

SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES
NEWSLETTER
JANUARY 2002

Secretary's Notes

Enclosed with this mailing, please find two notes from our Convenor, Martin Conway, the first about the meeting of 'Societas Oecumenica', due to take place in Salisbury later this year, and about our own plans for a big weekend conference in May 2003. The Committee has been hard at work, endeavouring to rethink our strategy and more will, of course, be said about this at the AGM at Church House, on February 15.

AGM

This takes place at 4.45 pm at Church House, Great Smith ST, London SW1, by kind permission of Rev. Dr Paul Avis, general Secretary of the Commission for Christian Unity of the Church of England and, of course, one of our own members. We thank him and his secretary, Hazel Agar, yet once again for their hospitality. As usual, there will be a short business meeting, followed by talks and discussion. This year, we look at new developments in the diaconate. Paul Avis and Tom Bruch, General Secretary of the Lutheran Council of Great Britain will talk to us about the developments within their respective communions. We hope also to have a Roman Catholic speaker - name to be confirmed.

AGM Business Agenda

This will be as follows:

1. Opening Prayer by Convenor
2. Minutes (as in February 2001 newsletter)
3. Financial statement
4. Report on plans, especially for 2003
5. Election of Convenor, Treasurer, Secretary and other Committee members
6. AOB.

Recent developments

After a long period in which ecumenists have felt rather frustrated, much seems to be on the move again. Both the report of the formal conversations between the Church of England and British Methodism and the report of the informal, trilateral conversations between the URC, the Church of England and the Methodists have been published.

Some have expressed disappointment that, in particular, the Anglican-Methodist report was not more radical. Two very positive features can be discerned within both processes. First, the deep level of engagement with ecclesiological issues which have not always been as clearly addressed in the past. Secondly, within that, the level of questioning and

engagement with each other. The URC wanted its two partner churches to look at concerns especially important to it, viz. the conciliar nature of the Church and eldership. I discern within all of this a degree of listening to each others' concerns. Ecumenism is about a fine balance between witnessing to the truth that we believe God has committed to us in the past, and which we cannot abandon, and listening to what he may be trying to say to us about our need to receive from the insight of others.

The reception process for both these reports will be very important. Whatever may be agreed at the level of Conference and the General Synod will only bear fruit if it is taken to heart by the Methodist and Anglican people and will only go on to bear wider ecumenical fruit if it takes account of the concerns of the URC and, indeed, other ecumenical partners. In both sorts of conversations, the ecumenical observers from other traditions have played a key role, a valuable reminder that no two communions can exhaust all that it means to be Christ's church in its fullness. Neither the bilateral Anglican Methodist relationship nor yet the trilateral one, including the URC is an end in itself, though both can be a great help and stimulus to the rest of Christendom in the search for unity.

The present process has been powerfully influenced by the Anglican philosophy of 'unity by stages' and this has much to commend it, particularly if it can be backed up by a real reception and growing closer together at the grass roots. As Cardinal Mercier said long ago, 'In order to be united, it is essential to get to know and to love another'. It is my personal prayer that we may all come to love our sisters and brothers of other traditions that we take their concerns, riches and values at least as seriously as we take our own. The proposed Covenant preamble calls for it to be inaugurated in 'a spirit of penitence for all that human sinfulness and narrowness have contributed to our past divisions' and 'in a spirit of thanksgiving and joy' for the way in which God has brought us closer together'. The Report calls on us to 'harvest our diversity'. That, of course, is a call that applies far more widely than to just Anglicans and Methodists. Giants of the Past.

Recently, I have been reading Geoffrey Wainwright's magisterial biography of Lesslie Newbigin, *Lesslie Newbigin-a Theological Life*, OUP, 2000, E40. ISBN 0-19-510171-5. Granted the very proper advance of ecclesiology to the top of the ecumenical agenda, it is important to revisit his life and theology, perhaps especially his pioneering work, 'The Household of God' which did so much to expound the complementary strengths of 'catholic', classical Protestant

and pentecostalist ecclesiology. Wainwright gives much valuable contextual information on the development of Newbigin's views and stresses their continued relevance in ecumenism.

Mark Woodruff reminds me that next year will see the fiftieth anniversary of the death of another, and even more pioneering ecumenist, re-reception of whose insights and spirituality is also long overdue. I refer to the Abbe Paul Couturier, a person with whom I can especially identify, since like me, he was a not over successful schoolmaster who developed an ecumenical vocation as he approached middle age. Like Newbigin, he also had an excellent biographer, in his case the Anglican, Geoffrey Curtis, whose book, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, SCM, 1964, remains fresh and inspirational. Above all, he was a deeply spiritual man, who believed the churches best sought unity by 'spiritual emulation' that is by both deepening their own characteristic forms of spirituality and receiving humbly from each other. Greater holiness would lead to greater unity.

On one occasion, the Abbe Paul said, 'in order to re-read the divine mystery (ie in terms of another tradition) and to transpose one mentality to another, a special divine assistance is needed'. This reminds us of how much all our work is dependent upon the Holy Spirit. I write this as unity week approaches.

The Holy Spirit and Ecumenism

A consultation on this subject, involving, amongst others, a few of our members, will take place in Assisi in October 2002. I think a pneumatological challenge comes from both sides of the Reformation divide- from Protestants to 'catholics' to recognise the real work of the Spirit in communities that they regard as lacking the 'covenanted' ministerial structures and some, at least of the covenanted means of grace; from Catholics to those Protestants who are still suspicious of 'unbiblical' beliefs and practices in the 'catholic' churches to recognise the real life of grace and holiness that exists in such churches.

In a homily early in 2000, Pope John Paul II said this, 'The longing for unity goes hand in hand with a profound ability to sacrifice whatever is personal in order to predispose the soul to ever greater fidelity to the Gospel. Preparing ourselves for the sacrifice of unity means changing our viewpoint, broadening our horizons, knowing how to recognise the action of the Holy Spirit who is at work in our brethren, discovering new dimensions of holiness and opening ourselves to fresh aspects of Christian commitment'.

One might add, is part of the 'conviction of sin' of which John speaks in chapter 16 of his Gospel as the work of the Spirit, the revealing to us of the inadequacy of our own narrowness of vision? Is part of his searching of the 'deep things of God', of which Paul speaks, a searching of the riches of graces found in very diverse spiritualities. It is a point to ponder.

David Carter.