

In November 1975 'Informal Talks' took place in Rome at the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. These arose out of earlier discussions between the Secretary-General of the Anglican Consultative Council (Bishop Joyn Howe) and the President of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (Cardinal Jan Willebrands) on the desirability of an annual liaison meeting of Anglicans and Roman Catholics outside the (relatively narrow) context of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission and the Anglican/Roman Catholic Commission on the Theology of Marriage and its application to Mixed Marriages. Their purpose was to exchange information and views, to discuss common concerns, and if necessary to propose action to the respective authorities.

These first 'Informal Talks' were co-ordinated by Bishop Howe and Mgr. William Purdy of the Secretariat. Also present for part or whole of the time were: Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli (Secretariat for Non-Christians); Mgr. Charles Moeller (Secretariat for Unity); Bishop Gerald Mahon (Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster); Fr. John Long, SJ (Secretariat for Unity); Archbishop David Somerville (Archbishop of New Westminster, Vancouver); Bishop John Taylor (Bishop of Winchester); Bishop Edward Knapp-Fisher (Archdeacon of Westminster); Canon Michael Moore (Archbishop of Canterbury's Counsellors on Foreign Relations).

The main subject under discussion was the question of the ordination of women and the following observation and two recommendations were made:

"We see no ground for supposing that the ordination of women by Anglicans need prejudice the efforts of our two Communion to find organic union with one another.

"Given that member churches of the Anglican Communion are almost certain to ordain women priests in the next few years, we recommend a consultation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics - not to discuss whether or not it is right to ordain women, but to try to find to what extent and in what ways churches with women priests and churches without can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship. /

"We are however aware of the difficulty that this issue may pose for the Orthodox Church, and we also recommend that the ordination of women be considered by the Anglican/Orthodox Commission."

The second 'Informal Talks' took place in Rome a year later, November 1976. Their principal subjects were the Report of the Third Meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, and the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission's Agreed Statement Authority in the Church. The previous year's recommendation of a Consultation on the relation between churches which do ordain women and those which do not was endorsed.

Later in the same month the Plenary Session of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity agreed that such a Consultation should take place. In May 1977 the Anglican Consultative Council, meeting near London, also agreed to the proposal that a Consultation should consider:

To what extent and in what ways Churches with women priests and Churches without women priests can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship.

Practical matters were discussed between Bishop Howe, myself, Fr. Pierre Duprey, WF and Mgr. Purdy (both of the Secretariat for Unity) at the Chichester meeting of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission last September. There was further discussion at the third 'Informal Talks' in Rome last October, where it was again accepted that the basis would be the recommendation of 1975. Nevertheless Bishop Ramon Torrella (Vice-President, Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity) pointed out that the Holy Office declaration Women and the Priesthood (January 1977) could not be ignored. It was agreed that the document had changed the situation and must be taken account of.

The appointment of members has been made by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Secretary-General and President (the Archbishop of Canterbury) of the Anglican Consultative Council respectively.

CJH