

ECUMENISM

Thoughts of a fellow pilgrim



David Cornick, from the United Reformed Church, will be stepping down as General Secretary of Churches Together in England (CTE) after 10 years in the job. Here, he reflects on his experience with CTE and also looks at the challenges faced by the Churches on the road to unity.



First, let me say that doing this job has been an immense privilege. It has opened my heart and soul to a range of relationships, experiences and spiritualities that could never be the gift of one communion. I've had the privilege of sharing in worship on grand state and church occasions in some of the most wonderful historic sites of English Christianity. But I've also joined Mar Thoma Christians as they opened a new parish; stood with Pentecostals as they consecrated new bishops; with Baptists as they welcomed a new General Secretary; with the Copts as they grieved and remembered their martyrs – and worshipped with the Free Church of England as they celebrated their anniversary. Everywhere I've been generously and kindly welcomed as a fellow pilgrim.

Focus on relationships

A highlight for me has been to discover more about Catholic spirituality and discipleship – to spend time as an ecumenical observer on English ARC has been deeply enriching; to sit in the chapel of the English College in

Rome changed the ways I understood English church history, and to attend mass in one of the catacomb chapels under St Peter's gave me a sense of the catholicity and historic apostolicity of the Church as never before.

Our focus in CTE over the past decade has been on relationships, broadening out from careful nurturing of relationships between black, ethnic minority and white Christians to the wider aim of bringing Pentecostal, charismatic and new Churches into relationship with the historic Churches, and also of helping them discover their theological voice in dialogue with others.

That strategy has coincided with an odd period in English church history as the gentle decline of historic Protestantism has gathered pace, counterpointed by a very different narrative of growth particularly amongst Pentecostals, fuelled in large part, but not entirely, by migration. That is not to say that there is no growth amongst the historic Churches – some parishes and Churches grow whilst others decline and that has always been so. However, the edginess of the changing landscape, and the touchiness about growth and decline, underscores the im-



portance of the deliberate creation of relationships, and of the need for patience and courtesy with each other, because in some cases we have little else in common beyond our conviction that ‘Jesus is Lord’ and God is Trinity.

Ecumenical conundrums

We’ve lived long with that in ecumenism, but now there are new dimensions. The first is that for most of our members, mission has moved to the centre of the agenda. At a very basic level, that’s about how we can co-operate together to run Street Pastors and Night Shelters and so on, but underneath that, is a sense that the tectonic plates have shifted.

Over the past thirty years we’ve experienced the resurgence of conservatism and evangelicalism in English Christianity, and the natural *métier* of evangelicalism is mission. Indeed, there is a good historical argument which suggests that the evangelical revivals of the nineteenth century needed to create narratives of moral decline and decadence precisely to explain their own spiritual success. ‘The world is in such a terrible state that it needs us and that justifies our mission.’

Although evangelicalism has fine strengths, it also presents ecumenical conundrums. First of all it assumes that unity is to be found in a common baptism, or more probably a common faith, and therefore pushes issues of sacramental theology and church order to one side as ir-

relevant. That is all the more apparent when the agenda is set by the need to respond to decline – what matters is getting bums on pews and transforming our communities. That’s the important stuff. Disagreements about church order might interest academics and theologians, but to most ordinary Christians who just want to get on with it, they are an irrelevance. The fact that this attitude side-lines about a third to a half of the world’s Christians – Catholic and Orthodox – passes them by.

Second, and I worry about this – it creates unlikely alliances which are based in ethical conservatism rather than ecclesiology. That was why Pope Benedict’s visit was so welcomed by black Pentecostal Churches – here was someone who took a firm stance on sex and abortion, a proper Christian leader. Never mind Marian devotion and Eucharistic theology. Behind those alliances lurks ‘orthopraxy’ – the truly faithful are those who behave as we behave and it is with them that we will pursue unity. And the present touchstone is of course sexuality, but in ten years’ time it could be Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the question of whether humans can create souls. Ethics, I think, is in danger of superseding doctrine.

Danger of polarizing Church and world

I’m thinking of starting a society for the preservation of liberal Christianity because I fear I’m becoming an endan-

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gered species. There is within the new evangelical world a tendency to demonise 'liberal' Christianity. At its worst, it regards theology as an insidious threat rather than a helpful servant. We really don't want to have to think too hard about the relationships between the gospels and Paul, or the problem of evil, or the mechanics of incarnation. That gets in the way of witnessing that Jesus is Lord.



Third, and closely related, this is a style of being Christian which runs the danger of polarising Church and world. It understands the world as something to be redeemed and saved rather than being what Calvin called 'the theatre of God's glory'. It favours proclamation rather than dialogue, and David Ford's impish comment that theology should be the most promiscuous of all disciplines precisely because the world is suffused with the Holy Spirit, falls on deaf ears. That is not to deny the centrality of the gospel for a moment, but it is to plead for a proper, reflective doctrine of creation, and for the continuing dialogue between the Church and secular disciplines which was modelled so compellingly in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Those are some of the theological issues that are hidden at the moment under the decorous hedges of the ecumenical landscape.

Anglican-Methodist dialogue

Turning from the multi-lateral to the bi-lateral, the long, patient work of dialogue remains an imperative. The achievements have been very considerable doctrinally, and all that undergirds and enables the ways in which enmity has turned into friendship over the past fifty years. We may be frustrated that so little has been achieved institutionally in England, but we should not overlook the fact that being together and working together is now taken for granted locally.


I'm one of those who thinks that the present Anglican-Methodist dialogue about the possibilities of Methodism taking the historic episcopate into its system is very important. If the proposals are accepted, it means that for the first time the Church of England will have made full, canonical provision within its own polity for the recognition that the Holy Spirit has indeed been present in Methodist orders. Of course, the Church of England already believes that because it recognizes Methodism as a Church, but there is a real difference between the abstract and the actual.

But accepting the proposals of Mission and Ministry in the Covenant would be the first. It potentially gives us a way of reconciling episcopal and non-episcopal Christianity such that both are validated in the gifts of the Spirit they display as real Churches and, at the same time, the historic episcopate is shared with a non-episcopal Church which can benefit from it in a way that suits and enhances its own way of being Church. That is far, far more than re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

The beauty of receptive ecumenism

I rejoice too in the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican communion are coming together, not least because historically all roads lead back to Rome and Paul and Peter. The prospect of union, though, is becoming more eschatological since the Anglicans ordained women, and has been exacerbated by the logical consequence of women bishops, and unless there is a revolution in theological anthropology I can't see that one being solved easily. And that in its turn invites us to welcome the simplicity and beauty of receptive ecumenism, of discovering how we might grow together but separately into the fullness of Christ by exploring each other's Christ-given gifts.



Ecumenism in England over the next decade will be about holding some or all of that in creative tension, allowing the loud to listen to the quiet, the poor to enrich the rich, and hopefully the large to be true companions to the small, but above all sharing with each other the Christ who called us into ever closer companionship with him. 

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This article is an edited version of a talk David Cornick gave to the Church leaders' meeting at the Focolare Centre for Unity on 30th January this year.