

The Porvoo Theological Conference 08.10.2020

The Original Vision of the Porvoo Communion

Mary Tanner a co-secretary of the Porvoo Conversations

Introduction

I am delighted to have been invited to take part in this Theological Conference though of course disappointed that we cannot be gathered in Sigtuna as we were for the first meeting of the Porvoo Conversations in August 1989. I am very happy to be sharing this session with The Reverend Dr Tiit Padaam, a fellow member of the Conversations.

I shall remember first the context in which the vision emerged, then describe the vision encapsulated in words in *The Porvoo Common Statement (PCS)*, and end with a few thoughts on living into the vision.

I. A Vision Emerges

1. Archbishop Robert Runcie (Canterbury) and Archbishop Bertil Werkstrom (Uppsala) had called us together believing that the time was right, within the wider fellowship of Christians in Northern Europe, to live out more visibly our calling to be one. Steps to this end had already been taken through the Meissen Agreement with Anglicans, Lutherans and Reformed in Germany, as well as in the Concordat in the USA, and agreements in Africa too.¹
2. When the members of the Conversations met for the first time in Sigtuna, in August '89, there was a sense of friendships being renewed

¹ *The Meissen Common Statement: On the Way to Visible Unity*. 1988, CCU Occasional Paper No 2, 1992

and a ‘comfortableness’ of being together. We recognised that we had much in common, that there was ‘a family likeness’. (It is worth noting that the different traditions in the Church of England, Evangelical and Catholic, were well represented around the table.) At an informal session on the first evening we identified two issues that we must explore: did we share a vision of visible unity and what might bring this about?

3. We had brought much to the meeting to help us explore these questions. There were the piecemeal agreements made in the 1920’s with the Church of Sweden, the 1930’s with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, In the late 1930’s with the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Estonia and Latvia and in the 1950’s with the Churches of Norway, Denmark and Iceland. These agreements allowed for Eucharistic sharing and in some cases taking part in episcopal consecrations, though no interchangeability of ministries.²
4. We brought with us also the recent results of many international bilateral and multilateral conversations to harvest, among them the results of the Anglican –Lutheran Conversations, especially the latest text, *The Niagara Report on Episcopate*.³ There was the Lutheran- Roman Catholic work on justification and the Anglican- Roman Catholic *Final Report on Eucharist, Ministry and Authority*. There were reports from our conversations with the Orthodox, the Reformed, the Methodists. And, overarching them all, there was *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, The Lima Text, from the multilateral conversation of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the most representative ecumenical forum that then existed.⁴ And, to help us understand visible unity we had the unity statements from Assemblies of WCC, important among them the New Delhi and Canberra Statements.⁵

² Cf Existing Agreements between our Churches, Christopher Hill, in *Together in Mission and Ministry, The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe*, Church House Publishing, 1993, pp 53 – 58.

³ Anglican-Lutheran International Continuation Committee, *The Niagara Report on Episcopate*, Niagara Falls, 1987, paras 60-80, with its new light on old Faith and Order issues about episcopacy and succession.

⁴ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, WCC Faith and Order Paper 111, 1982.

⁵ See Official Reports of these Meetings published by WCC. New Delhi 1961, Canberra, 1991.

5. The footnotes in the PCS show just how much harvesting we did. We were aware that the visible unity we were seeking to understand and capture in words, and embody in a life together, was not exclusively for Anglicans and Lutherans, nor was it exclusively a Northern European vision. It was, to summarise New Delhi, a vision of the all in each place united to the all in every place united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages.⁶ We had a visible reminder of the inclusivity of our vision in those around the table, Dr Gunther Gassmann, Director of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC and The Reverend Henrik Roelvink OFM, from the Nordic Catholic Bishops' Conference.
6. We were conscious of the changes taking place in the social and political scene in Northern Europe, changes especially in the Baltic States and the moves to greater union in Europe. These changes called for a way of Christian togetherness which just might be a contribution to the newly emerging Europe. By focussing on visible unity, we were making commitment to the future proclamation together of the Gospel in a secularised society which would offer a contribution towards a Christian response to moral and social issues.
7. We were clear that the motivation for us to understand more about the life that God was calling us to live out visibly, was a matter of mission, for the world's sake. John 17 was never far from our thoughts. We were after, to borrow a phrase from Professor Katherine Grieb, a 'missional ecclesiology'.
8. Our conversations were grounded in shared prayer and reading the Scriptures together. We gathered daily at the Eucharist and at morning and evening prayer where we knew that in Christ we belonged to one another, we already shared so much in faith and sacramental life. In that context a vision became clearer.

⁶ The New Delhi Statement, The Church's Unity, para 2 in *The New Delhi Report*, SCM Press, 1961 p. 116, ff.

9. There were times of excitement and hope. There were times too of frustration when agreement seemed to elude us, and once or twice we had to retreat into two groups – Anglican and Lutheran. There was one memorable night when we thought the game was up. We sent three of our number away (with a bottle of duty -free whiskey) to find a way of overcoming what seemed an unresolvable difference in relation to episcopacy and succession. They emerged the next morning with a calmness placing a text before us that captured what we had been trying to express and agree and which would take us all on in our conversations.

II Expressing our Common Vision

10. Our aim was to understand ‘visible unity’, ‘visible communion’, a phrase that appears 17 times in the text. We knew it was no good talking about visible unity unless we could put content into the phrase. Anglicans had often talked of ‘organic unity’ which sounded to some Lutherans to overemphasize the structural; Lutherans had espoused ‘reconciled diversity’ which seemed to some Anglicans to prioritise diversity over unity. Other models had been used in other contexts: ‘united not absorbed’; ‘full communion’. We were clear that we were not about taking over any of these models of unity. Rather what we wanted to offer was ‘a portrait’ of visible unity, a picture in words of the gift of a life that God was calling us to live together for God’s sake and the world’s sake. Perhaps the title of this talk ought to be The Porvoo Portrait! I often wish we had had a resident contemporary artist with us to paint our portrait with colours and textures to make our vision immediately attractive.-The Porvoo Portrait was a Scriptural portrait: the church living in the light of the Gospel. (20)

11. The unity we were called to make visible was, we believed, a unity grounded in the communion of God's own Trinitarian life, *koinonia*. It was not something we were about to manufacture. It was God's gift to be received. 'Like every good gift, unity (also) comes from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit'. (21)

12. We could affirm together that the inter-related elements of visible unity were unity in the faith of the Church through the ages (grounded in Scripture, confessed in the catholic Creeds, to be affirmed afresh in each generation), unity in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, with the service of a single threefold apostolic ministry. And, what was immensely important, was that we all agreed that visible communion, visible unity, requires embodiment in shared structural form. (22) So, borrowing from BEM, we explored the triad, personal, collegial and communal structures of oversight at every level of the Church's life that would enable us to take counsel together, nurture communion, hold us mutually accountable to one another, particularly when any of us were faced with new theological, ethical or moral questions. (44 and 45) We knew that there would be issues that would threaten our unity and we needed these structures of connectedness to stay mutually accountable as together we sought Christ's mind for the Church in our generation. We often reminded ourselves of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where the church at the very beginning came together in Council to face the threat of division.

13. Openness to embracing diversity was indispensable to the Porvoo portrait. Structures of oversight, we believed, were there to help us live in unity with diversity. We were emphatic that unity was not uniformity (23). Unity was enriched by diversity, legitimate diversity. A dynamic diversity in unity ought not to be afraid of facing difficult issues whether theological, ethical or moral with a determination to stay together, to live through difference, even conflict, as together we searched for the mind of Christ open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. That's why structures were so important to the Porvoo team.

14. It was important that our portrait would convey something of the 'qualitativeness' of life together in unity, showing love to one another, joyful, prayerful, hopeful, sharing burdens and financial resources, with a shared commitment to the poor and passionate search for justice. The more we painted the portrait of visible unity the stronger was the conviction that visible unity was for service and for mission.
15. But there was one issue that separated us that we had to resolve if we were to live into that visible unity we were painting in words: the matter of episcopal ministry and succession. (34 -57) All our churches were episcopal churches. Five of the Lutheran churches had either retained or regained the sign of historic episcopal succession. But Denmark, Norway and Iceland had a presbyteral succession at the time of the Reformation. This was the neuralgic issue.
16. Chapter 4 describes the agreement we reached step by step. I remember Professor Stephen Sykes explaining that our agreement was like a set of boxes one inside the other. The outside box describes a rich understanding of the apostolicity of the whole church in continuing the faith and mission of the apostles, never separated from it. (36) Apostolic succession is then understood within the apostolic tradition of the whole church (39). Episcopal succession is a visible and personal sign of apostolic continuity. It is a sign of fidelity – that is a sign of God's fidelity to the Church; in that sense we could agree the sign was guarantee - guarantee of God's fidelity. We also agreed that we could use the word sign of the Church's intention, our intention to be faithful to our apostolic calling, though obviously not a guarantee of our fidelity. The laying on of hands in episcopal ordination too is a sign – both of God's fidelity and our intention to be faithful. Historic succession is also we agreed, shown in the ordered succession in historic episcopal Sees of the catholic Church: where the stress is on bottoms on seats rather than hands on heads, well attested in the early church. Apostolic Succession is seen in the Porvoo Common Statement as a rope of several strands. If

one strand is broken, another strand such as historic Sees can hold it even if the rope is weakened... Being apostolic is a many-sided reality.

17. The careful explication of apostolicity and succession was reached only after much discussion, much going back to the *Niagara Report* we were fortunate to have the Co-Chairs of those and our conversations, Bishop David Tustin and Bishop Tore Furberg as well as Bishop Stephen Sykes a member of the conversations, with us to help us with our understanding of episcopacy and succession. The penny dropped for us all! The agreement we had reached led the Anglicans to see now that they were **free** to recognise the episcopate of the churches of Denmark, Norway and Iceland, where at the Reformation bishops were consecrated by a presbyter but where succession in historic Sees had been maintained. These churches too were **free, free** to resume the use of the sign of succession in the laying on of hands at consecrations. The use of 'free' we understood meant that we could do no other. We recognised one another's intention to remain faithful in the past and were open to sign that intention now, together visibly, into the future, in a single reconciled ministry in historic succession. There was a lovely generosity shown to one another. It was a moment of conversion. Our portrait of visible unity was now of a church living and sustained by historic episcopal succession, signed in the laying on of hands.

18. The 10 commitments each church made in signing the Declaration add more colour, more texture to the Porvoo Portrait. (58)⁷ Each of these commitments fill out concretely the Porvoo portrait of our life in visible unity that we looked to share and to which we were eager to move towards. Indeed, we saw the *Porvoo Common Statement* itself as a step in that direction. I pick out two of the 10 Commitments:

⁷ See Appendix

- The first commitment, not surprisingly, underlines our missional ecclesiology - the vision of a common mission and service, prayer and the sharing of resources.
- The eighth commitment picks up the importance of forms of collegial and conciliar consultation for pursuing together matters of faith, order, life and work, for mutual accountability.

19. The Porvoo vision of visible unity is firmly set within one grand eschatological vision – a restored and renewed creation and a reconciled humanity. (27).

II. **Living into the Vision: painting the portrait in life**

20. I am reminded of what Archbishop George Carey said to the General Synod in presenting the Porvoo Common Statement. Bishop Aarflott of the Church of Norway was with us:

We stand on the brink of a new ecumenical future for Northern Europe. Most important are our commitments to Common Mission... to the vision of our future proclamation of the Gospel in secularised society and our Christian response to moral and social issues. As Europe works towards a wider unity so our Churches can contribute more to make the new Europe a continent that has spiritual roots which reach down into the common Christian culture that we all inherit.

21. He went on to say that if we signed The Porvoo Declaration 'it would mean the most significant ecumenical step we have taken this century'

22. We are in a new century. The political, social, economic situation is very different. The Porvoo vision was articulated in a pre-internet, pre-e-mail, pre-Zoom, pre-pandemic, pre-Brexit world. Is the Porvoo vision still relevant? And, in the wider context of the ecumenical movement, how does it relate to the vision expressed in the Faith and Order document,

*The Church Towards a Common Vision?*⁸ And how does it relate to the response of each of our churches to that ecumenical document, the most important, multilateral text since BEM? Perhaps the subject of the next Theological Conference.

23. Have we in twenty-five years made unity more visible in our life together? Tiit again has described some of the things that have taken place. More can be found in the very encouraging book, *Towards Closer Unity: Communion of the Porvoo Churches 20 years*. Are we still growing in Communion five years later? Today we shall explore this more.
24. Important symbolic moments came for me at the 1998 and 2008 Lambeth Conferences, when the Nordic and Baltic Bishops were there no longer as ecumenical observers but as bishops in communion, sharing collegiality. Does there not remain still the question of what structures of grace would embody the personal, collegial and communal oversight and keep us mutually accountable, sustain and nurture our unity and guide us together when matters of faith, order and, moral life threaten to divide us and inspire our mission? That's when we need one another's insights and when, in communion, we can ask restraint as we go on exploring together. Again, Tiit has offered reflections on this.
25. An important question for us must be – how has the Porvoo Communion enhanced mission? Is it a missional communion in becoming?
26. It is necessary for new generations to relate the vision to new contexts and different challenges. How might we do that in communion today so that the Porvoo vision becomes more a lived reality and not words on a page? The regular Porvoo Theological Conferences, The Primates' Meeting and the Church Leaders Meetings have important roles to play.

⁸ Faith and Order Paper 214, WCC Publications, 2013.

Appendix The Commitments made in signing the Porvoo Declaration

- to strengthen our common mission? to share a common life in mission and service and praying for and with one another and to share resources;
- to welcome one another's members to receive sacramental and other pastoral ministrations;
- to regard one another's baptized members of all our churches as members of our own;
- to welcome diaspora congregations into the life of indigenous churches to their mutual enrichment;
- to welcome persons episcopal ordained in any of our churches to the office of bishop, priest or deacon to serve....in that ministry in the receiving church without re-ordination;
- to Invite one another's bishops normally to participate in laying on of hands at the ordination of a bishop as a sign of unity and continuity;
- to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry;
- to establish appropriate forms of collegial and conciliar consultation on significant matters of faith and order, life and work;
- to encourage consultation of representatives of our churches to facilitate learning and exchange of ideas and information in theological and pastoral matters;
- To establish a contact group to nurture our growth in communion and to co-ordinate the implementation of this agreement.