bishop acts alone. Priests join with him in laying on hands on new priests and in all ordinations the prayers of the congregation are an essential part of the rite). In common with all episcopal Churches

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[5] See *Statements of Faith*, a supplement to the *Plan*, p. 20.

[6] E.g. Rev. David Lyon, *Church Union*, Vol. 5, No. 3, August 1960, p. 40.

it values very highly the continuity of the Church's ministry in all ages and places, though it has never officially denied the validity of non-episcopal ministries.

Regarding the ministry the Churches differ in methods of ordination and in emphasis. Differences in practice do not necessarily imply inconsistent doctrines and the ministry of the united Church is intended to bring together and express the positive insights of each Church. At the time of union God is asked to make these diverse ministries one.

The Development of the Act

The North India Plan has its origin in the Round Table Conference held in Lucknow in 1929. In 1947 the Conference accepted the method of Unification of the Ministry by prayer and the mutual laying-on of hands. What are the influences which led to this decision?

The Lambeth Conference 'Appeal to all Christian People' of 1920 suggested that in a scheme of union Anglican bishops and clergy would willingly receive from the authorities of the other uniting Churches 'a form of commission or recognition which would commend our ministry to their congregations as having its place in the one family life'.[7] The hope was expressed that non-episcopal ministers would 'accept a commission through episcopal ordination, as obtaining for them a ministry throughout the whole fellowship'.[8] While there is no explicit mention of mutual laying-on of hands, that is the obvious method by which the required 'commission' could be given in each case. The commission given to non-episcopal ministers is described as 'episcopal ordination' though it is made clear that neither their previous ordination nor the reality of their ministry is called in question.

In Chapter VII of his book, *The Christian Sacraments* (1927), Canon O. C. Quick argued that in a divided Church all ministries are defective in validity since all lack the authorization of the whole Church. A minister receives in ordination not a personal power to perform efficacious rites but authority to act on behalf of the whole body. Hence, according to Quick, the way to union, as far as the ministry is concerned, is that each of the uniting bodies 'should further validate and authorize the other's official ministry, as much as it lies in its power to do so' (p. 150).

The Lambeth Appeal and Quick's book must have influenced union negotiations in India. As far back as 1931 an All-India Conference on Church Union was held in Nagpur with Bishop Azariah as president. It resolved that, since different conceptions of the ministry greatly restrict fellowship, in any scheme of union 'it is essential that the question of the Unification of the Ministry be examined' (quoted in the *Plan of Church Union*, 4th edition,

[7] *The Lambeth Conferences* (1867–1930), London, S.P.C.K., 1948, p. 39.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

p. 4). In 1941 the Round Table Conference received a committee proposal that the Anglican and Methodist Episcopates should be united by 'the mutual laying-on of hands with prayer and with the use of such a formula as shall leave no room for any scruple or doubtfulness'.

In 1944 the General Council of the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon (Anglican) proposed that 'when separated Communions come together again their ministries should be united by a solemn act of humility and rededication in which through the mutual laying-on of hands with prayer they seek from God the enrichment of all these ministries'.[9]

About this time (in 1943) a proposal was made in the South India negotiations for what was called 'supplemental ordination' The term originated among American Anglicans. Those who proposed it for South India explained that supplemental ordination implies that those who receive it are real ministers of Christ's Church and that they receive through it 'further grace of orders' and authority (*ibid.*, p. 125). Dr. Kellock comments that supplemental ordination is something one divided Church is able to supply to another. The concept was no doubt influenced by Quick's book. Quick wrote: 'The spirit of charity and humility seems to indicate that each uniting body should be willing to receive from others what it lacks and to supply to others what they lack, rather than to insist upon the recognition by others of its own sufficiency, beyond what is necessary in the cause of truth' (*op. cit.*, p. 160).

As we have noted, the Round Table Conference in 1947 accepted as part of the basis of union the method of uniting the ministries of the different Churches by mutual laying-on of hands and Prayer. It is a natural assumption that both in the C.I.P.B.C. resolution of 1944 and in the basis of union the proposed method is supplemental ordination. This was the interpretation placed upon it by the Church Union Committee of the United Church of North India in 1947. 'The Round Table Conference forwards a proposal for "unification" of the ministry from the beginning by "supplemental ordination"' (Kellock, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

However, as understanding of the Act of Unification developed it became clear that this interpretation is a mistaken one. Dr. Sully[10] throws light on the C.I.P.B.C. resolution of 1944. He quotes from a letter of Bishop Hubback who commended this resolution to the South India negotiators. 'The mutual laying-on of hands is the outward sign of our penitence and our prayer to God that He would repair, as far as may be, our mutual defect. Supplemental ordination conveys the impression that we ordain (or consecrate) others and they do the same for us. That was not behind my plea; my idea, I hope, was that God will act, not

[9] Quoted by James Kellock, *Break Through for Church Union in North India and Pakistan*, C.L.S., Madras, 1965, p. 21.

[10] *Church Union*, Vol. 5, No. 4, November 1960, p. 53.

through or by the authority of the Ordaining or Consecrating Person as He normally does, but by a special and direct movement of His Grace for this particular set of circumstances.' In the various revisions of the Plan and the accompanying discussion the idea of supplemental ordination was decisively rejected. It is instructive to trace the Act of Unification through the different editions and note how understanding of it has developed.

We may start with the second edition (1954). It provides for a representative Act of Unification of the Ministry at the inauguration of union. The bishops, presbyters elected to be bishops and other representative presbyters take part. They all make together a declaration which recognizes their existing ministry and includes the words, 'I . . . am humbly prepared through the laying-on of hands with prayer to commit myself to God both to receive from Him for myself and to be used by Him in giving to others, such further grace, commission and authority as shall be necessary for ministering in the united Church.'[11] Representatives, not more than three, including a bishop in the case of episcopol Churches, from each Church in turn, then, lay hands on the ministers present of all the other Churches with words which recognize their existing ministry and pray for power and grace from the Holy Spirit for the 'wider exercise' of their ministry and 'more effectual service' in the united Church.

The statement of intention, the declaration of the ministers and the words at the laying-on of hands show that (*a*) the ministers of the uniting Churches are true ministers of the Word and Sacraments; (*b*) they lack the seal and authorization of the whole Church; (*c*) the different ministries are made one in the act of unification and (*d*) it is *God* who acts to bring about a homogeneous ministry. The Act of Unification in the second edition does not imply that the ministers of each Church are giving supplemental ordination to the ministers of the other Churches. The emphasis of the act lies on (*c*) and (*d*) above. The prominent idea is not that each supplies to the other what is lacking but that their separate endowments are united; not a sense of what each can give but a seeking from God, in humility and penitence, the remedy for their common defects. However, the procedure—that the representative ministers of each Church in turn should lay hands on the ministers of the other Churches—might suggest that it is the separate Churches which supply what is lacking.

Considerable revision of the act, especially regarding the procedure, took place in the third edition (1957). Instead of the laying-on of hands by representative ministers of each Church in turn on all the others the following procedure was adopted. Three ministers, including a bishop, are chosen. Seven ministers (one representative from each of the seven Churches comprising the Church of North India) then together lay their hands on the three mentioned above. The seven then rejoin their delegations

[11] Part III, Ch. III, Step 3.

and the three lay hands on all the other ministers present. Thus it is made visibly clear that the act is not something which each separate Church does to the other, it is an act of the united Church. Rather it is an act of God in the united Church. The Church asks God to make its ministry one.

The changes in the wording strengthen this understanding of the act. The statement of intention stresses the 'primary importance' of the Union of the Churches (Step 1 in the inauguration services).[12] The declaration of the ministers taking part leaves out the words found in the second edition 'and to be used by Him in giving to others' said in connection with the 'grace, commission and authority' which God is asked to give. That is the stress is placed on the act of God and not on the human channel.

The Plan in its third edition was presented to the negotiating Churches for their decision. Only two of the seven Churches accepted it with the necessary majorities. The Negotiating Committee reconsidered the Plan and published a fourth edition in 1965.

The C.I.P.B.C. General Council, in giving a first reading to the Plan in its third edition, interpreted the Act of Unification of the Ministry in a way which aroused much controversy. The preamble to its resolution states, 'In leaving it to the wisdom of God to determine what is to be bestowed on each participant, which we might expect to be different in each case, it is on the human level legitimate to place different interpretations upon what God does in the Act. Thus it is our conviction that in the rite episcopal ordination is bestowed upon those not previously so ordained, though it does not repeat any ordination previously received; while the Prayers, the laying-on of hands and the Formula, taken in conjunction with the Preface, have been judged adequate to convey Holy Orders in the historic succession.'[13] This interpretation of the act was criticized by members of other negotiating Churches. It seemed to imply that the act was intentionally ambiguous, allowing some to interpret it as an ordination and others as something different. Writers expressed regret that one negotiating Church should define what God does in the act, even 'on the human level'.[14] The discussion affected the changes made in the fourth edition where the emphasis is even further placed on what God does through the already united Church and on the plain meaning of the words in the rite rather than on different interpretations.

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[12] Third Edition, Part II, Ch. VII, sect. 7.

[13] See *Ceylon, North India, Pakistan*, edited by S. F. Bayne, Jr., S.P.C.K., London, 1960, p. 12.

[14] Dr. W. Stewart in *Church Union*, Vol. V, No. 2, May 1960, pp. 27–29; North India Provincial Synod of the Methodist Church, *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 4, November 1962, p. 57.

The main changes in the act in the fourth edition are:

(*a*) The separate unification of the episcopates of the C.I.P.B.C. and M.C.S.A. was omitted. Without this step the rite is more straightforward.

(*b*) The statement of intention was shortened and made more positive. It asserted 'the intention of the rite is clearly and unambiguously set forth in the prayers to be used together with the Declaration and the Formula'.[15] The point is, presumably, that the words referred to be taken in their plain sense and no other.

(*c*) Along with the seven representatives of the Churches brought into union four other ministers of Churches outside North India, two bishops of the historic episcopate and two ministers of non-episcopal Churches, will lay hands on the three ministers who are to lay hands on all the others. This expresses communion with the universal Church in what is being done.

(*d*) When the three lay hands on the others, coming forward in regional groups, they say the words for each group and then lay hands on each member of the group *silently*. This small change no doubt is meant to emphasize that it is God who takes action in the rite.

The Meaning of the Act

In the light of this development and of the accompanying discussion can we gain any new understanding of the act? In what follows I do not seek to put forward another interpretation of what the act is. I seek to understand further what it achieves.

We may distinguish between the intention of a rite and its interpretation. In the case of this act the intention of those taking part is that they should wait on God to receive from Him whatever is necessary to make them one, fully authorized and empowered ministry of the Church of North India which is a branch of the Catholic Church. Interpretations of this act would be statements of *what* God gives to bring about this result, e.g. episcopal ordination to one, presbyteral ordination to another. Those who take part in the act must have an agreed, publicly expressed intention. It is not necessary that they should interpret the act in any precise way.

This distinction obtains in other cases, for example in relation to Holy Communion. The Church's intention in celebrating Holy Communion is to do what Christ commanded at the Last Supper. Christians, even in the same denomination, hold different interpretations of Christ's presence in Holy Communion. To receive Communion it is not necessary that they should explain Christ's presence in the same way, or even explain it at all.

[15] Part II, Ch. VII, para 10.

While there are limits to the variety of explanation of Christ's presence, the important thing is that those taking part have a common intention to do what Christ ordained and commanded.

The Plan rules out, by implication, two extreme interpretations of the act. By its explicit recognition of those taking part as already ministers of the Word and Sacraments it rules out the view that the act is reordination or ordination for the first time. On the other hand, the prayer for the gifts which God alone can bestow makes the act more than the giving of a licence to preach and minister the sacraments by some Church body, e.g. in Anglican practice the licence a bishop gives to a priest or deacon. But it is the positive intention rather than the ruling out of wrong interpretations that is important.

The fourth edition of the Plan by omitting the careful negative explanations of previous editions encourages us to look positively on what the act secures. Growth in understanding is reached if we concentrate on the result rather than the method. What we pray for, and may confidently expect God to grant, is the complete *Unification* of the Ministry of the Church of North India. The ministries of the Churches in separation are of different kinds. After the Churches have united they as one Church present their diverse ministries to God that He may make them one. This unified ministry is the ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. By taking part in the act no minister gives up anything except separation and everyone gains something. Bishops do not cease to be bishops. Episcopally ordained presbyters do not cease to be episcopally ordained presbyters. Presbyterally ordained presbyters do not give up anything positive in their ministry. But all the ministers of the united Church, in the threefold Orders, are made one. The differences between bishop and bishop and between presbyter and presbyter cease. Therefore, it must be said that all ministers of the C.N.I. are episcopally ordained ministers. As an essential balance to this statement it must also be said that all the ministers are presbyterally ordained, not in the negative sense of non-episcopally ordained but as sharing in the tradition of presbyteral Orders. In the act no Church presumes to give to another by its ministry what it judges that other to lack. Neither does any Church proudly claim the self-sufficiency of its own ministry. When the act takes place instead of seven separate Churches there is one Church. Its ministry is of a diverse kind. Its ordinations have taken place by different methods in separate bodies. The confusion can only be set right by God. Therefore, the united Church presents its ministry to God praying that He will make it one. Among other things it is an act of penitence, confessing the unchristian state of past rivalry and lack of fellowship. God is asked to receive and forgive and unite. The unity of the ministry and the fact that God alone can supply it are the dominant notes in the act. The Prayer, which all say together,

asks God 'to gather us into one fellowship'.[16] In the Formula all are exhorted, 'see that you do these things in brotherly partnership with God's fellow workers whom in this union of Churches He has made your own'.[17] The words of the Declaration, 'I . . . am humbly prepared to commit myself to God and through the laying-on of hands with prayer to receive from Him such grace, commission and authority as it may be His will to bestow upon me',[18] and similar words in the Prayer and Formula are not designed to cover up opposite views about ordination. They are precisely the words required to express the intention of humble self-offering in those taking part. The ministry and the unity of the ministry are the gift of God. The Church and its ministry live in continual dependence on God. The act is in keeping with the conception of reunion as the penitent receiving of a gift from God and not an ingenious human attempt to undo human wrong. It is God who unites both the divided parts of the Church and their separate ministries.

This rite is without precedent in Church history. It is designed for exceptional circumstances. We may gain further insight into its meaning by considering other new ventures in the Church's life. Many writers have noted the laying of hands on Barnabas and Saul described in Acts 13:1–3. This act marked a new extension of missionary work. The Rev. J. C. Hindley discussing the laying-on of hands in the New Testament suggests that we can see the act of unification as 'an act of seeking afresh from God the grace which He sees we need' for increased evangelistic work.[19] This conception should be given a very important place in our understanding of the act. But the main purpose of the rite is to seek a unified ministry for *all* the tasks of the Church.

We need not confine attention to instances in the New Testament where the laying-on of hands is mentioned. I think we can gain understanding of the act from the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15–26). An exceptional situation arose right at the beginning of the Church's history in that one of the twelve whom Christ had chosen proved a traitor. The remaining apostles knew that one must be found to fill the place of Judas. They put forward two men. Then they prayed to God, 'show which one of these two thou hast chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside' (vv. 24, 25). They then cast lots and considered Matthias, on whom the lot fell, to be God's choice. His choice and appointment as an apostle was the work of God alone.

There is only one point of resemblance between the election of Matthias and the act of unification, other than that they both are concerned with the Church's ministry. It is that in an exceptional situation we commit the whole matter to God and ask

[16] Fourth Edition, Part II, Ch. VII, para 15.
[17] Para 16.
[18] Para 14.
[19] *Church Union*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, February 1963, pp. 10–11.

Him to act in His divine wisdom. The eleven did not ordain Matthias an apostle. They prayed for and witnessed a special divine act. Beyond this the parallel with the Unification of the Ministry must not be pressed. I am not suggesting that in the latter case any group of ministers corresponds to Matthias or any to the eleven.

Theology develops as Christians face practical tasks. The problems of Church union are opportunites for growth in understanding of the Faith. Progress is possible if we face these problems theologically and not as exercises in ecclesiastical diplomacy.

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