



# Fifty years of Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue

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*This article examines the origins and development of bilateral theological dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics at a world level since it commenced in 1967 as a result of the Second Vatican Council. In taking stock of the dialogue, consideration is given to what has been achieved in successive phases during the past fifty years. A number of theological issues are identified as requiring further dialogue. The article concludes by outlining the present agenda of the international Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue commission and briefly considering the future prospects for theological dialogue at a world level in the context of contemporary ecumenism.*

THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE • ECUMENISM • METHODISM • ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The bitter theological legacy of Reformation controversies ensured that Methodists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted a strongly anti-Roman Catholic stance. Well into the twentieth century, Methodist catechisms and scholarship invariably maintained a polemical stance against Roman Catholic doctrine, actual and supposed. That Methodists and Roman Catholics in fact have much in common in the way they describe holy living in terms of growth in grace towards entire sanctification is therefore a comparatively recent discovery, as a result of mutual engagement and reassessment through theological dialogue.

The immediate origins of formal theological dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics lie in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which was attended by a number of accredited observers from other world communions, including the World Methodist Council. The principal Methodist observers at the Second Vatican Council, Albert Outler (United States) and Harold Roberts (Great Britain), took advantage of the unprecedented opportunity afforded by their status to engage with the Roman Catholic bishops and theological advisers assembled in Rome for the purpose of bringing up to date the formal teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Though not permitted to speak during the formal sessions of the Council, the observers had full access to the papers and were invited to participate in seminars convened by the specially constituted Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity so that ecumenical voices could be heard in the process of shaping the final text of the conciliar teaching documents.

Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the Second Vatican Council signalled the start of a new era in relations between Roman Catholics and other Christians after centuries of mutual condemnation stemming from sixteenth-century Reformation controversies in the West and the Great Schism between East and West in 1054. However, this was far from clear at the time due to the prevailing ecclesiastical climate of mutual suspicion and distrust, reinforced by disquieting memories of the authoritarian and centralising outcome of the First Vatican Council (1869–70). Both beforehand and during the early sessions, there was widespread suspicion in Protestant circles that Pope John XXIII's real intention in summoning a Second Vatican Council was to reassert the exclusive claims of the Roman Catholic Church and its prohibition on all forms of ecumenism other than that which urged the 'separated' Christians to return to the Church of Rome.

Yet, despite attempts by the curia to impose a conservative theological agenda, commentators began to note progressive voices among the bishops and the emergence of a fresh way of describing the Roman Catholic Church in terms that accepted the ecclesial reality of other Christian communities. Correspondingly, conciliar teaching was expressed in more nuanced theological language than had previously appeared to be the case in the polemical exchanges between the Reformers and their opponents. Convinced, therefore, that the teaching of the Second Vatican Council provided a starting point for a fruitful conversation across the Reformation divide, Albert Outler made determined efforts to persuade key figures in the World Methodist Council that the prospect of a formal theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church presented a unique ecumenical opportunity to address historic differences between Methodists and Roman Catholics.

The World Methodist Council meeting in London in 1966 duly accepted an invitation from a renamed and enhanced Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to appoint representatives to a joint international commission for theological dialogue.<sup>2</sup> The joint commission first met in Ariccia, near Rome, in October 1967 and has remained active ever since so that it is among the most enduring and productive of the bilateral theological dialogues at a world level.<sup>3</sup> The commission continues to be sponsored, and its members appointed, by the World Methodist Council and the Holy See's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The fiftieth anniversary of Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue at a world level happens to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses protesting against the sale of indulgences. Whether Luther actually nailed the text to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony, on 31 October 1517 as is popularly supposed, his Ninety-Five Theses set in train a series of events that ignited the fires of Reformation and division in Europe. To mark its own jubilee in October 2017, the joint commission will assemble in Rome for a series of commemorative events, including an audience with Pope Francis, arranged jointly by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome. The recent establishment of a Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome under its director, the Revd Dr Tim Macquiban, was made possible by the deepening relationship between Methodists and Roman Catholics, as a result of the improved ecumenical climate to which bilateral theological dialogue contributed.

## Summary of international Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue

Since 1967, there have been ten successive rounds of conversations, each timed to coincide with the five-yearly cycle of World Methodist Council meetings. At the conclusion of each round, the joint commission issues a substantial report to its sponsors in the form of a convergence statement. In common with the practice in other bilateral dialogues, these reports are not authoritative statements on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church or the World Methodist Council but instead are published by the joint commission for study and reception among Methodists and Roman Catholics. The text is available electronically on the Vatican and World Methodist Council websites; earlier texts can be found in the *Growth in Agreement* series compiled by the World Council of Churches.

The work of the joint commission has been incremental, building painstakingly on the secure theological foundations established in successive rounds of dialogue. The initial phase of the dialogue between 1967 and 1976 produced two reports registering outline agreement on a range of topics: the *Denver Report* (Denver, 1971) and *Growth in Understanding* (Dublin, 1976).

Between 1977 and 2001, a second and more systematic phase of dialogue focused on aspects of core Christian doctrines in order to establish a secure theological framework in which to develop a convergence in historically divisive issues. The title of each report signifies its particular subject: *Towards an Agreed Statement on the Holy Spirit* (Honolulu, 1981); *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Nairobi, 1986); *The Apostolic Tradition* (Singapore, 1991); *The Word of Life: A Statement on Revelation and Faith* (Rio de Janeiro, 1996); and *Speaking the Truth in Love: Teaching Authority among Catholics and Methodists* (Brighton, 2001).

Between 2002 and 2011, a third phase of dialogue produced two substantial reports on ecclesiology. *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (Seoul, 2006) sets out what Methodists and Roman Catholics are able to recognise in each other as being of the Church and explores a possible 'exchange of gifts'.<sup>4</sup> In response to the need to integrate theological dialogue and church life, the report states a number of guiding principles for Methodist–Roman Catholic relations.

*Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (Durban, 2011) revisits selected topics addressed in the landmark multilateral convergence statement

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (WCC, 1982) in order to extend and deepen existing agreement between Methodists and Roman Catholics. The overarching theological framework is provided by the scriptural theme of the participation of all the baptised in the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. In investigating the Eucharist as the sacramental memorial of Christ's saving death and resurrection, the joint commission drew on the neglected treasury of eucharistic hymns by Charles Wesley as the basis for proposing that 'Catholic language of a eucharistic "offering" of Christ's sacrifice and Methodist language of "pleading" that sacrifice can be reconciled' (Durban, §132).

The treatment of ordained ministry in *Encountering Christ the Saviour* seeks to deepen and extend agreement between Methodists and Roman Catholics. Despite their Wesleyan heritage, Methodists have tended to espouse the indiscriminate Protestant idea of 'the priesthood of all believers' in reaction to Roman Catholic teaching on the ordained ministry as a sacrificing priesthood. The report develops a more nuanced understanding that Christ continues to exercise his priestly ministry in the Church by means of the ministerial priesthood together with the common priesthood of the faithful (Durban, §189).

Since 2012, a new phase of dialogue has begun to focus more closely on the Christian life as experienced in its corporate and personal dimensions. *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory* (Houston, 2016) builds on previous reports to consider 'how Methodists and Roman Catholics understand the nature and effect of divine grace upon the human person and the implications for the Christian life' (§4). The report investigates the grace that enables, the grace that justifies and the grace that sanctifies. The historically divisive issues of 'good works and merit' and 'the assurance of faith and salvation' are set in a new context of a shared understanding of justification. The report explores similarities and differences relating to practices of holy living in the two traditions and adopts a fresh approach to the historically controversial issues of prayer for the departed and the intercession of the saints.

## What has Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue achieved?

On 31 October 1999, after years of theological dialogue and the last-minute addition of a clarifying annex, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity signed a Joint

Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), which encompasses ‘a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations’ (JDDJ, §5).<sup>5</sup> Since ‘justification by faith’ lay at the heart of the dispute between the Reformers and their opponents, the JDDJ was widely hailed in the secular press as bringing to an end half a millennium of division in the Western Church.

But to what extent is it credible to claim that Reformation controversies have been resolved and are no longer church-dividing? Responding to the JDDJ shortly afterwards, Geoffrey Wainwright posed a question that remains pertinent in this 500th anniversary year of Luther’s protest against the sale of indulgences: ‘Is the Reformation over?’<sup>6</sup> Noting the very precise language and limited scope of the JDDJ, Wainwright concluded that an unequivocal ‘Yes’ was impossible, ‘while a resounding “No” would also be untrue to the considerable achievements of the ecumenical twentieth century.’<sup>7</sup> In 2006, after an extensive consultation among member churches, officers of the World Methodist Council meeting in Seoul joined Lutherans and Roman Catholics in signing a Methodist Statement of Association with the JDDJ, thereby extending the theological consensus on justification to include Methodism.<sup>8</sup>

If, to a certain extent, unfinished theological business remains from the Reformation, what has been the achievement of ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics in the past half-century? In 2009, shortly before his retirement as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper summarised the ‘fruits’ that can be ‘harvested’ from the bilateral dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and the major traditions in the Western Church – Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Reformed.<sup>9</sup> The rich harvest identified by Cardinal Kasper included: a shared apostolic faith; a fresh and renewed understanding of the relation between Scripture and tradition; basic agreement on justification; deepened understanding of the nature of the Church; and new approaches to the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. The fruit of Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue is conveniently summarised in a convergence text published by the joint commission, entitled *Together to Holiness: 40 years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue* (2011).

Cardinal Kasper also identified a number of areas requiring further dialogue: the need for a common theological language; fundamental hermeneutical problems; a shared theological anthropology; and the sacramental nature of the Church. To these, the present author, writing in a personal capacity, would

add a number of other issues for future dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics:

- the participation of the ordinary faithful in authoritative discernment in the life of the Church by virtue of their baptismal vocation to share in the ministry of Christ;
- the ordained ministry in relation to the ministry of the people of God and the service of all the baptised;
- the mutual relationship between the saints below and the saints above within the communion of saints and the way in which the benefits of Christ apply to the faithful departed as members of his body, the Church;
- the role of personal *episkopē* exercised by bishops and others in relation to the corporate *episkopē* exercised by conciliar and synodical structures, including Methodist conferences;
- the structural implications of a shared belief that the Church itself is a means of grace;
- universal primacy and the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome as pope.

## Current dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics

As things presently stand, the future agenda is sufficient to keep the joint commission in work for at least another half-century: theological dialogue is a long haul. Meanwhile, the commission's next report is scheduled for presentation to the World Methodist Council meeting in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2021. Continuing to focus on the Christian life in its corporate and personal dimensions, the commission has chosen as its theme for this current round of dialogue the question of how Methodists and Roman Catholics respectively live out their reconciliation 'in Christ' in the Church and how together they can proclaim a gospel of reconciliation to the world involving peace, justice (social and economic) and the integrity of creation. The theological framework in which the joint commission will approach its work is that of the reconciling work of God in Christ (2 Cor 5:18–20).

Addressing the question of reconciliation 'in Christ' will involve giving attention to the nature of Christian community, the bonds of communion and the structures of unity. Thus the topic chosen for the 2021 report is closely related to that of the previous report (Houston, 2016). As the joint commission noted in that report:

The call to holiness is also a call to unity in the Church, the body of Christ. Jesus prayed for his disciples to be sanctified in the truth that they might all be one (John 17.17, 21). Holiness and Christian unity belong together as twin aspects of the same relationship with the Trinity such that the pursuit of either involves the pursuit of the other. (Houston, §5)

## Conclusion

As long ago as 1986, the joint commission proposed that the goal of theological dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics should be nothing less than 'full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life' (Nairobi, §20). This goal has been restated subsequently in several reports, most recently in *The Call to Holiness* (Houston, §5) and will be closely investigated in the present round of dialogue.

But what of the long-term prospects for sustaining an international theological dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics in the face of competing demands for scarce resources and other priorities such as evangelisation and the urgent need for interreligious dialogue? To advocate continuing theological dialogue between the different Christian traditions in the style of the classical Faith and Order movement is to swim against the tide of so much contemporary ecumenism, which regards shared mission as a sufficient goal. If cooperation in mission is all that matters, theological dialogue becomes redundant. Elsewhere, I have argued that the related concept of 'reconciled diversity' does not adequately express the 'full visible unity' of the Church.<sup>10</sup> In the face of competing agendas in contemporary ecumenism, Methodists are faced with a choice of ecumenical method and horizons in the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, their eventual choice will reflect where Methodists seek to locate themselves ecclesologically in relation to the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.<sup>12</sup>



## Notes

1. See Albert Outler, *Methodist Observer at Vatican II*, Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967.
2. National bilateral dialogues between Methodists and Roman Catholics were subsequently established in the United States, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia (now Uniting Church–Roman Catholic dialogue). These dialogues are beyond the scope of the present article.
3. For a detailed study, see David M. Chapman, *In Search of the Catholic Spirit: Methodists and Roman Catholics in Dialogue*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004.
4. For the exchange of gifts, see David M. Chapman, 'A Methodist Perspective on Catholic Learning', in Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 134–148.
5. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html) (accessed 31 July 2017).
6. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Is the Reformation Over?* Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2000.
7. Wainwright, *Is the Reformation Over?* p. 3.
8. In 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches also signed a declaration of association with the JDDJ.
9. Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London: Continuum, 2009.
10. See David M. Chapman, 'Ecumenism and the Visible Unity of the Church: Organic Union or Reconciled Diversity?', *Ecclesiology* 11 (2015), pp. 350–369.
11. For Methodist ecumenical method, see David M. Chapman, 'The Methodist Contribution to Ecumenism', in Paul McPartlan and Geoffrey Wainwright (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
12. For Methodist ecclesiological method, see David M. Chapman, 'Methodism and the Church', in Paul Avis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

