A Holy Alliance

Known as ‘fish and chips’ because they’re always found together and in the newspaper, David Sheppard and Derek Worlock have an unusual mission. Liverpool’s bishops – one Anglican, one Roman Catholic – are fighting for its salvation – and they don’t believe that wearing a dog collar should stop them getting their hands dirty.

By Andro Linklater

It was a combination of golden syrup and Roman Catholicism which sustained the Vauxhall district of Liverpool for most of this century. The worst and best of the city is to be found in the dense network of streets which make up this area. Some of the bleakest scenes in Alan Bleasdale’s Boys From The Blackstuff were filmed against its crumbling buildings, and unemployment has hovered close to 50 per cent since the nearby Tate & Lyle factory was closed six years ago.

Yet for more than a century it has been home to a close-knit Irish Catholic community, and when they began an ambitious rebuilding scheme in 1982, it was natural that the local Catholic church of Our Lady in the Eldon Road should have been their first headquarters. When the time came, last year, to lay the foundation stone, it was equally understandable that they should have invited the Catholic archbishop of Liverpool, Derek Worlock, to attend the ceremony. What was astonishing was that the stone was actually laid by a Protestant cleric, the city’s Anglican bishop, David Sheppard.

‘We owed a hell of a lot to those two bishops,’ declared Tony McGann, chairman of the Eldon Community Association. ‘If I had my way, they’d get the Nobel peace prize every year. They fought to keep the Tate & Lyle factory open, and they stood by us against the Militants when they tried to close us down. It wasn’t one or other of them that helped most, it was both of them together.’

Togetherness is what Worlock and Sheppard have advocated and practised for the last 12 years. They both preach ecumenism, or the communion of faiths, often from the same pulpit, they lobby businessmen and politicians in tandem, attack racism and social injustice with a single voice. Worlock frequently visits Sheppard and his wife, Grace, and two years ago they all holidayed together in Assisi. Now they have jointly
An unlikely combination, David Sheppard (left) and Derek Worlock, Liverpool's Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, nevertheless believe that they are Better Together.
written the story of their partnership as bishops of Britain's poorest city in a book entitled, unsurprisingly, *Better Together.* Apparently, not even the strains of joint authorship have dented their friendship.

'I usually wrote the first draft of each chapter, after we had discussed it at length together,' Sheppard says. 'But I found that I wrote with great freedom, knowing how much we agreed on what we wanted to say.'

'I could recognise what David thought before he thought it,' Worlock confirms. 'Of course we've listened to so many of each other's speeches that we each know all the other's stories. Still,' he added, nodding towards his partner, 'you continue to smile magnificently at some of my corniest ones.'

Nevertheless, the alliance of two such prominent churchmen is too unusual not to attract comment. To their admirers they are 'the Merseyside miracle', and to sceptics 'fish and chips' (because they are always found together and in the newspaper), but to many traditionalists they are nothing less than traitors to their faiths. Sheppard is criticised for ignoring the main body of Anglicans in favour of the poor, the blacks and the Catholics, while Worlock is subjected to dyspeptic abuse from Auberon Waugh, who describes him as 'ambitious, a schemer, utterly bogus', because of his ecumenical views. At least part of this hostility springs from the sheer unlikelihood of a partnership between men of such divergent backgrounds and personalities. Sheppard comes from the evangelical and radical wing of the Church of England, while Worlock retains a conservative respect for the church's authority. And as important as the doctrinal divisions - they still disagree on such matters as the ordination of women (Sheppard is in favour) - are the differences in character.

At 59, David Sheppard remains instantly recognizable as the tall, broad-shouldered cricketing hero of the 1950s who periodically left his work in an inner-city parish to score a century against the Australians. His thick hair is streaked with silver now, and spectacles frame his blue eyes, but he still displays a large, eager enthusiasm which is perhaps more curate-like than episcopal.

'When you see them in action for any length of time,' Alfred Stocks, chief executive of Liverpool City Council from 1973 to 1986, pointed out, 'their different characteristics become obvious. One's impulsive, the other's more thoughtful. One says, 'Come on, let's do it.' The other says, 'Hang on, let's think out what the implications are first.' Put them together, they can achieve far more than they could separately.'

Towards Worlock, his elder by 10 years, Sheppard exhibits a protective gentleness which, one senses, is due not so much to the former's physical fragility - the effect of a serious illness some months ago - as to the vulnerability of a shy and clever man. Worlock began his priesthood as secretary to three successive cardinals, and his reputation as a skilful administrator has not been entirely erased by subsequent service in Stepney and as Bishop of Portsmouth.

'Having been a priest for nearly 44 years now,' he confesses, 'I would say that my happiest time was in Stepney, and the hardest wound I have had to sustain is that people say, 'Of course, he's a great administrative man', while I would love to think of myself as an intensely pastoral man, deeply concerned with the individual's needs.'

Before Basil Hume's appointment as Archbishop of Westminster, Worlock was the favourite to succeed Cardinal Heenan, and it may well have been this bureaucratic reputation which tipped the balance against him. It would, however, be hard to imagine a better balance to Sheppard's energy and drive than his clarity of thought and sharp wit.

What brought them together was Liverpool. Sheppard was the first to arrive, having come there in late 1975 from being Bishop of Woolwich, and he was quick to welcome Worlock when he was appointed archbishop in February 1976.

'I think I was the first person at your house after you arrived,' he reminds Worlock. 'The ecumenical partnership with the Catholics was more important to me than anything. Liverpool was not a very far cry from Belfast.'

The city's sectarian rivalries were symbolised by its two great cathedrals. The Anglican, designed by Gilbert Scott in 1904, was to be the biggest in the world, and as Liverpool then had more millionaires than any British city outside London, this goal did not seem too ambitious. In the 1920s the Catholics responded with a plan from Sir Edwin Lutyens for a still more gigantic edifice with a dome larger than St Peter's and a crypt big enough to house four ordinary churches. This rivalry was repeated at a more basic and dangerous level with the harassment of Catholics by Orangemen and the creation of Catholic and Protestant ghettos on either side of the Scotland Road. Worlock and Sheppard's predecessors kept the tension in check, but in 1930 when Lutyens suggested to the then Anglican bishop that he should join his Catholic counterpart in a procession between the two cathedrals, the bishop replied crisply, 'You are thinking in centuries.'

The march took place less than half a century later in 1977, when the bishops led their congregations from the Anglican cathedral along the half-mile road, appropriately named Hope Street, which led to the Catholic cathedral. The breakthrough resulted from a moment of crisis when, as they put it, they met 'at the foot of the cross'. For Worlock, the impact of Liverpool's poverty and the suffering caused by dilapidated housing and lack of jobs had been almost overwhelming. He was close to despair when, on Good Friday 1976, Sheppard telephoned to talk to him about the meaning of the day and of Christ's death upon the cross. If it was typical of Sheppard to make the first move, it was no less characteristic of Worlock to see its wider significance. "The Lord gave me 10 happy years as Bishop of Portsmouth with the River Itchen and the New Forest to enjoy," he says wryly, "then I had to exchange them for Liverpool - but he gave me David too."
By 1976 the war and economic decline had halted Liverpool's cathedral rivalry. The Catholics had commissioned a smaller building, which was completed in 1967, and poverty delayed the completion of the Anglican cathedral until 1978. When the Queen came to the consecration, Sheppard ensured that Worlock had a part in the ceremony. Four years later the compliment was repaid when Pope John Paul II came to Liverpool and Worlock arranged for him to visit the Anglican cathedral before celebrating Mass in the Catholic cathedral. In 1985 their ecumenical commitment was enshrined in a covenant celebrated by a service begun in one cathedral and concluded in the other. Halfway down Hope Street, Sheppard looked back at the crowd still streaming out of the Catholic cathedral towards the Anglican. 'Even if we wanted to turn back now,' he said to Worlock, 'I don't think the people would let us.'

Such processions are only the peaks of a great ecumenical range. Not only have they promoted the growth of bodies such as the Merseyside Churches' Ecumenical Council, which includes the Methodists and Baptists, they have built churches in Widnes and Warrington which both faiths share and encouraged cooperation between congregations in other parishes. As Pat Jones of the Catholic Pastoral Formation said, 'They set the example by making ecumenism a priority, and if you make something a priority it gets done.'

As a cricketer, Sheppard was slow to develop, but once convinced of his own ability, he could come to the wicket with almost no practice and play the best bowlers in the world, as he did in 1956 when his score of 113 against the Australians helped England retain the Ashes. So too, once he accepted that the battle against social injustice was as much a Christian duty as preaching the gospel, nothing could shake him.

'We went to the East End of London,' he says, 'I was totally apolitical, believing that Christ could change an individual, who could change another individual, and eventually you'd change the world. But being in the East End made me believe that God the Creator cares about the structure of society and the quality of life that people are allowed to have.'

That attitude, which Worlock shared, made it inevitable that they would be drawn into the battle to save Liverpool's jobs after Mrs Thatcher's economic policies began to bite. The docks were run down, more factories closed, and unemployment soared. In addition, there was racial strife in 1981 with the Toffeeth riots, and two years later Militant Tendency seized control of the ruling Labour group on the city council.

To respond adequately to this unprecedented barrage of catastrophes presented an almost insuperable challenge. Despite the bishops' intervention factories were closed, their presence in the streets of Toffeeth did not douse the flames, and Militant Tendency ignored their protests against its divisive policies. Neither of them glosses over these facts. 'There's a terrific longing that Christianity should provide an insurance of success and prosperity,' Sheppard acknowledges. 'It doesn't seem to me that we were promised that, but there's the promise of Christ going with us on the journey.'

Nevertheless, the fact that they did intervene, not simply by preaching from the pulpit, but by lobbying businessmen and politicians in their offices, and by talking to policemen and rioters in the streets, had a crucial effect. From each side of the fissures which threatened to split the city apart, they were perceived as a positive force for unity.

'Ecumenism?' a docker remarked when asked its meaning. 'I suppose it means those bishops fighting to keep our jobs.'

As chief executive, Alfred Stocks put their work into perspective: 'Liverpool can fracture very easily,' he insists, 'but the fact that they can work together has a remarkably unifying effect. If collaboration can happen between those two religious factions, it can happen in industry, in race and in politics.'

Perhaps it is only in the area of politics that their mission of reconciliation can be said to have failed. In October 1985, as Militant Tendency's confrontation with the government threatened to bankrupt the city, the bishops launched a withering attack upon the movement's policies, which were souring race relations and breaking up communities like that around Eldon Road. The onslaught helped to discredit Militant, and to this day Tony Mulhearn, one of its leaders, finds their attitude unforgivable. 'When the going got rough, they stabbed us in the back and ran for cover,' he said bitterly. 'If Jesus Christ had been alive today, He would have belonged to the Labour group on the council, and He would have been betrayed and crucified like the rest of us.' In Liverpool politics, such language is not uncommon, and indicates the importance of peace-makers in the city.

With Militant defeated, and the first signs of economic recovery appearing, the bishops have now formed the Michaelmas Group to encourage initiative. But it is not so much to business that they look as to communities like Eldon Road. 'That's where the real hope is,' Worlock declares. 'Just as the spirit of Christianity is irreplaceable so is the spirit of the community.'

The proof of it is to be found in the space opposite the Eldon Road church. Once it was occupied by the Tate & Lyle sugar factory. Now it is where over 100 families in the Eldon Community Association will build their new homes. All it took was seven years of unremitting effort — and two bishops.

Better Together by David Sheppard and Derek Worlock is to be published by Hodder & Stoughton, £6.95.