

Article

Imaginative Ecumenism—Rethinking the Paradigm from an Anglican Perspective

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Abstract: This article reviews the history of the ecumenical movement from an English Anglican perspective, exploring its successes and limitations. It suggests that ecumenical aspirations risk being bogged down in incremental ecumenism, the pursuit of small steps in inter-church relations. A worked example is the Porvoo agreement, which depended on a new paradigm of the Anglican understanding of order, yet which has not been applied equivalently elsewhere. The necessity of unity is reasserted, and a call for a more imaginative, eschatological paradigm of unity is made. Some implications for Anglican ecumenism are briefly explored.

Keywords: Anglicanism; order; ecumenism; Church of England; faith and order; conciliarity; primacy

1. Introduction: An Ecumenical Winter?

Has the modern ecumenical movement been a failure? By the standard of the post-war and post-Vatican II aspirations of its greatest advocates, it seems hard to deny it. Writing under the heading “Unity in our time” and reflecting on the impact of Vatican II, the American Methodist Bishop, Fred Pierce Corson (1896–1985), suggested that the Council had “launched a movement towards Christian unity that nothing can stop” (Corson 1965, p. 173). Corson’s view was actually more nuanced than his essay title might suggest, but in 1965, it was easy to think that the new Catholic approach to ecumenism, and, above all, the Council’s decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), was indeed a decisive turning point, raising a real possibility of Catholic and Protestant convergence on ecumenical strategy and theological agreement (Abbott 1966). The excitement of the moment was echoed across the ecumenical movement. Two years earlier, at the Montreal Conference of the Faith and Order Commission, the Conference’s chair, Oliver Tomkins, had enthused that the time was like “an almost unbearable apocalyptic—‘a door opening in heaven’ revealing the potentialities of the *Una Sancta* on earth” (Hastings 2001, p. 123). The Conference’s own statement, “A Word to the Churches”, spoke of an ecumenical reality taking shape “faster than we can understand or express it” (Rodger and Vischer 1964, p. 39). The dramatic about-turn in the Catholic Church’s attitude to the ecumenical movement unleashed pent-up hopes that seemed to be realised in ever more dramatic steps towards full visible unity—the beginning of major bilateral dialogues, including the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, the growing richness of local ecumenical relationships, the inclusion of Catholic voices in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the creation of new united churches, such as the United Reformed Church (URC) in Britain.

Yet, already, by the early 1970s, limits to what was achievable were beginning to appear. In 1972 the Anglican (i.e., Church of England)–Methodist unity proposals in Britain faltered for the second time. That was the same year in which the URC was formed, a union whose main protagonists strongly believed that their new church was “an intermediate entity with a desire to cease existence in the event [strongly anticipated at the time] of further unity in England” (Butler 1996, p. 152). There is a long list of ecumenical initiatives that appear to have stalled since then. In Britain, apart from the accession



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of the Churches of Christ to the URC in 1981, there have been no more organic church unions since 1972. Covenanting proposals involving most of the mainstream Protestant denominations in England failed in the 1980s. Despite the renewed discussions inaugurated by the Anglican–Methodist Covenant of 2003, once again Anglican–Methodist unity seems, in 2023, elusive. Proposals for convergence and unity between churches in Scotland failed in 2006. Many local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs), formed enthusiastically in the 1980s and 1990s, have run out of steam, terminally in some cases. Churches recently, including the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, have depleted their ecumenical staff resources. Talk of an “ecumenical winter” has been common for a long time (Tjørhom 2008, pp. 841–59). Perhaps, fearful of ever more precipitous decline, many of the traditional churches in Britain have tried to refocus their energies away from what can seem the “luxury” of the pursuit of organic unity, towards internal reorganisation and projects aimed at fostering growth. Also, dramatic developments in inter-church relations themselves can provoke counter-impulses. As the Swedish historian and ecumenist Bengt Sundkler noted, as churches come nearer to one another in union movements (he was writing of the Church of South India), “they discover their supposed fundamental principles and assert them. This in turn. . . works against union, and a tension is created”; the same observation could be applied to ecumenical dialogue (Sundkler 1965, p. 295).

Despite these apparent setbacks, the achievements of the ecumenical movement on a long perspective are remarkable. Three main clusters are noticeable. One is the transformation in local ecumenical relationships over the last half century or more (and here I am referring specifically to England). Churches Together in England maintains a register of formally agreed local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs), where two or more denominations covenant to share resources, and to worship and minister together wherever possible. In 2022, there were 868 in England (Churches Together in England n.d.). It also listed some 43 as having lapsed, though this is almost certainly an underestimate. But although the total is small in comparison with the number of churches maintained by all the denominations, it does not include formal and informal church-sharing arrangements, and the many instances of repeated local cooperation, such as joint Good Friday walks of witness, shared worship, pulpit sharing, and many joint practical and pastoral projects, such as food banks. Putting all this together, it is clear that the local ecumenical scene is no longer one of mutual rivalry and sectarian suspicion, as it was into the early twentieth century. Despite some LEPs running into the sand as the “founding generation” died, or people moved on, there are signs of resilience here too. Recent research by the URC has concluded that churches in LEPs are more resistant to decline than other churches (United Reformed Church 2023).

Perhaps the most salient feature of the modern ecumenical movement in the last half-century has been the theological dialogues. Here, it is too easy to be sceptical of progress. In fact, a remarkable level of agreement has been achieved, both in bilateral and multilateral relationships. Just taking my own tradition, Anglicanism, the conclusions of global dialogue have been little short of breathtaking. The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission, in three phases to date, has reached wide-ranging agreement on key elements of formerly disputed doctrinal and ecclesiological topics, including ministry, eucharist, authority, the Virgin Mary, morals, and salvation (ARCIC I 1981; ARCIC II 1986, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2005; ARCIC III 2017). Disagreements remain, but the groundwork for moving closer in prayer, worship, and life has been laid down. The Anglican–Orthodox dialogue, perhaps more episodic, has yielded important statements on doctrine (including a remarkable concession by Anglican participants that the *filioque* clause should be omitted from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed—a point that has yet to be adopted formally in the Church of England), ecclesiology, anthropology, and ecology (Anglican-Orthodox International Commission 1976, 1984, 2006, 2015, 2020). The Oriental Orthodox–Anglican Dialogue has concluded two far-reaching, agreed statements on Christology and pneumatology, challenging centuries of mutual misunderstanding (Anglican-Oriental Orthodox Commission 2014, 2017). The Anglican–Lutheran dialogue has led to relationships of full communion

between Anglicans and Lutherans in North America through agreements concluded in 2001, and in Europe between Anglicans of Britain and Ireland and the Lutheran churches of Scandinavia and the Baltic state through the Porvoo agreement of 1992, and also closer relations, though not yet full communion, with the Lutheran churches of Germany through the Meissen agreement of 1988. The Anglican–Lutheran conversations have been especially important in relation to changing Anglican understandings of ministry and ecclesiology, to which I will return. Anglican-Reformed and Anglican–Baptist dialogue have produced weighty, far-reaching statements ([International Anglican-Reformed Dialogue 1984, 2020](#); [Anglican Communion-Baptist World Alliance 2005](#)). Above all, in Britain the Anglican–Methodist dialogue, though as yet to achieve full interchangeability of ministry, has built on a covenant process to reflect the almost complete absence of substantive theological disagreement between the two traditions. But this is only to survey the dialogues as they impact on Anglicans, and then especially on the Church of England. Once other bilateral and regional dialogues, and the multilateral work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC are taken into account, the extensive and now deeply rooted theological study, communication, and agreement across separated traditions is even more evident. Even bilateral conversations where convergence may seem, *prima facie*, altogether unlikely, such as the Catholic–Pentecostal dialogue, have involved serious theological engagement and yielded an impressive overlap of language, concepts, and terms ([Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2015](#)). All this is necessary groundwork—to repeat the term—for any further progress towards full visible unity.

A further aspect of the theological dialogues, because it has been facilitated by theological convergence, is the formation of various united or “uniting” churches over the last eight years. Many of these are combinations of non-episcopal Protestant denominations, such as the Uniting Church of Australia, formed in 1977 from Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches. But their most salient form is perhaps the churches of South India (1947) and North India (1970), which combined those denominations with Anglicans in new, ecumenical episcopal polities.

Also dismissed all too easily are the various formal instruments of the ecumenical movement, from the World Council of Churches itself, formed at Amsterdam in 1948, through to national bodies, such as Churches Together in England, and down to local councils of churches. The creation of the WCC was long seen as marking the “arrival” of the ecumenical movement as the ultimate conciliar expression, outside Catholicism, of the aspiration for unity. It was, for example, the natural endpoint for Stephen Neill and Ruth Rouse’s pioneering history of the ecumenical movement ([Rouse and Neill 1954](#)). Early assemblies of the WCC, and of its constituent commissions, such as Faith and Order, have proved fixed reference points for the self-understanding and strategic direction of the ecumenical movement—the “Lund principle” of 1952 to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately”, for example, or the New Delhi statement of 1961 on unity as “God’s will and . . . gift . . . for one fully committed fellowship” ([Tomkins 1953](#), p. 16; [WCC 1961](#), p. 116). Yet, by the 1970s and 1980s, the WCC, alive to post-colonial sensitivities as it expanded its membership, was mired in allegations of covert support for left-wing regimes and terrorism ([Norman 1979](#)). Somehow, it has never quite recovered its early momentum. And the energy behind the formation of national and regional councils has also often faded, at least in parts of the West. Nevertheless, again it is possible to overstate the stasis and bureaucracy of many of these bodies. Compared with inter-church relations half a century ago, the situation today in many parts of the world has changed dramatically.

So, where has the perception of stasis, “winter”, even decline, come from? Unquestionably for churches in the West—and this is true even of the United States—continuing decline in membership and attendance has sapped energy, and drawn attention away from ecumenism towards institutional reform and renewed efforts at evangelism ([Gallup Report n.d.](#)). Staff posts in ecumenism have been cut in many churches. The dramatic growth of charismatic and Pentecostal churches in much of the global south has, at least for a

time, sidelined longer-established patterns of inter-church relationship, though this may be less true in places where Pentecostal churches have begun to participate fully in national and regional ecumenical movements, such as Britain. It is perhaps also true that the most dramatic achievements of the ecumenical movement represent more of a “tidying up” of relationships between traditions, which already shared many common roots, than a fundamental paradigm shift in inter-church relations. From here on in, in other words, things get more difficult—the intractability of deeply-embedded cultural and social differences more evident, fundamental disagreements in theology more pervasive, the interplay of ecclesial power and ideology more complex. Of no Christian tradition is this perhaps truer than the Anglican tradition, since its internal divisions, especially in recent years over sexual ethics, often seem to transcend even the divisions between Anglicans and others.

This article aims to explore the current state of play in the ecumenical movement from the perspective of an Anglican participant, and a Church of England-based one at that, to review what appears to be the current impasse in ecumenical initiatives in which Anglicans are involved, and to chart a way forward. It will look, first, at what I am calling “incremental ecumenism” (which includes the methodology of ecumenical dialogue), putting that, second, in the context of the rationale for Christian unity, and then proceed to outline what I am here calling “imaginative ecumenism”.

2. Incremental Ecumenism

It is often said that personal relationships constitute a crucial dimension of ecumenical activity. But relationships wax and wane, depending on the individuals concerned, and are difficult to assess as a starting point for a survey of ecumenical realities. In preference, I turn to the method of ecumenical dialogue, not to challenge its value, but rather to indicate the limitations that flow from placing too much reliance on its progress and too little on a longer, strategic view of Christian unity. I am leaving to one side the multilateral conversations of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, which resulted in the “convergence” texts, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM, 1982), and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), for the moment. The Anglican Communion (*qua* a Communion) has been engaged for over fifty years in an extremely wide range of bilateral dialogues, and their achievements, as noted above, are considerable. But any bilateral dialogue, attempting to mediate one Christian tradition to another, has to negotiate two complex sets of relationships—internally, how one language and symbolic system can be “heard” and understood by another, and externally, how whatever is the product of this first mediation is then received and understood by other Christian traditions outside the dialogue. Anglicans traditionally have tried to balance these things by “all round” ecumenism—that is, by insisting that progress in any one dialogue in which they are involved should not of necessity pose a further obstacle for other relationships. Push ahead on all fronts, in other words. Without calling this into question as a basic standpoint, given the breadth of theological opinion in Anglicanism and the resulting Catholic/Protestant polarity, its necessary implications are worth spelling out. In particular, moves that would look bold, even radically prophetic, in any one direction are ruled out on the grounds that they would obstruct or even reverse progress in another.

But this has shrunk expectations of what can be achieved by bilateral conversations down to relatively minor points of adjustment. Even without the ensuing paralysis that afflicts elements of our ecumenical relations, this caution has sometimes involved linguistic and theological acrobatics. As the Catholic philosopher of religion, Denys Turner, has observed, “too much official ecumenical activity between our two Churches [i.e., Anglican and Roman Catholic] has looked like piecemeal negotiation, is too fragmentary, too preoccupied with the identification of agreed, neutralizing, forms of words. . . which are still too fearful of the divisive power and vibrancy of each other’s dialects” (Turner 2002, p. 70). But it has also reduced ecumenical progress to small, undramatic steps, which—necessary as they may be (and they are)—all too easily produce a foreshortening of ambition and vision. This is an *incremental ecumenism*, with sustained or elongated processes of mutual

discussion between committees of experts by which relationships are edged closer step by step, sometimes without the fundamental shift of ambition, which Jesus's prayer for unity really demands of us.

There is a logical method behind these incremental processes. Concentration on what divides two traditions helps to identify an agenda for constructive reconsideration. After all, the inverse problem of the goal of Christian unity is accounting for Christian division. This requires careful historical study of the confessional development of the two traditions, attending to the emergence of distinct ecclesial cultures. Mutual study of what is really meant by the language, concepts, and institutional forms of the two traditions can lead in turn to negotiation over how these differences can be reconstrued so as to permit some sort of statement of agreement, and even, ultimately a timetable for convergence. Perhaps the best example one can give from the ecumenical activity of the Church of England (indeed all the Anglican churches of the British Isles) concerns relations with the Nordic and Baltic churches, and as this is such an illuminating and significant example of a changing paradigm of church order, it will be examined in some detail.

The Nordic and Baltic churches are, like the Church of England, all descended from medieval Christendom, but had retained elements of continuity with their pre-Reformation origins. In some, such as Estonia, the episcopate had been lost altogether, with superintendents appointed in their place (Podmore 1993). In most, the jurisdictional pattern of dioceses had been retained, but political conflict and changing territorial allegiances over the centuries had complicated church governance. In Sweden, not only had the basic territorial pattern of church government remained in place, but so had the episcopal hierarchy, and the succession of bishops through the laying on of hands at consecration. The Church of Sweden, in its practice and understanding of church order, looked remarkably like the Church of England (even though, until well into the nineteenth century, the Swedish perception was that the Church of England was really a Reformed church in its theological essentials) (Wordsworth 1911). For this reason, growing mutual understanding between Anglicans and Swedish Lutherans in the late nineteenth century led to the appointment of a special commission by Archbishop Randall Davidson in 1908, which concluded that "Here we have an opportunity for. . . communion with a Church which is the most like our own in history and organization of any in Europe" (Archbishop of Canterbury 1911). Yet, for various reasons, despite the encouragement of successive Lambeth Conferences, no formal agreement of communion was instituted with the Church of Sweden as a result of this recognition.

Part of the difficulty perhaps lay in the realisation that any formal agreement with the Swedes could raise more complicated questions in relation to other national Lutheran churches in the Nordic region. Here, almost certainly nineteenth-century developments in Anglican ecclesiology somewhat impeded progress. Although the Church of England had preserved the tactile sign of apostolic succession at the Reformation, through the laying-on of hands by the ordaining bishop in ordinations of bishops, priests and deacons, little theological significance had been attached to this by the English Reformers themselves (Sykes 1956). Not even Hooker had made much of it: for him any specific form of church government was "a thing accessory" (Sykes 1956, pp. 20–23). Even High Churchmen in the eighteenth century did not generally emphasize apostolic succession (Nockles 1994, pp. 146–83). It was the Oxford Movement which "supercharged" the doctrine, Newman stressing in *Tract I, Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission* (1833) that "the real ground on which our authority is built [is] our APOSTOLICAL DESCENT", for Jesus had given his Spirit to the Apostles, and "they in turn laid their hands on those who should succeed them; and these again on others; and so the sacred gift has been handed down to our present Bishops, who have appointed us as their assistants" (Newman 1833). The Tractarian view was not universally accepted even by High Churchmen in the nineteenth century, but the renewed emphasis on apostolic succession shifted the centre of gravity of Anglican ecclesiology, paving the way for the summary on points Anglicans consider necessary to secure unity contained in the "Quadrilateral" approved at the Lambeth Conference in 1888—

the Holy Scriptures as the “Revealed Word of God”, the Nicene Creed, the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and the “*Historic Episcopate*, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples” (Davidson 1896, p. 334, emphasis added). Since then, the Anglican understanding of order in ecumenical dialogue has particularly highlighted the need for agreement on the nature and exercise of episcopacy, and this has frequently been interpreted as insisting on the tactile, historic succession as an essential element of any agreement (Chapman 2000, pp. 474–503; Chapman 2022, pp. 29–46). This has been, for example, the issue tripping up successive Anglican–Methodist reunion schemes in Britain: how should Methodist ministers, non-episcopally ordained, be regarded in any future scheme of mutual recognition? But it also raised questions against ideas of Anglican–Lutheran convergence, especially where the Lutheran churches concerned had either lost the episcopate altogether or, whilst retaining the office of bishop, had lost the historic succession.

But a real shift in perspectives emerged in the post-war period, particularly through the formalisation of Anglican–Lutheran dialogue, and the multilateral conversations of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission, which issued in *BEM*. Anglican ecumenical commentary in the 1960s was replete with the idea of what the 1968 Lambeth Conference called a “wider episcopal fellowship” (Lambeth Conference 1968, p. 147). The Lutheran–Anglican (here communion-wide) “Pullach” report of 1972 acknowledged Anglicans’ sensitivities on the apostolic succession, but asserted that they need not “make it the sole touchstone of ecumenical fellowship with churches holding a different set of priorities” (Oppegaard and Cameron 2004, p. 43). By the time of the “Niagara” report of 1987, it was possible for Lutherans and Anglicans together to go much further and urge Anglicans to make the canonical changes, which would enable them to acknowledge and recognize “the full authenticity of the existing ministries of the Lutheran Churches” (Oppegaard and Cameron 2004, p. 110). This has not ever been accepted in full in the Church of England in the sense intended in the report, though it did also depend on Lutheran churches making changes in their practices of ordination, which have not universally happened. But the significant change in approach is best illustrated by the section on “Ministry” in *BEM*, which had, five years earlier, recognised that the “primary manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole” and that the succession “is an expression of the permanence and, therefore, of the continuity of Christ’s own mission in which the Church participates” (WCC 1982, para. 35). This paved the way for the *Porvoo Common Statement* (PCS, 1992), which established full communion not only between the Anglican churches of the British Isles and the Church of Sweden, but also most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches, which, through mutual participation in ordinations, committed themselves to re-receiving the “sign” of the historic succession. Something easily forgotten in all of this was that Anglicans had here accepted a significant shift away from the Tractarian “supercharged” succession, back towards a more nuanced and richer idea of succession, in which the faithfulness of the whole Church over time, together with other elements of continuity, such as that of see (i.e., where there had been continuity in diocesan governance), provided a broader context within which the specific form of successive laying-on of hands should be received. This was a paradigm shift in Anglican ecclesiology, however modest the change might seem on a long view.

This development has been worth exploring in some depth, because whilst it helps to highlight how dialogue can make a real difference to inter-church relationships, and therefore can be acknowledged as one of the great achievements of incremental ecumenism, from an Anglican perspective, at the same time it also highlights some of its limitations. Here, specific problems between churches in the nature of episcopacy and the place of apostolic succession (subsequently re-badged as *historic* succession, to avoid the exclusive connotations of the other term) were identified, explored, and transcended in a mutually agreed formula for convergence. But not commonly noticed were the untidy elements in the resulting set of church relations. The PCS did not force identical theological interpretations of episcopacy on signatory churches (Eckerdal 2017). The status of Nordic and Baltic

clergy not ordained by bishops who had received the sign of historic succession was not treated as in any way inferior; indeed, there was no mass “re-ordination” of them. Ordination of deacons by cathedral clergy, never other than exceptional, was not formally abolished in some churches, including Denmark and Norway, until some time after 1992. The diaconate in some churches was not practised as a preparatory or transitional form of ministry, as it commonly was in the Church of England, though steps have been taken in the Church of Sweden towards that end. The sign of the succession was restored over some years, and has become universal in the participating churches, through the mutual participation of Anglican and Lutheran bishops in each other’s consecrations, a practice, which continues to this day. Yet, this new paradigm in the Anglican understanding of order took over thirty years to emerge, and has not yet translated into significant advances for Anglican ecumenical relations elsewhere than the “Porvoo region”, though it has been echoed (arguably in a more radical way) in relations between Anglicans and Lutherans in North America. Agreements with other Lutheran churches on the continent of Europe, including the Meissen agreement of 1988 with the German Lutheran churches, and the Reuilly agreement of 2001 with the French Lutheran and Reformed churches, have not produced a relationship of full communion and interchangeability of ministry, since the partner churches concerned have not implemented a model of episcopacy and historic succession consonant with that of the Anglican churches. But the British Methodist–Anglican proposals, *Mission and Ministry in Covenant*, which provided for full mutual recognition and interchangeability of ministry, and which *did* involve the creation of an order of episcopate within the British Methodist Church, and the extension of the historic succession to Methodist ministry, have also to date failed gain traction, in part at least because the status (from an Anglican view) of non-episcopally ordained Methodist ministers remained unresolved, despite the fact that this very same issue did not stymie the Porvoo agreement.

Something is amiss here, then. What I have called a paradigm shift in the Anglican understanding of order has not been reflected across the breadth of the Church of England’s ecumenical engagement, where further progress towards mutual recognition continues to be bogged down by apparently recalcitrant elements of an older understanding of order. This is not to downplay what has already been achieved, nor is it to minimise the seriousness of the remaining obstacles in, say, Anglican–Methodist relations. But it is to point out that there is a certain foreshortening of vision in play here. The resulting relationships of communion created by the Porvoo agreement, and commonly called the “Porvoo communion”, were always intended to be set in the wider context of the goal of full visible unity, and to be a stage on the way to further convergence. But little more has occurred towards that end since 1992. Full communion and interchangeability of ministry have not led to a process of ecclesial convergence. What is the justification for continuing separation, for parallel and overlapping jurisdictions, when there are *no* substantive, remaining differences of faith and order? Why are Anglican chaplaincies in parts of Europe not united with Nordic/Baltic congregations? These same questions can be put with equal force to the Anglican churches’ relationship with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, with which, under the Bonn agreement of 1932, a relationship of full communion (*communio in sacris*) was concluded long ago (Moss 1964). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the achievable goal of interchangeability of ministry here has been mistaken for a kind of ecumenical completion. The incremental nature of the ecumenical advances achieved by Anglicans in the last half-century has ground ecumenical ambition down into small advances, painfully made, with a bleeding away of wider ecumenical ambition and vision. The excitement generated by successive agreements and covenants with Old Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Methodists, to say nothing of the remarkable theological explorations of Anglican dialogue with Catholics and Orthodox, has fallen back into a preoccupation with the maintenance of what should not ever be more than temporary, proximate structures of dialogue and relationship.

3. Why Does Unity Matter?

Faced with this loss of ambition, it is important to return briefly to the question at the heart of the ecumenical movement—why does the visible unity of the Church matter? The New Delhi statement spoke of the growing visibility of a unity “which is both God’s *will* and his *gift* to his Church” (WCC 1961). Will and gift provide a useful framework for a brief reconsideration of the ecumenical imperative. The text usually cited as foundational for Christian unity is John 17.20-1, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” “That they may be one” has become something of a motto for the ecumenical movement, used for example in Latin as the title of John Paul II’s great encyclical on Christian unity, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). The unity of Christ’s followers is something *willed*; it is an intention of God in Christ that Christians should be visibly united. Why “visibly”? “So that the world may *believe*”. Unity here is a condition of the mission of the Church, and it is therefore absolutely inseparable from it. Christians cannot evangelise, following this divine intention (and surely a divine intention becomes, for Christians, a mandate, a command to be obeyed) without at one and the same time pursuing the visible unity of the Church. It is not enough to be spiritually united but visibly separated into our independent denominations, and separate and competing structures. Furthermore, this unity is not something simply to be achieved as a human work. It is not in that sense ultimately a feature of creation. Rather, it is rooted in and stems from the unity of Christ with the Father. The formula “that they may be one” is used three times in just four verses, highlighting the intrinsic and unbreakable link between the unity of God and the unity of Christ’s body on earth, the Church. Christian separation is a consequence of human failure. The search for visible unity has the highest possible priority. It is not an ancillary benefit of discipleship, but intrinsic to it. It *is* the Gospel, or at least it is the Gospel as seen from one side. Just as we can absolutize love, or redemption, or any one of a number of possible descriptions of the Gospel, so we can absolutize unity, provided that at one and the same time we recognise that all these terms are only ways of presenting what is a multivalent reality, life in Christ, and all are equally valid, provided they include the others. By implication, where disunity is accepted and not challenged, the Gospel is not truly preached, and, as Paul Avis has argued, the Church has actually ceased to be the Church and has become a ‘counter-sign’ of the Kingdom (Avis 2021, pp. x–xi).

The unity of the Church is also a *gift*; however, something donated to the followers of Christ who were gathered around him as he walked amongst them. After all, as Paul asked rhetorically in 1 Corinthians 1.13, “Has Christ been divided?” The answer, of course, is no—he cannot be. There is only one Christ, and therefore only one body on earth. The Church is the new Israel, Christ the one high priest who, by his offering of himself, has “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Hebrews 10.14). The one Spirit was poured on the disciples at Pentecost, gathered in one place, and although they spoke in many languages, it was the one Christ of whom they spoke (Acts 2.1-4) and the one body to which they belonged (“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul”, Acts 4.32a). This *gifting* of the oneness of God, in Christ and in Spirit, occurred in many dimensions, one could argue—baptism, calling, sacrifice, service, prayer, inspiration with the Spirit—but its reference, its cause, was always the one God. Once we have grasped this truth, we can see it is everywhere in the New Testament, but especially so in the letters of Paul or pseudo-Paul, where constantly the words of the apostle are marshalled to retrieve or protect a unity in Christ, which risks being lost by the folly and greed of Christ’s own followers. As Albert Melloni points out, even John 17.21 implies divisions in the community (Melloni 2021, p. 8). After all, much of 1 Corinthians is dedicated to combatting the consequence of Christian division—“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement”; (1 Corinthians 1.10); “when you come together as a church, I hear that there are division among you”; (1 Corinthians 11.18) “For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body”. (1 Corinthians 12.13) In

Galatians, Paul rejects the idea of different grades or classes in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek. . .for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28). And perhaps the most striking formulation of this sense of unity in God as gift is in the letter to the Ephesians, where the word “one” connects God, faith, calling and life: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4.4-6).

It is not possible to shunt this powerful thread of New Testament reflection on the unity of the people of God into the sidings of the distinction between the visible and invisible Church. If this distinction perhaps has its roots ultimately in Augustine’s famous assertion that “in the ineffable foreknowledge of God many who seem to be outside [the Church] are within: many who seem to be within are outside”, nonetheless neither Augustine, nor any of the theologians who followed him (including Calvin) thought that this idea could be used to *justify* permanent division amongst Christians, or that the two dimensions of the Church were absolutely distinct (Augustine in [Bettenson 1970](#), p. 239). The often-encountered suggestion that “Surely we can all get along in our separate traditions and churches?” falls before the logical outworking of any such suggestion in the light of the New Testament witness. Can Christians seriously maintain that it is possible ultimately to have radically different ideas about the eucharist and Christ’s presence (or lack of it) there? Is Christ divided? Can we maintain that mutually contradictory positions on, for example, infant baptism are ultimately possible simply because we can be content with different church communities having totally different baptismal practices? Would not that be to condone a facile relativism? Is Christ divided? Practical consequences that have sometimes meant persecution and death to different communities of Christians have followed from our disagreements in the past—the obverse of the willingness to be martyred was the willingness to kill and maim for the sake of disagreement. And practical consequences remain in place today—Christian couples from different churches who cannot receive communion together, Christian churches competing for members, Christians in one community feeling condemned by the views and actions of those in another, and so on.

Any Biblical scholar worth their salt would point out that a fuller discussion of the scriptural vision of unity requires a substantial discussion in turn of the question of hermeneutics, and it is obvious that that lies beyond the scope of this article. But we can assert that the implication of unity as God’s will and gift is that in no sense is the faith given to us simply “my own”: I do not possess the truth of God, and the light of the Gospel, as if they were my own personal possessions, which I can dispose of at my own will, but only as they are given to me by God and demand of me complete self-transformation in conformity to the will of God. This sense of faith as objective and other than my own subjective consciousness is something that has had to be strongly restated again and again in Christian history, so powerful are the impulses that turn us away from Christ and draw us into our own little kingdoms. We find it in Luther (“the soul can do without anything except the Word of God”), for example ([Luther 1960](#), p. 279); in Barth (“GOD is true: HE is the Answer, the Helper, the Judge, and the Redeemer; not man”) ([Barth 1932](#), p. 80); in Newman (“Grace ever outstrips prayer”) ([Newman 1882](#), p. 351); and in Schmemmann (“Christ who is both God and man has broken down the wall between man and God. He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion”), to take but a few widely disparate voices ([Schmemmann 2018](#), p. 27). Variety and difference may be characteristics of the glory of God’s creation, and it is no surprise then that they also characterise the lives of the followers of Christ in history; but that is a very different matter from the existence of permanent divisions amongst Christ’s followers, embedded in rival denominations and histories of mutual suspicion and even persecution.

If unity is indeed God’s will and gift, how is it to be achieved, given the limitations of our nature and the constraints imposed by our own cultures and global histories? The unity of the Church is not only a practical task to be worked at incrementally, as we have seen, but a goal whose completion—like the absolute fulfilment of the *missio Dei*—lies at the end of history. The modern church is often deeply uncomfortable with anything other

than the vaguest or most spiritualised eschatology. What was a powerful conviction of the imminent end of all things in the consummation of God's creation and Christ's return in the earliest centuries of the Church gradually lost edge over time, especially as growing human awareness of the extraordinary "deep time" in which the world as we know it was formed appeared to shrink and relativise the place of human history in it—this, despite the strong counter-arguments of theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann (Moltmann 1967; Bauckham and Hart 1999). No account of the Gospel, however, which neglects the future hope can do full justice to God's redemption and re-creation of the universe. Nor does this imply anything less than the fullest possible attention to the Christian life here and now: "the hope of the coming of God's kingdom is a living hope, which already breaks into a realisation in the present in Christian worship participating in the life of heaven, and Christian service, participating in the life of the world" (Doctrine Commission 1995, p. 195). If, as I have argued, the unity of the Church, both invisible *and* visible, is an intrinsic aspect of the Gospel, then its *full* reality lies ahead of us. William Temple expressed this nicely when he said, "The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact: our task is not to create it but to exhibit it" (Avis 2021, p. 154). We need to recover a fully eschatological vision of Christian unity, including but also transcending the proximate, practical, and incremental steps by which churches, including of course my own, the Church of England, tend to measure their efforts towards that goal.

4. Imaginative Ecumenism

The greatest and most urgent paradigm shift required in the ecumenical movement is, therefore, the recovery of a profound and urgent sense of the unity of the Church as an eschatological goal, something in which we as Christians participate, but which is ultimately God's will and gift for his Church, and which is a dynamic task for the Church as she is, in Augustine's words, "on pilgrimage in this world" (Augustine 1972, p. 45). Only in that light, can we truly evaluate what smaller steps we can take here and now, and in the immediate future. We need an *imaginative ecumenism*, which is not afraid to think and test what a fully reconciled and reunited Church of Christ would really look like. By "imaginative" I do not mean the merely fictive, but rather the capacity of active, creative discernment, as conceived, for example, by S.T. Coleridge (Hedley 2008). Although the future is not, of course, available for us to study, we can try to throw our imaginations forward, and conceive of what might be necessary in order to achieve the ultimate goal of full visible unity. F.D. Maurice, in his *Kingdom of Christ* (1838–1842), an influential text for early Anglican ecumenism, postulated that all existing Christian traditions stood for positive truths, which belonged to the Church as a whole, and tended to be, he thought, right in what they affirmed, and wrong in what they denied (Maurice 1891, pp. 62–130; Morris 2005, pp. 55–97). This was clearly an over-schematised reading of history, but it does help to indicate how a genuinely comprehensive vision of the unity of the Church might draw together the experience, traditions, and insights of separated communities of Christians across the centuries. This imaginative ecumenism would seek to align the horizon of present experience and ecumenical commitment, with its proximate goals, with the future horizon of the full visible unity of the Church, echoing perhaps the hermeneutic of two horizons expounded by Anthony Thiselton, drawing on Gadamer's work (Thiselton 1980). In order to do that, it needs to reckon with the whole range of Christian community and theological identity, and to do, imaginatively, the apparently impossible, namely, to think what can best and maximally capture this variety and experience. In doing so, it must transcend and at the same time encompass those seemingly contradictory instincts over unity, which have been falsely opposed in some ecumenical circles as "reconciled diversity" and "full visible unity" (Morris and Sagovsky 2003, pp. 167–90).

To spell this out, there can be no ultimate vision of unity, which does not include, on the one hand, Roman Catholics and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, and on the other, Pentecostals, independent and community churches, Quakers and the Salvation Army, as well as those traditions of "mainstream" Protestantism it is usual to place somewhere in

the middle of this particular continuum. For Anglicans, whilst this seems at first sight reassuring, in that it—superficially—reinforces the common perception that Anglicanism is a “bridge” between different wings of Christian tradition, what is actually challenging, perhaps even disturbing, is the reflection that obviously the full visible unity of the Church must lie somewhere *beyond* the ecclesiological space currently occupied by Anglicanism, and demand of Anglicans a process of self-criticism and change, which few of them have even begun to perceive. In my few remaining paragraphs I will attempt to sketch where such a process might lead.

Let me begin by stating what seems to me to be obvious: the full visible unity of the Church must recognise and embody fundamentally the development in church order which occurred at least from the second century of the Church onwards, and involved the emergence of episcopal order, with a principle of territorial oversight. No vision of unity which tries to convey something of the continuity of the Church over time, could possibly ignore the convictions of the Catholic, Orthodox and other episcopal churches, which together—on this specific question of order—represent far and away the largest portion of world Christianity. The Preface to the Ordinal of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* itself claimed that “from the Apostles’ time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ’s Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons”. A fully reunited Church of Christ will be episcopal, though the specific *form* of episcopacy, which belongs to the full visible unity of the Church, remains an ecumenical problem to be studied and agreed. So too with the broader question of the “traditional” threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons. The WCC convergence texts are helpful here, and especially *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, which lays out the outlines of a growing ecumenical consensus on authority in the Church, and makes use of the term *episkope*, “oversight”, whilst at the same time acknowledging lack of agreement yet on whether this needs to be embodied in a *personal* order of bishops, and also maps out important insights on conciliarity (WCC 2013, paras. 48–57). As I write, I am conscious that the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church is shortly to meet in Rome. This also has the potential to embody a significant shift in the Catholic Church’s understanding of conciliar processes, and especially of synodality, including as it does some lay and non-episcopal voices, as well as voting “Fraternal Delegates” from other churches. It may be, then, that we are on the verge of another momentous step in Catholic ecumenism, which could put all these arguments about church order, on that long horizon of an imagined future for which I am arguing, into a new context of enhanced ecumenical convergence. For Anglicans, the conviction that the threefold order, and especially the historic succession, belongs to the full visible unity of the Church is justifiable, *not* because it has always been central to Anglican ecclesiological identity (for as we have seen, that is simply not true), but as a proleptic instantiation in the Anglican churches of a vital aspect of that unity. In practical terms, this mandates for Anglicans a continuing commitment to exploring with other episcopal churches, and especially the Catholic and Orthodox churches, remaining significant areas of difference in theology and practice. But let me be clear—it does not mean “no change” in our position on order and the episcopate. Even against this long, imaginative trajectory of unity we have much to reconsider in the ways order is expressed in our churches, including canonical status and discipline, synodical government, the exercise of office, and residual elements of social hierarchy, amongst other things.

Likewise, the long trajectory also demands of Anglicans a reconsideration of primacy. All the Anglican churches model primacy in a limited way in their autonomous national churches or provinces, but there are variations (Ross 2020). The Orthodox similarly add to metropolitan authority in some places the title and role of Patriarch. The ARCIC II document, which dealt most thoroughly with primacy, *The Gift of Authority*, whilst expressing agreement on the Petrine ministry as a ministry of discernment, appeared to contradict any suggestion (which lingers still in some Catholic circles) that that ministry is a ministry *over* the Church, for, it says, “This form of authoritative teaching has no stronger guarantee from the Spirit than have the solemn definitions of ecumenical councils” (ARCIC

II 1993, para. 47). The hostile reception of this document in some parts of the Anglican Communion, especially by Evangelicals, suggests there is a long way to go in securing even “in principle” consensus amongst Anglicans. It seems to this author at least that, if the Petrine ministry does belong to the full visible unity of the Church, it must perforce look very different from what it is now. It must sit inside a structure of ecclesial authority, which is relational, interdependent, and effectively non-hierarchical. Some strands of current Anglican discourse anticipate that (Wondra 1995). It is notable that one of the most striking passages in John Paul II’s *Ut Unum Sint* touched precisely on this question, when he invited other Christian leaders (“Church [*sic*] leaders and their theologians”) “to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject. . .in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church” (John Paul II 1995, para. 96).

If, as it will have seemed thus far, my call for a renewed eschatological vision of full visible unity supports the contention that the threefold order of the Church belongs to that unity, and that the Petrine ministry also does, does this not merely amount to something like a predictable “Anglo-Catholic” ecumenical agenda? I do not think so, for now I must turn to the implications for other sets of relationship. The inescapable starting-point here, from where I stand, is the Anglican–Methodist relationship. As I have already indicated, certain things that some Anglo-Catholics have held to be an obstacle to a relationship of full communion and interchangeability between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain have already proved not to have been so in other contexts, and especially in the Porvoo relationships. Moreover, Methodists in the Anglican–Methodist Covenant process have already committed themselves to re-receiving the gift of an episcopal order, and the sign of the historic succession. The long trajectory of an imaginative ecumenism, focused on the distant horizon of full visible unity, would surely recognise the immensity of that change, given Methodist history and polity, and see it as the overarching framework within which any specific concerns about the exercise of ministry by non-episcopally ordained ministers ought to be set. It does not imply an automatic organic union, for as we have seen, that has not occurred in the Porvoo churches, nor between Anglicans and Old Catholics: that would be a further step, much further off and dependent on the relationship between the churches developing ever closer. Anglican–Methodist mutual recognition would be a remarkable testimony to the commitment of both churches to the unity of the Church.

Other relationships for Anglicans with Protestant churches also need to be seen against the background of the long horizon I have indicated. Full mutual recognition of ordained ministry between Anglicans and the German churches (the “Meissen” churches) is not, given all I have said above, just around the corner, not least because it would be difficult to take that step without something analogous to the Methodist Church of Great Britain’s willingness to embody a personal episcopacy in a form consonant with the traditional threefold order. The united churches of the Asian sub-continent are a sign that further progress in this direction is perfectly possible, but they arguably prove my point: even if the Church of South India for example retains, in some ways, features of order that are not typical of other Anglican churches (such as the election of a bishop as moderator in each diocese every other year), nonetheless in their overall structure they adhere to the threefold order and on that basis, as well as their common cultural and linguistic heritage, participate in the Anglican Communion. The issue of order put to one side, the Reformation churches—Lutheran, Reformed *and* Anglican—surely have something vital to contribute to the long horizon of unity, in their renewed emphasis on the primary theological insights, which infuse the New Testament. The remarkable convergence signalled by the Catholic–Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999, subsequently adopted by Methodists, Reformed and Anglicans) is a case in point.

Restoration of the full visible unity of the Church requires above all the repairing of two seismic divisions in Christianity, that between East and West, and that between Catholicism and Protestantism in the West. But issues of order and doctrine, at least as

conventionally discussed in ecumenical dialogue, do not completely exhaust what needs to be said about that goal. Here, I think that, although F.D. Maurice's working out of his insight (derived from Coleridge) of the complementarity of truths strongly held by different traditions (and it is noteworthy that Yves Congar's method in *Divided Christendom*, 1937, bears some similarity) was much too rigidly and narrowly drawn, nevertheless the basic insight remains relevant. Separated churches have usually gone their own way because, in their concern to follow the Gospel to the best of their ability, they have highlighted and clung to aspects of the Gospel and Christian living lost or downplayed by others. To what extent these aspects are central or peripheral, essential, or disposable, to the full visible unity of the Church would need a treatise in itself. Would traditions that are non-eucharistic, for example, need eventually to recover the eucharist as the centre of Christian worship? I have said nothing here on the Anglican view on that, though my own belief is that the eucharist must belong to a fully reunited Church as its very centre and heartbeat. But the long horizon of which I've spoken does surely open up possibilities that go way beyond where ecumenical dialogue currently has reached—and incidentally, Anglicans participate with many other denominations in chaplaincies in hospitals, schools and universities in the UK where conventional confessional boundaries are often fluid. Only in recent years have Anglicans begun to engage seriously in dialogue, and in places (especially in the United Kingdom) in joint activity, with Pentecostal churches. I see no fundamental reason why the Pentecostal tradition should not be able to embrace the arguments on order I have suggested above, but it also seems to me that their richness of engagement with, and experience of, the theology of the Holy Spirit and the power of spiritual gifts is something so vital to the life of the Christian Church that it must belong to the *oikumene*. And what about the shape and structure of a fully reunited Church? Could it not include within it distinct traditions, which, while united around a common witness to the Gospel, nonetheless preserve something of their own emphases, characteristics and traditions? After all, in the Catholic Church religious orders in one breath are fully "part" of the structures of the Church, and in another remarkably diverse. Could the Salvation Army, for example, have a vocation in the long horizon of Christian unity as the equivalent of a missionary order within the Church? Could the Quakers have a particular contemplative role as a gift to the whole Church?

5. Concluding Comments

I do not believe we are in an ecumenical winter. Some initiatives have faltered. But there are many encouraging signs of greater mutual understanding between Christians, and a growing desire for reconciliation. Even as new grounds for disagreement have raised their heads in the last few decades—especially over women's ministry and human sexuality—at the same time churches have continued to rediscover a common life and witness. There are new forms, or new expressions, of the ecumenical spirit. Nothing I have said in this essay should be interpreted as critical of the theology of receptive ecumenism, for example, nor of the "spiritual ecumenism" noted by Cardinal Kasper (Kasper 2004, pp. 155–72), nor of the 'ecumenism of the heart' adumbrated by the World Council of Church's 2022 assembly (Murray 2008). I have said too little here of the fertile theology of *koinonia*, which lies behind many recent advances in ecumenical dialogue (Sagovsky 2000). All of these perspectives—which do not seem to me mutually contradictory—have been in some sense assumed into what I have written. They provide important tools and insights for further reflection.

In describing the effects of incremental ecumenism, rather than attempting to criticise or disable contemporary ecumenical instruments, dialogues, and initiatives, I have only intended to point to a foreshortening of vision latent in the contestation of proximate goals. These instruments, dialogues and initiatives are necessary vehicles of ecumenical advance. We cannot do without them, and in many cases they are the best we can do in the current circumstances. But the ecumenical strategy of any one church should not be defined and so circumscribed by them. They always need judgment against the longer perspective of the

full visible unity of the Church. Anglicans must recover their conviction and inspiration in that end, that telos of the movement for Christian unity. It is indeed a distant horizon, further off perhaps than some ecumenical enthusiasts thought in the 1960s and 1970s. But just as the unity of the Church is God's will and gift, in Christ, so the mundane task of working towards that unity, and overcoming our lamentable history of Christian division, is a challenge, hope, joy, and inspiration under God.

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