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Anglicanism, Mission and Unity in Latin America: A Personal Viewpoint

MAURICE SINCLAIR

Towards a More Certain Call, a paper published in 1972 by the South American Missionary Society forms part of the current re-thinking concerning the role of Anglicanism in Latin America. The background, against which this reassessment is being made, is both spiritually and politically dynamic—if not explosive! Protestant Churches are growing faster in Latin America than anywhere else in the world. They are still minority groups—now substantial and politically important minorities in Brazil and Chile—so the Anglican Church is a minority within a minority. However, Anglicans are sharing in the wider evangelistic advance, and growth of Anglican churches is sufficient to require the further development of suitable church structures. Anglican Conversations in Peru are being planned for March 1973 to review this situation.

Naturally, these conversations cannot be conducted in an attitude of isolationism. Anglicans cannot plan their structures entirely without reference to other churches. Political developments are too far-reaching to be ignored. Spiritual movements are crossing the denominational barriers. Indeed the charismatic revival is putting a question mark over denominationalism itself. What then of the Anglican denomination in Latin America?

It is apparent that a dynamic situation is bringing to the surface fundamental questions:

- (a) Can we fulfil our true role as Anglicans without deliberately seeking unity with other denominations?
- (b) Can the present impetus for mission and renewal in Latin America be sustained without promoting greater unity?
- (c) Can a realistic plan for church unity in the Latin American republics be conceived?

These questions and the issues they raise will be considered in turn.

(a) *Anglicanism and Denominationalism*

ONE starting point for examining the nature and role of Anglicanism is suggested by the original purpose of the English Reformers. They set out to free the English Church from unscriptural doctrine, corrupt practices and ecclesiastical domination from abroad. They wanted to see the church of God in England, reformed and evangelical but also undivided in itself and a part of the catholic or universal church.

In spite of the denominational divisions which were to follow, this basic intention of the Reformers can inform our own re-assessment of our objectives in Latin America. If England needed, and still needs, a united and catholic and yet reformed and evangelical church, then surely this is what each of the Latin American republics needs. What would be good for England would be good for Argentina. The church of God in Argentina, catholic and reformed, may seem a distant goal, bearing in mind a still massive Romanism and a fragmented Protestantism. However, such a distant goal is not necessarily an irrelevant one. Certainly it accords with the Scriptural principle of 'all in each place' and cannot therefore be misconceived.

It is safe to conclude that the Reformers did not envisage a multiplicity of denominations and would have been horrified at such a spectacle. Anglicanism understood in terms of their intentions does not harmonise with an easy acceptance of denominationalism. Nor does such an attitude square with the Lambeth quadrilateral, another yard-stick of authentic Anglicanism. Neither the Scriptures, nor the Creeds, nor the sacraments nor episcopacy agrees with denominational divisions. They cut across the quadrilateral on all four sides! If we are to be true to ourselves, therefore, as Anglicans, we are committed to work for unity. In each republic we must make the fostering of a united national church a clear goal, and see our future within it.

(b) *Mission, Renewal and Unity*

TO seek unity is important to us as Anglicans in finding and fulfilling our role. But church unity in Latin America has a wider relevance and an even greater urgency. It is legitimate to ask whether the present impetus for mission and renewal in Latin America can be sustained without further progress towards unity.

The greatest growth has undoubtedly been achieved by Pentecostal churches. In some areas, though, the proliferation of different Pentecostal denominations has reached ludicrous proportions. Further growth is threatened by this kind of fragmentation and the resulting dislocations and contradictions. On the credit side, however, 'Evangelism-in-Depth' promotes unity between denominations and rightly relates it to mission.

If the Pentecostal Churches can become 'all breath and no skeleton', then the other Protestant denominations can easily be all skeleton and no breath! The more traditional churches are often failing to hold their younger members, especially those who are students. The denominations clearly need one another. A full combination of resources and gifts—evangelistic, teaching, organisational, charismatic—is required if all sections of the community, including the growing middle class, are to be reached and then held for the Gospel.

The denominations need unity, but so do the nations to whom they witness. Individualism, fragmentation and multiplication of parties are chronic features of Latin American politics. If the Protestant churches mirror these divisions in their own life, then to this extent they are no different from the world around them, and to this extent deny the Gospel. The Latin American republics are nations looking for a soul. A more united and national church could speak powerfully to a nation and give it a soul.

Considerations such as these underline the importance of and urgent need for unity but still do not reach the most fundamental issue. In *Unity is not Enough* Mark Gibbard warns the Church of South India, 'Unity without inner renewal will not equip churches for mission.' The authors of *Growing into Union* emphasise a converse truth, which is decisive. They declare themselves in this way: 'Our interest in the ending of scandalous division within God's family does not depend on any estimate of what consequences this might have in the other fields . . . Rather, we see the achieving of visible oneness as necessary simply because it is the revealed will of God . . . The quest for union . . . is not, indeed, a quest that can be isolated from the quest for truth, and holiness, and faithfulness in mission, which God also commands, but equally it is not a quest which can be shelved while these other goals are pursued.'

Here then is the heart of the matter—'plain Christian obedience'. And perhaps it is at this level that we see the significance of the current questioning of denominations and desire for unity expressed by leaders of the charismatic revival in Argentina. And, if theirs is a call to obedience, what response are we to make? Do we react against our Anglican heritage? We may serve the whole church better by preserving it! Yet our very nature as Anglicans forbids us to be content always to remain Anglicans in South America. The exact way of obedience may not be obvious but its attainment is not wholly remote. Local bridgeheads are even being achieved between Roman Catholics and Protestants through the biblical and charismatic revivals. Where there's a will there's a way. Where there is God's will, there must be God's way. What we shall need is eyes to see it.

(c) *'The Uniting Church', a possible approach towards Unity in Latin America*

WITH the failure of the Anglican-Methodist Scheme in England, there seems to have been a turning away from negotiated mergers and the official and centralised approach to unity. *Growing into Union* criticises the Anglican-Methodist proposals as too static. The authors advocate a more dynamic method, and, as we have noted, see unity in relation to reformation, renewal and mission. The 'Call to the North' in the York province provides another example of the present emphasis on mission in unity. They tell us, 'We have sought to relate actual union of local churches to their task of mission.' They continue, 'The obvious place to start such a united church is in the new mission areas.'

While limiting its practical proposals to the situation in England, *Growing into Union* contains vital principles which have a universal application. One possible outworking of some of these principles in the 'mission areas' of Latin America is set out below. It would involve the following steps:

1. The Anglican dioceses in Latin America would declare their intention of seeking unity with other denominations. Such a declaration would be made as a concerted act of faith and obedience, and would depend upon prior consultation, prayer and unanimity among the congregations.

2. A specific approach would be made to denominations and independent congregations working in adjacent areas, with whom we already enjoyed fellowship and shared agreement on essential Christian doctrines. This approach could also be made locally rather than centrally. Local churches would then simply need the permission of their denominational leaders. The proposal we would make to them would be that we should seek to increase our fellowship together in the Holy Spirit. On the basis of this fellowship we would look for opportunities to engage in joint evangelism with the aim of establishing new congregations in new areas. As a seal to such an agreement, we and they would append the title 'Uniting Church' (in Spanish 'Iglesia Uniéndose') after our respective denominational names.

3. When joint mission had established new congregations, these would of course share in unhindered fellowship with both parent denominations. The original team of evangelists would have been drawn from both the older churches, and such a combined ministry would continue to be available to the new groups of believers. Fellowship and ministry would thus be shared, as well as mission. It would, however, be necessary to agree beforehand which constitution, discipline and doctrinal confession a particular new congregation would be committed to. This would then have to be respected by all parties. If mission was carried out in this way in two different areas, then the new churches in one area should adopt the discipline and full doctrinal

standards of one parent denomination, and those in the other area the discipline and doctrine of the other parent. All new churches could be given the title 'Uniting Church' first, to which should be appended the names of both parent denominations.

4. Naturally, this kind of unity in mission would not be limited to two denominations, but increased to include, on an equal footing, a growing number of other denominations with basically congruent doctrinal standards. Where sufficient agreement did not exist, mutual understanding could be prompted through joint Bible study, as it is already with Roman Catholics. Initially, joint mission could not be sponsored, but in the present changing climate churches could move together, influenced through the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit.

5. The outcome of this whole process could be a federation of denominations (Uniting Churches), which would be sharing together in a deepening fellowship and engaging together in a concerted missionary advance. Such a composite body could be the fore-runner of an authentic national church. Through the renewing and unifying activity of the Holy Spirit a common confession and discipline could eventually be agreed. On the basis the old denominational name would be discarded and the 'Uniting Churches' would become 'United Churches', in name and in reality.

The principle of unity in mission, upon which these suggestions are based, does not introduce anything totally new or foreign to the existing pattern of church growth. It is significant, for instance, that evangelistic campaigns giving birth to three new Anglican congregations in Argentine towns or cities have involved evangelists from other denominations. God vindicated these efforts undertaken together. The present plea is simply that what has been begun occasionally should be continued deliberately and consistently, as part of our obedience to God. The fact that the path to unity is a long one is no reason for not stepping forward along it. As we think again about the purpose and structure of Anglicanism in Latin America, the unity of the whole Body of Christ in that continent is an issue we cannot ignore.