

World Methodist Conference
Ecumenical Workshop, 1 September 2016, 1.30pm

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your interest in the dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church. This morning, the World Methodist Conference received the latest report from the international Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue commission, entitled *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*. It is the tenth such report to be produced since the dialogue began in 1967. For convenience, these reports are often given a short title according to the name of the place at which the World Methodist Council and Conference were meeting when a particular report was presented. Thus *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory* becomes known as ‘the Houston Report’.

My name is David Chapman, and I am the Methodist Co-Chair of the dialogue commission. Bishop Donald Bolen, the Roman Catholic Co-Chair is unable to be present today because of a prior engagement. However, I am delighted to welcome Fr Anthony (Tony) Currer, who is the Roman Catholic Co-Secretary of the commission. Fr Tony works at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, based in the Vatican, where he has responsibility for the Roman Catholic Church’s relations with the Anglican Communion and with the World Methodist Council. Along with the Methodist Co-Secretary, Rev. Dr Karen Westerfield Tucker, Fr Tony has played a key role in drafting the report – though responsibility for its content rests with the commission as a whole.

In this afternoon’s workshop, Fr Tony and I will introduce the Houston report, drawing attention to its key features and findings. Keeping to our script (for the benefit of the translators), we will speak for about 30 minutes. Then, since this is an interactive workshop, we will invite you to discuss the report and the questions on the sheet in small groups before a general conversation in which there will be an opportunity to offer comments and ask questions. Fr Tony and I will answer these as best we can with the assistance of other members of the commission who are present: Rev. Dr Edgardo Colon-Emeric, Rev. Dr Leao Neto, Rev. Dr Trevor Hoggard, and Rev. Dr Priscilla Pope-Levison. As a group, we are indebted to the encouragement of Rev. Prof. Robert Gribben, Chair of the WMC Standing Committee on Ecumenical Relations, and to Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Foundations of the Houston Report

To recap, briefly, the Houston Report addresses a theme that is central to the Christian life. In the words of John Wesley, under the providence of God, Methodism was raised up to spread ‘scriptural holiness’ over the land. The Denver Report (1971), the very first report of this bilateral dialogue, registered a basic convergence between the Methodist emphasis on ‘scriptural holiness’ and what the teaching of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, refers to as ‘the universal call to holiness in the Church’.

Why, then, is dialogue necessary? Despite a shared understanding among Christians that a holy God calls forth a holy people, the source, means and possibilities of ‘holy living’ were at the heart of Reformation controversies. These have continued to divide Christians in the West theologically, liturgically and spiritually. At the centre of the dispute was Martin Luther’s famous exegesis of the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians in which he notes that justification is by grace through faith. For his opponents, Luther’s approach risked undermining the call to holiness because ‘faith without works’ (James 2.26) is dead. Though the difference at first was subtle, the consequences for interpreting the implications for holy living were considerable and enduring. Nevertheless, by a

complex historical and theological process, Methodists and Catholics have been able to move beyond the polemical stances that were commonplace prior to the ecumenical movement. In particular, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) established a new context for theological dialogue.

Accordingly, the fruits of our WMC-Roman Catholic dialogue since 1967 provide a secure theological foundation for the Houston report. Of particular significance here is the agreement between Methodists and Catholics concerning the Trinitarian mission in salvation history. The Honolulu Report (1981) established significant agreement in understanding the person and work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Son and the Father in creation and redemption. That doctrinal framework gives rise to the theme so fruitfully explored in relation to the Church and sacraments in the Durban report (2011): namely, the common participation of Christians in the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A theological breakthrough in overcoming divisions caused by the Reformation occurred in the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in Augsburg in 1999. In 2006, officers of the World Methodist Council, along with Lutheran and Catholic representatives, signed a Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This basic agreement provides another secure theological foundation on which the Houston Report builds.

Scripture and Christian Experience

Turning to the report itself, it is important to note that the call to holiness is not an abstract theological concept. It is grounded in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who summoned men and women to discipleship. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, that summons continues to be heard today. For this reason, the Houston report begins with a Scriptural meditation on the call to holiness. The familiar story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in St Luke's Gospel is a story of divine grace and the call to holiness. Zacchaeus, though an undeserving figure, is graciously accepted by Jesus and drawn into a saving relationship with the Lord, which transforms his previously self-centred and selfish life into holy living expressed in very concrete terms.

The report ends with a meditation on the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians. Here St Paul locates grace and holiness in relation to salvation history. By sovereign grace, God has made it possible for humankind to attain salvation. From the foundations of the world, God elected a people in Christ to be 'holy and blameless before him in love'.

Throughout the history of the Church, there have been individuals whose lives manifest in exemplary ways the transformative effect of divine grace and holy living. Chapters One to Four of the Houston report conclude with biographical sketches of a number of such figures. These are broadly representative of Catholic and Methodist traditions. The person of Mary, the Mother of our Lord, who is 'all holy' exemplifies the work of grace in a special way. The report discusses with sensitivity the exemplary nature of Mary's discipleship and the particular conclusions that Catholics draw about her unique place within the communion of saints.

Chapter 1: The Mystery of Being Human

This first chapter outlines a shared understanding of Christian anthropology. What it means to be a human being is not a question that humans can answer for themselves but rather a divine mystery to be approached with humility and reverence. Human beings are created by and for God.

They are created in the image of God and with a desire for God. These joint affirmations are the starting point for theological reflection upon the dignity of human beings and the call to holiness.

Human beings are created for relationship with God, with others and with the rest of creation. However, the gift of freedom and our failure to bear the responsibility of freedom, as recounted in the creation narratives in Genesis, have led to the reality of sin. As a result of Adam's disobedience, human beings became estranged from God, from one another, and from the rest of creation. Yet, God did not abandon Adam after his fall. Instead, God's saving purposes have been evident from the outset. Jesus Christ, the New Adam, fully reveals the mystery of the human being. The created image of God, disfigured by sin but not destroyed, is made a new creation in the image of Christ. By grace, the human destiny, therefore, is to be changed from the glory of the first Adam to the glory of the Second Adam (2 Corinthians 3.18). The Christian vocation to holiness is to be conformed to Christ and clothed with his image.

Chapter 2: God's Work of Creating Humankind

On the basis of Chapter One's shared account of humankind created in the image of God, Chapter Two considers what Methodists and Catholics can say together about God's work of re-creating humankind. The central concept in this chapter is that of 'grace'. Human salvation is possible only because a loving and merciful God graciously undertakes the work of re-creating humankind through the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The nature and effect of divine grace in its personal and corporate or ecclesial aspects is here explored under three headings: the grace that enables, the grace that justifies and the grace that sanctifies. Of course, these are not separate effects of grace, as if the work of grace were simply a linear process, but rather they are related aspects of God's work of salvation and call to holiness.

The chapter addresses two issues that have been contentious since the Reformation: the merit accruing from good works of mercy and piety, and whether it is appropriate to speak of an 'assurance' of salvation. The changed theological and ecclesial context in which these historically divisive issues are nowadays discussed creates new possibilities for convergence. We invite you to read these sections closely and decide whether and how the commission has been able to move the conversation beyond historic differences to achieve a basic agreement that allows for differences in emphasis.

Chapter 3: The Saints Below

This chapter considers in concrete terms what it means to be called to holy living in the Church and in the world. Holy living is described in relation to the sacraments, witnessing to the Gospel, devotional practices, and service in the world.

The holiness of the Church itself is that of a people on the road, on pilgrimage – a present reality, through the presence of the Risen Jesus, and a future promise towards which the people of God journey together as disciples. The Church on its pilgrim way is possessed of the sins and failings of its members, yet still oriented towards God. In this sense, Catholics and Methodists can affirm together the holiness of the Church. Seen in eschatological perspective, the holiness of the Church is something that is both 'already' and 'not yet' a reality. Whereas Catholics tend to emphasise the holiness of the Church as a present reality, Methodists tend to emphasise the holiness of the Church as a future reality. These contrasting emphases do not compromise our shared belief in a holy Church, but they lead to differences in the way we respectively view the structures of the Church and the possibilities for authoritative discernment.

The chapter explores the Church as a 'household of grace' and the ways in which worship and liturgy, especially the sacraments and preaching, nurture holy living in the world. Seen from this perspective, the sacrament of Baptism is a vocation, a living continuous reality, a participation in Christ that enables our hearts to burn with the Spirit when we hear God's word, and brings us to communion with Christ. The Lord's Supper consecrates and renews the people of God for holy living and mission.

There are areas of continuing difference that will require further dialogue before agreement can be reached. In particular, there are a number of devotional practices traditional in Catholic life that raise questions, and even alarm, for Methodists: Catholic emphasis on certain bodily gestures; the veneration of images; the blessing of inanimate objects; devotion to Mary and the departed saints; the veneration of relics; and adoration of the Eucharist. In these cases, Methodists are concerned that the person and work of Jesus Christ is in danger of being obscured. Nevertheless, in some parts of the world, Methodists are beginning to develop an embodied spirituality through the sacramental use of material things (such as the use of candles and other religious artefacts in worship and anointing with oil) and devotional practices related to the liturgical year. For their part, Catholics recognise that caution is needed and that some devotional practices that have taken exaggerated forms are false expressions of piety. The development of devotional practices requires careful ecclesial discernment in order to avoid such dangers.

The final section of this chapter, 'Holy Dying', is particularly relevant at a time when contemporary social trends in the West view the end of life as a negative or meaningless experience to be hastened as quickly as possible. In contrast, the traditional Christian emphasis on a 'good death' in the hope of the promise of the resurrection to eternal life is a powerful witness to the Gospel. Dying is itself a graced experience and holy dying is part of holy living. The call to holiness should inform Christian approaches to care of the dying and respect for those who are near to death.

Chapter Four: The Saints Above

Continuing the theme of pilgrimage, Chapter Four explores the transition from death to eternal life, and the consummation of all things in Christ at the end of time. In the words of the ecumenical creeds, Catholics and Methodists together profess their belief in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

The communion of the 'saints below' and the 'saints above' is like that of a family, where bonds of love and solidarity continue to exist between the living and the dead. Methodists and Catholics believe that God wills the salvation of all people, whilst believing that salvation is attained exclusively through Jesus Christ. Hope for those who do not explicitly come to saving faith rests in a just and merciful God. Though God's mercy is limitless, neither Catholics nor Methodists believe in universalism (that all will be saved irrespective of their free will) but instead accept that a person may choose to sever his or her relationship with God.

Methodists and Catholics further agree that perfection in holiness, where not attained in this life, will be conferred in the transition to eternal life. However, we have not yet reached full agreement on the nature of the transition from death to eternal life, nor on the relationship between the saints below and the saints above. Issues that require further study include the doctrine of purgatory, prayer for the departed saints, and the intercession of the saints above, especially the intercession of Mary, the Mother of our Lord.

When a person dies still unprepared to see the face of God, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory envisages a process of purification following death, in which intermediate state the deceased person is purged of sins and made perfect in holiness through the cleansing effect of God's grace. However, the Reformers rejected the doctrine of purgatory, and Methodists have been circumspect in their teaching about this transition. Nevertheless, Methodists and Catholics are in agreement that God's particular judgement at the point of death determines a person's final destiny, and that the transition from earthly to heavenly life depends on the gracious action of God. This basic agreement provides a basis for further dialogue.

Catholics believe that a spiritual exchange of prayer and its effects is possible between all members of the body of Christ and so continue to pray for those still being purified after death. While there are indications that Methodists may increasingly be open to the practice of prayer for the departed, it remains a subject for further conversation.

Related to this, Catholics view the saints above as intercessors for those still living, always remembering that Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity. Methodists acknowledge the mysterious solidarity of the saints above and the saints below, but have generally been resistant to the invocation of the departed saints for their intercession, believing that the uniqueness of Christ as sole mediator is at stake.

The Roman Catholic dogma of the Assumption of Mary and her intercession also require further dialogue. Catholics believe that Mary already shares fully in the resurrection of her son, and that, at the end of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. Methodists can affirm the core intention to bear witness to God's saving work in Christ and the final consummation of holy living, but find no scriptural foundation for the dogma. Therefore, we continue to differ in the way we understand the spiritual and pastoral implications for the saints on earth of Mary's unique place within the communion of saints. Nevertheless, our basic agreement that Mary is a sign of grace and holiness provides a basis for further dialogue.

Chapter Five: Growing Together in Holiness

This concluding chapter summarises in creedal form those statements in the report that Catholics and Methodists can affirm together. It identifies areas where agreement has yet to be reached and poses questions for discussion among groups of Catholics and Methodists in local churches and other settings. Some of these questions are reproduced on the handout for group discussion.

Finally, on behalf of the commission, we would like to mention that the Houston report is dedicated to two outstanding ecumenical statesmen and former Co-chairs of the commission: Bishop Michael Putney and Rev. Prof. Geoffrey Wainwright. We thank God for their collegiality and for their dedicated service to ecumenism.

Thank you for listening. Now we invite you to turn to the handout for this workshop and the questions for discussion in groups.

Rev. Dr David Chapman & Rev. Anthony Currer

7 July 2016