

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS



Forum 2018

'I am with you always' – together in God's mission –

General Secretary's report

Five new Member Churches since we last met in Forum, and more in the pipeline. Eight new Bodies in Association, from the Society of St John Chrysostom to the Christian Police Association. In their diverse lives yet common witness, England's Christians want to be seen together, gathered around the same tables. That's a funny old ecumenical winter.

We've felt the movement of the Spirit in so many ways over the past three years. As we commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reformation last year, we celebrated what are now our common martyrs. Martyred then precisely for being Catholics or Protestants, we remembered Pope Francis' wise words about the ecumenism of blood – 'The martyrs belong to all Christians'.

As we reflected on the 100th anniversary of the first world war, our particular contribution was to highlight the largely unknown and unsung contribution of African and Caribbean servicemen. That proved far more significant than we could have imagined, as churches, schools and other educational institutions eagerly adopted our resources. We have a long, distinguished track record of working with the African and Caribbean churches which are such an important part of the English church landscape. The Windrush generation found themselves unwittingly at the centre of a media storm earlier this year due to the iniquities of immigration policy. That made the long planned celebration of the contribution of the Windrush generation in Westminster Abbey in June all the more poignant and notable. And at this point I want to acknowledge publicly the singular contribution that my colleague Joe Aldred made to the planning of that service. It is his passion, and CTE's, that black and white Christians should be partners together in the mission Christ gives us in England.

We've seen the Spirit blowing where she wills across the country as Christians in towns and cities have come together across previously insuperable boundaries. Some call it a 'new ecumenism' – city and town wide grouping, many of which have grown around local Churches Together groups whose aim is the transformation of their communities. Those groups came together in Movement Day at Westminster Central Hall last year, and it was a real joy that our Presidents were able to lead prayers for the nation in Parliament Square.

And just in case anyone thinks the Spirit has deserted the 'old ecumenism', we published *A new framework for local unity in mission*. And pay a visit to Cumbria and see ordinary Christians doing extraordinary things as the churches in Cumbria form ecumenical 'mission communities' to ensure that the church remains in every community for the people of Cumbria and to meet their laudable aim that: 'By 2020 every person of all ages and backgrounds will have an opportunity to discover more of God's purposes for their lives, so they will discern more of Jesus and the Good News and become followers of Jesus in a Christian community.' Cumbria is *en route* to becoming England's first ecumenical county.

And we've seen the Spirit of unity stirring up the Pentecostal family as they have held two national symposia on their life and witness in the presence of many of their ecumenical partners.

It's been some three years. A funny old ecumenical winter, all of that. And it's quite clear that, in the words of the philosopher Charles Taylor: 'Our age is very far from settling into comfortable unbelief.'

That brings me to our most significant piece of work since we last met – the Theos Report. A brief summary: Congratulations, you've built the relationships, now what are you going to do with them? That's one reason for the sub-title of Forum: 'Together in God's mission'.

When Lesslie Newbigin retired as Bishop of Madras in 1974 and moved to Birmingham, he described Britain as the hardest missionary territory he'd ever encountered. I don't think he'd say much different if he were alive to-day. One of the most thoughtful and far-sighted of missionary theologians, Lesslie was the one who in 1952 argued that if Catholics and Protestants were to be given the gift of unity, it would come from the hands of Pentecostals and charismatics and a new understanding of the Spirit.

One of the delights and astonishments of the last ten years has been the growth of CTE. A decade ago when I took up this unique and privileged ministry at CTE, I could never have predicted the ways in which Orthodox churches, charismatic and Pentecostal networks, and some of the New Churches, have asked to come to the ecumenical table, but they have. It is together that we face the realities of mission.

I've never managed to kill off the church historian in my soul, and one of the tools of that trade is statistics. We know the story they tell. To put it simply and clearly, more Christians are dying than are being made in England – and yet, and yet. There is growth too, some of it, praise God, in England's historic denominations – but most of it is to be found amongst migrant Christians, in non-denominational groupings and new Christian communities tucked away in churches on industrial estates – if you like the Christian edge-lands. The God of Bethlehem and Nazareth giving life from the margins – who'd have thought?

Crystal ball gazing is a dangerous occupation, especially for Christians because the Spirit of God is deliciously creative and gloriously unpredictable. I hesitate to predict the ecumenical future. But I do know what I've seen with my own eyes over the past ten years. I've seen the effect of stretched budgets and declining memberships. I've seen the unrolling horror of abuse scandals and their numbing impact. We come to the foot of the cross ashamed, penitent, grieving, empty, knowing that only the grace of God and the love of Christ can raise us.

Yet I've also stood in solidarity as we have remembered and prayed for the martyrs of today's church as malign attempts to obliterate Christianity in its Middle Eastern homelands and Egypt have grimly succeeded one another. And I've been reminded that we are part of a community that stretches round the globe, that the world church is here on our high streets, that we are the world church and that means that we not only share the pain of our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church, but are lent steel and backbone by the sheer courage and power of their witness.

I've also seen young people finding purpose and fulfilment in lives given to Jesus, I've seen countless people on breadlines enabled to survive by food banks, I've seen politicians and policy makers challenged about their treatment of immigrants and the woefully widening gap

between super-rich and grievously poor, I've seen giving on a sacrificial scale to feed the world's poor. I've seen faithful Christians doing what faithful Christians do – unsung, unnoticed. Somewhere in that solidarity and witness of the ordinary people of God lies the invincibility of the church, if you will its God-like-ness. And I've seen that going on amongst Pentecostals, Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, community churches, and Orthodox, and more excitingly (for an ecumenist), I've seen them joining hands in common discipleship as the transforming power of Jesus takes the work of their hands and turns a bit more of the world into his kingdom.

I hope you'll allow me a personal digression as I move to retirement. I'm a deeply grateful 'baby-boomer' – grateful for the visionaries who were determined that after two world wars, there should be no more war, grateful for the far-sighted who were determined that the world would be a better place, that Beveridge's five Giant Evils of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness, should no longer stalk the land, grateful for the NHS, which has so far saved the lives of my wife and one of my sons, grateful for the 1944 Education Act which allowed poor kids like me the opportunities of grammar school and university and a changed life. Grateful to the church of God, because once I'd learnt a bit of history and theology, I discovered that the creation of that post-war world had its roots deep in Christian theology and ecumenical commitment. That most singular and remarkable of Archbishops, William Temple, symbolised that dual, indivisible commitment – the eminence grise of the Welfare State, the first President of the British Council of Churches and one of the architects of the World Council. The Christ who calls us to unity is the one who transforms the world. Ecumenism is not an end in itself, because the church is not an end in itself. It is the new Israel, God's chosen way of revealing himself and focusing his world transforming presence in Christ. What do we have to say about the way our world is? How, together, can we let God's transforming presence flow, so that all can share in the blessings of God's shalom?

My whole career, from theological college onwards was lived in ecumenical situations until, seventeen years ago, the United Reformed Church called me to be its General Secretary. Now, I love the URC dearly, so don't misunderstand this, but it was like losing a limb because the day to day ecumenism which had been the life-blood of my ministry disappeared as I slid into a denominational silo. So, moving to CTE ten years ago was like resurrection.

I want to stay with that for a moment because I believe there is a spiritual truth hidden in my experience. Jesus is so much greater than our perceptions, far more beautiful than our limited vision, far more inclusive than our limited denominations and communities, so much richer and profounder than our finest theologies. There is always more of Jesus to discover, new aspects of him to adore, new experiences of him to be embraced. And because Jesus loves with a generosity we can scarcely begin to appreciate, we find him in the most unexpected company. Unlike us, he is at home in every culture. Unlike us he is as delighted to be in warehouse where the praise thumps out of the bass guitar with all the force of an aircraft taking off at Heathrow as in the most exalted polyphony of King's College Chapel. Unlike us, he's as comfortable in Swahili as in English, in Welsh as in Norwegian. If you love someone you want to know all about them. If you love Jesus you want to know all about him, and that is why ecumenism is so important – it's about discovering the hugeness and wonder of the one who loves us. Put theologically, Christ comes to us in the other, and he has gifts for us.

The second reflection is that although we know that our Lord longs for his Church to be one, my experience of learning more about Jesus has happened within the tensions and pain of the Church as it is, full of imperfection, division and tragedy. There's grace for you. Christ is with us where we are, as we are.

A large component of ecumenical spirituality must be humility, the realisation that Jesus is at home in places that we write off as either heretical or not quite proper, or past it or far too radical. For myself, over my time with CTE, I can only bear witness that I have encountered Jesus in the exuberance of charismatic praise, in the awed silence of eucharistic adoration, in the sharing of the peace during parish communion, in the sheer otherness of Orthodox prayer (generally in a language that I don't speak or understand), and in the astonishing mutual attentiveness of the Friends' Annual Meeting. Even, once in a while, in the worship of the United Reformed Church!

For me, that's where ecumenism starts – in the wonderful generosity of God in Christ, with the fact that although I might have real doubts about the cultures or structures of partner Churches, the reality that I cannot deny is that Jesus is there and the fruits of his presence are obvious.

Unity, theologically, isn't about institutions, but the spiritual reality of being in Christ. As we encounter our Lord in our fellow Christians, we grow into his stature, his all-embracing love and generosity, and we literally become more like him. We become part of that radical new humanity which Paul spoke about in Galatians – no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all one in Jesus Christ. It is that profound, vibrant, transforming reality which bowls us over – that is why we recognise fellow disciples in traditions other than our own which our ecclesiologies tell us are treading on thin ice or have fallen into the murky depths of not quite believing the true gospel which of course has been delivered into our own denominational keeping.

We are, all of us, part of that radical new humanity, forged in the furnace of God's cross-embracing redemptive love, called to live God's alternative kingdom.

It's not that we are called to build the kingdom, God does that. We are called rather to be lovers of the kingdom, its citizens, opening the door with our faith. And that means having a healthy scepticism about the kingdoms of Trump and May and Corbyn, because Jesus' radicalism, his creation of a new humanity and its implications makes most political philosophies look like nursery stories.

We live the kingdom as part of one radical new humanity – that is, as you will, another name for the communion of saints. And it is because we are that reality, that deep in our hearts and beings we know it, that it becomes an imperative to live that unity, that reconciliation. The Theos Report showed clearly what we all know, that some of our Member Churches think that unity is a goal that we strive for, others that it is a given reality. So be it. We are human. We disagree. We are divided. We know that. But let's be crystal clear – Jesus calls us to be one.

He calls us into that new relationship with him, binds us into the very life of the Trinity, makes us a new people, his vast, amorphous, tumultuous family. He no more expects us to be clones of each other than any normal family. I am the father of two sons, and I have to report that they are chalk and cheese and always have been, and praise God for that. It's the same in Jesus' family. Do we all want to worship in the same way? We certainly do not! Do we want to dress in the same way? You must be joking. Do we do theology in the same ways? Certainly not. The biggest lie ever circulated about unity is that it is a synonym for uniformity.

But, if we are united in the new humanity, if we are all sharers in the life of Jesus and therefore in the life of God, then the hurt that we cause each other by not being able to come to Christ's table together, and the scandal we cause to the world by our competitive structures (which look like nothing more than the market economy in ecclesiastical dress) are plain, and it is our duty to continue addressing them, not because we want to live in a monolithic institution, but because as fully enfranchised citizens of the same kingdom we need to become what we already are.

Well, the world waits, for it is God's will, says Paul, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. And that ministry of reconciliation is given to us, and we need to be about it, and I dare to believe that if we can go about that mission together, then the longed-for unity of the body of Christ will soon follow, for we will see the face of Christ in each other and know that we can no longer be apart.

David Cornick

Given on 17 September 2018 at CTE's Forum

For the video, click the link on www.cte.org.uk/Forum2018/afterwards