

AN ECUMENICAL EXCHANGE.

Each year since 1983, the Ecumenical Commission of the Roman Catholic diocese of Namur, covering the south eastern portion of Belgium, has invited a church of a different confession from a neighbouring country to send it a small group to present their Christian witness to the diocese. One member of the group concerned has also been invited to preach at the main diocesan service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

It has also been the custom of the Commission to send a small group from its own membership to visit the church concerned beforehand. The aim has been to form as rounded an understanding as possible of the partner church and its style of mission and service. The findings and experiences of the Namur group are then written up in a brochure of about twenty or so pages copies of which are then circulated throughout the diocese in order to give its clergy and people an understanding of the church concerned.

The programme *Churches Witnessing to Jesus Christ* celebrated its twenty fifth anniversary in 2008. It was originally the brain child of Fr Thaddee Barnas, deacon and monk of Chevetogne, a Benedictine monastery situated within the diocese which was founded early in the twentieth century with the express intention of working for Christian unity, originally particularly with the Orthodox churches in mind but now with an overall commitment to spiritual ecumenism and learning, in the spirit of Vatican II, from the spiritual riches of all Christian confessions. Fr Thaddee, an American by birth, is the editor of the prestigious internationally renowned ecumenical review, *Irenikon*, and is also the current chair of the diocesan ecumenical Commission. He is well known both locally and internationally.

The aims of the programme are to heighten the ecumenical awareness of the diocese in which relatively few Christians of other confessions are to be found, Belgium having the highest proportion of Roman Catholics in relation to other Christians of any north-west European country. Every effort is made to involve the few non-Catholic Christians of the diocese in the programme and in some years a local non-Catholic has joined the visiting delegation to the partner church. A key aim is to promote spiritual ecumenism and mutually receptive learning, helping all to be aware of the way in which the 'local' church which, of course, in Catholic terminology means the diocese, can be enriched by the wider Universal Church as family of diverse local churches. Another key aim is to learn from the mission experience and practice of others, sharing problems and sights alike in order that, together the churches concerned may more effectively speak for Christ. As item 8 amongst the formal list of aims states

'We seek to praise the Lord together, to confess together our common faith, to witness together'.

As far as Fr. Thaddee is aware, this is a unique programme, at least at Catholic diocesan level (one may note in passing that there are a certain number of parochial exchanges or twinings in Europe across national and confessional boundaries). The partner churches have come from all the major Christian confessions, the first exchange having been with the Evangelical Reformed Church of Neuchatel in Switzerland and the most recent one with the Methodist Church of Great Britain, of which more will be said later in this article. Fr Thaddee stresses that some of the most fruitful exchanges have been with churches that might popularly be supposed to be most distant in style and ethos from the Roman Catholic Church; he instances those with the French Baptists and Mennonites as particularly significant. His understanding is eloquent testimony to the immense breadth of his own ecumenical approach and

sympathies. Fr Thaddee has a deep appreciation of the qualities of Christian heart and discipleship that these churches can bring to the oikoumene as a whole.

The emphasis in the exchanges is upon spiritual ecumenism rather than upon dialogue in the formal theological sense. It is not, of course, that Fr Thaddee is insensitive to the significance of the latter. Far from it, Irenikon has as one of its key functions the diffusion of news summaries of the achievements of the major inter-confessional bilateral dialogues. However, at the diocesan level, the emphasis is upon the sharing of a common discipleship and practice of Christian mission and service, upon making grass roots Christians aware of the same Christ operative in the lives of each others;’ communities. It is upon establishing relationships of live friendship within and through which we may have the confidence to engage in a real exchange of gifts in which we learn in humility to receive what Christ has to offer from one another. It is part of that vital preparation for ultimate unity of which Paul Couturier spoke so frequently, constantly reminding people that unity could not come through the work of theologians alone¹. Rather it requires a profound transformation of mindsets and relationships at every level of the Church, it is a matter of development within the *sensus fidelium*.

For the Week of Prayer of 2009, the Namur ecumenical commission chose the British Methodist Church as its partner, approaching David Carter, a Methodist local preacher with previous knowledge of and contacts with the Catholic Church in Belgium, as preacher for their diocesan unity service. From his end, he sought the blessing and support of his church through its World Church Office, responsible for relationships with overseas churches, both Methodist and of other confessions. Particular support was given through the Methodist European Reference Group, whose chair, Rev. Harvey Richardson, and officer, Colin Ride, gave warm support to the venture.

The rest of this article will be devoted to an account of the visit by a Belgian delegation to London and the return visit, during the Week of Prayer 2009, of a small group from British Methodism to the diocese of Namur, together with some concluding theological observations. It is hoped this will illustrate clearly the spiritual and ecumenical principles under-girding the Namur exchange programme.

The Belgian Visit.

Over the week-end of 24-27 October, a delegation of six from the ecumenical commission of the diocese of Namur visited British Methodism. As previously stated, a key aim of the preliminary visit to the partner church is the acquisition of a real feel for its distinctive contribution to the oikoumene and the preparation of a brochure acquainting the diocese with this. This particular visit was most certainly carried out in the spirit which Paul advocates in Romans 1:12 when he expresses his longing to visit the church in Rome in order that both he and the Roman Christians might be mutually encouraged.

The Belgian delegation delivered during their visit exactly as they had promised, showing a great eagerness to learn from the understanding and practice of mission and spirituality in contemporary British Methodism. They showed great interest in our experience and ethos and shared fully with us on the problems of mission in the similar contexts of both our countries in which the churches are faced with declining attendances and the need to preach the gospel

¹ Curtis, G. *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, London, 1964, p.83.

to those who are profoundly secularised and cannot normally be reached through more traditional forms of evangelism and church life.

The Group of six was led by Fr. Thaddee. It included a religious sister, Sr. Carmen of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a lay catechist, Isabella Wenisch, two priests, Jules Solot, dean of Rochefort and Christophe Collard, and a layman, Guy Fontaine de Ghelin, who works with handicapped folk. All are deeply engaged in the daily mission and service of the diocese.

David Carter met the group at their hotel and brought them to Methodist Church House to be greeted by Colin Ride, who, as Europe Secretary-World Church Relationships, had given valuable help with the preparations, and Chris Elliott, British Methodist Secretary for External Relations. The main item was a presentation by Graham Horsley on 'fresh expressions' of church which was greatly helped by a power point presentation with some French sub-titles². There was a good preliminary discussion of the issues in which we realised how many common problems we faced. Chris then spoke to us about the world church dimension of Methodism, stressing that every Methodist is *ipso facto* a member of the Missionary Society. One may add that one of the key features of both the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches is their sense of global missionary responsibility.

The Saturday was largely taken up with a visit to Wesley's Chapel at City Road, the oldest Methodist church in London, founded in 1777 by Wesley himself. The Rev. Jennifer Potter, assistant minister, accompanied us throughout the day. The group first met ecumenical partners from the nearby Anglican, Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, an event that gave the Group a flavour of English local ecumenism in a strong local churches together style context where excellent relationships between the clergy concerned have been fundamental. Jennifer also talked about the particular problems and opportunities of a large multicultural congregation. Later, they saw the Museum of Methodism, the Foundry Chapel and the main sanctuary all of which helped give the visitors some understanding of Methodist history and the enduring values which lie behind the search for fresh expressions of mission, worship and Church. The Group and David Carter expressed warm appreciation of Jennifer's wholehearted and generous giving of herself throughout this day from 10 am till about 5.30 pm. Over all our meals together, we were able to continue our discussions.

On the Sunday, the group was entertained by Shirley Methodist Church, an ordinary suburban London church, where the current chair of the European Group, Harvey Richardson, is minister. It attended the main morning service which was Guild Anniversary with a former minister, John Pritchard, preaching and conducting worship³. David Carter explained that certain features of this service were thus a little different from ordinary. The Namur Group was impressed by the large choir (now, as David explained, a relative rarity in our churches) and particularly by the integration of the hymnody and the prayers, the former, as one of them

² Fresh expressions of church is a new joint venture between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. It involves the encouragement of new forms of mission and Christian presence and worship in which those who are normally beyond the reach of traditional forms of church life and worship may be reached befriended and encouraged to explore the gospel and its claims. In some cases, it has resulted in a transformation of the lives of particular congregations as, for example, in small Methodist congregation in Cornwall which found new life and growth through involvement in a mission to local surf boarders.

³ The Wesley Guild was originally set up at the end of the nineteenth century for the benefit of young people who wanted to live on wider horizons than had been traditional in earlier Methodism and engage more with contemporary culture. Its meetings alternated between those of a devotional nature and those of a more cultural and recreational one. Today, the Guilds are more likely to have an elderly rather than a young membership but they survive in some vigour in many of our British Methodist churches.

said, leading very well into the latter. They met several of the congregation over coffee afterwards. The Church then kindly cooked us an excellent lunch at which they were joined by Harvey and by Paul Wright, a senior laymen and former French teacher, who was able to give the Namur group an excellent impression of the range of activities at the church, including those of the Guild which still meets weekly.

Harvey Richardson spoke of the centrality of class meetings, small groups meeting for prayer bible study and mutual counsel, within the serious and disciplined life of the Church⁴. He also stressed the continuing relevance of the Methodist understanding of and search for holiness whilst admitting that it had in some places become very attenuated. He spoke about his own spirituality and gave testimony to a continuing search for new forms of spiritual growth, a testimony very much in line with Wesley's own searching out of the spiritual riches of so many sources in his own time. The Group again expressed their deep appreciation of all of this.

In the evening the Group were entertained to supper by Professor Anne Stevens, an Anglican laywoman and professor of European Politics, and her husband, Handley, at their home where David Carter was staying. Both he and the Group were deeply appreciative of their kindness.

On the final morning, the Group first met the auxiliary bishop of the Catholic archdiocese of Westminster responsible for ecumenical matters, Bishop George Stack. Bishop George spoke to them of the ecumenical scene in the archdiocese and of the very warm relationships between the church leaders. They were then greeted by Martyn Atkins as General Secretary and Secretary of the Conference of the British Methodist Church, who spoke of his hope that existing ecumenical relations with the 'traditional' churches would be deepened, that new relationships with the black led and 'new' churches and movements would be developed and that, together, all the churches could address the urgent issue of mission in a deeply secularised society. After this, Michael King, from the World Church Office, spoke about his co-ordinating work in the world Church department and the problems of maintaining and deepening relations and co-operation with our seventy or so partner churches overseas.

Ken Howcroft, Assistant Secretary of the Conference and Ecumenical Officer, then reflected with the group on the practical recommendations contained within the final section of the most recent Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue report, *The Grace Given You in Christ*.⁵ He stressed the importance of seeing that these were acted upon at the local level. One may add that the Belgian decision to seek a link with British Methodism was particularly timely in view of the publication of this report in 2006, representing, as it did, an important stage in the theological and ecclesiological evolution of the dialogue and a new initiative in terms of the grass-roots reception of the maturing Roman Catholic-Methodist relationship. The current ninth quinquennium of the dialogue is now studying some of the thorniest issues in the understanding of ministry and sacraments which must ultimately fully engage the *sensus fidelium* in both communions⁶.

⁴ A key feature of early Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic. For a modern study see Watson, David Lowes *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, Nashville, 1992.

⁵ *The Grace Given You in Christ, Catholics and Methodists Reflect further on the Church*, published by the World Methodist Council, Lake Junaluska, 2006.

⁶ For some information about prospects, see my article, 'Catholic-Methodist Dialogue: Promise, Hope and Caution', *One in Christ*, vol. 42, no1, Summer 2008, pp. 148-170.

There was then a period for final reflection by the members of the group who expressed their gratitude for what for them they felt had been a most enriching experience. Points made included their discovery of the Wesleys and, in particular, of their adventurous flexibility and breadth of approach to mission, the value of hymn singing and its natural relationship to prayer, the emphasis upon the universality of the mission and the wide use of lay ministry as something important in its own right, an expression of the common baptismal vocation rather than as a stopgap when presbyteral ministry is unavailable! At about 1.30pm, they departed leaving those Methodists who had met them feeling also richly blessed through the experience of their visit.

A Theological Reflection.

This visit reinforced for me the conviction that the only true way to unity is through the humble and joyful acknowledgement and reception of the gifts that Christ and the Spirit have bestowed on our sister churches. The spirit in which our visitors came to us was almost a living icon of this charism.

Their attitude was sustained at each point in their joyful and grateful acceptance of everything that we could offer and it is from them that we hear again the voice of our own authentic Wesleyan tradition being spoken to us, in one sense from outside but in another from those who are now profoundly *with us* inside the one Body. We remember the call of the Conference of 1820 to ‘display the kind and catholic spirit of primitive Methodism to all denominations of Christians who hold the Head’ and the reminder of our own ecumenical pioneer, William Shrewsbury, that the Wesleys are the ‘debtors of all’⁷. (he mentioned the high churchmen of the seventeenth century, the Puritans, the continental pietists, especially the Moravians). Particularly relevant is the passage of para 97 of *The Grace Given You in Christ* which challenged our two traditions alike ‘to look each other in the eye with love and esteem and to acknowledge in each other what is truly of Christ and the Gospel, and thus of the Church.’

It will, I believe, be only when we can display such attitudes mutually and at every level in the Church, that unity will come, not forcedly from above but with total naturalness as we come in love and humility to let ourselves be challenged and yet also comforted by the witness of each other. It is then that we will want to receive the gifts held out to us as gifts given by the Lord *through* the ministry of others. When for example, we really love and esteem our United Reformed⁸, Anglican and Catholic sisters and brethren, then we will find our attitudes towards the exploration and reception of forms of the ministries of elder, bishop in historic succession and petrine office transformed and we will trust the Spirit to lead us together in the examination and authentic development of these things. As was said more than once during our meetings, things can never be settled by theological dialogue, important though it is, in isolation, but only in lived and growing communion in life and mission on the part of the whole people of God.

On more than one occasion, Fr. Thaddee told me that some of the most exciting visits for the Namur group have been those to churches, such as the French Baptists and Mennonites with

⁷ For the 1820 call of the Conference, see Simon, J.S. *A Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline*, London, 1923, pp. 268-9. For the thought of Shrewsbury, see my article ‘The Ecumenical Principles of William James Shrewsbury’ in *One in Christ*,

⁸ The United Reformed Church is the main reformed church in England, being a union of the former Presbyterian Church of England, the Congregationalist Church and the Disciples of Christ.

which they might previously have thought they would have little in common, only, through the visit to be surprised by joy at the richness of the witness to and service of Christ within those communities. Fr Thaddee is a living lesson to us all in his deep appreciation of the sheer variety of authentic witness to Christ across such disparate traditions which nevertheless all have their centre in the living Lord.

Conclusion.

In my opinion, this was an immensely valuable visit and it is to be hoped our links with the diocese of Namur can be kept going beyond next January and our return visit. It reinforces my view that the Methodist European Group might with advantage do more to discover and foster a variety of relationships with churches of all Christian traditions on the Continent and that such a development can contribute widely to the inseparable goals of both mission and unity. The Namur Commission are to be thanked for the way in which they have recalled us to some of the most enduring emphases and traditions of Methodism as a springboard for the renewal of our future common mission. We are grateful for the word spoken by the Lord to us through their ministry of ecumenical and Christian witness.

Grateful thanks were expressed both by the Namur Commission and by David Carter to all in British Methodism and its ecumenical partners who had helped with this visit.

The British Methodist Visit to Namur.

From 16 to 20 January, a small Methodist group made a return visit to Namur for the early part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Two of those invited were unable to join the group which, in the end, consisted of just three people, Rev. Alison Geary, superintendent minister and formerly minister of the joint Roman Catholic-Methodist church in Nelson, Rev. Harvey Richardson, superintendent minister of the Croydon Circuit and chair of the Methodist European Reference Group, and David Carter.

The group travelled out on 16 Jan and were lodged in the guesthouse of the famous monastery of Chevetogne. Its guide and companion throughout the visit was Fr. Thaddee Barnas. Fr. Theodore, a Dutchman and also deacon in the Community, acted as our chauffeur and to both of them we express our heartfelt thanks for their time and friendship so splendidly lavished upon us throughout the trip. Fr Thaddee has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the churches of all traditions. Most impressive of all is his understanding of those radical Protestant churches which would normally be seen as furthest from his own church. He understands the riches of their very different forms of spirituality, admires the contributions that they make to the oikoumene and understands the hurts they have experienced and hence their continuing reservations in relationships with his own church. To be with Fr. Thaddee is to be educated in the broadest possible ecumenism.

We were confronted with an extremely full and richly varied programme in which all the members of the Commission who had visited us in London played a role. We began with a supper at the presbytery of Fr Christophe Collard, a capable and energetic young priest in suburban Namur. On Sunday morning, we attended mass at his church where we were warmly welcomed. At the end of the service, Fr Christophe held a special childrens' mass attended by several dozen children of infants' school age, some from outside of the parish as he is apparently one of relatively few priests' to hold such a service which contains the main elements of the Mass but in appropriately simplified language.

On Saturday morning, Fr Thaddee held a Round Table at Chevetogne, at which we were introduced and answered questions about Methodism which, of course, is little known in Belgium. At this and later events, we were impressed with the degree of lively interest shown in an unfamiliar tradition, the desire to learn from it and to explore it. Everywhere we were well entertained and plied with plenty to eat, one highpoint of this being perhaps on the Monday at Rochefort, a local tourist spot, where we seemed to have endless excellent coffee, a very nice lunch in the local equivalent of a lunch club and a very nice evening meal at which there was some sort of champagne and a local delicacy, a sort of scrambled egg with bits of bacon and ham. Another highpoint was when Jehanne Dupont, a member of the Commission who had been unable to come to London because of illness, and her sister, Genevieve, entertained us to Sunday lunch at their family home.

We were impressed with the very rounded view of the life of the diocese presented through the various parishes and activities that we visited. We saw plenty of evidence both of serious spiritual renewal and of fruitful Christian community involvement and service. At a video presented to us at the Premonstratensian abbey in Dinant we were reminded of the essential symbiosis between them. The canons were presented as constantly returning in prayer to the source that provides their essential spiritual nourishment and yet being driven out, burning with love to serve others in the parishes for which they are responsible.

Belgium is country rich in religious communities and orders both old and new. We visited the abbey in Dinant, as already mentioned, and were shown round by Pere Bruno Dumoulin, a man so obviously in love with Christ and happy with his vocation. We also went to the new community at Tiberiade, deep in the countryside, and heard the story of its foundation thirty years ago by Brother Marc Piret. This is a largely lay community with over twenty brothers and six sisters, living from farming and from gifts. It is largely a community of younger adults working mainly amongst the young. It sends members out a week at a time in order to work in schools, often amongst children who know little of the Christian faith. It lives an austere life of prayer, more austere than that of some traditional religious communities. The members begin the day at 6.15 am with an hour of silent prayer and continue the day with other offices, an hour of lectio divina (in their case always biblical) and a later hour of spiritual reading from the lives or writings of one of the saints. Recent missions have resulted in the establishment of two other communities, following the same rule, in Lithuania and the Philippines. On 20, after the others had returned to England, David Carter was taken to a lay community, run in the franciscan spirit, in Bastogne. This works more like a third order with the members still fully engaged in their daily professional, social and family lives in the community but meeting regularly for study and prayer together.

The sheer spiritual energy and commitment of these varied communities was deeply impressive.

We heard about service in the community, particularly of the poor and the marginalized, in two main contexts. The first was in the parish of St Jean-Baptiste/St Loup where, with the help of the pastor, Fr. Paul Malherbe, a dynamic parish council has mobilised a very considerable number of lay people with a strong emphasis upon what Methodism would call 'the ministry of the whole people of God' and on collaborative ministry. Emphasis is placed alike on their role in the preparation of worship and in giving particular attention to the needs of the poorest in the world, whether locally or further afield.

The second was at Rochefort, famous for many years for an orphanage run by the daughters of charity. When, in 1974, changing circumstances made it difficult for this to continue, the sisters, aided by a large number of lay folk, took the initiative in turning the building into the Centre Accueil Famenne and the Foyer St Vincent which now, with the aid of a small permanent staff and a much larger number of volunteers maintain a plethora of activities serving the whole community. There is a homework club in which volunteer local teachers help children, a lunch club, largely for the elderly and particularly as a place for those on their own. There are classes of all sorts. A lot of work is done amongst the marginalised and there is a sort of sheltered housing complex for those in need of refuge and care such as battered women.

The diocesan Unity service was held on Monday 19. Jan with David Carter preaching and Alison Geary making an appeal on behalf of a children's charity in Zimbabwe to which, on our recommendation, the collection was given. The church concerned has Fr. Jules Solot, another member of the Commission, as its rector. Fr Jules is the director of diaconal training for the diocese and was formerly professor of sacramentology at the diocesan seminary. We had the pleasure of meeting the auxiliary bishop, Mgr. Pierre Warin; later, on 20, David, accompanied by Thaddee and Christophe, met the diocesan bishop, Mgr. Andre Leonard.

We also attended a unity week service at the Protestant church in Namur on 18 Jan where we were received by its Congolese pastor, Luc Lukusa. We noted with interest that, though Roman Catholicism is, as elsewhere in Belgium, numerically the overwhelmingly strong Christian tradition, every effort is made to involve both the United Protestant Church and smaller independent evangelical churches in ecumenical activities and that Fr. Thaddee is tireless in forming appropriate links.

In the reception after the Rochefort service, I met a relative of one of Belgium's greatest ecumenical pioneers, the founder of Chevetogne, Dom Lambert Beaudouin. Dom Lambert was, in his time-well before Vatican II, persecuted for his ecumenical activities. Belgian Catholics today live faithfully after his example and conformably with the teaching of Vatican II that they should learn from everything in the life of the Orthodox and Protestant churches that can enrich their own Christian living. I have recently been reading, with great profit, the inspiring story of his life and of the very real price he paid personally for his efforts in promoting ecumenism in the years well before Vatican II, suffering exile from his own monastery for almost twenty years before being allowed back⁹!

Consequences and Conclusion.

We British Methodists now need time carefully to reflect upon all that we have heard and seen and to begin to contemplate the lessons that could be drawn for our own church and ecumenical life.

The return visit reinforced the impression we had already gained in the course of the Belgians' October visit, that our two churches face many of the same problems, ageing membership, smaller congregations, increasing secularisation and an enormous missionary challenge, especially where younger people are concerned. There are elements of actual

⁹ Mortiaux, J. and Loonbeek, R. *Dom Lambert Beaudouin, visionnaire et precurseur*, Paris, 2005, gives an excellent account of Dom Lambert's life. As far as I know, there is no English translation as yet of this book.

hostility to the Gospel in both countries, in UK from a certain increasing degree of militant atheism, in Belgium rather more from a traditional strain of anti-clericalism.

Nevertheless, in the diocese of Namur, there are clear new shoots of spiritual growth and a robust determination to take the gospel to young people and to live a servant lifestyle for the benefit of the marginalised. We can learn from this and draw both comfort and inspiration from it. The rapid numerical decline in British Methodism over the last generation and a half has discouraged many and British Methodists need to remember that such decline is not inevitable and certainly not universal!

For some time, I have personally felt that British Methodism would benefit from more contact with and learning from continental churches of other Christian traditions. I feel we have certainly learnt something from the diocese of Namur and would do so from other continental churches. In much of Europe, the new religious communities of varying styles, are playing an important role in renewal. Few, with the exception of the Focolare Movement, yet have much presence in UK though I suspect this will change. In the meantime, we should think of ways in which we might contact them in Europe and learn from them¹⁰.

Recent developments within ecumenism point to the importance of learning from each other and being enriched by each others' life. The *Receptive Ecumenism* conferences held at Durham have stressed this¹¹. The most recent report of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue, *The Grace Given You in Christ* shows both churches challenging *themselves* to learn from each other and suggests a programme of practical contacts and interchange as a way to advance in mutual love and understanding. The local and national churches are challenged to take this up.

Our British future is likely to become more and more European as economic reality dictates that a nearby market of 500 million plus cannot be ignored by a country of 60 million on an offshore island. We will need to understand these churches, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox better in order to witness better to Christ together.

Above all, contacts of this sort bring our fellowship in Christ alive. We see that other Christians, however much we might differ on some theological opinions and on aspects of church order and liturgical practice, do share the same basic trinitarian faith and the same desire to proclaim Christ and to serve him in others¹². We can certainly love alike even if in some things we do not yet all think alike. The Belgians spoke back to us in deed and in bearing out of our *own* tradition, manifesting that truly 'catholic spirit' which Wesley and the Conference of 1820 commended, in their welcoming of us and their affirmation of our life

¹⁰ For an introduction to a few of these communities, see the three essays by Timothy Watson, Sr. Muriel d'Hoffschmidt CCN and Dave Bookless in Woodruff, M. *The Unity of Christians, the Vision of Paul Couturier*, London, 2003, pp. 109-123.

¹¹ See Murray, P (ed) *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, Oxford, 2008.

¹² John Wesley distinguished between fundamental and non-negotiable doctrines that went to the core of the faith and what he called 'opinions' over which Christians might reasonably differ. To a degree this distinction corresponds with the Roman Catholic one between doctrines that occupy the highest point in the hierarchy of truths and those that are at a lower level in it. For Catholics, of course, even those truths that are 'lower' in the hierarchy of truths nevertheless remain as part of the deposit of faith to be believed. Further dialogue may clarify the exact relationship between the teaching of the two churches on this but the fact remains that on the key fundamentals of the historic creeds, there is agreement. The late Methodist ecumenist, David Butler, calculated from a comparison of the catechism of the Catholic Church with authoritative sources that Methodists would assent to 93% of the catechism, a figure David Carter quoted when asked a question about the extent of common belief during the recent trip to Namur.

and contribution to the Christian whole. It is to be hoped that these contacts can be maintained and strengthened.

We owe an immense debt to the diocese of Namur and particularly its Ecumenical Commission for taking the initiative that led to this fruitful mutual discovery!

David Carter.

(Note: The opinions expressed, particularly in 'Conclusions and Consequences', are David's own personal opinions which he hopes may be of use both to Methodism and our ecumenical partners in contemplating the value of such links for the future. In no way do they represent an official Methodist statement. David wishes,, however, to express his thanks to Chris Elliott and to the Methodist European Group, particularly Colin Ride and Harvey Richardson, for the support and encouragement given him in following up the original invitation from Namur and in all the subsequent planning.)