

AUSTRALIAN METHODIST ECUMENISM

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This article surveys the Australian Methodist involvement in ecumenism from 1902, when the Methodist Church of Australasia was formed in a union of Methodist churches, until the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977. It traces the Methodist commitment to ecumenism to the 'catholic spirit' of its founder John Wesley and in the international ecumenical context. It argues that, though there were many setbacks, Australian Methodists never gave up on the vision of full organic union with other Protestants and were remarkably consistent in their advocacy of such union. The influence of the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches and the thought of Lesslie Newbigin are shown to have made a significant contribution to Australian Methodist ecumenism.

When he was ordained to the Methodist ministry in 1949, the Reverend Harvey Perkins, son of a Methodist minister in Tasmania, a General Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches, a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and a lifelong ecumenist, is reported to have said: 'I was born a Methodist; I pray that I do not die one.'¹ The Methodist Church of Australasia, united in 1902, was from that time until the inauguration of the UCA in 1977 strongly committed to ecumenism.

As we observe the progress of Methodism in Australia in relating to other Christians during these years it is important to realise the deep sense of what would later be termed ecumenism at the very heart of Methodism. Along with this sense of the need for ecumenical cooperation there was also strong Methodist pragmatism. Thus, at one end of the spectrum there was a sense of call to co-operation between the churches, particularly between Protestant churches, and co-operation with inter-denominational agencies, such as the Sunday School Union. At the other end of the spectrum there was the desire for full, organic church union.

¹ J. Brown, Eulogy, Memorial Service for Harvey Perkins, Canberra City Uniting Church, 29 November 2012.

I. Wesley, Methodism and Ecumenism

What was later to be termed ecumenism lay as central in John Wesley's theology. Since the time of Wesley, Methodism had been remarkably affirming of other Christian traditions. In relation to European Pietism, Gordon Rupp puts it very clearly:

[I]n Pietist Moravianism under Zinzendorf and in Wesley's Methodism the 'koinonia' – 'the fellowship' – came into its own, and gave something to the ethos of Methodism, which it has never entirely lost and which even now must constitute one of its most treasured gifts to a united Church...both stressed the inwardness of the true Church, as a union of believing hearts in Christ – and this is the clue to Zinzendorf's concern for Christian unity, and John Wesley's doctrine of a catholic spirit.²

Of course it is true that Wesley stood very clearly within the Protestant tradition of the Church of England. Nevertheless, we see a catholic and ecumenical spirit right at the heart of John Wesley's work.³ He was much more open to other Christians than the Calvinists or the Independents of his time. Moreover, his concept of sanctification sees continuity between the saintly life of Methodist societies and the saintly life of the departed faithful. In fact, there were many commonalities between, for example, the holy life of Methodism and the holy life of the Benedictine Order. Here lies Wesley's theological basis for what would later have been termed ecumenism. This is further brought out, for example, in his exposition of John 13:14 on Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet:

He designed to teach them the great lesson of humble love, as well as to confer inward purity upon them. And hereby He teaches us (1) in every possible way to assist each other in attaining that purity; (2) to wash each other's feet, by performing all sorts of good offices to each other, even those of the lowest kind, when opportunity serves, and the necessity of any calls for them.⁴

Moreover, though loyal to the English Reformation, he was prepared to reach out to Catholics in significant ways. His 'Letter to a Roman Catholic', written in 1749 in Ireland, is marked by an irenic

² G. Rupp, 'Introductory Essay', in R. Davies and G. Rupp, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 1 (London: Epworth Press, 1965), xxxvi.

³ J. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1905), 726–727.

⁴ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, 362.

tone and an acknowledgment of common doctrine with Catholics in many areas. Wesley pleaded for Catholics and Protestants to ‘reason together’ rather than engage in ‘endless jangling about opinions.’⁵ In sharp contrast to the majority of Protestants of the time, he recognised Catholics as Christians despite what he saw as the errors and superstitions of their Church. He was himself deeply indebted to Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ* and the early Fathers of the Church, which he recommended to Methodist readers. He also referred to Francis de Sales and other Catholic writers as model spiritual guides for Christian perfection.⁶ It is this catholic spirit in Wesley which can be seen played out in the constant search by Methodists for church unity.

This needs to be seen within the wider international Methodist theology on communion between the churches, which had continued to follow and develop Wesley’s thought and to stress the communality between Christian believers, in addition to their fellowship in and with Christ. In other words, the Methodist tradition stressed that communion is both a vertical relationship (the communion together of Christians in and with Christ) and also a horizontal relationship (the communion together of Christians with each other in and because of Christ).

Australian Methodism between 1902 and 1977 was primarily influenced from outside by British Methodism. Two British Methodist theologians of the period clearly reflect this theology of ecumenism. Vincent Taylor, when writing on Holy Communion in relation to Paul, states: ‘The kind of communion which the Apostle describes is closely related to his teaching concerning union with Christ, but it is union with Him in the power of His reconciling death.’⁷ Again, Taylor states:

Throughout the centuries, and still today the Church celebrates the Eucharist in its twofold aspect of a present experience of fellowship with the Living Christ and a joyful anticipation of the perfected Kingdom...In doing this, we...fulfil the intention of Christ, who instituted the Eucharist to give to those who love Him a part in His redeeming love, the

⁵ A.C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 493–499.

⁶ See *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church, Report of the International Commission for Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, Eighth Series, 2006* (Lake Junaluska: World Methodist Council, 2006), para. 22, p. 14.

⁷ V. Taylor, *New Testament Essays* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 56.

experience of His presence here and now, and the opportunity to plead that His Sacrifice be fulfilled in a renewed and transformed world.⁸

C.K. Barrett, who gave the Methodist Cato Lectures in Australia, emphasised the horizontal nature of communion and unity of Christians when, for example, he writes in relation to Romans 1:9 that;

Christians in fellowship with Christ share, not in His being (so Barth) but in his relation with the Father...The thought is that Christians share in the position of the exulted, eschatological Lord. This fact links up with the thought of God's faithfulness, which is the one guarantee of Christian existence both in the present and in the future.⁹

Indeed, since the time of Wesley, Methodism has been generous in its affirmation of other Christian traditions. This gave Methodism a flexibility not always found in other Christian traditions. Although speaking of British Methodism, Rupert Davies puts it well for the whole Methodist tradition:

Methodism, since Methodist Union, has experienced many changes, some forced upon it, some actively and consciously willed by its leaders and people...Many of the changes have been in the direction of assimilation to other churches...The result...has been to maintain the essentials of Methodist teaching and spirituality...while dispensing with many of the formulae and activities in which they used to be clothed, and to fit the Methodist people in some measure for the reciprocal sharing of spiritual treasure with other Christians.¹⁰

From all of this, it can be seen how the strong ecumenical spirit in Wesley, developed as it was in Methodist theology, particularly in Britain in the twentieth century, was to be played out in Australia in the constant search for church unity. Despite the continuing frustrations and apparent let-downs which other partners would bring during the years 1902 to 1977, Methodist people on the whole kept striving forward, both for pragmatic terms of co-operation and finally for organic union. In the tripartite relations with the

⁸ Taylor, *New Testament Essays*, 59.

⁹ C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 40.

¹⁰ R. Davies, 'Since 1932', in R. Davies, A.R. George and G. Rupp, eds, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Vol. 3* (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 390. The 'Methodist Union' referred to here is the British Methodist Union of 1932.

Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, Methodists more than the others and against the odds, kept pressing forward.

II. Methodism in the International Context of Ecumenism

To be more precise, it is necessary to look at the international discourse on the theological motivations for ecumenism into which the Methodist Church of Australasia came in the period after 1902. From the Methodist point of view, the theological rationale for inter-church co-operation, moving towards the search for an organically united Church, was diverse. The issues in relation to ecumenism which were being presented internationally throughout the period from the lead-up to the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference through to the 1970s were varied. First, the New Testament bore witness to the central importance of Church unity. Second, the missionary calling of the Church demanded that the one gospel be proclaimed by a body organically united. Third, denominational titles needed to be superseded, as they bore poor witness to Christ in undermining the claim of Christians to be a reconciled, sanctified, reconciling and sanctifying community. Fourth, united churches had truly gone through the process of death and rebirth, death to the old system and new life in a new body. Fifth, united churches were proleptic signs of the united universal church, and pointed to the eschatological nature of Christian faith. Sixth, united churches represented good stewardship; they made better use of resources, both human and material. Seventh, for Christian unity to be meaningful it needed to be expressed in practical ways and in specific concrete bodies in each place.

During the period from 1902 to 1977 there were various forms of ecumenism. It is important that this international context is outlined, because in these years Australian Methodism was to seek ways forward, time and again, from the experiences of others. It was to do so within its dual foci of ecumenism, between the ideal of organic union on the one hand and pragmatic co-operation on the other. Three factors need to be raised. First, there came about before and during these years a great number of intra-confessional unions, most notably between churches within each of the Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed (Presbyterian and Congregationalist) traditions, as had been the case with Australian Methodism in 1902. Second, there came into being the inter-confessional unions produced mainly, but not always, in the English-speaking world, and

often in the areas of former British colonial influence. These unions mainly involved Anglicans, Baptists, Brethren, Disciples, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed and Evangelicals. The first major union of this kind was that of the United Church of Canada in 1925. Many of these unions came about in independent, post-colonial, nations. The movement to create united churches of this kind had its high point between 1965 and 1972, when in eight years church unions came about in Zambia (1965), Jamaica and Grand Cayman (1965), Ecuador (1965), Madagascar (1968), Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (1968), Belgium (1969), North India (1970), Pakistan (1970), Bangladesh (1971), Zaire (1971) and Great Britain (1972). The inter-relationship between these churches, on the one hand, and the World Council of Churches (WCC), on the other, was significant, in that the union negotiations of many, but not all, of these churches had been linked to the discussions within the WCC, especially in its Commission on Faith and Order. In South Asia inter-confessional unions uniquely involved Anglicans; for example, in two of the broadest inter-confessional united churches internationally, the Church of South India (1947) and the Church of North India (1970). Third, many inter-confessional unions resulted in sections of the uniting bodies deciding to stay out of the union. The existence of these non-uniting bodies was not surprising, given the voluntary nature of the unions, and, indeed, had to be expected. Nevertheless, the fact that they were minority movements attested to the overwhelming success of the church union negotiations of this type in general.

III. Australian Methodism and Ecumenism: The ‘Tortuous Trail’

It is in this international context that it is now appropriate to look at the specific situation in Australia. Indeed, from the perspective of Australian Methodism, the search for organic unity was continuous. Although there were setbacks, Methodists never really totally gave up. Their major attempts, primarily involving the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, took place during six periods: from 1901 to 1913; from 1917 to 1926; from 1928 to 1934; in the late 1930s; between 1942 and 1947; and from 1953 (formally, 1957) to 1977. On the one hand, the journey to co-operation and eventual organic unity, as

Wright and Clancy portray it, was indeed to be a ‘tortuous trail’.¹¹ On the other hand, right at the beginning of the period after Methodist Union in 1902, a spectacular and highly idealistic plan for Protestant corporate unity was launched. This was the first of five Methodist movements towards union which can be observed between 1902 and 1977.

This first, and grandiose, plan had been put forward by the Rev. T.E. Coulston in the Sydney Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in March 1901. His motion requested the Presbyterian General Assembly of Australia:

...to appoint an influential Committee to devise a scheme for the federation of as many as possible of the Protestant Churches of Australia, with power to confer with the representatives of other Churches, so as to promote closer fellowship and organised cooperation with a view to the ultimate formation of one grand Church of Australia.¹²

This was subsequently endorsed by the General Assembly. The Congregational Union was also approached, and was enthusiastic. In 1904 the newly formed Methodist General Conference of Australasia responded to this plan for ‘one grand Church of Australia’ or ‘a United Evangelical Church of Australia’,¹³ and resolved:

...that in view of the overtures that have been made by the Presbyterian Church in the direction of Organic Union with the Methodist Church, this Conference expresses its cordial appreciation of the spirit which has prompted such overtures and declares that, in its judgement, such an Organic Union is eminently desirable provided that a satisfactory basis of Union can be formulated.¹⁴

Factors in the social and theological contexts of the period were supportive of moves towards organic union, particularly between Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Population growth, particularly in the last decade of the nineteenth century, meant that these three churches had been forced to co-operate closely in the developing housing and settlement areas. In efforts for religious education in schools and in the Sunday Schools movement

¹¹ Don Wright and Eric G. Clancy, *The Methodists: A History of Methodism in New South Wales* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 154.

¹² Presbyterian Church of Australia, *Minutes and Proceedings of the General Assembly* (Blue Book of GAA) (1901), 93.

¹³ Wright and Clancy, *The Methodists*, 155.

¹⁴ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1904), 61.

there had been close integration in their activities. This was also so in their welfare work, particularly in the difficult times of the 1890s. Moreover, in the Australian context differences within Protestant theology, for example between Arminianism and Calvinism, and in styles of worship, were diminishing. In addition, the stance of Roman Catholic leaders such as Cardinal Moran had tended to encourage pan-Protestant self-defence.¹⁵

From the beginning the churches most enthusiastic were the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. At the 1904 Conference the specific Methodist interests in union, and the factors that were to sustain that interest into the future, were clearly set out, and emphasised:

...the creation of a strong national religious sentiment and force which may be applied and directed to a comprehensive system of Home Missions...the more adequate discharge of the great missionary obligation which rests upon the Christian Churches of Australasia in regard to the tribes and people of Polynesia and adjacent groups and to India, China, and other non-Christian countries...the giving more practical and visible effect to the Saviour's prayer, 'That they all may be one that the world may believe that thou hast sent Me.'¹⁶

Work began quickly. In August 1904 the Joint Committee of the three negotiating churches met and appointed sub-committees on doctrine, polity and co-operation in ministerial training. In the years immediately following, a number of patterns were to emerge which would set the tone for much of the subsequent two decades. First, at the outset, Anglicans, Baptists and Churches of Christ were invited to participate, but soon fell away. Although negotiations were conducted with the Anglicans in 1906 and 1907, the Lambeth Conference of 1908 rejected these.¹⁷ Second, continuing and sustained interest in organic union was shown largely by Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists alone. Third, initially it was Presbyterians who provided conceptual leadership, but these Presbyterian leaders had difficulty in garnering and sustaining strong support throughout the denomination. Fourth, the concept of a way forward in a 'Basis of Union' had come from the

¹⁵ See J.S. Udy, 'Church Union in Australia', MA Hons diss., University of Sydney, 1983, vol. I, 33–8.

¹⁶ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1904), 141–42.

¹⁷ Ian Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 99.

two recent intra-confessional unions of both Methodists and Presbyterians.

During the years that followed, the initial enthusiasm of the three Churches, particularly in the Joint Committee, faced a number of serious problems. The issues were very largely pragmatic. Presbyterian leaders could not sustain strong denominational support. The Congregational Church, as the smallest denomination of the three, feared the disappearance of its traditions. For Methodists in particular, despite the enthusiasm of the leaders, circuits showed little interest. Knowledge as to what was implied was limited. The result was that, although in the circuits there was little overt opposition, there was low interest.

Nevertheless, in 1907 a proposed Basis of Union was produced, and in 1910 the Methodist General Conference and the Congregational Assembly both gave approval to it.¹⁸ However, the Presbyterian Assembly gave only general approval. In general, there was immense frustration among all in the three Churches seeking union. Impetus therefore declined before the First World War, and in the 1913 Methodist General Conference the double motion was passed: 'That this Conference expresses its profound sympathy with the movement which is seeking to bring about a closer Union among the Churches, and recommends our Annual Conferences to promote the movement as far as possible'; and 'That the Committee on Union of the Churches be thanked for its services and discharged.'¹⁹ Despite its frustration, the Methodist Church as a whole remained the most enthusiastic of the three Churches.

The second attempt came after the experience of co-operation between the Churches during the First World War. Other international factors, following on from the war, were of significance, too. At the Lambeth Conference of 1920 the concept of organic union was taken up with the appeal:

We believe that it is God's purpose to manifest this fellowship, so far as this world is concerned, in an outward, visible, and united society, holding one faith, having its own recognized officers, using God-given means of grace, and inspiring all its members to the world-wide service of the Kingdom of God.²⁰

¹⁸ Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendix 1, 476–85.

¹⁹ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1913), 113.

²⁰ Lambeth Conference, 1920, Resolution 9, Part 1.

This Anglican concern had its echo, for example, in South Australia.²¹ There was also the stimulation of the events in Canada, where the three traditions of Methodism, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism were in the process of moving towards the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925.

The 1917 General Conference reappointed a committee to prepare a Basis of Union, and the 1920 Conference resolved that a vote of members 18 years and above be taken on the questions: '1. Are you in favour of the organic union of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in Australia and Tasmania?'; and '2. If in favour do you approve of the proposed Basis of Union as adopted by the Joint Committee on Union, with such amendments (if any), as the General Conference or its Committees may agree to?'²²

Of the Methodist voters throughout Australia, 88 per cent of Methodist members and 86 per cent of Trustees of Methodist Properties were in favour of this organic union.²³ Subsequently the Basis of Union was revised in September 1921²⁴, and at the 1923 General Conference resolutions were passed that the Conference:

1. Affirms its conviction that Church Union in the direction contemplated and in accordance with the terms of the Basis of Union as finally revised would, if harmoniously effected, tend to advance the interests of the Kingdom of God' 2. Expresses its gratification that the members and Trustees of the Methodist Church throughout the Commonwealth have by so large a vote shown their sympathy with a great ideal and affirmed their readiness to sink personal considerations in the desire to promote the unity of Christ's Church [and] 3. Is convinced that any movement towards Union can only be successful as it is based on a large measure of goodwill in its favour on the part of the negotiating Churches.²⁵

These are significant statements of the attitude of the Methodist General Conference toward ecumenism. The second resolution clearly presents the centrality of the ecumenical spirit to Methodist identity. The third resolution underscores the incipient frustration

²¹ D. Hilliard, 'Anglican Relations with the Protestant Churches in South Australia, 1836–1996,' in *Heritage of Faith: Essays in Honour of Arnold D. Hunt*, ed. George W Potter (Adelaide: George W Potter, 1996), 200–201.

²² Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1920), 97.

²³ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1923), 184.

²⁴ See Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendix 2, 486–503.

²⁵ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1923), 185.

as to how negotiations would work. As it turned out, this third statement was an accurate prediction of what was to occur. The Presbyterian Church had difficulty carrying its constituency. The Congregational Union feared the disappearance of Congregational principles. This was stridently expressed by Principal E.S. Kiek of Parkin College of the Congregational Union in Adelaide. Again, frustration, largely on pragmatic issues, and primarily not of Methodist making, caused the negotiations difficulty. Ultimately, however, it was the Presbyterian General Assembly which brought the negotiations to an end. The 1926 General Conference was notified that, 'shortly after last General Conference information was received from the Presbyterian Union Committee that it has come to the decision that it was useless to proceed further with the movement at present'.²⁶ There was deep disappointment in the Methodist Conference, which – pointedly – immediately discharged its committee on union.²⁷

After the disappointment in 1926, a third, more modest and entirely practical, attempt at union was made with the setting up of Canberra as the nation's capital in the 1920s. Each denomination was to be allocated a piece of land for their national cathedral or centre. In March 1928 a combined meeting of representatives of the three churches in Canberra declared that, 'Canberra offers an opportunity for the manifestation of fellowship in Christian service such as may not be ignored without grave responsibility'.²⁸

As a result of the meeting, a document entitled 'Conversations, Concerning Cooperation at Canberra (Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational Churches)', and including 'Guiding Principles', was produced. A Co-operative Council was set up. The Presbyterians alone would build a church on their site, for the use of all three Churches. The Methodists would build a hall for Sunday school and other purposes for all three bodies. High hopes were raised for the 'United Church of Canberra'. However, in September 1934, just prior to the opening of the Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian members of the Canberra Co-operative Council informed the Methodist and Congregational Churches that the Presbyterian Church was now to be for exclusive Presbyterian use. To many, this appeared to add betrayal to the disappointment of 1926.

²⁶ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1926), 254.

²⁷ Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of General Conference* (1926), 255.

²⁸ 'Conversations, Concerning Cooperation at Canberra (Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational Churches)', 1; see James S. Udy, *Living Stones: The Story of the Methodist Church in Canberra* (Sydney: Sacha Books, 1974), 74–93.

As seemed reasonable to those disappointed, a fourth move towards union, this time between the Methodists and Congregationalists (a so-called Dual Union) developed in the 1930s. It was heavily influenced by the Rev. John W. Burton, who, as General Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia, had been in Samoa, where he had seen the need for co-operation between the large Congregational Church, founded by the London Missionary Society, and the smaller Methodist Church. A Statement on Church Union was prepared in 1936, and information was shared with leading Presbyterian theologians.²⁹ However, an ambivalent Congregationalist outlook, fostered by Principal Kiek, produced a general lack of enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, this was an important intervention by Burton from the perspective of Methodist Missions, in that the Methodist General Conference of Australasia at that time included Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and New Zealand, in addition to the work in Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. In fact, for the future this would be an issue in relation to the formation of the UCA. New Zealand became a separate national Conference in 1913. Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands became a part of the United Church there in 1968, as has been noted. Fiji, Samoa and Tonga each gradually became self-governing Conferences, similar to Australian State Conferences, but were also part of the General Conference of Australasia. Their separation as national Conferences only came with the formation of the Uniting Church, and with some pain.³⁰

Fifth, between 1942 and 1954 there were a series of unfulfilled attempts at union, and one pragmatic achievement, the United Church in North Australia. In 1942, again the Presbyterians proposed to the Methodists and Congregationalists a Federal form of Union, based on the States, and highly pragmatic.³¹ Discussion continued for some years, but again the Presbyterians were unable to garner support in their constituency. At the same time, forms of the Basis of Union proposals between the Methodist and the Congregationalists continued, with the same ambivalence from the late 1930s.³²

During the same period there came into being the consummation of pragmatic ecumenical arrangements which had been made

²⁹ Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendix 3, 504–13.

³⁰ Subsequently the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific (MCCP) was set up to overcome this factor.

³¹ Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendix 4, 514–16.

³² Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendices 5 and 6, 517–26, 527–47.

between the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational missions in the Northern Territory since the arrival in Darwin of the Rev A.J. Bogle from Adelaide to set up a Wesleyan Mission in August 1873. In fact, the first Wesleyan chapel in Darwin was erected with materials originally sent up for a Congregational building. There was co-operation between the three missions, although under comity arrangements each, mainly the Methodists in Arnhem Land and the Presbyterians in the Centre, largely worked in their own areas. On 5 August 1946 the joint committee of these three Churches accepted a recommendation that the co-operative arrangements in the Top End should be named 'The United Church in North Australia (Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian)'. Centres for worship were soon operating in Darwin and in five other places, and a range of co-operative welfare agencies were opened and developed. The work of this United Church gradually developed to include the Centre and the northern part of Western Australia.

The sixth, final, and this time successful attempt at union between the three Churches began in the 1954 General Conference. At the Conference there was to be final discussion on the Basis of Union for the 'Dual Union' between the Methodist Church and the Congregational Union. Great sadness was faced in the fact that the Presbyterians would not be part of the union. The frustrations of previous years were well summed up by Harold Wood, who had worked tirelessly for the tripartite union for over 20 years, in his words:

The refusal of the Presbyterian Church to unite with others seems to many friends of Union in that Church and outside, to be one of the greatest tragedies in the religious history of Australia. It is the greatest tragedy because there is no reason in doctrine or polity to justify separation.³³

IV. The Journey to the Formation of the UCA

Just before the vote on Dual Union was taken, Mr R.H. Grove, 'after much thought and discussion with friends',³⁴ moved an amendment to give the Presbyterian Church one more chance to come into the proposed union negotiations.³⁵ The amendment was passed in the

³³ *The Spectator*, 23 September 1953.

³⁴ Udy, 'Church Union in Australia', vol. 1, p. 290.

³⁵ See Udy, 'Church Union in Australia', Vol. 2, Appendix 7, 548–50.

Conference, and in September 1954 the Presbyterian General Assembly made a positive response, with the support of State Assemblies, Presbyteries and Congregations.

A Joint Commission on Church Union, consisting of seven members each from the three Churches, convened in November 1957. From the bitter experiences of the previous attempts at union, it was clear that there needed to be a fresh approach. Moreover, this approach could not simply be pragmatic, or based merely on comparative ecclesiologies, as events had demonstrated.

Here the international context, and in particular the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, was to be central. The concept of inter-confessional organic unions, in fact, had gone back to the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, where there had been strong argument against merely practical co-operation between churches of differing confessional backgrounds. In the first two Faith and Order conferences (Lausanne, 1927, and Edinburgh, 1937) the issue of organic union proved to be the most difficult. However, through the work of Faith and Order, particularly after the Toronto meeting of the Council's Central Committee in 1951 and the Faith and Order meeting in Lund in 1952, as well as the specific work of the theologian Lesslie Newbigin, forms of organic union began to be stressed internationally. In 1954 Newbigin reflected on the correct form of church unity:

...first that it must be such that all who are in Christ in any place are, in that place, visibly one fellowship; and second, that it must be such that each local community is so ordered and so related to the whole that its fellowship with all Christ's people everywhere, and with all who have gone before or will come after, is made clear.³⁶

Moreover, in 1959, as the result of Newbigin's work, Faith and Order presented to the Central Committee of the WCC a statement which was subsequently very largely adopted by the Third Assembly at New Delhi.³⁷ The Assembly used the critical words:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptised into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the

³⁶ J.E.L. Newbigin, 'The Quest for Unity through Religion', *Journal of Religion* 35: 1 (1955): 31.

³⁷ G. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113–14.

Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.³⁸

Furthermore, New Delhi also formally enshrined the central ‘death-and-rebirth’ principle in relation to organic unions. ‘The achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice.’³⁹

The high point of the formation of united churches (1965–72) came immediately after this Third Assembly in 1961. In addition, the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement in the 1960s as a result of Vatican II was to have enormous impact. It was very much in this international context of theological discourse that the form and process of union towards the UCA took place. The two reports of the Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Faith of the Church* of September 1959 and *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, together with a ‘Proposed Basis of Union’ of March 1963, followed closely from the discussions in Faith and Order noted above.⁴⁰ The influence of Davis McCaughey and his close involvement in Faith and Order was significant, as was the influence of Lesslie Newbigin, through his contacts with many in the three uniting Churches. However, there were strong influences as well, with much international experience, from the Methodist Church, including the influence of Harold Wood and Calvert Barber on the Commission, and of Colin Williams, as a theological advisor. Moreover, during this period a number of influential Methodists, including John Mavor, Winston O’Reilly, Harvey Perkins, Jean Skuse and D’Arcy Wood, were strong participants in the ecumenical movement internationally. The most contentious issue in the Proposed Basis of Union was that of a Concordat with the Church of South India and the provision of bishops, with the formation of which Newbigin had been involved. Harold Wood led the charge

³⁸ WCC, *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (London: SCM, 1962), 116

³⁹ WCC, *The New Delhi Report*, 117.

⁴⁰ Udy, ‘Church Union in Australia’, vol. 2, Appendix 8, 551–66.

against such a move in the Methodist General Conference.⁴¹ Along with three Presbyterian members of the Joint Commission, four Methodists also opposed this move, and it was eventually dropped. The issue of bishops was left to be decided upon after, and not before, union. This style, again, came from the Faith and Order discourse. Moreover, the Australian negotiating veterans, like Wood, wanted nothing extraneous to stand in the way of this sixth attempt. The Standing Committee of the Methodist General Conference received the subsequent 'Basis of Union 1970'.⁴² The primary areas of pre-union agreement were to be doctrine and polity, while other areas, including liturgical practice and the place of the episcopate and the diaconate, were to be finalised after the union. Finally, the General Conference received the 'Basis of Union (1971) of the Uniting Church in Australia',⁴³ and in 1972 Methodists voted 85 per cent in favour of the union, very close to the figures of the first vote in 1920. After further procedural and legal delays from the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church entered the UCA on 22 June 1977.

During the period from 1902 to 1977 Methodists presented a remarkable consistency in relation to developing ecumenism. The combination of their determination against the odds, their stoicism in the face of frustration and rebuff, and their deep call to unity for the sake of evangelism and diaconal service never wavered. In a sense, their moves towards organic unity never stopped. Certainly in Methodism there were concerns for Protestant unity in the face of the Catholic Church and later in the face of a hostile or indifferent Australian community. They found their ecclesiastical partners at times narrow minded and self-interested. Their understanding of ecumenism grew with their constant interaction with the worldwide ecumenical movement, as more than any other tradition internationally Methodists involved themselves in church unions. Despite everything they never gave up. It was indeed appropriate that it was the sorely-tried Methodist ecumenical veteran Harold Wood who was to pray, and to pray extemporarily, at the decisive liturgical moment of unity in the formation of the UCA, which the

⁴¹ See, too, the 'Reservation', in *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering* (Melbourne: Aldersgate, 1963), 68–9.

⁴² 'Minutes of the Joint Commission on Church Union held at Wesley College, 27–28 November 1970', 1; Udy, 'Church Union in Australia', vol. 2, Appendix 9, 567–79.

⁴³ Udy, 'Church Union in Australia,' vol. 2, Appendix 10, 580–92.

Catholic Archbishop Francis Rush described as ‘the most significant ecumenical event in Australia’s history.’⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *The Courier-Mail*, 16 June 1977.