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Changing landscape of ecumenism

Thank you for your invitation to explore the changing ecumenical landscape. I want to begin by describing some of the changes that my colleagues and I are observing in our work, and then I want to do a little bit of theological reflection and then open up a conversation with you – because that's always the most interesting part of this kind of gathering.

I joined CTE in 2008, which in retrospect was not a good time to start a new job! I began in May, and in the October the economy collapsed. I don't detect a causal link, but it was not an auspicious time to be joining an umbrella organisation which was dependent on the giving of over 30 charitable organisations.

CTE's vision was then about supporting ecumenism in two main ways. The first was horizontally, gathering the denominations together through a series of co-ordinating groups which were intended to allow them to share their work and co-operate in areas like mission, new housing, training, unity and theology. The second was vertical, supporting the ecumenical infrastructure of Intermediate Bodies stretching across England which in its turn was supporting a whole ecology of 'churches together' groups locally and various expressions of ecumenical co-operation locally, particularly but not exclusively LEPs. In other words, we were focused on what I've grown to call 'historic ecumenism'. I say that with affection and respect because, like most of you (I suspect) I was shaped and moulded spiritually by that movement which was the most exciting and dynamic force in the twentieth century church, and which only just, by the smallest of margins, failed to change the shape of English Christianity decisively. Let me say just a little about that heritage which we share.

As we look back we can see that there were two conversations going on, in different parts of Christ's church, and that at a critical point when a larger conversation would have been game-changing, it didn't happen. The first conversation was the historic Protestant conversation which was lent focus and power by the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 and which was to lead eventually to the formation of the World Council of Churches and the British Council of Churches. It was in England by default a conversation between the Church of England and the Free Churches, and it wound its way through some of the most significant events of twentieth century English church history – the 1920 Lambeth Appeal to All Christian People, Scottish re-union in 1929, Methodist union in 1932, the continuation committees of Edinburgh, the British Council of Churches in 1942, the slow and sometimes agonising 27 year process that produced the Church of South India, Fisher's appeal in 1946 for the English Free Churches to take episcopacy into their system and the long train of Anglican-Methodist explorations that followed from that, and the formation of the WCC in 1948. It was a remarkable conversation which brought about international structures of

peace and reconciliation in a world divided and shattered by war and violence. In England it began to heal the rift between what Michael Ramsey called the 'two cultures' of Protestant England which were produced by the English wars of religion and the settlement that followed them.

The second conversation began much later. Despite the attempts of a few brave pioneers like Paul Couturier and Paul Wattson, and those who were engaged in the Malines conversations in the 1920s, Catholicism was cautious about ecumenical conversation until the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of the remarkable Decree on Ecumenism in November 1964. In a flash, at a trumpet crash, to misappropriate Hopkins, the entire ecumenical scene was transformed. The irony is that the Protestant conversation in England reached a significant turning point just six weeks before the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated. A BCC Faith and Order Conference, held at Nottingham in the September as part of the British Churches' response to the World Council New Delhi Assembly of 1961, challenged the British churches to unite by Easter 1980. The irony was sublime. The Church of England found itself challenged to unite with Protestant partners at precisely the moment when for the first time since Newman launched the Oxford movement, Anglo-Catholics saw a real possibility of unity with Rome.

And so with impasse guaranteed, spiced with a twenty year debate over the ministry of women, those two conversations passed like strangers in the night. The 1960s also provided a wider, more troubling, context for the churches as the slow process of decline which can be traced back at least to the early 1900s, accelerated. The jury is still out on why, but this was something that happened *to* the churches which they seemed powerless to stop. The sharp decline was breathtaking – Anglican Easter communicants fell by 24% in the decade, baptisms by 23% between 1956-1970, confirmations by 36% between 1963-69, ordinations by 25%. Methodist membership fell by 24% between 1960-75. Some scholars would go so far as to say that Christian culture collapsed in the long 1960s, and its not coming back.

The pace of decline has lessened, the gentle leak from traditional white historic Christianity has continuing unabated. Churches weakened by the crisis of the long 1960s have been getting weaker. We knew about that, bit our lips, adopted strategies, planned mission, sure that renewal would be round the corner if only we got the methodology right. But they didn't come back. Check out age profiles of most congregations and its obvious why.

There is in management theory a concept called strategic drift. It can happen to the finest and best run companies. You perfect your offering, and get so caught up in it that you don't notice that the world is changing and your customers have gone elsewhere. The best examples from to-day's retail world are the big supermarkets who completely misjudged their customer base when the budget retailers, Aldi and Lidl, arrived on the scene.

That happened to the church and to English ecumenism. So intent were we on that grand narrative that flowed from Edinburgh through the great William Temple, the British Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches and the reconciling of Catholic and Protestant in such religiously explosive places as Liverpool and Glasgow, that we forgot to watch what the customers were doing.

Well, we've established that for half a century they've been leaving, and those that are left have been dying. But that is far from the whole story. At the same time that decline was happening, new things were coming to birth, slightly off radar, so either we didn't clock them or we thought they them of no importance. Decline prompted the churches to immerse themselves in mission. Maybe it was the church that was putting people off, not Jesus, so let's see if new ways of encounter and being church work. And somewhere within that

process of responding to the crisis of the 1960s, ecumenism began to be perceived not as the solution but as an integral part of the problem. It has become the scapegoat for a far deeper and profounder shift in the tectonic plates of Western culture.

If we didn't notice the first stirrings in creative mission, we also missed the fact that Christianity was flourishing in other ways and places. Migrant churches were growing and expanding exponentially, especially those with a reach into second and third generations. Put bluntly the colour of English Christianity was changing, within the historic churches and in new churches – 24% of London's churchgoers are now black, 48% in the inner city. Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity in its many shapes and hues was bursting with life, and some of the networks formed in the 1970s almost as protest movements against the historic churches have matured, and are opening their arms to welcome their older neighbours to work with them in service of their communities.

I take my hat off to the ecumenical movement. The Instruments were prescient. Some black church councils were engaged from the formation of CTE, and by the turn of the millennium the Unification Council of the Cherubim and Seraphim, two umbrella bodies and the Wesleyan Holiness Church were full members. Over the last decade that has turned into an explosion - eighteen new members have been received – some Orthodox, some new churches, but mostly black led churches, and we received our first megachurch, Ruach, last year.

That is why CTE has changed, It is not a council, it's a meeting place. Its not a bureaucratic conundrum, it's a living conversation. Its not yesterday's tired structures and turgid agendas, it's a celebration of witness and service. Its not a suite of offices, a well appointed venue at a posh address. We are tenants in an office with one desk for our administrator, a hot desk for visiting staff in London, and a mobile staff team spread across the Midlands and the North. We are the place where Christ's diverse and wonderfully beautiful body encounters itself. And in that, believe me because I've checked it out, we are unique in Europe – far more Global Christian Forum than WCC.

I think the ecumenical tide is beginning to turn, an ecumenical Spring rather than an ecumenical winter is in the offing. But its not what we expected. Across the country new mission focused unity movements are springing up – let me give you one example. In Southampton the evangelical Southampton Christian Network, Churches Together and the mainly black Southampton Pastors Network have come together to form 'Love Southampton'. They have been working with the local authority to try and serve the community in the wake of government austerity. The churches worked out that between them they provide 17 fulltime youth workers and 37 parent and toddler groups across the city, and they are now the major providers of youth and under 5 services across the city. The council was spending £1.2 million paying agencies to find families for adoption. The churches have taken on that work and since March 2013 have found 70 people willing to be foster carers. And so it goes on – food banks, free breakfast for 60 every Saturday, teams going into schools to lead assemblies, Street Pastors, pregnancy counselling and so on. It is an extraordinary development which we are watching closely with our friends and colleagues in the EA.

For those white haired ecumenists like me its Life and Work rather than Faith and Order. But listen to a URC minister in Southampton – 'I think unity, though not uniformity, among Christians is crucial. When we see God at work with people others scorn or ignore, and join in, that's good news. I want Love Southampton to become one of the many ways in which we can embody good news in this city' and her Evangelical Pastor colleague – 'There is a desire to seek the good of the city rather than an individual church. While we have

theological and church differences, they are recognised, respected and celebrated. We are one church here.'

One swallow doesn't make an ecumenical summer, but this breaking down of barriers in community service across the country is surely significant. So too is the slow but steady development of relations across ethnic barriers as black and white churches grow in trust and understanding of each other. So too is the very traditional ecumenical 'next step' in Cumbria as the Anglican diocese, the URC Synod and the Methodist District develop 'an ecumenical county'. Being an Ecumenical Instrument, or a County Body, is about holding that balance between the new and the historic, discerning the signs of the times.

I threatened some theological reflection when I started, so let me finish with it. Only too rarely a theological book moves me profoundly and offers new horizons and possibilities. One which has is Frances Young's *God's presence: a contemporary recapitulation of Early Christianity*.¹ You have to know a little about her to appreciate the book. She is a Methodist minister in her mid 70s, a retired professor who specialised in patristics and early church history and theology, a poet, and the mother of Arthur, a profoundly disabled son whom she has cared for all his life. This extraordinary book is at it were the summation of her thinking and theologising as a woman, Arthur's mother, a preacher and a patristics scholar of rare accomplishment. She has also been a deeply committed ecumenist and in her chapter on ecclesiology she reflects on that experience.

She suggests that the fathers present various understandings of what it means to be 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church.' As she reads the Eastern fathers, particularly Basil of Caesarea and Cyril of Jerusalem and the great Western theologian Augustine, she finds a tension between 'now' and 'not yet'. Basil speaks of the church being tossed about in tempest, likening its strife to a naval battle, yet foreseeing a day when all its many parts will be brought into the harmony of a single body by him who grants '...even to dry bones a return once more to flesh and muscles'. Holy church, says Cyril of Jerusalem, is the mother of us all, the figure and copy of the Jerusalem which is above. In former days she crowned martyrs, but she alone transcends all earthly kingdoms. As Young puts it, '...what the church is transcendentally is not yet realised on earth...'² And in Augustine too the church cannot be what it really is until the end comes and Christ is all in all.

She then turns to the ecumenical history which has been the backdrop of her career – Vatican II, the Lima document, the denominational conversations, the easy and often unnoticed ways in which scholarship and liturgical work effortlessly transcends denominational boundaries, and notes that for all the achievement, '...there is a widespread sense that ecumenism has run into the sand, that it does not comprehend the full spectrum...'³ But the literature of all of that exhibits the same tension that she finds in patristic ecclesiology between the empirical church and the eschatological church. And she ponders – why, when we live in that tension, when we proclaim 'unity not uniformity' and we celebrate diversity – do we never seem to acknowledge that it's OK for separate churches to exist. Why, for example, do the Orthodox and the Catholics, to take the oldest traditions of East and West, say that there can be no Eucharistic sharing before unity and intercommunion? What she is arguing for is taking the reality of penultimate church more seriously than we do. She then relates a series of moving ecumenical experiences, from the hospitality offered by Spanish Franciscans to Spanish Protestants, from the welcome she has received from the Orthodox in Russia, to the bewilderment of those with learning

¹ Frances Young *God's presence: a contemporary recapitulation of early Christianity* (Cambridge, CUP 2013)

² *Ibid* p. 351

³ *Ibid* p. 353

difficulties who don't understand why within the L'Arche community there can't be one Eucharistic sharing, to her own Methodist experience that communion is as Wesley called it '...a converting ordinance'. And she reflects, 'Should we not move on to a critical ecumenism, earthed in realities that are more clearly attested by the Christian understanding of the sinful condition than by ideologies, religious or secular, which preach a utopian unity in the here and now? Our union belongs to the eschatological future – we live in hope; yet constantly we find anticipations of that unity, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts open to the good things which pass our understanding prepared for us by God.'⁴

The trouble with wholeness, says Arthur's mother, is that we think of it as perfection, with no sin and pain and division and failure. But surely, wholeness in Christ is which absorbs and transfigures brokenness and loss, and hurt and death.

Do we need a new vision of unity, I wonder, which begins with the broken Christ, and accepts our brokenness and division?

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⁴ *Ibid* p. 357