

British Methodists to join Anglicans

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LONDON -- The leader of the Methodist Church of Great Britain says his denomination is now ready to rejoin the Church of England after a separation of more than two centuries.

The Rev. David Gamble, president of the Methodist Conference, told the Church of England's General Synod last week (Feb. 11) that "we are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in our mission, but for the sake of our mission."

That mission, he said, is to "serve the needs" of the kingdom of God.

It is not the first time that a reunion of the two churches has been proposed, but previous efforts have been torpedoed by a variety of divisions, including over the role of women in the church.

The Methodists approved a merger in 1972, but the Church of England backed off because of opposition from Anglo-Catholics, which led the Anglican synod to reject reunion at that time.

Methodism sprang from the 18th-century evangelical teachings of John Wesley, himself an Anglican priest. But when Wesley died in 1791, the Methodists broke away from the rest of the Anglicans and went their own way.

There was no immediate official response from the Church of England about the Methodists' latest offer, but Anglican Bishop Christopher Cocksworth of Coventry conceded there would be "cultural clashes" ahead.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is likely to touch, perhaps in depth, on the subject of reunification when he addresses the Methodist Conference in June.

Membership in the Methodist Church in Britain has slumped in recent years and now stands at some 265,000, spread across 5,800 chapels and parishes. By comparison, the Church of England regularly draws an estimated 960,000 to its Sunday services.

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