

# **The Society for Ecumenical Studies**

## **The Ecumenical Movement**

**The developing scene in Britain and on the World stage**

Selly Oak, November 2002

### ***Conference Report by Dr Martin Conway***

Some 30 people gathered in the Conference room of the United College of the Ascension in Birmingham, Selly Oak, for this joint conference, some 12 of them students at the UCA or its sister colleges linked to Birmingham University's Centre for the Study of Mission and World Christianity, 10 as members of the Society for Ecumenical Studies and others who belong to the staff of the College or of the University.

#### **Morning Session I - Where is the Ecumenical Movement Going?**

The first address was given by Dr Mary Tanner, formerly General Secretary of the Church of England's national Council for Christian Unity, and former Moderator of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order, therefore particularly well placed to speak on the subject. She began by speaking briefly of two fascinating conferences she had recently attended, one in Italy at Cardinal Suenens Foundation, bringing together Pentecostals, Adventists and Southern Baptists as well as the more usual participants in inter-church meetings, and the second a regular meeting of the General Secretaries of the World Families of Churches, who are also now a company considerably wider than the spread of churches represented within the World Council of Churches. So it was against the background of these experiences of a wider spread of confessions that she spoke of the 'Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC', of which she had been a member, and

whose Report had been considered by the WCC Central Committee at its meeting in Geneva at the end of August.

## **Background**

In the last decade of what many have considered 'the ecumenical century' it is widely agreed that the major instruments of the ecumenical movement, at different levels, are no longer functioning adequately. Here in Britain, we have seen the transition from a British Council of Churches to Churches Together in Britain & Ireland and the different bodies for the four nations, all involving the Roman Catholic Church (in not quite the same way in Ireland) as well as a number of black majority churches. Somewhat similar transitions have been taking place in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in the USA. Meanwhile the WCC had been working on its 'Common Understanding and Vision' statement, as accepted by the member churches at its 1998 Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, although in the view of many the statement went much less far than it needed to on at least two fronts:

- it hardly addressed the key issue of whether, and if so how, the Roman Catholic Church could ever become a member of an ecumenical instrument at the world level; and
- it failed to consider, let alone specify, which agenda items/areas positively need to be worked on by a **world** council of churches, which by **national** or **regional** bodies, which best by **local** ecumenical instruments.

Second, the Harare Assembly had briefly considered the proposal for a Forum, a wider, less committing gathering than the WCC itself, but which could serve as a 'safe space' for a much wider spectrum of Christian communities to get to know each other and explore together what the will of God for their relationships might be. This would clearly not be centred on the visible unity of the Church in the sort of way the WCC has been since its foundation. Many member churches had appeared to be a lot less than keen on this idea, even while agreeing to some initial steps in this direction. Yet

both those few Pentecostals present at Harare, and the Russian Orthodox Church, which had pressed for the Special Commission, were genuinely attracted to the idea.

Third major point of background: the WCC is once again facing a major financial challenge. How can it properly curtail the range of its agenda and prioritize its activities within the limitations of the budget the member churches are willing to provide?

### **The Special Commission**

It was hardly a surprise that the Orthodox Churches in the later 1990s were displaying a growing dissatisfaction with the WCC: clearly it was no longer, if it ever had genuinely been, a 'safe space' for them. Major reasons they voiced included:

1. because of the way it took - or at least appeared to take - decisions, by majority votes;
2. because of the stance the WCC (appears to) take(s) on certain topics, e.g. the ordination of women or human sexuality, which are controversial in many churches;
3. because of the way membership of 'individual churches' (i.e. at the national level) works, ensuring that the Orthodox will for ever be no more than a 'minority', and with a considerable number of 'full member churches' appearing to be no more than loosely attached to the doctrine of the Trinity;
4. because of the patterns of worship that have come to dominate the prayer life of the WCC, e.g. the insistence on 'inclusive language'; and
5. because of the failure of the WCC to keep the theological work for visible unity at the centre of the Council's activity.

The starkest possible evidence for this huge gulf that had opened up between the Orthodox and most other member churches was given during the opening days of the previous Assembly, in Canberra in 1991, when a significant, richly Trinitarian address written by Metropolitan Parthenios of Alexandria was immediately 'up-staged' by what one theologian called 'a brilliant, media-professionally orchestrated cocktail of feminist and Korean folk-religion motifs', half-Christian, half-Buddhist, by a young Korean woman theologian then teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Half the Assembly was visibly fascinated by the sheer contrast, the other half, including all the Orthodox, no less visibly, indeed profoundly shocked by the very possibility that some other 'spirit of the world' could be in this way substituted for God the Holy Spirit of Pentecost.

In the intervening years, two of the Orthodox Churches, those of Georgia and of Bulgaria, officially withdrew from WCC membership, both deeply plagued by internal dissensions, while the Russian Orthodox Church has been increasingly restive, partly because of the activities of other churches in Russia, partly because the WCC did not seem to be taking any steps to 'correct' its ways. And so the Special Commission was brought into being in 1999, with each Orthodox Church appointing at least one member, and an equal number of members from the Protestant 'side' of the WCC, led by its two Co-Moderators, both incidentally Europeans, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus (Ecumenical Patriarchate) and Bishop Rolf Koppe (Evangelical Church in Germany). It worked in plenary sessions and by smaller sub-groups - in both achieving a remarkable quality, indeed intensity, of mutual listening, as of encouragement to the 'others' to articulate precisely and at length their hesitations, doubts and problems. Predictably, there were discovered to be no shortage of 'internal' diversities and disagreements within the two 'sides'. But also several discoveries that the concerns the Orthodox were raising were in large part shared, if often in different vocabulary and on the basis of different backgrounds and contexts, by some other churches.

Five main issues are pinpointed in the final Report of the Commission - virtually all pointing up the need for a radical mind-shift (akin to that we have

experienced in the UK) from a **'Council'** out beyond the majority of people in its members, and thus often on its own, to **churches** knowing themselves held in shared fellowship:

1. **Ecclesiology:** Are the member churches really committed to seeking and reaching the 'visible unity of Christ's Church' ? Within this the 'other churches' posed a sharp question to the Orthodox: 'Do your views in this area really allow for us to be part of "the church" ?' And a hardly less sharp question back: 'How do you understand yourselves as belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene Creed ?'
2. **Social and ethical issues:** Here the Orthodox were insisting on considerably more clarity and articulation of precisely how scripture and tradition are best used to handle current moral issues and to reach common conclusions that can be seen as in some way binding on all Christians. They pleaded for much more openness and clarity about the theological questions involved in the very process of doing this kind of work, and for the leaving of much more space for the elaboration and recognition of 'minority', even divergent, opinions.
3. **Common prayer:** Here there was general agreement that prayer must remain at the heart of the whole ecumenical movement. Yet there was an equally shared conviction that to speak of 'ecumenical worship' (as the WCC often has) is seriously misleading. The Commission recommended, and the Central Committee has agreed, that any act of worship at a WCC meeting will from now on be clearly marked as either 'confessional worship' (i.e. in the tradition and under the discipline of the 'xxxx' church), or as 'inter-confessional worship' (i.e. drawing on different traditions, as possibly appropriate for a mixed gathering). To ensure that there are both sorts of occasions in any one meeting will allow everyone to share in the diversity of riches available and prevent any falling into a habit of 'lowest common denominator' solutions. A lengthy Appendix discusses the issues in some detail.

(While this policy will allow for a Church whose tradition is to offer eucharistic hospitality relatively widely to do so to all member churches, as for an ordained woman to preach, it would preclude the celebration of the Lima liturgy, as an 'accepted ecumenical liturgy' - unless one particular church had adopted this liturgy as a form of its own tradition.)

4. **Decision-making:** The recommendation here, again accepted by the Central Committee and accompanied by a lengthy appendix offering more details of how it can be pursued, is to move from a parliamentary style (i.e. of debate for or against certain specific proposals, and then a final, numerical vote) to a pattern of seeking consensus - as e.g. the Society of Friends has long seen as a more satisfactorily Christian procedure. This 'consensus' can include a row of possibilities:
  - there may prove to be unanimous agreement;
  - one or more minority/ies can accept that a clear majority is ready to accept any given decision, which the minority/ies will be happy to live with;
  - the Council can 'agree' on a range of different patterns being followed by its various member churches;
  - the meeting may decide that they are not ready to reach a definite conclusion, because ... and adjourn the debate to a future occasion.
  
5. **What it means to be member of the WCC:** Here the Commission recommended, and the Central Committee has accepted, that a distinction be drawn between:
  - Member Churches belonging to the fellowship of the WCC; and

- Churches in association with the fellowship (i.e. a 'weaker' form of belonging yet which does not break off from it). The representatives of these churches would be allowed to speak at a meeting but not to vote, if ever such a procedure were followed.

In accepting these recommendations, the Central Committee has appointed a 'Standing Committee on Orthodox Participation in the WCC' (consisting for the first period of the members of the present steering committee of the Commission) to follow through on the Commission's work, to watch over the experience of working by consensus procedures, and to give continuing attention to the crucial ecclesiological issues. It has also instructed the Faith and Order Commission to articulate the vision of visible unity in Christ, and has encouraged each and every group within the WCC to try as carefully as they can to work by the consensus procedures suggested.

### **Mary's own questions**

Mary concluded by articulating two areas of question which this whole story leaves her with:

- How real and deep is the agreement of the Central Committee? Outwardly, all nine of the Commission's recommendations were accepted, yet undoubtedly there will have been many unanswered questions and unspoken doubts among its members. Many believe, for instance, that it involves an apparent 'backing-away from' all that the Council has so fruitfully and creatively learned about 'common worship drawing on a mixture of traditions' these last 20 years, since the pioneering Assembly at Vancouver in 1983. Bishop Margot Kaessmann of Hannover, for one, has resigned from the Central Committee, quoting this as a serious betrayal of one key and hope-giving element in the Council's recent experience.
- The Special Commission aimed at creating in the WCC a 'safe space' for the Orthodox, and indeed other sometimes hesitant churches. Does

such an aim overlook the fact that no ecumenical 'space' will ever, or should be, entirely comfortable to divided churches? If the 'Forum' idea gets taken further, that will by definition be a much *safer* space, since it rules out any such commitment to visible unity as the WCC has been based on all along. Is it conceivable that the churches will have enough budget to keep both institutions in business ? Where in particular will there be room for all the careful work that still needs to be done on key questions in the approach(es) to visible unity - for instance, on the comparison of the diverse results of the many bi-lateral unity discussions being pursued ? One can only admit that even around the WCC table there appear at present to be all too few churches actually envisaging moving into more visible patterns of unity, and therefore devoting time to working towards that. So is it right that this should remain as the main and overall goal of the WCC?

Mary's last paragraph is this:

The recommendations of the Special Commission, and the discussions about the need for a larger and more representative forum at world level, need now to be considered together as the search continues for what would be the most appropriate ecumenical instrument to serve the world-wide ecumenical movement in a new millennium. The time leading up to the next Assembly of the WCC (provisionally: Brazil, 2006) is a good time to explore all this.

## **Discussion**

In a relatively short period for questions, a Greek participant spoke of the difficulties in a country where church and state are closely tied together in traditional attitudes that show virtually no tolerance to any other Christians, while a Chinese participant witnessed to the hugely encouraging and inspiring effect that the Canberra Assembly had had on a local pastor from his area who was enabled to take part as a visitor and came back quite lyrically joyous at what he had experienced.



## **Morning Session II - Current Ecumenical Strivings in British Methodism**

The second part of the morning had been planned as an address on 'The Plan for an Ecumenical Bishop in Wales', on which the Revd Gareth Powell, Methodist Chaplain at Cardiff University, was ready to report. Unfortunately, he was ill on the day, but was replaced at short notice by the Revd Peter Sulston, one of the Senior Secretaries of the Methodist Conference (see also below).

He prefaced his remarks by pointing out that the resources of the University and Colleges in Birmingham were of importance to Britain as well as to the wider world, not least for our struggles in Britain to live in effectively reconciled diversity in a society that is now both multi-cultural and multi-faith.

### **'Towards an Ecumenical Strategy**

He spoke first of the statement 'Towards an Ecumenical Strategy' that the Methodist Conference of 2001 had adopted in order to co-ordinate the many different efforts and projects pointing at present towards a more whole church. This strategy tried to:

1. start with the 'big picture', to be aware of the 'oikoumene', the 'whole inhabited earth', in which God was seeking to bring all things into reconciliation in Christ. We must not overlook, for instance, the huge questions posed by inter-faith relationships to what Christians have tried to mean by a 'fellowship in holiness';
2. emphasise the central importance of sharing together in a common life. Wherever you go in UK Methodism today you will find much being done in partnership with other churches. There is an undeniable 'koinonia' being experienced in much of this, from which we need to be better at drawing out the long-term significance;
3. keep in mind the goal of 'full, visible unity' in Christ. At present we are working on this especially - see below - in relation to the Church of

England, but there will be many further relationships to be developed and learned from in the further future.

These three 'streams': the big picture, the sharing in common life, and the goal of visible unity, are precisely what came together in the WCC.

### **Welsh Ecumenical Bishop**

He then brought us up to date with the Welsh plan for an 'ecumenical bishop' in the East Cardiff area. This was conceived already some years ago, in the follow-up of the failure to discover how Swindon could have a genuinely ecumenical bishop, and of the more deliberate, slower progress made in Milton Keynes by upgrading an 'ecumenical officer' into an 'Ecumenical Moderator', and by the creation of an 'ecumenical Dean' in Telford. The Welsh proposal grew directly from the Welsh Covenant agreed in the early 1980s by the Methodist, United Reformed, Presbyterian and Anglican Churches, along with some of the Baptist congregations belonging to the Baptist Union of Great Britain. It was originally designed to be able to give properly shared/common oversight both to the various Local Ecumenical Partnerships in the East Cardiff area, and to the growing relationships between 'normal' congregations of these churches in that area. During this last summer both the Methodist and United Reformed Churches had given formal approval to the plan, but unfortunately the Governing Body of the Church in Wales failed to achieve a sufficient majority in both the houses of clergy and of laity (despite the bishops being unanimously in favour) to allow it to go through.

This has been quite a blow to the participants in the ENFYS (the Welsh Covenant), and there will have to be some time devoted to 'what next' questions. The two types of question raised about it concerned

- size: how could one have a Bishop for such a relatively small area ?  
and
- gender: would it have to be a male Bishop ? (with both Methodists and United Reformed insisting on 'gender openness at this point).

## **Anglican Methodist Covenant in England**

Turning to the proposed Anglican-Methodist Covenant in England, Peter pointed out that this was not a scheme for full, visible unity, still less for a 'merger'; it is to be seen as the next step in a long pilgrimage towards visible unity between our two churches, on which we have been engaged for a good long time already, and which will itself prove to be no more than a small step on the much longer road towards the full unity of all Christ's people. Yet it will test out whether our two churches have yet reached enough mutual understanding to be able to move this one step further.

It has at least four notable features:

1. the text as published has for the first time achieved a shared/agreed account of our history (drafted in the end by a historian belonging to the United Reformed Church for us !). This must surely serve as a key preparation for a genuine 'healing of memories' which have all too long now divided us. The reports of the ARCIC (Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission) have also greatly helped to point the way ahead in overcoming our respective shortcomings, in harvesting our diversities for the good of both churches, and in seeking a new and more hopeful future than we shall ever have in division;
2. it includes also a vital passage on sharing in mission, drawn not least from biblical sources;
3. it seeks to overcome also the hurts (perhaps especially on the Methodist side) inherited from the failures of the earlier schemes in 1969/72 (for full unity) and in 1982 (for a four-church covenant). It notes in particular that the Church of England has never voted against any of these proposals; as in Wales this summer, it was always a case of 'failing to achieve a sufficient majority';

4. it very usefully teases over the remaining issues and areas of disagreement in the four familiar areas of the Lambeth Quadrilateral: the common faith, the sacraments, the local ministry, the ministry of oversight. These will remain to be worked on in detail during the period that it is hoped the Covenant will open.

So he ended by stressing that the Covenant now being discussed in both churches towards decisions in mid-2003 is intended as a public, formal, overall acceptance of each other as churches at present divided but moving towards unity. Pray hard that we don't fail God and each other yet again !

### **Afternoon Session I - A Local Ecumenical Partnership**

The Revd Gary Renison (Church of England) reported on his experience as the (Anglican) minister in the local church at Bar Hill, sponsored by four member churches of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland. To understand the church in Bar Hill you need to know about Bar Hill as a place. It is a relatively newly built estate, on the outskirts of Cambridge, with 6000 residents and the largest Tesco's in Europe!

In the early planning it was agreed by the authorities to have a central site set aside for church/es, and then by the churches to build only one. Things happened organically - i.e. as seemed right at each successive stage. In the first place the Christians met in a builders' hut, then in a school, so that the actual church was only built in the late 1970s, after the life of the estate had taken shape. Both the Church of England and the Methodist Church at the beginning asked local ministers already in nearby posts to work together to establish the new congregation; in fact it was soon discovered that people from at least 6 denominations were actively involved, including Roman Catholics. Not long after the congregation came into existence, the two ministers were found to be differing in their emphases and in danger of splitting the congregation into two, so it was agreed to have only one minister, licensed by four denominations (Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed, Baptist) with the Society of Friends taking an interest and the Roman Catholics making their own arrangements for priestly contacts.

Both the community as a whole and the congregation within it have seen themselves, from the start, as a place of experimentation, with the people more valuable and important than any structures, traditions or institutions. Of course there have been lots of 'problems', but so far all have been found to be 'overcomable'. Four areas were mentioned:

1. *How many Methodists/Baptists/Anglicans do you have?* From the outset it has been recognised that we did not want to count ourselves into four or more separate churches, but to come together from how ever many different backgrounds into one church. So we have long since agreed to have only one membership roll, and to count every one in membership as belonging to all four of the sponsoring churches. If you become a Christian for the first time we baptise you into full membership of all four of the churches; if you come to Bar Hill after having been a Methodist/Baptist/Anglican somewhere else you will join our extended membership - and often find yourself in some difficulty when going back later to a one-denominational congregation !
2. *Pattern of services.* Over a 'cycle' of two months all our sponsors will find their traditions figuring in our Sunday worship. On the first and third Sundays of each month we have a eucharistic service: on the first involving robes and a set liturgy from a service book (one month Anglican, the next Methodist), on the third without robe or book (according to Baptist or United Reformed pattern); everybody, by and large, comes to all these equally happily. On the second Sundays we have a service of praise and preaching, on the fourth a family service geared not least to children and young people. Our evening services are deliberately more experimental, even 'radical'.
3. *Governance and Decision-making.* We have settled into a congregational ecclesiology with an episcopal trim ! The church meeting, open to all members, is basically in charge of all major decisions, yet with an 8-person Local Advisory Group, (one from each

of the four denominations, a Quaker, a Catholic and two members of the congregation) whose recommendations to accept the key decisions of the church meeting need to be confirmed by the Bishop of Ely as far as the Church of England is concerned. The danger in this process is that the minister is the one person present at every stage, so it is very important that the minister is someone who knows how to handle such a set of structures with appropriate care (Gary remarked at this point that he happens not to be passionately interested in 'ecumenism' though he is in Bar Hill !)

In parenthesis, Gary mentioned that Quakers seldom come to the Sunday services, though a few come on the three Sundays a year when the 'praise service' incorporates a certain degree of Quaker custom. The Roman Catholic Church paid £25,000 towards the building costs of £750,000 when the church was built, and therefore are part-owners. They hold their weekly service there at 6.30 on a Saturday evening as a 'Mass Centre' for Catholics from quite a ring of nearby villages, who come for Mass (and their weekly shop at Tesco's), yet without seeking any contact with the Sunday congregation.

4. *Sacraments*. It was decided early on not to seek any form of 'lay presidency' of the eucharist. Also to practise both infant and believers' baptism. Every family on the estate with a new-born child is offered a service of thanksgiving for the birth. Believers' baptism always takes place in the same service as (joint) confirmation for those already baptised as infants.

People join the congregation because we are centred on Bar Hill, yes, but far more because we are centred on Jesus Christ, and because we invite them to serve their neighbours in Bar Hill and beyond in the mission to which he calls his people.

In response to a question Gary said that there is no other Christian group worshipping regularly in Bar Hill; those wanting anything different can always

go to Cambridge and find what they want there. Mary Tanner pointed out that such a report vividly illustrated how the 'pilgrimage of unity' must be both a means and an end, never just one or the other, and that - as Gary's last remark had stressed - the 'kingdom in Bar Hill must always be related to God's kingdom in other places and in other ages, of yesterday no less than of tomorrow'.

### **Afternoon Session II - Ecumenical Strivings in Kenya**

John Ataya, a Kenyan Methodist and PhD student working in the area of Bible translation, spoke of what he saw as the emerging trends, constrained by the specific situation of Kenya. Much ecumenism in our past was institutional, (as it were) simply downloaded from elsewhere: both our National Christian Council (CCK) and the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) which has its headquarters in Nairobi, have been since their origins modelled on a pattern known in other regions, and are now suffering from severe financial cuts.

Today what is emerging is a unity orientated to our actual situation and needs. The churches come together in order to accomplish something which will be better achieved if tackled jointly rather than in separation. In Kenya, for instance, we have 42 languages (50 if you count major dialects), so we simply have to help one another over any tricky issues, for instance in the work of bible translation. Our Bibles must not have different terms for, say, the Virgin Mary, or bread and wine - our differing cultures and languages give us enough problems without importing new ones! Especially when you think that a complete translation of the Bible into a new language can take 20 years, we simply must share as closely as possible with one another in service of Kenya's people as a whole.

Moreover in Africa, where certain forms of dictatorship always threaten, the churches need to be very watchful and active in regard to the patterns of governance. No one denomination can pursue that sort of struggle on its own with any prospect of 'success'. Kenya, for instance, is busy working towards a new Constitution to succeed the one drawn up at Independence in the 1960s;

President Moi has been happy to let that old one run on, but the churches, with others, have been pressing for a new one. It is not a question of the church pressing its own ideas but of the churches applying their weight to major public questions. The churches have shown that they can get vital issues, like HIV/AIDS or the threat of famine, brought to public notice in a way that governments often won't or don't want to.

Small people, e.g. farmers growing coffee, are almost never able to control the middle-men who are responsible for the prices paid for the coffee - there can be a lot of money disappearing in corruption. But the churches can help the farmers if they work together effectively, in whatever grouping proves appropriate. It doesn't need to be, or become, a permanent structure with a sizeable budget.

In a question, Israel Selvanayagam asked if this need-based approach could substitute over the years for some more structured cooperation. John Ataya responded that he, personally, would love to be able to follow Christ's will that we form one body, one mind and one spirit, but - pragmatically - he couldn't see anything other than such a need-based approach having any real chance of working.

### **Afternoon Session III - The witness of the united Church of South India**

Professor Iris Devadesan (a lay member of the CSI, teaching at the United Theological College in Bangalore, known for its liberal thinking and creative new ideas) said that she never knew how privileged Indians were to be working and worshipping in a united church, open to other churches and to the Hindus all around, until she started living in other areas and experiencing their separated churches. She once belonged to an Anglican Church in North India whose vicar said it was a sin to go to a Baptist Church!

What does Christian Unity mean for lay people ? First, a delight that the united CSI brings us together as Christians across all our languages. We don't have to search out 'our own denomination' but simply share in whatever we find in our local church. Of course any thinking Christian will soon realise that



there are many questions yet to be faced, let alone resolved. What brought our former churches together in the first place was not a concern for the church, rather a concern for India, a refusal to present Christianity as a complex of scandalously and unnecessarily divided churches. For in a country shaped by a different faith (in our case Hinduism), as Bishop Azariah already said forcefully at the first Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne in 1927, it is nothing less than a sin and a scandal that the Church of Christ should be divided.

In the early years of the CSI there were indeed tensions, even squabbles, not least because many of us wanted to re-think all traditions in the church/es with regard to India and in Indian ways. We have been able to introduce the ordination of women as deacons, later as priests - so far only one as bishop. Both the Lutheran and Mar Thoma Churches now train their future ministers in the same colleges as the CSI. The Church of North India has followed in our footsteps, if with a slightly different mix of 'former churches', but the churches in North East India (where some are more nearly a majority of their populations) are still hesitating about closer unity.

We have had for some years now a 'joint Council' of the CSI, CNI, and Mar Thoma looking towards an all-India united Church, but are hardly making much progress with that. There are lots and lots of human problems involved! The CSI tries to follow Jesus when he said: 'that they all may be one, ... so that the world may believe'. For the mission Christ entrusted to his followers is not simply a matter of establishing schools and hospitals, or providing vans and audio-visual equipment. The Ramakrishna (Hindu) Mission can do that just as well as we! But they don't have good news to bring and to tell out! Since 1985, for instance, the CSI has had a programme: 'Vision for Equipping Local Congregations for Mission' (VELCOM) for training lay Christians, often with city congregations adopting partner congregations in the rural areas. It's not enough to behave like a good samaritan, we need to go on to bring sociological or economic or political wisdom and creativity to get the underlying situations changed. It is not enough for pastors to read the Bible aloud. When, for instance, four Catholic nuns were raped not long ago in a

certain part of India many hundreds of Christians, of all denominations, made a silent march and took a petition to civic leaders, getting them to promise to do what we were demanding.

The burning issues today are:

- ***How do we live together with other faiths?*** A particularly urgent question, given the policies of our national, Hindu-based government.
- ***How can we get rid of discrimination against lower caste people, especially women?*** Dalit women are the worst treated of all Indians.

You can follow our debates and strivings on these matters in papers such as *The People's Reporter* and *Laity Focus*, agonising over realities of concern to Christians all over India.

### **Worship**

After a tea break, participants joined, in the newly re-designed chapel of the United College of the Ascension, in a memorable service for the inauguration of the Selly Oak Initiative for Ecumenical Study and Action (SOIESA). This eucharistic service was presided over by the Revd David Tuck, Chair of the USPG Governors, and included a sermon by the Revd Peter Sulston, Co-ordinating Secretary for Inter-Church and Other Relationships of the Methodist Church.

One hymn sung during it may not be as widely known as it deserves :

From many grains once scattered far and wide,  
Each one alone, to grow as best it may,  
Now safely gathered in and unified,  
One single loaf we offer here today.  
So may your Church in ev'ry time and place,  
Be in this meal united by your grace.

From many grapes, once living on the vine,  
Now crushed and broken under human feet,  
We offer here this single cup of wine;  
The sign of love, unbroken and complete.  
So may we stand among the crucified,  
And live the risen life of him who died.

From many places gathered we are here,  
Each with a gift that we alone can bring.  
O Spirit of the living God, draw near,  
Make whole by grace our broken offering.  
O crush the pride that bids us stand alone;  
Let flow the love that makes our spirits one.

*Words by Michael Forster. © copyright Kevin Mayhew Ltd, Buxhall,  
Stowmarket, Suffolk, IP14 3BW. Reproduced by permission, from 'The  
Hymns of Michael Forster'.*