



## CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND

### **‘With you, always...’ Unity, mission and the love of God**

*This input was given to CTE's Enabling Group in March 2018 alongside a PowerPoint presentation which is not available.*

This is the church where I worship, where I am a member. Emmanuel URC, Cambridge. Emmanuel, ‘God with us’. For those of us whose spiritualities have been shaped by a congregational understanding of church, those words have been cashed in the realities of togetherness, of shared discipleship and Christian living. So it’s the realities of church that surround us in stained glass – an odd selection you might think – two Elizabethan martyrs – Barrow and Greenwood, the MP for Cambridge and eventually Lord Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell and his ‘foreign secretary’ the poet John Milton, and the first two ministers of what became the Great Meeting, the seventeenth century congregation from which Emmanuel eventually was born. All of them walked the streets of our city and the courts of its colleges. Our stained glass is a powerful reminder that Christians are to be found on all sides of history, losers as well as winners. God does not desert those who end up on the wrong side of history. So, we remember each Sunday that God with us through Word and Sacraments in our fellow church members, Christ keeping his promise that wherever two or three are gathered, there he is in the midst of them.

‘...the virgin shall conceive’, said the angel to Joseph, ‘and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’ (Mt 1:23), Matthew tells us as his gospel opens, and he closes it by bringing the rhetoric theologically full circle. For Jesus, the one in whom God was with us for thirty three years, with us in Nazareth and Jerusalem, with us and for us in Gethsemane and Golgotha, with us in the mortality of holy Saturday and astonishment of Easter Sunday, in his last words in the gospel says ‘I am with you always to the end of the age’. (Mt 28:20). Or as John summarises it, ‘...the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us...’ (John 1:1,14)

The Anglican theologian Sam Wells, presently Vicar of St Martin’s-the-Fields, writes, ‘I believe “with” is the most important word in the Christian faith.’<sup>1</sup> It’s the most important word because it’s God’s biography. There is nothing in God which is not ‘with’, whether within the dynamics of the trinity, or in the overflowing love of the trinity summoning forth a creation which in its immensity and intricacy delights, confounds and intrigues the very ablest of scientists. Without God’s passion to be ‘with’ us, there would be no creation. ‘He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world’, *Ephesians* muses, ‘...he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will...’ (Eph 1:4-5).

‘...before the foundation of the world’...

Let’s think for a moment about our planetary home. First of all, its big. The most basic unit of measurement of space is the light year – the distance light would travel in a year. Light travels at about 670 million miles per hour, so a light year is 5.88 trillion miles. If you left earth travelling at the speed of light you’d pass the moon in 1.5 seconds, leave the sun in your rear mirror after eight minutes, and be approaching the centre of our solar system. The nearest star to our solar system is Proxima Centauri. With rations packed, it would take you four years to get there. There are 300 billion stars in our own galaxy and a hundred billion galaxies in the universe. According to astronomers getting to the edge of the meta-universe

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Wells *Incarnational ministry* (London, Canterbury Press 2017) p 7

(which is still expanding) would take millions of light years, by which time your sandwiches would have gone stale. The sheer immensity of it is staggering – Carl Sagan once calculated that there are probably ten billion trillion planets in the universe – which is why some physicists are convinced that life elsewhere in the universe is a mathematical certainty, and why some theologians like David Wilkinson in Durham are pondering what the implications of that might be for theology. But, and it's an enormous but, thus far across these vast unimaginable distances, there is only us.<sup>2</sup> To suggest that humans are special, even exceptional, seems to be anathema to a range of thinkers from cosmologists to evolutionary biologists, all of them in retreat from the big story of human dominance and what it has done to the planet. To suggest that we are special and precious is to utter heresy in our secular age.

But listen to the American novelist Marilynne Robinson who for my money is one of the profoundest religious thinkers of our generation. Noting in passing that there are more neurons in the human brain than stars in the Milky Way, she comments – 'The human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe. By my lights, this makes the human mind and the human person the most interesting entity known to exist in the universe. I say this to my students because I feel their most common problem is also their deepest problem – a tendency to undervalue their own gifts and find too little value in the human beings their fiction seeks to create and the reality it seeks to represent...'<sup>3</sup>

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars that you have established;  
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
Mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3)

This sounds crazy and unbalanced, but on the current state of play it looks as if all of this is because God loves, because God wanted us to be and to be with us. That sounds crazy and unbalanced, but it's divine crazy, the mad extravagance of the gospel – as Athanasius so pithily put it in *De Incarnatione* (c.310), 'He became as we are that we might become what he is.'

And so God's biography, God's passion to be 'with' passed by way of Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee and Jerusalem, from manger to cross, from incarnation to ascension, and on into history through those who caught the kingdom in Christ's eye, knelt, adored, followed, served until in every land and continent, under the guidance of the Spirit the confession is made that 'Jesus is Lord' and hymns of praise resound.

We, as it were, find our identities through being the objects of God's love. We are those God longed to be with – Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Pentecostal, Independent, Baptist, Moravian, Quaker, Salvationist – English, Welsh, Nigerian, Jamaican, Armenian, Egyptian – all of us the ones God created a world and endured a cross for. And that is where our unity begins. It is that which holds us in being and therefore holds us together. Some of you will know that before I got translated into church leadership 17 years ago, I plied the trade of a church historian. And there I discovered a truth – church history is very messy. Every time you try and draw a boundary, a saint, a pioneer or a sheer maverick pops up on the other side of the fence, and says 'You thought you'd got God taped, but you haven't'. My conclusion after ten years in this job, privileged with watching historic communities evolve and new ones emerge, is that God is so much smarter and more generous than we are. I don't for a moment mean that God wanted the unity of the church to fracture, but God's providence works in ways that embrace rather than confront human freedom, and even free and devout Christians are capable of the most monumental mistakes which can have dizzying consequences. Some are obvious – the fear and violence and anathematising of the reformation period, the alignment of state power and state church in 1662, the Protestant and

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<sup>2</sup> The figures are from Bill Bryson *A short history of nearly everything* (London, Doubleday 2003) pp 1-26

<sup>3</sup> Marilynne Robinson 'The human spirit and the good society' in *When I was a child I read books* (London, Little Brown 2012) loc 2084 (Kindle edn)

Catholic collusion in the slave-trade, the inability of denominations to hold those like William and Catherine Booth as they pressed at the edge of the possible, the marginalising of Pentecostalism – the list goes on and on. What is remarkable about the providential care of God is the ways in which our mistakes become the raw material for the creativity of the Spirit. Our divisions are to be lamented and repented of, yet simultaneously to be rejoiced in because the histories we inhabit in all their ambiguities have been theatres of God's activity and born fruit in an ever broadening community of disciples. The Spirit is always ahead of us, and ecumenism is about keeping up with the Spirit. That's why the edge-lands of church history and the contemporary church are so very interesting. And its also why ecumenism will always be slow and not slick, and why its work will never be done. The Spirit would never have got beyond the first module on strategy at the Jerusalem Business School. All meandering particularity and not a lot of corporate identity. Not 16 members but 46, with more in the wings – who'd have thought?

That's what catholicity means, catholicity with a small 'c'. And no one has put that better than the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe, in this address which he gave in 2004 as part of a service confirming a gay man called Charlie Brown into the Catholic Church with a big 'C' -

'This community embraces saints and sinners: St Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, John Henry Newman, and also the Borgias, the Inquisition, people who persecuted the Jews and who did terrible things in the name of Christ. You cannot make a selection. You cannot pick and choose. It is all or nothing.

So the voice of the Good Shepherd summons you saying, "Come on Charlie. Here you belong." Why? This vast communion of the good, the bad and the ugly, is a sign of the kingdom of God, in which all human beings are summoned to be at home. It is a sign because it has no claim to be a gathering of the great and the good. Jesus came to call sinners, and in this, at least, he was highly successful. As James Joyce says, "Here comes everyone." <sup>4</sup>

All here, all called, all loved. I might think you theologically misguided – many of you doubtless think I am. I might last about ten minutes in a service of worship which you think is wonderful – actually I'd last much longer, I have a very high tolerance threshold – but you'd certainly die of boredom in a service that would rivet me. You might regard my way of doing ethics as at best edgy and I probably think yours are impossibly constricting and a compromise of Christian maturity, and that's before we start on doctrine. But what I can never deny is that you are the apple of God's eye, chosen, loved before the world's foundation, and because of that my sister, my brother. Nothing sentimental or cosy about that incidentally. I'm an only child, but those with brothers and sisters tell me they fight like cats and dogs – but what they can't deny each other is that common parentage.

Our unity rests in that common parentage – one in Christ in all our diversity. Its worth resting there a moment, and listening to part of John's account of Jesus' high priestly prayer – 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me...I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (Jn 17: 20-23)

The purpose of the cross was to restore the world's relationship with God. It was to bring back that 'with'. The gospel is that reconciliation. There is nothing else, no ulterior motive, no prescriptive programme, just God wanting to be with us and paying the price. That 'with' is restored in Christ. . Sam Wells again – '...God and humanity in peaceable interaction...fundamentally just being, because there in no better place to be and no better company to keep and no better thing to be doing. This is Sabbath – the crown of creation; simply being with God.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 'Here comes Charlie Brown' *The Guardian* 25.05.2004, accessed 1.iii.18

<sup>5</sup> Sam Wells *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Oxford, Wiley Blackwell 2015) p 25

It is the dynamics of that 'being with' which Jesus explores in his high priestly prayer. It is that 'being with', that unity, that reconciliation, which will, says Jesus, convince the world that God is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. It will convince the world because it is a radically new, profoundly different way of being human. It lays to one side all those human cultural constructs which shape nations and institutions – which side of the track you were born, what abilities you have, whether you are male or female, whether you are rich or poor, whether you are beautiful or ugly, whether you are powerful or powerless – and says, 'Come on in, here you belong.' But more than that, your unity, this new community, will convince the world that God is God. In other words, unity itself is a converting power because it expresses that new way of being human – of being with God, luxuriating in God. That is why ecumenism is important. That is why ecumenism is indispensable. It is about deepening and enhancing what it means for God to be with us because we are continually encountering the Christ who comes to us in the other. To grow together is to grow into Christ and to grow into Christ is to grow closer to each other. The ways in which we do that will evolve and change as the church evolves and changes. Unity is not a static set of instructions but a dynamic relationship. It could be no other because it is about the God who chooses to be with us, in all God's holiness, wonder, mercy and love.

Before the word 'ecumenical' narrowed down between the second and third centuries to mean the 'church universal' – ecumenical councils and all that – it meant 'the whole inhabited world' or, occasionally 'the universe'. In the late twentieth century ecumenists began to reclaim that understanding of 'ecumenical' whilst the church reflected on its understanding of mission and realised that the God who reaches out to be 'with' us, and therefore 'with' the creation which sustains and nurtures us, is primarily a missionary God.

It is, first of all, God who is the missionary, and we who are 'with' God and with whom God chooses to be, share in that mission. We are called to be with God in the world. So, I want to reflect on that for a few moments. I want to make three observations.

#### 1. God's biography is reflected in our biographies

We are people with whom God is – through no merit of our own – and our first responsibility is therefore to be with God, to enjoy God. It has always been the case that Mary chose the better part. Like Martha we itch to do, but we are called to be. What matters primarily is lives that reflect that, that value prayer, praise, being with God in whatever style of the spectrum of Christian spirituality which sustains and deepens us. In one of his books David Ford memorably describes the church as 'the community of the tenth lepers'. Ten went away healed, but only one came back to give thanks. We are those who make 'eucharist', who literally give thanks on behalf not only of ourselves but also the nine who wouldn't think of it. That is our first calling, and we do well to remember it. We are not a social change delivery agency – there are many excellent ones out there, some of them praise God Christian – but that is not primarily what the church is for.

#### 2. If God is with us, then we need to be with God

A good working definition of mission is being where God is. And that raises the question, where is God? Where is the Spirit of God? I want to plead that here we read the whole Bible. We are far too inclined to divorce the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New. We need reminding that the Spirit of God breathes being into the cosmos and animates life (Job 33:4). Paul talks of the Spirit orchestrating the labour pains of creation towards glory (R 8:28-29), and it is the Spirit, the Advocate who makes Jesus present to us in new life. It is the same Spirit. The Spirit is God present in the depths of creation, sustaining it, nurturing it each minute, and the Spirit of God is present in the church making Jesus real to us.

Of course the Spirit who is everywhere is not in everything, but wherever and however the Nazareth manifesto is being worked out in liberation, justice, mercy, healing and

peace, there is the Spirit. Wherever that is happening, God is. What else would we expect from a God whose generosity is so extravagantly abundant that each human being is fashioned in God's image? Mission then, is being with God where God is, and God the Spirit is ever present in his world.

Calvin called the world '...the theatre of the glory of God'. He used to keep the doors of the church in Geneva locked outside service times to stop people creeping back to church because they should be encountering God in the world as they exercised their varying vocations. I want to plead for a sense of being with God in mission that takes God's commitment to be with the world seriously.

Five years or so ago when my wife was seriously ill, I spent more time in oncology waiting rooms than I might have wished to. And after one session I went straight on to lead a session in a spirituality course. Gathered there were twenty or so Christians, mainly from my own tradition, all being intensely introspective about the work of the Spirit in their lives and the life of the church. My tolerance was severely stretched by a de-fault Christian exclusiveness which assumed that the Spirit was their own personal possession, their own precious toy. And I said to them what I now say to you.

Do you not think that the Spirit has other things on her mind than the church? Do you not think that the Spirit is in the minds and hands of the medics two miles up the road in the local hospital who are in the forefront of the fight against disease? Do you not think that the Spirit might be in the slow and painstaking work of one of my agnostic Cambridge colleagues whose work in chemical engineering is slowly unravelling the sticky plaques that are a probable cause of Alzheimer's? Do you not think that the Spirit might be in the skills of those diplomats who, against all hope, still doggedly try to produce peace in Syria? Do you not think that the Spirit might be in the patience of the reception class teacher and the open mind of the little girl who has suddenly discovered she can read? When God so loved the world, why are you so obsessed with church? Mission is about being with God. There is so much of God in the world, so much wonder, so much beauty, so much that we need to garner in thanksgiving and make eucharist with, whether we do that with sacraments or without.

But let's not get dewy eyed. The last moppings-up between the D day of the cross and VE day when God will be all in all are pretty bloody and messy. Some days the four horsemen seem to be having more than their fair share. All the more important then, to be with God, to be in solidarity with all those who live out the Nazareth manifesto.

3. Christendom isn't coming back and it's about time we stopped behaving as if it was.

Historians have been writing the story of the death of Christendom for the past fifty years but there isn't time to rehearse those niceties. The statistics are bald. People's behaviour changed. They stopped going to church. The story is complicated. A gradual decline in the historic Protestant churches, including the Church of England, since about the time of the first world war, which accelerated in the 1960s and shows no sign of abating is one part of the story, but only one. Another is the growth of migrant Christianity in recent decades, accompanied by the expansion of non-traditional forms of Christianity, Pentecostal, charismatic and more recently experimental as denominations have explored FX. The new does not outweigh the old, nor is it likely to in the immediate future because of the age profile of the Christian population – more are dying than being made is the simple truth. However, contrary to all expectation, Christianity is far from dead. What we are seeing is not the death of the church, but a profound change in church. It is quite clear that Christianity will remain a vibrant minority culture or more accurately, set of cultures, within an uneasily secular state. Historians and sociologists disagree profoundly about how to interpret this change of religious behaviour, but no one denies that it has happened.

Grace Davie perceptively characterised the profound shift in religious economy over the past half century as the switch from a territorial based system to a market economy. European religion, from the west coast of Ireland to the Russian steppes, was for over a millennium parish based. Look out of your window and you saw a parish, and you were part of it simply by being there. Americans never did see that because from the first days of their constitution they kept church and state separate. What eventually thrived in America was a religious market economy as individual congregations vied with each other for members. England knew a little about a market economy long before the twentieth century because the reformation and its aftermath bred pluralism, but the state had its thumb so firmly in the scale that only the determined and bloody-minded would have chosen Catholicism or nonconformity prior to the granting of civil rights and equality with Anglicans during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What we have seen more recently though is a profound growth in non-territorial gathered independent and charismatic churches, the end result of which is a messy, bewildering scene. The Spirit likes mess, as we saw earlier, but that then produces ecumenical questions about the complementarity of mission.

The first of those questions is about the fate of territorial religion. There is something profound and significant about the parish, which in England at least was formed between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, and provided a spatial, geographical form of belonging and the merging of the sacred and secular. The peculiar genius and charism of the Church of England is that it is wedded to the land, to the parish and all its people. It literally belongs to the people who even now can demand things of it, such as baptism and marriage. That is, as it were, the price of establishment.

Turning that in for the bargain of a pseudo-Congregational conservative evangelical HTB plants would seem to me a pretty poor deal. The parish is precious, and so is the 'establishment' of the Church of England itself. What little is left of identifiable cultural Christianity in this country – be it called vicarious, implicit or diffusive Christianity – is held in the public eye by the Church of England, by church schools which can be an incalculable force for good, and by what might be called the public, official role of the church. At various points, not least schools, and in various ways – for example the high media visibility of the Cardinal, the Roman Catholic Church plays a similar yet differently nuanced role.

I make those observations as a nonconformist who would be deeply uncomfortable to be part of an established church. So, one ecumenical question is how can we support, enable and encourage the Church of England and the Catholic Church to do what only they can do?

The obverse of that question is, can the nature of establishment itself be played by the Church of England to ecumenical advantage? Can that privileged voice into the heart of the state and government resonate with the voices of the whole Christian community rather than just the 1.7% of the population who according to the Archbishop of Canterbury attend the Church of England? What kind of consultative, creative mechanisms might be required to facilitate that and to help boost that particular task of maintaining and nurturing the cultural voice of Christianity?

Equally, how can the energy and dynamism of the newer churches be taken with ecumenical seriousness, and how can they be supported in their work which is often edgy, experimental and in places and in ways that the traditional churches fail to reach?

The twists and turns of English history resulted in establishment and the imbalance of power and size between the Church of England and all its partners, apart obviously from the Catholic Church. Can we imagine ways in which we can be mature enough to deal with that, to accept its reality, and see together how we can go about the mission of being with God where God is, using all our resources to do so? If we can, it will require infinite

patience and linguistic carefulness from the Church of England, but an equal portion of self-questioning and tolerance from the smaller partners.

If that is one way of putting the world first in mission terms, another is the extraordinary experiment going on in Cumbria under the overall banner 'God for All' where some of the historic churches in covenant partnership and churches pledged to be companions with them, including a number of independent churches, are working out what it would mean to use all their resources of buildings, ministry (including the ministry of all believers) and mission that everyone in Cumbria might have the opportunity to hear the good news that Jesus is Lord by 2020.

Theos explored yet another in their report *Doing Good: a future for Christianity in the twenty-first century*. Are the churches being radical enough in their planning, they asked. Projecting age profiles on twenty odd years, and linking that graph to the phenomenal rise in the number of Christian charities, they asked if the future of the church might not be groups of passionate advocates of transformation living out of those projects in prayer and praise.

Those are a few questions about mission post Theos. They are questions, not answers, a mess, not order, and that is as it should. If mission is about being with God and God being with us, order is an unlikely outcome because of the unfathomable immensity and generosity of God. If unity is playing catch-up in the wake of the Spirit, as I've suggested, then mission is about walking a thousand paths with the Emmaus Christ who opens the Scriptures to us as we travel. Setting ideological or conceptual limits to mission is a dangerous occupation. Unity and mission are both invitations to be with God and share God's life in Christ. Both are workings out of that call. That is why they are inseparable.

Let me leave you with a thought which I owe to my Indian Orthodox friend, Dr Elizabeth Joy. We were inevitably talking about unity. The trouble, she said, is that your Western definitions of unity are so small. In my Indian culture Oneness is huge.

Indeed so. Let's keep a sense of proportion. Paul raises the Ephesians eyes high for he talks of the gathering up of all things into Christ – Jew and Gentile, male and female, sub-atomic quantum theory and stable state physics, Marxism and monetarism, nationalism and internationalism, harmony and discord, the proton and the black hole, - all somehow reconciled, under Christ as head. The hugeness of One, the comfortable capacity of One which embraces us in all our God-given, God-loved diversity, and the one who invites us to anticipate that now, make it real in our shared mission, being with him in the word he loved to death and beyond.

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