

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS



Forum 2018

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

Paul Goodliff

CTE's incoming General Secretary interviewed by Ruth Bottoms

1. **As you take up the role of General Secretary, what ecumenical experience do you bring?**

In my own story, while I have been a Baptist most of my adult life, I grew up very active in an evangelical Anglican Parish in Sussex, and latterly have been one of a small group of Baptist ministers who have formed a rather Catholic/Baptist dispersed religious Order, the *Order for Baptist Ministry*. Something of a hybrid ecumenist, you might say! In the pastorates I have held, and especially as General Superintendent of an Area that included Milton Keynes, I have been ecumenically active. With the World Council of Churches I have been a member of its Joint Consultative Group with Pentecostals for almost two decades now. Latterly I have been hanging out with a bunch of canon lawyers – a novel experience – and developing something called juridical ecumenism.

2. **How were you led to take up the role?**

I must confess, my initial reaction when the role was drawn to my attention was 'not me Lord. They must want someone younger.' I had other plans! My custom is to read the *Order for Baptist Ministry* Office, using the Revised Common Lectionary, and at the start of a fortnight when I had to decide whether to take this further, the Old Testament reading included Genesis 18:9-13 – Sarah laughing because she was too old when she was told she would have a child; later that week, Psalm 95:7-8, "Oh that you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your heart", and so it continued, day after day, Scripture after Scripture until I had no option but to say "yes, Lord, I'll apply!" Ruth, you said the group that interviewed me were led to offer the post to me. As Baptists, we take that as guidance!

3. What do think might be the priorities for CTE as we travel forward?

First, continuing the good work thus far, by enabling good ecumenical relationships, keeping the doors open to others who wish to join CTE, supporting ecumenical theological reflection, and keeping alive the hope for visible unity... Oh, and holding one another accountable for the appropriate funding of what the churches want from CTE.

Second, by *renewing the focus of CTE upon mission*, and the *Theos Report* suggests the churches want this. I see CTE as like a big tent within which the churches can engage in missional theology, planning and preparation; where they can strategise together for the most effective means of proclaiming Christ and serving his world through compassionate action – and I don't think that involves following the world's ways or using uncritically its means. The tent is actually more like a marquee, with the sides wide open, letting the breeze of the Spirit blow through. CTE itself must not become another mission agency, but it can provide the space in which the churches pray and act together, and in this way serve them in their calling.

Inside this tent are some tables, around which we gather to eat, tell stories, make plans, watch what is happening around us, pay some bills... At the moment, we do not have one table to eat around, – a deep sadness for us – but we can recognize that the other's table is a valid table, and so some reach out from their table and grasp the hand of someone at an adjacent table – so the tables become linked by friends and brothers and sisters in Christ – until the day when there is one table. Here we worship and pray together as best we can.

The open sides are there to welcome others in and enable us to go searching for them in love. But at the heart of the tent, right in the centre, is the Lamb who was slain, the crucified God, the wounded healer, the Lord of all. He calls us to pray together, to be deeply engaged with one another in love and respect, and here we receive the strength to be One.

A third priority for me is to rediscover the way of discipleship for English Christians, and to recognise the remarkable way in which we have entered into one another's spiritualities. In prayer we find the presence of God, and in mission we discover that Christ is not confined to our tent, however broad it might be, but is already beyond its ropes and pegs, bidding us find him also in the society within which we are called to be followers of Jesus.

And a fourth priority is to find ways of speaking into the public square – the *agora*, in ancient Greece. Actually, some of us have become *agoraphobic*, fearful of engaging with public discourse about the economy, inequality, weapons of war, Brexit and the rise of populism and the demise of public truth – but we need to find courage, as Archbishop Justin did recently, and speak with a stronger, more united, voice. I would love to find ways of doing that more effectively.

And let me say this to those of you who are among the less elderly members of Forum! – Yes, those of you under 35. The baton in the ecumenical relay race is passing to you soon, so go back to your churches and pray, argue and convince your generation that the future of the church is ecumenical, and become part of the future of the church not its past. You are probably the most significant participants in this Forum – we honour you and encourage you to build upon the good of the past and enable it to be the seed-bed of the growth of the kingdom of God in our and your generation.

If we are not already at the place where we have no option but to be church together for the sake of Christ – and I suspect we are there already – then I passionately believe we must discover that place, fix our tent pegs there, set up our tables together and love, pray, act, witness and serve in the power of the Spirit, in the name of Christ and to the glory of God the Father.

Paul Goodliff

Given on 19 September 2018 at CTE's Forum

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