

Five Views of Unity

There are many views about the goal of the ecumenical journey and this reflection suggests 5 heard while working at Churches Together in England (CTE).



This is a personal reflection for further discussion and is not a policy statement of CTE. It basically tries to answer the question, 'what are we aiming at?' It does not suggest a priority order or right or wrong answer, but just recognises that there are many facets to be observed.

Preamble

At the start of his enthronement sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942, William Temple, said: "I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and regret that, at present, it doesn't exist."

This quote can be discussed in several different ways, one of which is to ask some questions: 'Should it exist?' 'Should we be One'? In what ways are we 'One' already? If we were to be 'One' what would it look like?' 'Would it be the same sort of "one" so often quoted in John 17: 21?'

In what ways are the churches in England to be 'one'?

This is a perennial question and one which I want to suggest has more than one answer. Reflecting on nearly seven years working with CTE, I want to suggest that there are five commonly held views expressed today of what we are aiming at. Some suggest there are more.

(Note, these 'views' are in addition to those from the 'New Delhi Statement on Unity' of the WCC: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1961-new-delhi/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>)

Five Views

Each view has a place in the bigger picture. These may be helpful to identify, as all frequently surface in conversations today. Each illustrates a different base for the ecumenical vision and, significantly, each one leads to a different set of assumptions, priorities, actions and outcomes. The purpose of this reflection is to hold them all together and let one speak to the other.

1) Working together. The default position of many mission initiatives like Hope, the Big Lunch, Street Pastors, Food-banks etc., is 'working together'. An illustration of this would be a CofE church and Methodist chapel in a providing a cream tea on the village green. A more complex example would be the Executive Committee for More than Gold which brought all the major denominations including Seventh Day Adventist and Coptic Orthodox to help engage the churches in the 2012 Games. The CTE presidents commended this 'working together' in their statement about how 'unprecedented' this particular piece of work was.

2) Mutual accountability. This is one step further on. Not only are churches working together, but they are in some way accountable to each other. The Anglican-Methodist Covenant is an example

where both churches have said they will take account of each other in ministry, deployment, resources etc. Peter Colwell from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, said he asked a number of key people from the ecumenical movement what their vision has been. Peter reported, 'mutual accountability – it's what they said they signed up for!'

3) Visible unity. The most often quoted 'ecumenical vision' is the 'visible unity' of the church. Interestingly, especially in the light of the 1961 'New Delhi statement', I have found people mean different things by 'visible unity' - and often not in the way probably envisaged by our ecumenical forefathers. People often explain what they do and don't believe about it now. For example, yesterday a colleague said, 'I believe in visible unity as you would be able to see it, but I don't think it will be a physical unity'. Stephen Smyth, currently General Secretary of Action for Churches Together in Scotland, illustrated 'visible unity' with a story about his family and brothers who he likes but sees little of. Stephen said, 'we belong together and enjoy each other's company when we are together. We have separate lives but belong together'.

4) Whole inhabited earth. The word 'Ecumenical' comes from the Greek word 'Oikoumene' which is used in various contexts as well as Christian. In summary it means the 'whole inhabited earth'. This is a long established goal and still inspires many ecumenists today – especially as they see the ecumenical vision as much bigger than the church. John Bradley is a national Field Officer at CTE, takes this view which its implications for local and cosmic social and environmental concerns. John says, 'the whole world is our business because it is God's'.

5) Coming kingdom of God. When Jesus gave us the model of prayer he taught us to say, 'your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. Mt 6:10. I have found that many people coming fresh to the ecumenical movement, like 'Global Day of Prayer' and the new networks for mission and unity illustrated on the website (<http://www.wegather.co.uk/>), take the 'coming kingdom' goal as the prime motivator for both mission and unity. The Gospels give glimpses of the 'kingdom' which emphasises God's love. Love is at the centre of the trinity and God's purpose for the world. The greatest commandment is to 'love one another'. John 13: 34. Love is at the heart of both unity and mission. The focus of ecumenical work is not the church but the local community.

Three personal reflections:

Given more space I would argue on the one hand that there are interlinks and complex relationships between all 5, while on the other, 1-4 Views of Unity find their completion in the 5th. The 'coming kingdom' encompasses and completes all the views. Although the 'coming kingdom' is less tangible than some of the other facets, it is the main aim of my own ecumenical journey.

Given more time it would be interesting to compare this list above with the 'New Delhi Statement' in 1961. In particular, it would be interesting to chart different views through the years and major events of the ecumenical movement in the past 50 years. One aspect of that I have observed, is a shift in ecumenism from how we do 'church' together, to how churches relate and serve their local communities and the world together.

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 that we may be 'one' is, I believe, to be read in the light of the vine and the branches which preceded it. We are one because we are in Christ, and out of him all life flows. We are all different, going and growing in different directions. There is an inherent paradox in our unity – we are at the same time one in Christ, yet separate churches.

Conclusion

I have illustrated how different people look at the ecumenical vision by reflecting on conversations heard today.

William Temple is often quoted from his enthronement sermon with his description of the Ecumenical Movement as 'the great new fact of our era'. If, by taking the start of the Lord's Prayer as our vision, with the vine and branches as the model, the 'great new fact' is bearing fruit. I hope looking at the Five Views of Unity celebrates our diverse thinking so we produce even more fruit, not for the sake of the church so much as the world we serve.

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Online June 2013. Amended July 2016.