

**A naïve theology of ecumenism**  
**Notes of a presentation**  
**by John Richardson, Ecumenical Officer, Churches Together in South London**  
**at the Café théologique in St Peter's Walworth**  
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*Naïve* can mean 'unaffected, straightforward' or 'foolishly credulous'. Obviously, in this presentation I want to emphasise the former, but I fear it may sometimes be the latter.

I think of my personal story as a journey from bigotry to big picture. My upbringing in Lancashire Methodism was warm, loving and all embracing. I sometime say that I appreciate it because it taught me to believe, to pray, to read my Bible, to get on with all ages, and also to play darts, snooker and cricket! It was nourishing in many ways, but it was also narrow and bigoted. Roman Catholics were beyond the pale and Anglicans were iffy.

My time at university changed all that and it was the Student Christian Movement that affected me most deeply. It was through that organisation that I became an ecumenical enthusiast, discovering to my surprise first that non-Methodists were Christian and, more significantly, that I could learn from and be strengthened by people of different Christian traditions.

Over the 50 years since then, I have been a naïve (in the 'unaffected, straightforward' sense, I hope) supporter of just about every development in the ecumenical movement.

A selection of my enthusiasms (literally 'in-God-isms')

- The Student Christian Movement approach, ie reading the Bible and changing the world (usually in a leftward direction)
- Organisational unity: especially Anglican-Methodist union
- Various covenants between churches to achieve more unity by a certain date
- The World Council of Churches statements on Baptism, eucharist and ministry
- International/national dialogues: Anglican/Roman Catholic, Roman Catholic/Methodist, Roman Catholic/Reformed, Roman Catholic/Pentecostal
- The 'churches together' concept and its local and national implementation
- Practical co-operation between churches for caring and justice
- Making connections, the current 'motto' of Churches Together in South London

A flip-side to all the above is my frustration when things haven't worked out as I hoped and the failure of others to share my passions – though these days I think am more sanguine, with a greater trust in things being 'all in God's time'.

Why have I been so keen on ecumenical progress? Maybe I'm temperamentally someone who wants people to get on with each other but I dare also to believe that unity is at the heart of the Christian message. Profoundly, or naively, I'm an ecumenist because the Bible tells me to be one.

In 2008, Churches Together in England and Bible Society produced a booklet 'One light: one world' which aimed to re-establish the scriptural basis for our ecumenical calling. 'Ultimately,' it stated, 'the reason we....are involved in the ecumenical journey is because there is a divine mandate'. It then gave a selection of passages showing 'the vision of the unity of the Church within the purposes of God'. These are set out in sections and I gave these below with some of the verses that are quoted.

**The unity of God**

Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Psalm 89:5-8, Mark 12:28-31

### **The unity of creation and the human race**

Genesis 1:26-31, Isaiah 40:21-26, Psalm 24:1-4, John 3:16, Romans 8:19-23 and 11:33-36

### **The unity of God's people**

Genesis 12:1-3, Psalm 95:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:2-3, 1 Peter 2:9-10

### **Christ's work in bringing us into unity**

John 10:14-16, John 12:32, John 17:20-23, Romans 5:10-11, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, Ephesians 2:13-22, Colossians 1:15-20

### **The Spirit's gifts of unity**

Acts 2:1-6, Romans 12:3-5, Ephesians 4:7, 11-16, 1 Peter 4:8-11

### **Recognising that we belong together** (interestingly, the longest section)

John 15:1-16, Acts 2:42-47, 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 3:26-29, 1 John 4:19-21

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The overall message to me is powerful, an overwhelming declaration that ecumenism is 'a good thing'. And when I add some of the dangers of disunity, resulting as it does in violence ('Divided churches cost lives' said one Irish churchman) and a ridiculous image of faith, plus the practical advantages of unity – it makes sense to outsiders, it makes us more effective in evangelism and the promotion of social justice etc - then my case feels unassailable. And yet....

I do ask myself whether I am being naïve in its less attractive sense. I want more one-ness among churches and perhaps I see it a bit too readily - to use a descriptive phrase common in my family, 'my geese can be swans'. I can therefore ignore what I once heard called 'the intractable snags' that affect the quest for greater Christian unity and I need to remind myself that they exist. Let me put them as questions:

- Doesn't the Bible also acknowledge our divisions – family and state violence in the Old Testament and 'parties' in the New?  
Haven't the centuries since Christ's earthly ministry resulted in deeply-held convictions which we cannot underestimate and which cannot be overcome at a stroke?
- Is there not an awful lot of accumulated baggage within each one of us?
- Is it not true that some of the greatest theological writing has divided rather than unified?  
Is it not also true that the most effective missionary advances have been individual and denominational rather than ecumenical?  
Isn't church life for the most part geared to traditions and denominations?  
Don't we all need the comfort of our traditions and customary practice?  
Isn't ecumenism a bit too abrasive for most people?  
Isn't co-operation hard work?

The answer to all the above is probably yes and I'd be a fool to ignore these realities.

Which prompts a final thought. Maybe naivety in pursuing the ecumenical vision is a foolish task blessed by God. Maybe some of us have a simple calling to pursue unity even when the counter-forces are strong. Our persistent enthusiasm may occasion a patronising response - 'Ah, bless him...' – and it often does inspire boredom, irritation and rejection. But we press on – and I personally am grateful to the many companions who join me in this naïve pursuit.

John Richardson – revised draft, 6 September 2013