

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND FORUM

SWANWICK, DERBYSHIRE

7th - 9th September 2009

The triennial forum of Churches Together in England took place at the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick taking the theme *Changing World: Changing Church?* The moderator of the forum was Bishop Declan Lang, Catholic Diocese of Clifton, and the deputy moderator was Val Potter, County Ecumenical Officer of Dorset. Nearly three hundred delegates were present at the forum from the thirty one churches that are members of the CTE.

General Secretary's Report

David Cornick, CTE General Secretary gave what was for him his first report to the CTE since his appointment in 2008. His presentation enumerated achievements of the ecumenical movement and suggestions for future direction against a backdrop of the biblical story of the Hebrews as slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt and their subsequent liberation.

David highlighted five achievements of ecumenism.

First, on a world scale, the evolution of the World Council of Churches has played a significant role in helping us understand the universality of the gospel, and the ways it both transcends and blends with cultures. The links all our denominations and parishes have with churches across the world remind us that we are part of a growing energetic faith, and we in our turn are learning painfully what it means to be a missionary church in a culture which bears just a superficial Christian veneer.

Second, we have grown together in England in love and understanding and commitment to each other. We have not completely healed the rifts within Protestantism which were a product of our post-Reformation history, but we have made genuine, tangible progress. One way of measuring that is united congregations, but a more significant one is probably our instinct to do things together at a local level, and the commitment of church leaders to each other in church leaders' meetings.

Third, the Roman Catholic Church has been an important and significant partner in the ecumenical enterprise for the last 20 years since the Swanwick Declaration of 1987.

Fourth, the English Christian scene has changed profoundly over the past two decades, particularly but not exclusively in our cities and larger towns. The historic churches have continued to experience what seems on the surface to be decline, but which might on a more rigorous inspection be changing patterns of religious commitment and behaviour.

But whilst that has been going on, the world church has arrived. There are now 31 denominations in membership of CTE. Caribbean and African Pentecostalism, various branches of the Orthodox communion which in origin at least are ethnic, are growing and influencing the shape of Christian engagement profoundly. All of that makes ecumenism more complicated, but there is a real sense of delight that they want to be around the table with their fellow Christians.

Fifth, churches have been engaged in theological conversations with each other, with some astonishing results. I do realise that some people regard this part of ecumenical vision as less interesting than watching paint dry, so I'll limit myself to one observation. The ostensible reason for the Reformation was that Martin Luther believed himself justified not by good works but by faith. Justification by faith became the touchstone of the division between Protestantism and Catholicism. In 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which states theological agreement on the matter and noting that the doctrine should no longer be regarded as church dividing.

Those five realities are part of the remarkable, tangible success story of the ecumenical movement, and it is important that we remember that gift to us, that we recall what God has done. It is not like it was. Once we feared and hated each other. It's no longer like that, thanks be to God.

Oddly, I think we are the victims of that success. Some of the frustration and disappointment that people now feel about ecumenism is that we haven't achieved more. Looking back it is one of ironies of church history that the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference of 1964 which called on the churches to unite by Easter 1980 issued its challenge just two months before Vatican II promulgated *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree on Ecumenism. Had the timing been slightly different a more inclusive form of ecumenism might have been created at a critical point, but it wasn't.

We need to remind ourselves that the achievements far outweigh the disappointments. England's unique ecumenical history over the past thirty years has given it a structure which is comprehensive and envied across the ecumenical world. There are nearly 900 Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and new ones keep coming into being. There are thousands of CT groups in towns, villages and cities across the country, serviced and supported by 63 intermediate bodies, composed of regional church leaders, some with a full-time officer, some with a part-time officer, and some with a spare-time officer. And nationally CTE exists to support those intermediate officers and encourage the English churches to work together at every level. That is not to say that it is strong, or that it is perfect – far from it. But it is there, and in many places it punches above its weight, from very slender resources.

Cardinal Kasper has made the point that it is precisely the success of the ecumenical movement which has created what seems like the present watershed in ecumenism. What keeps us divided are the big issues – primacy, episcopacy, the eucharist – and none of those are amenable to the quick fix. The question is, therefore, what we do in the

meantime, in the interim period before the unity which God wills for the church comes about in whatever form the Spirit gives.

Let me make a few suggestions.

1. Unity is for mission

It is much easier to do things together than to talk about God together. Deep things don't come naturally to English lips, but we're pretty good at spotting needs and doing something about it. Sure Mary chose the better part, but you'd rather have Martha organising the night shelter. Doing things together – a night shelter, an after school club, a drop-in centre, a youth club, a lunch club – create bonds of friendship and trust, and friendship and trust are the essential to building relationships and ecumenism is crafted from relationships. Sharing together in mission will inevitably help us grow together in Christ.

2. Be open to the gifts God is giving

One of the most important ecumenical developments of recent decades is the realisation that God has coped with the sinfulness of our division across the centuries not by chiding us, but by giving us gifts. God is by nature overwhelmingly generous. Grace overflows, and in our divisions we have been given gifts. Denominationalism has not been a cul-de-sac. Cardinal Kasper has suggested that after a century and more of ecumenical contact the question we need to ask is not 'What gifts does my church have to give?', but 'What gifts could my church receive? How might we be enriched by the gifts that God has given other Christian communities?' That needs to happen at every level of ecumenical encounter.

3. Be open to doing things differently

The title of this Forum is 'Changing world: changing church?' I was once minister of a church that decided it needed to change its hymnbook. The process took diplomatic skills which would not have disgraced Her Majesty's Ambassador to Iran. Change and church are rarely seen in the same sentence. But we have changed, and we continue to change, hopefully under the guidance of the Spirit. We changed profoundly at Swanwick in 1987 when at Cardinal Hume's prompting the churches declared 'It is our conviction that, as a matter of policy at all levels and in all places, our churches must now move from co-operation to clear commitment to each other, in search of the unity for which Christ prayed and in common evangelism and service of the world.'

Three years later CTE was formed to help the churches make that change real in England. Its founder members committed themselves to a united pilgrimage:

'...to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and

To fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world,
To the glory of God..’

No longer were Councils of Churches to do things on behalf of the churches. True ecumenism was the churches doing things together. The philosophy of ‘Churches Together’ is simple. It is what it says on the tin. CTE is a very small agency which exists to help the churches be together and do together.

In conclusion, let me return to that amazing controlling story of the Bible, the work of the Lord of the brickyard. Pharaoh’s oppressive rule, a cycle of repression and increasing economic demands, is replaced by God’s way and God’s economy. So, ‘we’ll cut off the supply of straw but still demand the same number of bricks’ is replaced with the ten commandments. They are about relationships – with God, with each other – and built in, some would say as the controlling principle – the Sabbath, the rest at the heart of things.

Ecumenism is in the business of relationships, of space and time for each other within the divine economy, of being able to receive Christ from each other through the gifting of the Spirit, of growing into God together. Get the spirituality and the theology right, and the appropriate structures will follow. And that is about mission, because the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee lie at the heart of the story of the people of God. Mission is about sharing in the life of God, and relationships with others and the created world.

Ecumenism too is about relationships, about cherishing each other, being with each other, receiving Christ from each other. It is about space and time for each other and for God. In that sense it is no optional extra, but part of the reality of what it means to be the church of God. If the churches have the will to make the churches together model work, it could deliver that.

CTE Presidents Signing the Covenant

This was the first formal occasion that Archbishop Vincent Nichols attended as one of the four CTE presidents and so there was a signing of the personal covenant by him along with the other presidents. The covenant states:

We rejoice that the Churches in England are steadily growing closer in mutual trust and respect. As Presidents of Churches Together in England we have in common many joys and hopes, and we have much to offer and to receive from one another in the rich diversity of our traditions. ...We undertake

*to develop our mutual friendship and support,
to pray, study and work together for the unity and mission of the Church,
to consult together on issues affecting the common good,
to promote justice, integrity and peace,
to speak with one voice to give common witness to Jesus Christ, as far as we are able.*

We pray God to lead us, with all our sisters and brothers in Christ, towards communion in faith, life and witness; so that, united in one body by the one Spirit, we may together witness to the perfect unity of his love.



L to R: Archbishop Vincent Nichols, Commissioner Elizabeth Matear, Bishop Nathan Hovhanissian, and Archbishop Rowan Williams.

Four Stories

There were four presentations providing examples of local responses to national or global issues.

i) action on climate change – Helen Boothroyd of Churches Together in Cumbria explained how the local churches were addressing this issue by raising awareness through a leaflet, *God, Nature and Climate Change*, dvd and website www.churchestogethercumbria.co.uk/ccacc . There was also practical action in which the churches took action to reduce their carbon footprint and to link with other organisations and individuals in public life to raise awareness and help communities reduce their carbon footprint.

ii) doing church differently – Viv Prescott of the Salvation Army from the Forest of Dean explained how a fresh expression of church was introduced to two existing small ageing Anglican and URC church communities in a village near Cinderford through a more youthful contribution from the Salvation Army. An LEP was formed and gradually there was growth and new life in the local Christian community and eventually the church became the first place of call for when there was a crisis in the community as well

as a prominent involvement in other community activities. All this was underpinned through prayer by all the Christians.

iii) who is my neighbour? – an account was given, in question and answer format, of the operation of street pastors in Birmingham. This was an example of the church being taken into the community.

iv) building bridges – Andy Williams, a Baptist minister, talked about churches making and developing contact with members of other faith communities in Burnley following riots in 2001. Every school in a new secondary system now has a ‘faith space’ along with faith friends (a concept of chaplaincy). Faith leaders meet regularly and promote interfaith dialogue in the community including the formation of young people’s and women’s groups and social events such as shared meals in which members from different faiths participate. A faith leadership group has also undertaken visits to London, Brussels and the Holy Land.

A common theme in these stories is the partnerships that churches working together have forged with statutory bodies such as local authorities and other agencies, the police for example, as appropriate. The facilitator concluded the session remarking that although there is a changing world it is always the same God. There is emerging a concern for God’s creation, hospitality is both open and radical and in loving your neighbour whilst people are different we share a common humanity. Forgiveness and reconciliation, core themes of Christianity, are at the heart of much practical ecumenism.

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe’s Address

Fr. Timothy’s presentation was very rich and profound and it is recommended that the full text of the address is read via the link at the end of this report. It painted a contemporary setting of the world in which the churches live and have their mission. Some key sections of the address follow:

There is a thirst for the spiritual, but not necessarily for Christianity, as well as a flourishing literature attacking the notion of God.

Christianity will survive by cultivating the unity of Christian life which needs to be vigorous. It will be vigorous by being open to insights from outside Christianity, to all that is nourishing and challenging in our society.

Our mission is to teach a doctrine and a moral obedience to all that Jesus commanded. Fr. Tim suggests that for Christianity to thrive in this changing world, we need a doctrine that is confident but not doctrinaire, that lives from the tradition and from interaction with our doubting, searching society. And we need a morality which is not moralistic but engages with our contemporaries in their search for the good.

Baptism is in the name of the Trinity which is expressed in action. The Trinity is the mystery of perfect, equal love, free of all domination or patriarchy. It is a doctrine that is

always necessarily surprising, because it is our sharing in the life of the God who makes all things new.

The Church can only thrive if we are both steeped in tradition but also engage imaginatively with our contemporaries. Alistair McGrath has argued that atheism captured the imagination of the nineteenth century. It seemed a vast liberation from a bossy oppressive God. But the godless regimes of the 20th century showed that atheism often led to the killing fields and the concentration camps. So, despite all the blustering of Dawkins and Hitchens, the field is open, if we can capture the imagination of the young today with the adventure of orthodoxy, which also means letting ourselves be captured by their imagination.

Solid teaching, sound doctrine, is always a venture into the unknown, an exposure to the surprise of God. A Triune love liberates us from the easy dichotomies to which our culture is so prone: left/right; right/wrong; progressive/conservative. The love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father is always a liberation into the unknowable freedom of the Spirit, pushing us beyond easy and introverted antagonisms and infatuations. It is the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us out of the security of narrow little sheepfolds into broader pastures.

We need faithful questioners. Such people are entirely different from the sceptic of the Enlightenment, who stands apart, watching everyone with detached suspicion, doubting everything. That radical scepticism was necessary for the birth of modern science, for which we are deeply grateful but it is deadly in the life of the Church.

One of the instinctive barriers against our faith is the assumption that Christianity is a relic of the Dark ages, before humanity grew up and began to think rationally. Our belief in God and miracles are relics from an age of superstition. But Pope Benedict argued in his controversial speech in Regensburg, that so-called Age of Reason was the triumph of a particular narrow, empirical understanding of reason. It is a shrunken rationality, which can no longer reflect upon fundamental questions of meaning, such as the origin and destiny of humanity, the nature of human happiness and freedom. Nothing is counted as scientific unless it can be measured and tested.

Central to the pastoral mission of the Church in the 21st century is that it be an oasis of wisdom, a place where people learn to talk and listen intelligently, seeking the truth in love, with faith and reason. We are the children of the Logos, the incarnate Wisdom of God. The trouble is that although Christians say that we believe in reason, it often does not look as if we really do. We do not behave like people who really believe that through debate we can engage with people who think differently and move towards the truth. But this should be one of our great gifts to a society which is has lost confidence in the possibility of truth.

The Church finds itself in a paradoxical position. The media more than ever want to know what stand church leaders take on moral issues. People expect you to give moral guidance, and are angry if you are silent. Simultaneously, the Church's moral teaching is resented. It is seen as intolerant of people who have made, as they say, 'other lifestyle

options.’ And what right do men with pointy hats have to tell me what to do? Moral teaching is resented as an external constraint on our actions. Doctrine tries to control our minds and moral teaching our actions. So Christianity is seen as a culture of control in the world of the free.

But this is seriously mistaken. Charles Taylor has plotted in *A Secular Age* the emergence of the culture of control. Absolute Kings tried to force the churches to submit to their power. We see the emergence of the centralised state. The poor are no longer seen as our brothers and sisters in Christ but as a menace to be imprisoned. The mentally ill are confined in what Michel Foucault called ‘le grand renferment’, the great lock up. We see the emergence of standing armies and eventually a police force, and escalation of legislation, culminating in the present obsession with health and safety.

With varying success we resisted the Holy Roman Emperor, the claims of Absolute Monarchs, the nineteenth century Empires and twentieth century communism. In the process, the Catholic Church became itself rather infected with the culture of control. The price of freedom was that the Church came to look rather like those whom she opposed. In trying to be counter-cultural, we often ended up conforming to the secular culture of control. But if we believe that the world is in the hands of God’s providence, then our churches should be deeply counter-cultural, oases of freedom in the nanny state.

But how can we offer moral teaching and still be seen as living with the freedom of the children of God? The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, told Fr Tim recently that in Hebrew there is no word for ‘obey’ in the sense of submit to commands. When the State of Israel was founded and such a word was needed, it had to be borrowed from Aramaic. The Ten Commandments were not understood as constraining. They are ten words of friendship, inviting Israel to share God’s freedom, who called them out of slavery. They were given to Moses, to whom God spoke as to a friend. They make no sense outside the context of friendship.

It is only in friendship that we can share people’s moral searching. Doctrine is alive. I suggested, in imaginative engagement with our contemporaries. We discover with them glimpses of the God who is ever new. And moral teaching is alive only in friendship with our contemporaries, when we can discover the unexpected goodness of God, and how his friendship leads us in paths that we could never have anticipated. Jesus’ parables always push his hearers beyond what seemed to be the only alternatives. Holiness is surprising.

A changing Church for a changing world? We need confidently to be ourselves, living from a Christian culture which is theological, imaginative, ethical and spiritual. We need a Christian *life*. But the tree lives from its interactions with what is not itself. A hermetically sealed tree would quickly die. So too, I believe that the world thirsts for sound teaching, good doctrine. But our teaching will only be alive if it is always rediscovered through imaginative engagement with our contemporaries. If we are not constantly surprised, then we are not talking of God, to whom we are joined as to the unknown, Aquinas said.

The world also thirsts for moral guidance. It longs to be told what is allowed and then resents us doing so. What we offer is the exigencies of friendship, with each other and God. But friendship with God is always surprising in its demands. And so we shall only offer vibrant doctrine and moral teaching that is alive if we are courageous and dare to risk being misunderstood. If we are timid, then Christianity will not thrive.

Bible Study

I Corinthians 1:10-31 was the text which Archbishops Rowan Williams and Vincent Nichols reflected upon. The audio file recording their reflections is available via the link given at the end of this report.

Small Groups and Other Events

Delegates contributed to the forum through being members of 16 small groups sharing their stories of ecumenical experience, reflecting on what Fr. Timothy Radcliffe had said, particularly with regard to the journey the Churches should now take together given the world we now live in and to identify three key points or directions that the churches should now embrace together. The material generated by the groups would be considered by the Enabling Group to help shape new priorities and role for CTE twenty years after its coming into being.

Another feature of the forum was the market place for Bodies in Association with CTE. Many of the twenty or so bodies, who operate ecumenically in particular areas of activity and interest, had stands at the forum and their representatives gave five minute presentations on the work of their organisation.

Concluding Observations

Like any big ecumenical gathering of this kind being in the company of Christians with a common purpose and hearing about positive stories of churches working together gave one encouragement to continue with the ecumenical effort. At the same time, one heard and shared constructive criticism of how the structures and instruments needed to change to be fit for purpose in the altered circumstances of both contemporary society and the churches. This particularly applies to the intermediate or county bodies.

The idea of thirty or forty years ago of achieving ecclesial institutional unity within a generation or so has now receded, the emphasis is now on churches working together on practical initiatives addressing the needs of society often in partnership with secular or statutory agencies. Additionally, the exchange of gifts that the different Christian traditions can offer to each other to enrich the spiritual lives of all Christians has become a greater priority. This is referred to as receptive ecumenism. There still remains the challenge of engaging the great majority of faithful across all the mainstream churches in the ecumenical dimension of Christian life. A more positive development is the increasing participation of the black-majority churches in the ecumenical structures.

However, Christian communities of an evangelical complexion, often vibrant in themselves, remain, with some exceptions, outside the ecumenical structures.

There was also a feeling that the church leadership should also have a higher profile by being seen responding and addressing together issues raised by society as well as local clerical leadership across the board, as opposed to enthusiastic and committed individuals, encouraging their congregations to engage in ecumenical activity. Last, but not least, is the issue of funding of the ecumenical instruments and endeavours particularly in the current economic climate. The level of financial support will surely be at least one measure of the ecumenical commitment of all the churches engaged in this movement.

N.B. Access to the full text of David Cornick's and Timothy Radcliffe's address, the audio files of the biblical study by the archbishops and the four stories are available through the link:

<http://www.churches-together.net/Articles/163221/Churches Together in/CTE/Forum 2009/Texts Sound Recordings.aspx> .

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