Reunion at Home and Abroad

By The Rt. Rev. T. G. Stuart Smith, M.A.[1]

" That they may all be one ; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us : that the world may believe that thou didst send me " (St. John xvii. 21).

WHATEVER view may be taken of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel, these words may be taken as an indication of the will of Jesus Christ for His Church. They carry two implications. First, the purpose of the existence of the Church is to convince the world that Jesus is the Saviour sent by God. The Church is by its very nature a missionary body. Wherever the Church or any part of it ceases to be concerned with its mission, it ceases to be the Church in any true sense. Secondly, the mission of the Church to the world is to be carried out through its unity. There may be need for special organizations within the Church to select, train and send out missionaries and afterwards to maintain them with its material resources and to uphold them with its prayers. The Church's mission is focussed in its missionaries and its missionary organization. But, if the mission is to be effective, the Church's whole life must have a missionary outlook.

A very great missionary leader in the Indian Church, the late Bishop Azariah, used to say that, while non-Christians might pay attention to the preaching of missionaries who came from outside, what influenced them most was the life of the local Christians. I am sure that this is true and that what the non-Christians look particularly to see is whether the members of the local church are one. The words of the text imply that this was the intention of Jesus. " That they may all be one . . . that the world may believe." There was to be a deep and divine unity between the members of the Church. This actually happened when in the one Body men of different races, different temperaments, different levels of wealth, culture and education were drawn together. But, as the Church spread out in the world, the maintenance of its unity became more difficult, and the Church has too often presented a spectacle of division rather than of unity.

Yet, wherever the Church has been concerned about its mission to the world, the recovery of its unity has been a matter of the greatest importance. The expansion of the Church during the last century and a half has brought the question of the Church's unity into special prominence. Missionaries have found that the entry of educated non-Christians into the Church is greatly hindered if the local church manifests division in any form. If its mission is to succeed, the Church must demonstrate how personal antipathies and rivalries can be overcome. It must show how problems of race and colour are being solved and how personal relationships in all spheres are being improved. But, if the Church is to be a reconciling force in different spheres, the Church must show that it is one. A divided Church is terribly handi-

[1] A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, May 19th, 1957.

capped in carrying to the world a Gospel of reconciliation. This has been felt all the more acutely where the Church has to work in an environment of non-Christian religions. It has led to a considerable degree of co-operation between the separated Christian bodies; to the establishment in many countries of National Christian Councils and more recently to the creation of a World Council of Churches. But the more seriously the different branches of the Church have taken their missionary responsibility, the more clearly they have seen that co-operation is not enough. If the world is to believe that Jesus Christ is the Saviour sent by God, it must be able to see His Spirit drawing His followers together. The unity contemplated in our Lord's prayer for His Church is deeper than any visible, organic union, but it is difficult to believe that it could mean less than that.

In many countries to-day it is the race problem which challenges the unity of the Church and indeed this problem constitutes the greatest threat to the peace of the world. But in this country the race problem is not at present acute. The witness of the Church is rather hindered by our unhappy divisions into different denominations.

Yet it is in other parts of the world that more progress has been made towards Christian unity. There have been conversations, negotiations and schemes of union in several parts of Asia and Africa. These schemes have reached various stages, but only in South India has union actually taken place. It began there early in this century when Presbyterian and Congregational Churches together formed what was called the South India United Church. In 1919 a joint conference of ministers of that Church with some Anglican ministers, on the subject of evangelism, resulted in a strong conviction that their respective Churches should unite. Official negotiations followed in which the Methodists later joined. The negotiations were often difficult and sometimes came to a standstill. But they were always carried on in an atmosphere of prayer and always faith and charity triumphed in the end. After twenty-eight years, at a great service in Madras the union was inaugurated and the three Churches, hitherto separated, were declared to be one, the Church of South India. This was the first reunion between episcopal and non-episcopal Churches and has naturally received much publicity. It was my privilege to be deeply involved in this union as one of its first ministers, charged with the responsibility of trying to make it effective in one of the dioceses. For, although the Church was united in name, it *had still* to be united in its life. That process has been going on and has now advanced to such an extent that there can be no question of going back. In the story of the first ten years of the life of the Church of South India there is much which gives great encouragement, and the doubts which were felt in many quarters in 1947 have since been very largely dispelled. Difficulties there have been, particularly in two or three areas. But the difficulties are gradually being overcome and it is remarkable that there have been so few.

I have now for personal reasons left the Church of South India and I am the incumbent of a parish in the Church of England. Within the area of that parish there are three flourishing congregations which are not in communion with the Church of England. After an experience

of life in a united Church in India to be thus confronted with disunion in England was a shattering experience. I am convinced that nothing would do more to strengthen the witness of the Church in this country than a reunion of Christian bodies which are now separated, even if that union at first has to be on a limited scale.

It is a matter for great thankfulness that the sin of Christian divisions and the harm which they do are increasingly realized; that real interest is shown in movements for reunion in other parts of the world; and that in Britain conversations are taking place between the Church of England and certain other denominations and that in one case already these have resulted in the publication of an unanimous report of singular interest. We must also thankfully acknowledge that there are many places where the relations between the different denominations have greatly improved. Yet we are not one, and our failure to be one hinders the world from believing in Jesus Christ. We may grant that the situation which led to the formation of the Church of South India was in many respects different from that which exists in the United Kingdom. But it would be unwise to assume that we cannot learn from what has happened there. Future schemes of reunion, even if they avoid some of its features, will certainly make considerable use of what has been done in South India. My purpose now is not to extol the Church of South India. I know its weaknesses only too well. I would rather try to interpret some of the experiences gained in that Church in their bearing upon our disunited state in this country.

It has clearly shown that Christian unity is a process and that ecclesiastical union is only a stage in that process. In South India three separated Churches were already co-operating in various pieces of work. They reached a stage of mutual trust and entered into negotiations. Eventually they agreed on a basis of faith and order which would enable them to unite. There were still many differences in their practices and in their forms of worship. But they believed that they would grow together more easily within the framework of one Church. Thus in faith they obeyed the leading of the Holy Spirit as they saw it and together they took the plunge into union. Their faith has been abundantly justified, for the process of growing together after the union has proceeded much more quickly than was expected.

At the level of church government and administration the growth in unity began at once. The bishops, drawn from different traditions, immediately found themselves one. One of the first acts of the newly united Church was to invite other Christian bodies in South India, which were still outside the union, to enter into conversations with the Church of South India. Several of these bodies accepted the invitation and conversations with one or other of them have been taking place almost from the beginning. The representatives of the Church of South India in these conversations were drawn from the different heritages which that Church contains. Representatives of the other denominations concerned have been greatly impressed by the unity of outlook which the representatives of the Church of South India showed. Although only recently united, they were already viewing every situation from the standpoint of one Church. And

within a year or two of the union visitors to the Synod or its Executive Committee or to the Diocesan Councils were finding it impossible to discover from the speeches of the members what their previous affiliations had been.

At the level of the congregations, the process of growing together has been slower, because opportunities for personal contact have been less. But there are definite signs of growing unity there also. It has already been possible in some places without doing violence to the consciences of any to put congregations with different backgrounds under one minister.

But even in this period of consolidation, as it may be called, the advantages of union have been seen in many directions. Few people who have first-hand experience of life in the Church of South India after working in one of the separated Churches before the Union would deny that union has brought a release of new power and life in the Church. Zeal for evangelism has increased. Numbers can be deceptive, but 31,000 converts in the last two years are a sign of evangelistic fervour in days when conversions, though not actually prohibited, are certainly discouraged by the State.

There has also been a great outburst of liturgical production. In less than ten years we have seen the publication of an Order for the Holy Communion; Orders for Baptism and Confirmation; Bible Readings and Collects for Sundays and other special days; and a table of Daily Bible Readings. The draft of an Ordinal has also been circulated for study. All this in a Church embodying diverse traditions so recently united must be considered an astonishing achievement.

It would also seem that the union of the Churches is leading to increased unity within individual congregations. There have been not a few cases in various dioceses, and I have seen some myself, where bitter feuds and quarrels of long standing have been ended and replaced by harmony and fellowship. South India has shown that Church Union both quickens the pace of growing unity and brings a general quickening of spiritual life in the Church.

On the other hand, it has also been shown that union is costly. When the three Churches united at Madras in 1947, three separate Churches died and there came into existence a new Church. Perhaps few of those who went into the Church of South India realized at the time how true this was. In accepting an episcopal form of church government about half of those who entered the united Church were making a fundamental break with their past traditions. The other half were leaving the Anglican Communion in which they had been brought up and were also experiencing a painful break with the past. Moreover, since the Union, there has been a constant process of adjustment necessitating great patience and mutual consideration, a willingness to learn from one another and a resolute refusal to allow minorities to be crushed. In the working out of Church Union, matters of finance and property are apt to assume exaggerated importance and can become a cause of fresh divisions. However keenly we may long for Reunion of the Churches, it would be foolish to shut our eyes to the cost which it involves.

But many difficulties have been overcome, and such success as

there has been in uniting and growing more united has been due less to clever planning and organization than to a readiness to be led by the Spirit. The negotiations for union were conducted, as I have said, in an atmosphere of prayer, and those who presided were not afraid to adjourn a session so that the delegates might pray together about the problems that faced them. In the councils of the Church since the Union the amount of time devoted to worship and prayer and the willingness to take time in order to reach agreement on difficult issues have revealed to discerning visitors one of the chief secrets of the Church's progress.

It is often thought that any kind of Church Union in this country is still far off. That may be so, for there are some peculiar difficulties, but there is no need to suppose that they are insuperable or that some progress cannot be made now. It would surely be a mistake to wait until all denominations are ready to unite. There can be no finality about any scheme of union or any church constitution until all Christians are united in one visible Church. And I do not exclude the Roman Catholic Church. But God leads us a step at a time, and we must go forward where His Spirit seems to be leading and opening doors. It is important to remember that we cannot be led anywhere at all, if we insist on standing still.

We may not yet have reached the stage of negotiation, but what seems to be required is deliberate preparation on a wide scale. The greatest obstacles to union in Britain are psychological. We have a long and unfortunate history of suspicion and ill-feeling. Relations are improving, but it is not long since I heard a minister of one denomination remark that it would put him off his breakfast, if he had to eat it with a minister of a certain other denomination. Such feelings do still exist and are not confined to any one denomination. I therefore venture to emphasize certain things which I believe need to be done without delay to prepare the way for Union in due course.

The first is that more opportunities should be made for Christians of different denominations to pray together. Many people do pray for unity at times and in their own places of worship. But we should not be content to pray for unity at particular periods and in our separate places. We should be able to pray more frequently *with* those whose heritage differs from our own. A big step forward has been taken when we have begun to pray together. This surely need not violate any rules. I believe that there should also be more joint acts of common worship under proper authority.

Again there are many spheres in which we can even now work together. Joint acts of witness not only impress the outsider; they are likely to draw together those who take part in them. People are sometimes stirred to think again, when they find ministers or laymen who belong to different Church bodies visiting them together. And there are many inter-denominational missions and societies for good causes for which we can work together and in doing so begin to grow closer together.

At the level of the congregations, Church and Chapel are often very ignorant of each other. It is necessary that each should learn more of what the other specially values in the Christian Heritage and why he

values it. Small gatherings of carefully selected persons, preferably in equal numbers, can meet to learn one from the other in turn. What is even more necessary is that *ministers of various denominations in a locality* should meet at regular intervals and get to know and so to trust one another. Such fraternal gatherings of ministers are fairly common to-day, but there are far too many who either cannot or do not attend such gatherings.

In venturing to emphasize certain things which I believe can help us to move in the right direction I have mentioned only things of which I have had some personal experience. The possibility of making an experiment in united training for the ministry also deserves more serious consideration than it has yet received. In South India there were two united theological colleges in existence before the union of the Churches took place.

I submit that, if we are serious in our desire for Christian unity, steps such as these need to be taken widely and taken now. If that is to happen, much more official encouragement and leadership will be needed. Those who see the need will have to ask for action to be taken. For by praying, working and learning together members of the separated Churches will gradually discover that the things in which they agree are far more than the things which divide them. And in the course of time, perhaps a shorter time than we now think, it may be possible for negotiations to take place and for agreement to be reached on the fundamentals which will form a sufficient basis for uniting. Then, when a decisive step into union has been taken and some of the now separated denominations have begun to go forward together, we may find, as our brethren in South India have found, that the process of growing together will be accelerated, that new power will be released and that new insights will be gained. We shall not have reached the final goal, but doors leading to wider union may then be open and at least we shall be on the right road, the road which will one day be leading to the fulfilment of our Lord's prayer, " That they may *all* be one . . . that the world may believe ".

FRESHMEN IN UNIVERSITIES

The Editor is glad to pass on a request that if any reader knows of freshmen or women going to Universities in the coming term, the names should be sent up at once to the Universities Secretary, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 39 Bedford Square, London, W.C.1. In this way, they will be contacted as soon as they go up. There is no doubt that such contact can be of the greatest help to men and women at the start of their University career.