

We include here the Course's response to the first of the four questions asked by the Ecumenical Validation Panel. The remainder of the Validation Document is available from the Administrator on request.

Question 1

What is the training institution's understanding of the mission to which the Church of God is called and the patterns of Church life and order through which the Church of England, the Methodist Church and United Reformed Church respond to that calling?

Introduction

Today our churches are, perhaps, learning once again what it means to say that:

*It is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world*¹

This learning though is by no means easy, and is not to be acquired apart from contexts which include the risks and confusions of managing institutional decline just as much as initiating fresh expressions of Christian witness. If our task remains one of watching for what God is doing and joining in (in an often repeated description of mission), then this will involve not only a joyful boldness (*parrhesia*) in the Gospel we have to proclaim (2 Cor 3:12), but also an ability to see that we cannot readily determine in advance where, or by what means, our proclamation will be heard and welcomed. In this position we stand both alongside and apart from the witness of the Church in every generation: alongside, in proclamation of the fact that 'God's plan as declared in the Holy Scriptures is to reconcile all things in Christ in, through and for whom they were made'²; and apart, in recognition of the fact that the context in which our witness occurs is new and unlike any the Church has previously experienced.

Five years on

Five years on from our last Inspection and Validation, SWMTC has taken the decision to rewrite our answer to Question 1, and endeavour to outline afresh our 'understanding of the mission to which the Church of God is called and the patterns of church life and order through which our sponsoring churches have responded to this calling'. Why?

There are a number of reasons for this but perhaps first among them is the sense - described by the great Protestant theologian of the last century, Karl Barth - that trying to describe the mission of God in the world is like trying to capture 'a bird in

¹ Quoted in *Mission-Shaped Church: Church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p.85 from Tim Dearborn, *Beyond Duty: a passion for Christ, a heart for mission*, (MARC, 1998)

² *Called to Witness and Service: The Reuilly Common Statement*, (London: Church House Publishing, 1999), p.18.

flight'. Things, people, and situations move on; and hopefully, the Church faithfully prays, in response to the God who moves us on.

SWMTC is a noticeably different organisation than it was five years ago, as indeed is the context in which it is set. No doubt the changes are in some places more marked than in others, but nonetheless in response to a pervasive sense of living in a 'changing Church', the Course has once more undertaken a consultation process with many of the individuals and constituencies involved in our life and work. Thus, as the people of our sponsoring Churches watch for what God is doing in the Church and the world, our question was simply: what do you see? Or, perhaps more pointedly: 'do you see anything' at all (Mk 8:24)? The reflections that we gathered from this consultation suggested that it would be profitable for us at this time to revisit our approach of five years ago and show how our response to Questions 1 and 2, although in continuity with the substance of our reflection of five years ago, develops in a slightly different direction.

Our previous answer

The ways in which we 'see' the world, its chaos or purposefulness; the ways in which we 'see' one another as neighbours or enemies; the ways in which we 'see' the institutions that enable or disable the processes of human flourishing: these things are shaped and structured by the stories we tell about ourselves and the environments in which we live. What does the world look like? What do we look like? What does God look like? In our submission of five years ago we suggested that the answers we give to these and other questions are best understood through the *stories* we tell. Moreover, we argued there, that this concern with the category of story 'reflects not simply a contemporary interest, but a deeper conviction that narrative is an appropriate form of discourse for Christian faith and practice'. From this conviction followed a series of interlocking reflections: God's mission is best understood as the *story* of 'sacrificial love, of mutuality, interdependence and service of others', which, from creation to Israel, Christ and the Church, is to be read as in some way reflective of God's own triune life; as story - and therefore 'unlike propositional discourse' - *discernment* is always required to interpret and embody the manner in which the story speaks both of a revealing and concealing God, and also of our 'deeply flawed nature' and capacity to discern honestly and live truthfully; and finally, while this act of *interpretation* and embodiment belongs to the Church as a whole, "those called to ordained and public ministry have a 'principal and directing role in this task'". This was the way in which our submission of five years ago cohered and offered a systematic reflection which nonetheless sought to remain somewhat less than 'a system'.

The 'sense' of the 2006 Consultation

It goes without saying that the feedback we received from this consultative exercise was varied. Nonetheless, it is of note that while some felt that the key organising concepts of our last submission - 'story' and 'interpretation' - were still to be warmly commended as constructive and appropriate; others felt that in the context of our missionary situation today, they appeared rather weak or passive metaphors for describing the enterprise to which the Church is committed - participation in the transformative action of God which thereby involves the transformation of the Church (*viz.*, 'it is the God of mission who has a church' and not *vice versa*). Our last

submission had not ignored this theme, and had spoken of a *kairos* moment for the Church: a description endeavouring to capture both the increasing cultural marginalisation of the Church and decline in numbers of 'practising' Christians, but also the opportunity that this afforded for new patterns of life and order to emerge within an ecumenical context. However, it was unclear to some how culturally acute and theologically informed this analysis was.

No doubt the differences that emerged strongly in the consultation concerning the centrality of more 'active' or 'passive' organising metaphors in the mission statement of a training institution are only indications of deeper convictions; convictions which may just as well be sparked by a cleared-headed analysis of the peril of the Church as a national institution in our land, as by profoundly held theological convictions concerning, for example, the properly 'counter-cultural' position of the Church. Moreover, although these contested convictions were evident enough in our consultation, so also was the shared assumption - however 'weighted' - that today it is not easy to think Christian thoughts or embody Christian practices in a culture whose imagination, whose ways of 'seeing' the world, are increasingly untutored by Christianity, and to a considerable and deepening extent quite hostile to it.

However, while differences and commonalities were evidenced in our consultation (as one would expect and welcome in an ecumenical Course), all these perceptions found an urgent focus in the character and prospects of local Christian communities. In other words, the context for people's answer to the question 'What do you see' involved reflecting on the shape, dis-eases and promises of local church communities. How are they to survive? How are they to grow? How are they to remake themselves in new and 'mission-shaped' forms? And of course, what forms of representative leadership and recognised ministry do they require?

This attention to the needs and prospects of local communities and their leadership was a theme little attended to in our submission of five years ago, but now appears to be a central concern in the lives of the churches engaged in our consultation. If there is to be a 'reformation' of the local Christian communities in response to the mission of God - and no doubt experienced through all kinds of different pressures, demands and opportunities - then this will irrevocably raise the question of the place of the ordained minister in these communities; and not least because as things stand, the resources given over to the training and formation of future ministers indicate that our churches place a high priority here (whether rightly or wrongly was again an issue that arose in the consultation). This would suggest that if we are to really *listen* to the responses we received from the churches we serve then this requires that we relocate our answer to Questions 1, and indicate more carefully how the Course thinks about the challenge of our context today. But what does this mean?

Relocating our Answer

There seems to be a (perhaps quite understandable) tendency towards responding to questions of the character of Question 1 with some sort of *dogmatica minora* which, quite often, derives itself entirely from reflection on the character of the Triune God, and then, in consequence, delivers divinely warranted categories for interpreting, or historically secured patterns for embodying, Church order.³

³ *Mission and Ministry 2nd edition, 2003: The Churches' validation framework for theological education* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003). Interestingly, the authors of this report comment on the criticism and confusion

In relocating our answer to the above question somewhere between our sponsoring churches own 'reading' of the mission of God, and an apologia for the shape and structure of the SWMTC training programme we want to draw attention both to the resources we readily have to hand (and should celebrate) in terms of ecumenical agreement attained, and, at a local level, our engagement with our sponsoring churches own mission and ministry strategies within our regional context.

Amongst the resources we have drawn upon are:

- *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England*
- *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper No. 111)*
- *Called to Witness and Service: The Reuilly Common Statement. Conversations between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches*
- *Mission-Shaped Church: Church planting and fresh expressions of Church in a changing context*
- *Mission and Ministry 2nd Edition: The churches' validation framework for theological education*
- *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church: The structure and funding of ordination training (GS 146)*
- *Shaping the Future: New patterns of training for lay and ordained*

In attempting to answer Question 1 in this context, and thus avoiding the impression of generating an understanding of 'the mission to which the Church of God is called' *ex nihilo* or sheerly idiosyncratically, we therefore want to make claim upon a fundamental theological point that is central to the Course's self-understanding and manner of operation. Thus, in a very brief sketch below, our answer to Question 1 will highlight the *social fact* that the Church has from its very origins been a *missionary* movement. And while the Christian movement has generated communities which, as a plain matter of fact, have existed in a series of differing forms; they have nevertheless sprung from and returned to the core conviction that they have something to say that is communicable across 'institutional' boundaries and which is compellingly attractive and of urgent importance to others (Mt 28:19-20).

God's Mission: Christ, Culture & Community

Thus, the crucial theological point to which our answer to Question 1 now responds is that the pattern of the Christian story (that our response of five years ago thoroughly explored) reveals a God who lets himself be spoken of - named and

that has surrounded Question 1 and suggest that what the question really invites is 'a fundamental theological account of the Church' (p.22). This is what we attempt to sketch in what follows.

followed - in terms of the social and human history that He sets in motion and shapes. This God 'chooses' to be the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ and in so doing chooses to be utterly and particularly committed to the future of humankind and the rest of creation. But if this constitutes the remarkable and utterly gracious mission of God, then the most fundamental recognition that this impresses upon Christian self-understanding and 'life-together' (and is itself the gracious gift given in Baptism) is that what justifies and sanctifies this possibility is the crucified and glorified humanity of Jesus Christ. The Church is 'authorized' to participate in the mission of God - to offer and to persuade people of the Good News of salvation - through its participation in the authority of Jesus risen from the dead. However, if the Church offers and testifies to a new way of 'life together' then it does so in obedience to the One who himself was rejected by cultural and political patterns of human organisation and association which continue to manifest themselves in our day just as much as in his. In Jesus' abandonment and dying alone, so - as Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw with such clarity - he is the one who is pushed out of the world such that the new life he brings from beyond death can no longer be the property or projection of any form of existing cultural pattern or formation. The Christian community therefore proclaims and sets forth as Good News the struggle to realize a life together in virtue not of family, tribe or social position but solely in celebration of a shared belonging with and to the risen Christ. This is what constitutes what Paul calls life *en Christo* (2 Cor 5:17 etc); and in the Second Letter to the Corinthians he explores the astounding claim that the identity of the whole human race (and therefore the global reach of the mission of the Church) is no longer to be discovered in terms of social construction but solely through relationship to Jesus Christ. For when this relationship is realized just so 'there is a new world': God 'in Christ reconciling the world to himself'. (2 Cor 5:17-18)

By presenting themselves as a foretaste of this new world, God's 'new creation', the earliest communities found themselves in sharp conflict with family, synagogue and the *imperium Romanum*; a conflict that, as Paul's letters show, was as much a matter of internal confusion and contestation as external definition. Christianity's Good News is that human community is possible; possible that is as an unconditioned relationship with God and with neighbour (Mk 12:28f). However, what follows from attention to the story of Jesus - a *following* of Jesus - is that this new creation is realized only through the giving away of power in order to nurture flourishing and authority in others. We learn this only as the Holy Spirit enables us to contemplate God's self-giving in Christ. It is this reality that is depicted in the 'mysterious exchange' between God and human kind in Christ (the *admirabile commercium* of classical theology) whereby the relinquishing of power generates a hope for shared and reciprocal empowering for growth towards the Kingdom.

The community which proclaims Christ as its Lord must exist as a network of mutual trust and reciprocal definition because it is founded upon the fact that God has uttered Himself in history; into the social and political processes of deformation and reformation. But in uttering Himself in just this way, the Christian community must understand its own relationship to the culture in which it is set as distinctive in the paradoxical terms of offering to that culture a sign of a *unified* world.

However, if living out this strenuous paradox has been evidenced in every age of the Church's life, what it suggests is that if we want to keep on learning about Christ, sharing in his life and offering it to others, then we must be always discerning those

practices, habits of life, modes of discipleship, that keep alive the distinctiveness of the Body while all the time refusing the allure of sectarian dispersion. It is this sense of being a learning Church participating in the mission of God that not only returns us to the opening of our answer, but also suggests the arena in which the Church has sought to 'explain' its patterns of church life and order (both to itself and to the world): that is to say, in the relationship between the pattern of the Body and the universal scope of God's mission to the whole of creation.

We will conclude our answer to Question 1 with a final remark as this pertains to the character of Church order and the way in which this can be interpreted in the traditions represented in SWMTC; for as *Reuilly* comments 'We all agree that the life of the Church must be ordered'.⁴ However, we hope that we have said enough to indicate why the Course neither owns nor proclaims a 'theoretical' understanding of the mission of God which it then seeks to put into practice in its training programme. Rather, as attentive to our sponsoring churches discernment and experience, and to the possibilities of own operation - within sometimes more expansive and other times more narrow constraints - we seek to remain ever faithful to the character of the God whose 'mission' shows that He is not to be spoken of without reference to that humanity revealed in the person of Jesus Christ; and just so, through the processes through which our humanity is raised to a new dignity. As the *Common Statement of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant* expresses this:

It is because the gospel of the redeeming love of God in Christ is embodied in Christian communities that mission is inescapably a matter that involves the Church. Mission is a dimension of the body of Christ, an expression of the nature of the Church. The *koinonia*, mutual participation in Christ, that Christians share is therefore essentially missiological. Mission is not something added to the being of the Church but is an expression of its essential nature, the cutting edge of its daily life.⁵

Church Order and Life: Marks of the Church

If the Christian community lives through its shared commitment and promise to be with the risen Christ in response to his promise to remain with the Church always (Mt 28:20), then this locates the Church in the mission of God as context and critique for all human association and fellowship: *context* - in the sense that it offers to the world a vision of the unity for the whole of creation beyond every sense of the local, tribal, or national; and *critique* - in the sense of forcing every human institution (the church included) to challenge its capacity to allow human beings to grow towards maturity through mutual exchange and trust. This dialectic has been given further specification through what the Christian tradition has depicted as the four notes or marks of the Church. Thus, as the *Common Statement* argues: 'Because mission is essential to the Church's nature it follows that it must be related to the four dimensions of the Church that we confess in the Nicene Creed: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity'.⁶ In that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic

⁴ *Called to Witness and Service*, p.30

⁵ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England*, (London: Methodist Publishing House & Church House Publishing, 2001), p.30

⁶ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*, p.31

so these 'marks' indicate characteristic areas in which the Church participates in the mystery of Christ's risen life, and through which the Spirit demands of the Church missionary witness and preparedness not to merge into the culture in which it is set.

It is clear to see that as one considers the different ecclesial traditions in Christianity, these marks have elicited wide interpretation and moreover have been embodied and made visible in different ways in differing Church polities - including the traditions represented in SWMTC. However, to the extent that that they have provided a 'common language' for the project of the ecumenical movement - allowing for the overcoming of old suspicions and development of new possibilities - then we may count this as not only a cause for rejoicing, but also an indication of how generative traditional theological resources can become when deployed in new contexts.⁷

Thus we would suggest that one way to answer Question 1 fully (which exploits the achievements of the modern ecumenical movement) would be use these marks of the Church as a template for examining the similarities and differences between the traditions of Church life and order represented in SWMTC. However, given that this is not really practicable in the space allowed, we will focus, in our answer to Question 2 on just one mark - *apostolicity* - which, in modern ecumenical discussion, has drawn to itself, in particular, the question of Church order in general and the ordained ministry in particular.⁸

⁷ See the use of the 'Marks' in *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 96f

⁸ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1982), p.28f