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# **The Effect of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* on the Church of England**

*Mary Tanner*

## **Introduction**

Looking back over the years since the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) in 1981 there can be no doubt that, from the perspective of the Church of England, this document has been a crucially important, if not the most important, ecumenical document of the ecumenical century<sup>1</sup>. BEM has had consequences not only for the internal life of the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. It has also contributed significantly to the establishment of new and closer relations with other churches enabling more shared service and united mission at local, national and European levels. A document recognised by many as a convergence document expressing convergence in matters of sacraments and ministry has proved to be more than a paper agreement. It has proved itself to be a convergence instrument, affecting the life and witness of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion as well as relationships with other churches.

## **I. Informing the mind of Anglicans through an intensive process of response**

### *1. Preparing for BEM, Lausanne 1927 – Lima 1982*

Part of the reason for the impact of BEM is undoubtedly due to the long and careful process of its formation. The subjects of baptism, eucharist and ministry were ones delineated as crucial for the unity of the Church as early as the First World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne in 1927. Anglicans with other Christians compared and contrasted their different perspectives and beliefs in the area of sacraments and ministry. A decisive breakthrough, however, came as a result of the Montreal World Conference in 1963 when the method of ecumenical dialogue moved from the merely comparative to the convergence method. Now Christians be-

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<sup>1</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, The Lima Text, Faith and Order Paper 111, Geneva: WCC, 1982.

gan to express together as much common agreement as was possible and also to record honestly those areas where differences remained.

By the time of the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in Accra in 1974 a first draft, *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry*, was ready to be sent to the churches for their reaction<sup>2</sup>. The Church of England was assiduous in preparing its response through careful study in its Faith and Order Advisory Group and debates in its General Synod. In the years following the publication of the Accra report Church of England theologians were involved in drafting groups whose task was to revise the document in the light of the responses the churches had sent to the Commission. They also took part in the meetings that considered three controversial issues: infant and so-called believers' baptism, the ordination of women, and *episkope*/episcopacy. These discussions were carefully followed in the Church of England. This meant that when, after the meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order in Lima in 1981, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was received by the Church of England, together with the four questions put by the Commission to the churches about the document, BEM was already in some senses "our document". The Church of England was already closely identified with the document. Its own theologians had in part crafted it, drafts had been discussed and many people, ordained and lay, knew of its existence and the main thrust of its direction.

## 2. Response to BEM

The publication of BEM coincided with the publication of *The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*<sup>3</sup>. This provided a unique opportunity for the Church of England to study the two documents together. BEM, coming from the broadest ecumenical forum that exists, provided an important overarching context in which to consider the substantial agreements on eucharist and ministry reached by Anglicans and Roman Catholics in dialogue. This helped to give confidence that agreements in the bilateral and multilateral arenas did not contradict one another, even if the ARCIC agreements went further than those of BEM.

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<sup>2</sup> *One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognised Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 73, Geneva: WCC, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> *The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, GS 661, London: CTS/SPCK, 1984.

Intensive study of both documents continued for more than six years in diocesan synods, deanery synods and in many parishes with the aid of a variety of popular study guides, including one prepared by the Student Christian Movement and a guide for Sunday school children. Thousands of copies of a popular ecumenical guide were used in ecumenical study groups. At national level the Council of Churches sponsored a multilateral discussion of BEM while bilateral conversations took place between Anglicans and Methodists, Reformed, Baptists and members of the Society of Friends. Discussions of BEM helped the different churches to come to a greater understanding of one another and to begin to see the implications the document had for deepening relations between the churches in England.

The official response of the Church of England was made by its General Synod after two major debates guided by the reflections of its Faith and Order Advisory Group and taking into consideration the results of the discussions in the dioceses and deaneries<sup>4</sup>. At the end of this intensive study and debate the verdict was that members of the Church of England were able to recognise in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* "the faith of the Church through the ages". This did not imply that every point in the document is expressed in exactly the terms Anglicans would wish to use, or that there were not areas concerning the doctrines of baptism, eucharist, and ministry that needed further reflection. Indeed, the report to the Synod drew attention to these areas. In regard to baptism it looked forward to greater clarity of the different stages of the initiation process and an exploration of the implication of the recognition of baptism for the reconciliation of churches, their members and their ministries. In regard to the eucharist it looked for a development in understanding the relation of baptism to eucharistic sharing, the relation of the celebrant to the eucharist, and the relation of the local eucharistic community to the whole Church. The section on the ministry was understood to be the least developed part of the report requiring future work on, among other matters, the ordination of women to the priesthood and the personal, collegial and communal dimensions of the ministry. It was recognised that each of the three parts of the Lima report required as its context an explicit statement on the Church. What are the ecclesiological implications of the report was a question of-

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<sup>4</sup> *Towards a Church of England Response to BEM and ARCIC*, GS 661, London: CIO Publishing, 1985; *The Church of England's Response to BEM and ARCIC, Supplementary Report to GS 661*, GS 747, London: Board for Mission and Unity, 1986.



ten asked in Anglican debates. As well as affirming the theological direction of the report the Church of England also saw that to recognise in BEM “the faith of the Church through the ages” carried with it challenges for its own life, as well as for its relations with other Christian communities. Thus it called for renewal and re-formation of aspects of its own life as well as the development of closer relations with other churches.

Throughout the debates an important distinction for the future was made between the initial official response at the level of synods and a much longer and more spiritual process of reception that must follow. This picked up the careful distinction made at the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Official response would be given in a short space of time but reception is a long range and far reaching process in which the whole church seeks to recognise and affirm confidently the one faith and through the words of an ecumenical text “freshly to lay hold of the new life which that faith promises”<sup>5</sup>. The Church of England noted that:

“This reception process cannot be hurried. More and more people at all levels of the church’s life must be drawn into the reflective and interpretative process, so that agreements reached first by theologians, and then affirmed by synods, become part of the life of the whole people of God.”<sup>6</sup>

What has happened in the Church of England in the twenty years since the publication of BEM cannot be understood apart from its active involvement in the process which led to the completion of the document, from the time of Lausanne in 1927 to the publication of BEM after the meeting in Lima in 1982. Involvement in this lengthy process meant that the Church of England was already formed by this work and some of the convergences were already in its blood stream. Moreover, its understanding of the difference between official response and reception meant that there was a readiness for the insights of BEM to be taken into the fabric of its own life and its relationships with others in the years ahead.

There was one further factor that was to give the Church of England confidence to open itself to receive the insights of BEM into its life and relationships. While the World Council of Churches invited responses from its member churches, the Church of England, as only one part of the wider

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<sup>5</sup> David Gill (ed.), *Gathered for Life: Official Report, VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July–10 August 1983*, Geneva: WCC, 1983, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Towards a Church of England Response to BEM and ARCIC*, p. 9, para. 19.

Anglican Communion, needed to be confident that its mind on the matter was in harmony with the mind of the Anglican Communion as a whole. If changes were to be made in the future in the life and relationships of the Church of England then these must be consonant with the mind of all Anglicans. It was, therefore, important that the responses of the Provinces were carefully analysed by an international group of Anglican theologians<sup>7</sup>. The overall verdict was that the Lima report was balanced and comprehensive in the subjects it treats. There were some preliminary issues needing articulation: the relation of Scripture, Tradition and traditions, the nature of sacraments, and an ecclesiological framework. There were matters identified in relation to each of the three parts of the report. Nevertheless, the general view of provinces was positive. It was on the basis of this careful analysis that the bishops of the Communion, gathered at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, recorded the “mind of the Communion” on BEM:

“This Conference:

1. Welcomes the text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM) as a contribution of great significance in the search for the visible unity of the Church ... BEM enables us to see a convergence towards substantial agreement in faith and practice between many Communion.
2. Endorses the view of the provincial responses that Anglicans can recognise to a large extent in the text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* “the faith of the Church through the ages”.
3. Considers that Anglicans can draw important consequences from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* for their relations with other Churches ...
4. Recommends that Provinces take guidance from the text for their worship, educational, ethical and spiritual life and witness.”<sup>8</sup>

This resolution, supported by all Anglican bishops, gave encouragement for a continuing process of reception in the lives of Anglicans around the world.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Emmaus Report: A Report of the Anglican Ecumenical Consultation 1987 which took place at The Emmaus Retreat Centre, West Wickham, Kent, England 27 January–2 February 1987 in preparation for ACC-7, Singapore, 1987, and the Lambeth Conference, 1998*, London: Church House Publishing, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988, The Reports, Resolutions and Pastoral Letters from the Bishops*, London: CHP, 1988, pp.201 f.

## II. From response to reception in life and in changed relations

### 1. Reception in life

The intensive eight-year period of study of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was crucial for the reception process that followed. It helped to form a “BEM mind set” in the Church of England’s understanding of the sacraments and the ministry. Theological Colleges and Courses were subsequently encouraged to use the Lima report in teaching doctrine and in courses on ecumenism. It is unlikely that any ordinand finishes his or her training without having been introduced to the document. It is a particularly valuable multilateral statement of agreement in the light of which to study the statements on sacraments and ministry coming from bilateral conversations, whether national or international.

BEM has also influenced the revision of liturgical texts. In preparing the new prayer book many members of the Liturgical Commission were conscious of the theological convergences of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Indeed, when the Liturgical Commission put before the General Synod a draft of a number of eucharistic prayers the point was made by a member of the Synod that one of the prayers was not consistent in its treatment of *epiklesis* with what BEM had said on the matter. The text in question was sent back for revision in the light of the eucharistic theology of BEM. The effect of such liturgical revision, consonant with BEM, means that whether members of the Church of England are themselves conscious of it or not, the theology of BEM (which was deemed to express the faith of the Church through the ages) is now a part of their Christian formation through participation in the regular worship life of the Church of England.

As the Church of England has reconsidered the ordained ministry in the last twenty years reference has always been made to the Ministry section of BEM. While the Church of England at the Reformation continued the threefold ordering of the ministry of the universal Church, the diaconate has been in the main a transitional one with men (and more recently women) serving a short period as deacons before being ordained as priests. A merely transitional diaconate made it hard for Anglicans to justify the threefold order to others in ecumenical conversations. Indeed, a report on the diaconate in 1974, unable to find a convincing rationale for the diaconate, recommended abolishing it altogether<sup>9</sup>. However, the Synod resisted this and by the time the next study of deacons was made the Synod was confirmed in its opinion that it was

right to retain the diaconate by the emerging convergence on the threefold order which was signalled in BEM. A report on the diaconate commissioned by the House of Bishops made extensive reference to the position of BEM and to the Church of England's response to it. It noted as important the position taken on the threefold order, that while no one pattern of ministry is to be found enshrined in the New Testament itself, nevertheless, because it became the generally accepted pattern early in the life of the Church and because it is still retained by many churches today, "it may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means of achieving it". The bishops noted that BEM affirms a threefold order, sees the diaconate in need of reform, understands the interplay between service and worship as characteristic of diaconal vocation, suggests that deacons may be elected to positions of authority, and affirms the special relationship of deacons to bishops. This reflection on BEM helped to confirm in the Church of England the view that if Anglicans were to commend the order there was need for a more credible expression of the diaconate. In particular the diaconal role in linking service to the world with liturgical functions should be expressed clearly<sup>10</sup>. It is quite possible that the ecumenical convergence on the threefold order had some influence in reversing the trend in the Church of England in favour of suggesting the abolition of the diaconate. A more recent report of a Working Party of the House of Bishops on deacons envisages a distinctive diaconate alongside the so-called "transitional diaconate"<sup>11</sup>. This latest report makes extensive reference to BEM's view of the ministry of deacons claiming that "BEM marks something of a watershed in ecumenical work on the diaconate".

It is well known that the catholic and evangelical wings of the Church of England differ over their understanding of the priesthood of the ordained ministry. In the past this was often cited as the cause of the failure of unity schemes. In the period of the response to BEM and ARCIC it was recognised that these international ecumenical texts provided the

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<sup>9</sup> *Deacons in the Church: The Report of a Working Party set up by the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry*, London: CIO, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church: Report to the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England*, GS 802, London: CHP, 1988, p. 69 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *For such a time as this: a renewed diaconate in the Church of England: a report to the general synod of the Church of England of a working party of the house of bishops*, GS 1407, London: CHP, 2001.

Church of England with an incentive to seek agreement among its own people on the nature of the priesthood of the ordained ministry. In 1986 a paper on the priesthood of the ordained ministry was prepared for debate in the General Synod<sup>12</sup>. One of its major chapters was devoted to a study of ecumenical documents including what the Lima report had to say about the priesthood of the ordained ministry. In particular the distinction made in Lima between the unique priesthood of Jesus Christ, the priesthood of the whole Church, and ordained ministers who “are related, as are all Christians, both to the priesthood of Christ, and to the priesthood of the Church” was found to be helpful. So too was Lima’s assertion that ordained ministers

“may appropriately be called priests because they fulfil a particular priestly service by strengthening and building up the royal and prophetic priesthood of the faithful through word and sacraments, through their prayers of intercession, and through their pastoral guidance of the community.”<sup>13</sup>

The report to the Synod recognised that the emerging convergence in BEM and other ecumenical reports “is consonant with Anglican understanding”. The final chapter of the report set out what it called “a contemporary expression of the priesthood of the ordained ministry” which took in the insights of the Lima report. Although this expression was not unanimously affirmed by the members of the Synod it is often referred to in discussions on the Anglican view of the priesthood of the ministry.

A substantial report of an Archbishops’ Group on the episcopate was published in 1990 which once more shows the influence of the Lima report on the Church of England’s re-thinking of the office and role of a bishop<sup>14</sup>. Two matters in particular were formative in shaping the view of episcopacy espoused in the report. The first was the way in which BEM understands the nature and functions of a pastoral leadership in “three planes” of the Church’s life. The bishop has a threefold role in relation to the local community, in uniting the local church to the communion of all the churches, and the local church to the historical continuity of the apostolic church. Secondly, this report affirmed BEM’s insistence that the ordained, pastoral ministry should be exercised “in a personal, collegial and communal way”.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry*, GS 694, London: CHP, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> *Episcopal Ministry: The report of the Archbishops’ Group on the Episcopate*, London: CHP, 1990.

This, together with BEM's explanation of what is meant by these three interdependent terms, has been formative for the thinking of the Church of England about the oversight role of the episcopate. It has been used many times to explicate the interdependent ministry of the bishops and to show how their ministry exercised within and not above the community is, as one bishop put it, the "glue" which holds the Church together.

In fact paragraphs 26 and 27 of the ministry section of BEM have proved to be some of the most creative in helping Anglicans to understand the place and role of the ordained ministry, in particular the episcopate, in holding the Church together. These paragraphs affirm that the ordained pastoral ministry should be personal signifying the presence of Christ among his people; it should be collegial for a college of ordained ministers can represent the concerns of the community; and it should have a communal dimension showing the ordained ministry rooted in the life of the community which is needed in the discovery of God's will. These different dimensions of the ministry need expression, BEM suggests, at every level of the Church's life. Working with these two concise paragraphs the Church of England has been helped to understand both the pastoral ministry and also the sort of structured life that is needed to hold Christians together as they seek to be faithful to the Gospel and effective in mission.

It has also helped members of the Church of England to understand their connectedness to other provinces of the Anglican Communion and to see what structures of oversight – personal, collegial and communal – might hold them more effectively in interdependent life. These structures at the international level include the personal ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the collegial gatherings of Lambeth Conferences, and the communal gatherings of the Anglican Consultative Council. The ministry section of BEM gives confidence to Anglicans in developing further their own structures in the light of the threefold dimension described in BEM. Anglicans look forward to the time when they will one day be joined in a wider fellowship through the same dimensions of ministry.

Two further recent reports of the House of Bishops, one on apostolicity and succession and the other on the collegiality of bishops, have taken up the insights of the ministry section of BEM<sup>15</sup>. In their treat-

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<sup>15</sup> *Apostolicity and Succession*, House of Bishops Occasional Paper, GS Misc 432, London: CHP, 1994; *Bishops in Communion: Collegiality in the Service of the Koinonia of the Church*, An Occasional Paper of the House of Bishops of the Church of England, London: CHP, 2000.



ment of apostolicity the bishops quote what BEM has to say about apostolic tradition in the Church which means “continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles”. They find particularly helpful the distinction made between *episkope* and episcopacy and the affirmation that all churches have a ministry of oversight in some form. They endorse BEM’s suggestion that:

“Churches which have preserved the episcopal succession are asked to recognize both the apostolic content of the ordained ministry which exists in churches which have not maintained such succession and also the existence in these churches of a ministry of *episkope* in various forms.

Churches without the episcopal succession ... are asked to realize that continuity with the Church of the apostles finds profound expression in the successive laying on of hands by bishops and that though they may not lack the continuity of the apostolic tradition, this sign will strengthen and deepen that continuity. They need to recover the sign of episcopal succession.” (BEM, M, 53)

The bishops welcome also BEM’s view that episcopal succession is not a guarantee of fidelity of the Church to the teaching and mission of the apostles but rather “serves, symbolises and guards continuity”.

In the last decades the role of the House of Bishops in the Church of England has assumed greater importance in guiding the Church in matters of faith, order and moral life. As a result it became apparent that there was need to work on the theology and practice of episcopal collegiality – what it means for bishops to work together as one body, how this helps to ensure that the Church is maintained in unity and truth, and how episcopal collegiality enhances the ministry and mission of the whole body of the Church. In the course of its work on collegiality the House referred on many occasions to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. In particular the bishops pick up once again the three dimensions, personal, collegial and communal, of the ministry of the Church and explore this in relation to the ministry of bishops interpreting the structures of both the Church of England and the Anglican Communion in the light of these three dimensions.

These are just a few examples to show how in reflecting on renewal and development of its own life in the areas of liturgy and the understanding of the sacraments, ministry and structures of the Church, the Church of England has turned again and again to BEM for inspiration finding in it an incentive to renew its own thought and life. Many more examples could be given from the debates on the ordination of women and how to live together in spite of difference, eucharistic presidency, and in responding to



the Pope's invitation to help him consider his ministry in the service of the unity of the Church. There can be no doubt that the insights of BEM in the last twenty years have been received into the fabric of the life of the Church of England. No other ecumenical document has had such a fundamental affect on both theological understanding and renewal of life.

## *2. Changed relationships*

It is, however, in the area of ecumenical relations that BEM has had the most dramatic effect. This is appropriate for a document formulated in an ecumenical context. It has influenced the development of relationships with other churches at the local, the national and the European levels.

The publication of BEM came after two decades of failure of ecumenical schemes in England, first the unity scheme between Anglicans and Methodists and later the proposals for a Covenant between Anglicans, Methodists, Reformed and Moravians. But all was not lost and attention was focused on the development of relationships at the very local level. Officially designated Areas of Ecumenical Experiment, now known as Local Ecumenical Partnerships, were introduced where churches came together to share their faith, baptism, offer and receive eucharistic hospitality, and share ministry short of an interchangeable ministry. In 1989 the Church of England looked to formalise what was happening by passing Ecumenical Canons<sup>16</sup>. These Ecumenical Canons indicate possibilities and procedures for local initiatives from tentative first steps to developed partnerships. Canon B 43 relates to ecumenical relations in all parishes while Canon B 44 is concerned with parishes where ecumenical commitment is to be expressed as a formal Local Ecumenical Partnership.

It is doubtful whether these Canons would have been passed without the existence of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. The official explication of the Canons refers at a number of points to the Lima report. It recommends the baptism section of BEM for understanding baptism as the unrepeatable sign of initiation into Christ and his Church and welcomes the insistence that baptism is both God's gift and our response to that gift (BEM, B, 8). It suggests that any differences between the churches in the area of baptism should be viewed in the light of BEM. The agreement on the eucharist in BEM was even more foundational for Local Ecumenical

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<sup>16</sup> *Ecumenical Relations: Canons B43 and B44: Code of Practice*, General Synod, 1989.

Projects. BEM's list of the elements for eucharistic liturgies is taken as the starting point in discussing local eucharistic services. On a matter which so often proves sensitive, that of the disposal of the consecrated elements, the advice of the Lima report is quoted – "the best way of showing respect for the elements served in the eucharistic celebration is by their consumption, without excluding their use for communion of the sick." Extracts from BEM are appended to the Canons. It is perhaps not too much to claim that *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* has provided the charter for ecumenical living at the local level. Growth at the local level has been a success story of the last two decades in England. It in part owes its success to the convergences of the ecumenical dialogues. But growth at the local level is not enough. Too easily the local Christian community becomes frustrated by having to relate to two or more national structures and World Communions. It can become turned in on itself and isolated from the wider Christian community. Growth at the local level needs to be complemented by a growing together at a wider than local level.

BEM has helped some of the churches in England to develop relations and take steps together at a national level. The national bilateral discussion of BEM that followed immediately on its publication did help the churches to a better understanding, both of their own identity and the identity of others. For example, the Church of England's discussions of BEM with the Baptists helped towards a more sympathetic understanding of the Baptist position over baptism and what had hitherto been mistakenly called "re-baptism". Discussions with the Reformed helped Anglicans to recognise the ministry of oversight exercised in that tradition. The Methodist awareness of connexionalism was understood afresh by Anglicans as together they discussed BEM. The position on sacraments and the sacramentality of all life, stimulated by the discussion of BEM with members of the Society of Friends, had an effect on increasing Anglican awareness of the wider dimension of sacramentality.

These intensive discussions had an important effect upon formal discussions in the late eighties and early nineties. The formal conversations between the Church of England and the Moravian Church led to the establishment of a new relationship on the way to visible unity on the basis of the *Fetter Lane Common Statement*<sup>17</sup>. These conversations began by

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<sup>17</sup> *Anglican-Moravian Conversations: The Fetter Lane Common Statement*, with Essays in Anglican and Moravian History, ed. Colin Podmore, CCU Occasional Paper 5, Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1996.

comparing their several responses to the Lima report in order to see whether there was a sufficient agreement between the two churches to hope that a new relationship might be established. This proved an encouraging exercise and in their preface to the Agreed Statement the Co-chairmen acknowledge the crucial theological groundwork that was laid out in BEM – “the consensus we have reached in our Conversations is based upon this groundwork”. When the Conversations came to set out ten areas of agreement in faith as a basis for entering a new and committed relationship the agreements on baptism, eucharist and ministry were couched not in Anglican or Moravian formularies but in the words of BEM. A separate chapter on the ordained ministry of the Church says that both churches find the statements concerning the threefold ministry in BEM consonant with their own understanding and goes on to quote extensively what BEM says about each of the three orders of the ministry. The same is true in the section that looks at apostolicity and succession. Here once more the convergences of BEM provide the building blocks on which a new relationship has been established, a relationship, which is developing today in committed partnership at local and national levels.

A similar process was followed when the Methodist Church invited the Church of England in 1994 to enter preliminary talks to identify the steps and stages required to realise the goal of visible unity. Again conversations began by reviewing what each partner had said in response to the Lima report<sup>18</sup>. In the report of the formal conversations which followed, agreement in the area of sacraments and ministry once more is expressed, not by reference to Methodist or Anglican formularies, but to the convergences of BEM and the international Anglican-Methodist conversations.

There can be little doubt about the effect that BEM has had on relations between the churches at local and national levels in England. But perhaps an even more notable effect of BEM has been on relationships between churches at the European level. The Conversations between the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Church of England which led to the Meissen Agreement, the Conversations between the Anglican churches of Britain and Ireland and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches which led to the Porvoo Agreement, and the Conversations between the British and

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<sup>18</sup> *Commitment to Mission and Unity, Report of the Informal Conversations between the Methodist Church and the Church of England*, GS Misc 477, London: CHP 1996.

Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches establishing the Reuilly Agreement all depended heavily upon the convergences of BEM<sup>19</sup>. Each of these three agreements sets out the goal of visible unity that the churches look to live together, outlines agreements in faith they already share and on the basis of these makes firm commitments to live more closely together, sharing resources, and engaging in mission and service. The relationships established by the Meissen and Reuilly agreements are significant stages on the way to visible unity. The Porvoo relationship is one of visible unity expressed in the life of the new Porvoo Communion of churches.

It is unlikely that any of these new relationships would have been established without the existence of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. BEM has contributed significantly to the changing of the ecclesial map of Europe. A new web of relationship between Christians in Europe has been created which extends across the old east–west divide. In a Europe seeking its own unity and identity these new partnerships are an important sign of the possibility of reconciled life. All of these churches involved in these new partnerships are discovering ways of strengthening their relationships and intensifying shared ministry and mission. It is not an accident that in order to support these new relationships new collegial and communal structures have been established which themselves mirror the dimension of ministry described in the ministry section of BEM.

## Conclusion

Looking back over twenty years since the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* it is impossible not to be impressed by the degree to which that document has influenced the life and relationships of the Church of England. What was a remarkable document of theological convergence has proved to be so much more than that. It has proved itself to be a convergence instrument capable of bringing about renewal and changed relationships. It has proved that theological conversation that

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<sup>19</sup> *The Meissen Agreement, Texts*, CCU Occasional Paper 2, Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1992; *Together in Mission and Ministry, The Porvoo Common Statement*, with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe, London: CHP, 1993; *Called to Witness and Service: The Reuilly Common Statement*, with Essays on Church, Eucharist and Ministry, London: CHP, 1999.

seeks for agreement in faith is an indispensable part of the ecumenical endeavour. This suggests that the churches need to continue together the search for agreement in faith that is sufficient and required to bring churches together and to keep them together in ministry and mission. The Faith and Order Commission has said over and over again that there are three requirements for visible unity – agreement in faith, the sacraments and ministry, and ways of taking counsel and deciding together. There remain some issues in the area of sacraments and ministry to be explored further. There also remains an important reception process to be stimulated in the area of the common confession of the apostolic faith. But most pressing of all is the need to develop work on how churches would take counsel and decide together on those matters that concern their fundamental unity. Without this the ecumenical advance is unlikely to progress towards the visible unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, towards a communion in faith, life and witness.

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