

Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach

3. What sort of instrument?

It is I think providential that Dr Williams has offered us a new way to think and act about church unity just when we are trying to catch a vision of how we can best 'make a difference'. I believe that the way we as a community go about overcoming disunity is vital to the whole business of 'making a difference'. I want to suggest that Dr Williams's proposal can help us to see what we are called as a church to do.

I doubt if Dr Williams knows what a substantial task he is setting us. The expectation of church leaders who look at the URC from outside and meet our representatives at ecumenical gatherings is, I suspect, that the URC represents a certain sort of 'churchmanship' familiar in the past. That expectation is fed by the contribution made by those of our ministers who go to ecumenical gatherings. I expect that Dr Williams thinks of us as mainstream Protestant Dissenters. As far as I can see, that old tradition lives on in the URC; but it does not, I think, define the culture of the URC today. To test that doubtful generalisation you may ask your minister exactly what the URC stands for and see what answer you get. I suspect that Dr Williams imagines that we all know exactly what we stand for. I suspect that as far as that goes he is a bit off the mark.

The United Reformed Church has, as it seems to me, only very recently come to terms officially with its own history. That history is, among other things, set out with great clarity by Tony Tucker in his book **Reformed Ministry** published by The United Reformed Church in 2003. The recent history and current position of the URC was explained in 6 short sentences by Tony Tucker in that book at page 163; "The failure of the covenant proposals (in 1982) closed a chapter in English church history. It showed that the version of Christian unity for which Christ prayed, could not be realised, at least for the foreseeable future in England, by the organic union of denominations. The failure dealt a serious blow to the United Reformed Church. In its short life it had understood itself as having been called into a temporary existence to act as a catalyst for a wider union of separated churches. The wider Church had hailed its formation in 1972 as sign of hope for the whole Church. It now faced an uncertain future as a relatively small denomination which had been robbed of its *raison d'etre*."

What Tony Tucker is saying is true to my limited experience and explains much of what I see around me. We are proud of our role in the ecumenical movement and it is not surprising that it has taken more than 20 years for the URC to tell the troops on the ground in so many words (in a book which many may not read) that since 1982 the URC has had no reason for existing. We knew when we started in 1972 that we were a particular sort of 'instrument', Tony Tucker describes it as a 'catalyst' in a process. The process came to nothing. What next? I believe that Dr Williams is now thinking of us as a different sort of instrument.

Before making up our minds to try something different we would want to take a close look at our present situation. But that is very difficult for most of us to do. There is no one place in which we can look for a comprehensive history of the URC since 1982. We are absorbed in the work of our own congregation and have neither time, nor opportunity, to find out the wider picture for ourselves. We know that overall the URC has a dwindling membership with a high proportion of elderly members, and a great many small churches; we are aware that we are short of ready money. But beyond that it is difficult to know. Are we in good heart? Some churches are flourishing; but my guess is that many of us are deep down probably in rather anxious heart. I shall set down how things on the unity front look to me, so at least you know the point from which I start when I recommend a change of course. Disagreeing with what I write may clarify for you where you think the URC stands today.

It is easy enough with hindsight to see that, if the next merger was going to be put off for the indefinite future, the URC was in 1982 embarking on an indefinite period of co-existence with other church institutions. It is not difficult to suppose now that a prolonged period of co-existence might demand a new strategy, and that, if the church's original *raison d'etre* had been snatched from it, it was desirable to come up with a new one, if only to keep the troops cheerful while marking time.

The unity front as it looks to me. I think that ministers and people understandably enough reacted differently to the failure of the Covenant talks in 1982. It seems to me that there were, probably, two strands in the URC from the time of its formation - the 'theological strand' and the 'house-keeping strand'. The 'theological strand' based itself ultimately on 'John' chapters 13 to 17. It assumed without question that what 'John' said should be applied to church institutions. It assumed that Jesus himself delivered the Farewell Discourses and prayed the prayer in 'John' 17. The prayer of Jesus was understood by at least two generations of Christian leaders to require a process of negotiation leading to an amalgamation, or merger, of institutions. The strength of the 'housekeeping strand' was that a union of the Congregationalists with the English Presbyterians could be seen in a time of falling numbers as a way of going on worshipping in the same way in the same dear place

for a little longer. Many Congregationalists found that, in order to achieve this, they could live with a Presbytery after all; and, I suspect, that Presbyterians, observing that many Congregationalists did not bother to turn up to Church Meeting any way, felt they could probably live with a church meeting.

After 1982 I suspect that our leaders were exhausted by their efforts, first to procure an agreement, and then to persuade their people to vote to carry it into effect. It would not be surprising to learn that some were rather dispirited by the failure of the cause for which they had worked so devotedly. After 1982 our people sank back thankfully enough to worship in the familiar way in the familiar places in which their parents had worshipped and to get on with doing all the good things that we see reported regularly in *Reform*. It was unthinkable to abandon the cause of unity, but quite what to about it was not clear.

At first, the leaders of the URC continued to prepare their people for some future amalgamation. It was difficult to take account of a new time scale. It was not immediately obvious to everyone that most of the saints were unlikely to be alive when the next merger was agreed upon, and our leaders did not take steps to depress our people with such gloomy news. They continued to equip the saints to go on being a catalyst for another merger. Naturally enough the whole emphasis of the teaching was on those things on which Christians of all denominations could readily be brought to agree, if they did not agree already. Over the years we were persuaded to adopt the Anglican Five Marks of Mission. We set about saving little churches which were perceived to be 'failing' by setting up LEP's with any denomination which would join them. We were encouraged to 'be the church', not just part of the church. Any differences of understanding between ourselves were to be overcome by loving one another, or not mentioning them. It came to be a virtue not to be 'divisive'. The inevitable result of all this, whether intended or not, was to emphasise the highest common factor in our church life and marginalise anything which was distinctive. Many things were not done that might have been done had the URC not remained fixated on the next merger. It was, in 1972, always going to be bit of a slog to change people's attitudes; but it was not perceived in 1972 to be necessary for our leaders to teach us what we stood for affirmatively as a union church, because the aim was to stop being a separate church very soon. If the negotiations for the covenant which came to nothing in 1982 had taught us nothing else, they had made it clear that we would have to jettison a great deal of what our forefathers had thought important if we were ever to achieve the sort of unity for which our leaders assured us (and continue to assure us) that Jesus had prayed. There was no point in teaching our people to exercise themselves in church meeting, because it was unlikely that the next merger would ever be achieved if we were to insist on bringing that profound religious insight as to how God deals with human beings into the merged institution. There was no point in straining to sustain and nurture the institution of elders, because we were going to have to take on board the full suit of bishop, priest and deacon. Believing God to

have commanded a further merger, the only question was how much of our distinctive heritage we would have to negotiate away in order to achieve that merger; every other consideration was subordinated to that. Though our principle of 'conciliar' government is difficult to work without constant preparation and practice, the only significant question ever likely to put to church meeting was going to be this: "Our negotiators tell us that this is the best deal we are going to be offered; do you, or do you not, approve of a covenant/merger with the Methodists, the Anglicans, or whomever, on this basis?" And our leaders could hardly be expected to hope that, after all their further efforts, some church meeting was going to say 'no' to that. One result of all this is that our practice of church meeting has run down somewhat; another is that elders have not been assiduously trained; and a third is that we have become too reliant on our stipendiary ministers. My guess is that they, for their part, find themselves anxious about the future and rather isolated.

Articulation. I am not suggesting that the URC does not stand for anything. I am suggesting that in the thirty odd years of its existence it has not made it one of its priorities to articulate what is special about it, so that every child knows on leaving Sunday school what the URC is for. If my uninformed assessment of where the URC now stands is any where near the mark, it will be a substantial task to bring the URC to a point of concert-preparedness to take a part in the Christian orchestra, (or chorus), which Dr Williams envisages. If I am anywhere near right about the decay of the eldership and the practice of church meeting, we should depend very much on our stipendiary ministers to get us up to concert pitch. But then, they have most to lose at the next covenant, let alone the next merger. They stand to lose their identity, the very things that caused them to train as ministers of the URC rather than as priests in the Church of England in the first place.

'Unity in diversity'. Gradually over the years since 1982 our ministers have been trying to find a way out of a cul de sac and some of them are now talking about 'unity in diversity'. This is, as far as I can see, a somewhat nebulous concept. I doubt whether all those who use the phrase could, if they were all to discuss it together, be brought to agree on its precise content. One thing is, however, clear. They are thinking about unity in a new way, which involves the continuance of the URC in existence as a separate entity for an indefinite period. No one emphasises the matter, but the fact is that visible organic unity has been put on the back burner. As far as I can see the URC has not yet fully thought through the practical implications of having to live through an indefinite period of 'unity in diversity' as a separate religious entity. Dr Williams also seems have put visible organic unity on the back burner; but he has come up with a plan for what to do in the interim period of co-existence. His plan, or vision, as it seems to me, involves the United Reformed Church in becoming a different sort of instrument, an instrument which continues in separate existence, knows what it stands for, and is prepared to stand

up and contribute its distinctive voice to the Christian orchestra, (or chorus), in England.

Co-existing with the Church of England. Though it is obvious enough when you think about it, it is not widely acknowledged that, the more like the Church of England the URC becomes, the less justification there can be for keeping the URC going as a separate institution at all. This is not an issue if you intend to amalgamate with the Church of England very soon; but, once you decide to battle on as a separate institution for the indefinite future, it seems to me that you need to decide whether you are still 'Dissenters' of some sort, or not; and what, if anything, you dissent about; and, what is more, what it is that you are not prepared to negotiate away. The problem has become acute for us in recent years as the Church of England is seen to be in danger of coming apart. The 'vision' which we are at present trying to catch must, I believe, include a vision about our position in relation to the great church. As far as I am concerned there is little point in trying to keep a separate religious institution ticking over, if it is going to waste precious years of what seems likely to be rather a short common life duplicating the unfortunate difficulties now facing the Church of England over the problems of human sexuality.

The difficulties of the Church of England affect our relationship with it. My understanding is that the Church of England is in a desperate situation. It finds it difficult to move in any direction, not only because of the diversity of opinion within it, but also because of the responsibilities of the Archbishop of Canterbury in relation to other churches in the Anglican communion. It is not the bitingly effective sort of missionary institution which any thoughtful person currently belonging to another church in England would hurry to join at this time. Despite our profound differences, we in the United Reformed Church have, as it seems to me, a slightly better chance than the Church of England of agreeing as a community where we are going. This is not the place in which to go into how we should go about it.

In Part 4 I shall suggest that what Dr Williams is proposing is a good pragmatic answer to the churches' present disunity and start to explore what sort of job Dr Williams might expect us to do.