

MEISSEN: A SHORT HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

To set the scene for our exploration of our Annual Meeting's theme, 'Making Meissen Work', Dean John Arnold, Anglican President of the Society, put The Meissen Declaration into its historical context.

In its early phase the Reformation in England was much influenced by the Lutheran Reformation, by the writings of Martin Luther, by travellers and scholars, by theological conversations such as those held in Wittenberg in 1536 and perhaps even by marriage, Margaret Cranmer being the niece of Andreas Osiander. However, it took a different course from the Reformation in Germany. It was largely led by bishops, some of whom died as martyrs during the Marian persecution of the 1550s, which drove many Protestant Anglicans into exile in Geneva and Frankfurt. And when they came back they brought with them the vision and experience of Reformed churches, which owed more to Calvin than to Luther.

There is and will continue to be controversy about the exact admixture of Lutheran and Reformed elements in the Anglican heritage. Suffice it to say that both are there, combined with reformist catholic and some specifically English elements, and that this has been a help, rather than a hindrance, to us in dealing with the mixed heritage of German Protestantism now.

Like the Scandinavian Churches, the Church of England was reformed under a strong, centralising monarchy; and it remained in principle a church for the whole nation with its diocesan and parochial structures, and the ministries which served them, intact. These included the historic episcopate, as defended by apologists such as Jewel and Hooker. German Protestantism, however, broke up along the lines of the German states, leaving us today with *Landeskirchen* of varying sizes, some Lutheran, some Reformed, some United. These churches developed in a constant polemical relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and in a fair degree of isolation, not only from the churches of other lands, but also from each other. So there were some significant differences, but there was never a formal schism. Our churches never unchurched or anathematised each other (contrast Lutherans and Reformed, Lutherans and Baptists). There was not much that we had to undo, other than the effects of drifting apart.

The First World War came as a terrible shock to basically friendly and respectful relationships between our churches. The German churches were shattered in 1918, not only by the defeat of their country in war, but also by the abdication of the *Kaiser* and by the de facto abolition of the *Summepiskopat der Prinzen* (the oversight of the church by the Godly Prince), which had provided the *Landeskirchen* with a framework of legitimacy since the abolition of diocesan structures at the Reformation. 1918 left them with unresolved ecclesiological problems, some of which re-surfaced at Meissen.

The modern Anglican-Lutheran dialogue began with conversations between the Church of England and the Church of Sweden in 1909, followed by Finland 1933-34 and Estonia-Latvia 1936-39 on the eve of their illegal absorption into the Soviet Union. In each case the starting point and framework was the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 (the holy scriptures, the catholic creeds, the gospel sacraments and the apostolic ministry, including the historic episcopate). It is this fourth leg, which makes the Lambeth Quadrilateral more solid than the three-legged stool of protestant ecumenism (scripture, creeds and sacraments) - but of course a four-legged chair wobbles if either the legs are of unequal length or the floor is uneven, whereas a three-legged stool is stable in all circumstances! After the Second World War in 1947 the scope was broadened to include the churches of Norway, Denmark and Iceland, leading to an agreement on mutual invitation to Communion in 1954. The 1950s were also the heyday of churches and peoples finding each other again after the Second World War. All Anglicans had been on the same side in the war. This was not the case with Lutherans, who had no framework of international communion at the time. They formed the Lutheran World Federation, at first for purely practical purposes; but it soon entered into dialogue with the Anglican Communion at world and European levels. Everywhere Anglicans and Lutherans found that they had much in common and were

co-operating naturally. Anglicans were also engaged in far-reaching conversations with Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed churches, and in failed attempts to unite with the Methodists, the other English Free Churches and the Church of Scotland at home. Lutherans mounted their own dialogues with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches; and they achieved pulpit and altar fellowship, after the annulment of many anathemas, with the Reformed Churches in Europe by means of the Leuenberg accord of 1973. Anglicanism had already found its own way of reconciling elements of the German and Swiss Reformations with the help of a uniform liturgy (the Book of Common Prayer) and of the historic episcopate, which has played a crucial, indeed indispensable, role in the maintenance of internal unity and of authority vis-à-vis the state and other churches.

A new phase began in the early 1980s with a serious attempt by the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation to reach agreement on episcopate, leading eventually to the Niagara Report of 1987. Meanwhile, we were reaping a rich harvest of other ecumenical dialogues; and part of the Meissen methodology was to make use of existing material, rather than attempt to think up everything *de novo* and re-invent the ecumenical wheel, and also to test rigorously for consistency between the various dialogues. Further encouragement was given by the publication in 1982 of the World Council of Churches report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry; but the real impetus came in 1983 from the fifth centenary of the birth of Martin Luther.

It was while participating in the celebrations of this event in East and West Germany that Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury, who had fought with distinction in the Second World War, proposed that closer relations be established between the Church of England and the German Protestant Churches. He also issued a more general invitation to Lutheran churches, which led eventually to the conversations with the Scandinavian, Nordic and Baltic churches. It had been his intention to hold the first round with them but his initiative met with such swift and warm responses from the Council of the Protestant Church of Germany and the Church Leader's Conference of the Federation of Protestant Churches in the German Democratic Republic that the two sets of conversations took place the other way round, Meissen thus accidentally serving as the forerunner of Porvoo.

But Meissen is more than that. It is an epoch-making ecumenical achievement in its own right, and later agreements with the Moravians and with the French Protestant Churches adopt the Meissen model and methodology. The Luther celebrations, the large number of twinings and the desire for reconciliation since the Second World War, and the reports of various theological commissions all helped to produce a favourable climate, leading to the Meissen Declaration, completed in 1988 on a day when, symbolically, the Elbe overflowed its banks because of the coming of spring in the mountains, and inaugurated in January/February 1991 with services in Westminster Abbey and Berlin in what was now a re-united Germany.

We had begun with tri-lateral talks and ended with bi-lateral celebrations. Liturgical celebration, rather than mere signing, was a specifically Anglican contribution to ecumenical methodology. So was the provision of structures of implementation and for joint oversight, not only of that implementation but also of the life in fellowship of the churches.

The Meissen Declaration marks an important stage in growth towards the full visible unity of the Church. However it is only a stage, because the mixed, federal polity of the German Churches (Lutheran, United and Reformed) or, they might say, the intransigence of the Anglicans, proved to be an obstacle to agreement on episcopal succession. 'Because of this remaining one difference our mutual recognition of another's ministries does not yet result in the full interchangeability of ministers.' (para 16). In all previous negotiations for unity it was assumed that a single point of disagreement was enough to ruin the whole enterprise. At Meissen, however, we broke new ground and said, "Yet even this remaining difference, when seen in the light of our agreements and convergences, cannot be regarded as a hindrance to closer fellowship between our Churches." (ALERC, 43). We rejoice in that 'closer fellowship'; but beyond it still

lies a move to the full recognition both of churches and of ministries within the wider perspectives of the universal Church.