

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Residential Conference

All Saints' Pastoral Centre, London Colney, Hertfordshire, 16-18 May 2003

The weekend conference took place around the major day conference at nearby St Albans on 17th May 2003, which brought together Archbishop Rowan Williams, the Revd Elizabeth Welch and Cardinal Walter Kasper to present a vision of Christian Unity for the next generation.

Those present at London Colney were John Bradley, David Carter, Martin Conway, Ruth Conway, Fidelis Daly, Frank Davis, Hermann Docx, Maximos Lavriotes, Paul McPartlan, Bernie Milligan, Martin Reardon, Ruth Reardon and Mark Woodruff.

SUMMARY

The following notes reflect the topics covered in discussion by the participating individuals and do not amount to the position or policy of the Society. They do however suggest useful agenda, both for the Society and the various churches:

- More collaboration by the Society and other bodies on specific study projects
- Attention to those at the 'ecumenical margins'
- Emphasis on the spiritual expression of the ecumenical vision
- The deliberate opening up of the churches' holy places for the world to realise this
- Ecumenical sustainability, related to developing European society and the environment
- The experience of the Eucharist in ecumenical study

1. EXPECTATIONS

The opening session reflected participants' own vision of the future of the ecumenical movement and expectations of what the St Albans speakers might offer. Among these ideas were:

- A fresh commitment to study, thinking and caring about unity in the 21st century
- A dynamic, spiritual ecumenism
- Bold tangible ideas, with practical outcomes
- A succinct message appealing to the people
- Humility towards the lights of others; humility in realising what one group of Christians needs to receive from others; humility to overcome the distortion of looking solely from the viewpoint of one's own traditions; and the humility to see ourselves as others see us
- Christian Unity as the means to the unity of the world and of humanity
- The spirit and drive for unity and church renewal, which was thriving in the 1960s especially in the wake of Vatican II, has been forgotten. Now is the time for fresh vigour
- Personal dialogue between Archbishop Rowan Williams and Cardinal Walter Kasper
- A considered view on the effect of the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* on Anglicans, less through circular arguments over validity and more through appreciating the value to Church life in different communions
- Better awareness that when the Vatican seeks to communicate, this must be in forms that can be understood. It can be poor at communicating well on things that matter (eg *Dominus Jesus*), and risks furthering misunderstanding rather than clarification
- Agreed statements are good in themselves, but they are less successful at explaining in popular terms how Christians see things separately and together. Agreement has been at the cost of ambiguity
- All churches need to change language traditions, in order to get beyond all their presuppositions and worldviews, so that everyone can understand what is being said
- A conscious decision to envisage the world not as an alien opposing power, but the object of redeeming love in Christ

- As no human plan inspires confidence, we need to hold to the reality that we shall be one on seeing the face of the Lord. Thus our ecumenical endeavours need to show the face of Christ more clearly for us. Thus we shall discover unity more in real, unexpected ways
- The conference needs to charge us with enthusiasm and pentecostal hope that the walls of separation do not reach as far as heaven
- There needs to be the chance for listening in dialogue, and genuine implementation of the doctrine of reception
- Ecumenical work should be less churchy, more earthy, more spiritual. It should be less concerned with statements, and more with what is to be done as a community of serving disciples
- To allow this action, there needs to be a proper freedom from ecclesiastical structures, although never in an anarchic way. Thus they cannot prevent unity, but instead resource and enhance discipleship. We should be 'light on structure, strong on service'
- The best models, leading the way forward in unity in the service of the world, come from below. Yet the *status quo* structures stop things rising from below, such as risk and experiment, developing LEPs, resources and money.
- While the grass roots may lack the overview, those who possess it can set free and deploy those at the roots, so that exciting new possibilities need not remain unexplored

It was striking how a number of these thoughts were addressed in the subsequent day conference in St Albans, especially the points about spiritual listening and learning from our respective expressions of the Gospel; humility and service; and working out the unity that already exists in and because of Baptism, rather than what is effected by relations between the various structures. A final comment - from Bishop Christopher Hibbert on welcoming the main conference to his Cathedral - is worth noting too:

- There is now a chance to turn a new page on unity, not to forget the past, but to remember for the future.

2. REACTIONS

After the St Albans event on Saturday 17 May, there were reactions to how the speakers' visions presented a way ahead for the churches, some of it especially urgent.

A. *St Albans - a model for the future?*

- i. The event showed what is there to be achieved. Although it was good that St Alban's Abbey, Newman Association and the Society could collaborate successfully, the operational Church itself cannot be run on that exceptional model, nor its unity thereby finally secured
- ii. The viability of a church is doubtful without collaboration. The watchwords now are not 'evangelise or perish' but 'ecumenise or perish'
- iii. The Society is too small to organise events on its own. It should serve to collaborate with other bodies to stimulate ecumenical study within and across various special fields, e.g the Rural Theology Association and the Churches' Rural Group to relate the environment with unity (see 'Forward Plans' below)

B. *Attitudes to the ecumenical future - spiritual emulation*

- i. Christians in different churches should share the delights, not just the pains in ecumenism
- ii. As the search for unity is something over which we strain, we should see and present it less as an effort which enervates us, and more as the exertion which stretches our fitness and achievement. Thus we can recover some enthusiasm, and recognise it is time to move the focus on from just the difficulties
- iii. With a right spirit of loyalty to our traditions, we can therefore confidently express why it is good to be a Baptist, a Roman Catholic, Methodist. An ecumenism worthy of the name builds upon these positive treasures and shares them with others, instead of being disappointed that the lowest common denominator is not rich enough to inspire anyone. We want the unity of what is already there and more, not less. We want unity, when it comes, to be the fulness of riches we can already envisage
- iv. Each group of Christians must allot a place within it for self-criticism. It is one thing what a people in a denomination say and another what others outside notice
- v. So instead of getting a Baptist to declare the greatness and value of the Baptist tradition, typically we should be hearing non-Baptists have telling us

why Baptists are great. A Baptist could then reply, correcting, explaining or refocusing the impression and thus a dialogue would be grounded not in one group's account of itself but in the interface between one group and another. The same would apply to all denominations

C. *'Holy Space' as an achievable task for the ecumenical movement*

- i. If the vision of unity for the 21st century is inescapably spiritual and prayerful in essence and expression (something which all speakers called for, in strikingly distinctive ways), Elizabeth Welch's plea for the offering of our holy place as people's holy space - for holy healing and holy people - needs to be seen as a key ecumenical task, something which all churches can provide for the world at large and not merely for each other
- ii. Such bodies as the Council for the Care of Churches could be made aware of their potential as active bearers of the notion of Holy Space and Christian spirituality
- iii. For despite falling interest in church as a cultural activity, interest in spirituality persist. Lest this be superficial and consumerist, churches through traditions, yet in concert, can offer wholeness and a wholesomeness of spirituality by encounter with God in Christ. Holy Space can offer refuges from the occult and misleading 'New Age' movements. It can also form a network of healing and growth in spiritual life. The London-based World Centre for Christian Meditation, the CTBI Living Spirituality network and the London Centre for Spirituality are exemplars of such achievable Unity

D. *The Church in developing European society*

- i. The effect in the UK of EU enlargement should be studied. The influx of new nations from the Christian East, especially after their long experience of state atheism, will influence life in the churches of the West as Europe on various levels brings together those who have been divided ecclesiastically for centuries and politically for much of the twentieth century
- ii. Work should be done on how spirituality impinges on work in society. The last half century has seen the disappearance of values we thought we could rely on (cf. the 40% divorce rate). Churches in common can speak to society of the quality of life we see in Jesus, a Christian culture of sufficiency and the desirability for the sake of others of voluntary poverty instead of the unbridled pursuit of riches and success. This applies as much to nations and commerce as to individuals. Therefore the Church as communion, realised ecumenically,

is a model capable of addressing today's society, offering balance to both society and the individual.

E. *Ecumenical sustainability - a Christian view of society*

- i. A common viewpoint in the churches on grace, providence and creation calls for sustainable development, something which is incompatible with the unbridled dominance of economic growth in a supposedly Christian Europe. To this the churches can speak of sustainable community
- ii. So future study could look at ecology, sustainability and the right use of the natural order in terms of how God has created and intended it, and how this is manifested in the Church's communion as *oikumene* - a single household for the whole world. Ecumenical sustainability

F. *The Christian idea of humanity and the ecumenical margins*

- i. Future work should concentrate on what it means to be a human being in such a context, as this has been neglected. Bishop Joe Aldred's challenge - that whole constituencies of people were to all intents and purposes not present at St Albans - was well taken. Black and Asian people, and young people as a whole, were absent. So churches should come to terms with why those at the margins of society or the churches' concerns are not engaged by ecumenical activity in the service of the wider world, why the churches effectively exclude people because we do not think their distinctive humanity counts. This is how we used to think about each others' churches - now we have transferred these attitudes to ethnic minorities, women and others.
- ii. People have fallen into the trap of thinking that being Christian is more important than being human. Yet, for instance, *Gaudium et spes* asserts that people need to find Christ to become fully human (no. 22). Indeed this very idea has been a keynote of John Paul II's papacy (being cited in all but one of his Encyclicals) - every human being needs to know of Jesus to be human. This passage demands to be realised in the forefront of ecumenical work, for at the moment we are containing Christ in separate denominations rather than presenting the fulness of his humanity which transcends all the church and is the pattern for the whole of humanity.
- iii. Clearly this, too, has ramifications for our thinking and practical dealings concerning interfaith relations.

3. FORWARD PLANS FOR THE SOCIETY

On Sunday 18 May, the Eucharist was celebrated at two services - one by Roman Catholics and another by Anglicans and Free Church members, conference participants attending both.

This direct experience of division - and the desire to be loyal to our churches disciplines at the same time as feeling frustration at the regulations - provoked searching discussion as the conference explored how the Society could be useful for the future ecumenical movement. Ideas included:

A. *Collaboration with other bodies*

- i. The Society should work more closely on projects with other bodies. It should apply to become a body in association with CTBI. A good way to raise the profile of our work, it would also enable the voice of lay people to be heard in the structures, owing to CTBI's and CTE's practical programmes. This is not always possible through separate denominations' representative and governing bodies
- ii. The Society should compare notes with International Ecumenical Fellowship (British Region). Whereas we have emphasised meeting for study, their approach has preferred meeting for experiencing living together and worship (not least at the Eucharist) in which meditation in common has been of vital importance
- iii. A more formal link with *One in Christ* could be explored for the dissemination of papers and new thinking. Other publications and bodies we could co-ordinate with more closely, as appropriate, are *Ecumenical Review* (with its international significance), *Societas Oecumenica*, *Exchange* (the Journal of the University of Utrecht's centre for ecumenical and missiological studies), *Ecumenical Trends*, the *Unity Digest* of the Church of England's Council for Mission and Unity, *Pilgrim Post* (with its broad accessible readership, news reports and useful summaries), USPG, the Selly Oak Colleges, Rethinking Mission, the Centre for Ecumenical Studies at Selly Oak, the Bible Society, the main ecumenical studies centres (such as Edinburgh, Cambridge, Camarthen, Sarum, the Black Theology Centre at Birmingham), the St Ethelburga Centre for Reconciliation, the World Centre for Christian Meditation the London Centre for Spirituality, the Simon of Cyrene Centre in Wandsworth

B. *Ecumenical study of environmental concerns*

- i. If the study of the natural world as the context of sustainable, ecumenical community were to be taken forward, the Society could usefully facilitate consultation among the Arthur Rank Centre, the association of agricultural chaplains, the Rural Evangelism Network, the CTBI Environmental Issues Network and the European Christian Environmental Network

C. *Conference outcomes*

- i. The committee should monitor new membership in response to May conference and consciously check the response from existing membership
- ii. There should be some kind of follow up letter from St Albans - with a focus on theological students - and coverage in the press

D. *Ecumenical education and evaluation*

- i. The Society could build for itself a networking role in the field of ecumenical study and ensure that this is a requisite component of theological education generally, resourcing scholars, teachers and students at theological colleges and seminaries, ecumenical offices (both within denominations and those in inter-church agencies). It should advertise its papers and promote its study events
- ii. The Society could be in a position to offer evaluation of LEPs

E. *The experience of the Eucharist in ecumenical study*

- i. The Society should directly address the 'real sense' of the Eucharist, the meaning of which is not in the Eucharist, but in life. What we are given in each Eucharist we divide and do not express in life. By making the emphasis on ecumenical spirituality, the Society could deflect attention from eucharistic division, towards declaring that we are mature enough to accept discipline as we can recognise that the bond between Eucharist and the Church at one in baptism is inseparable (something persuasively commended by Rowan Williams)
- ii. We should examine the link between the Pope's request to non-Roman Catholic churches to comment on the nature for them of the Petrine ministry and how it might serve unity on one hand and, on the other, what that implies about the prospects for eucharistic sharing. Given that the churches acknowledge real communion to exist between them all by virtue of baptism,

at what level of inter-communion in church life can eucharistic sharing (Holy Communion) be achieved?

- iii. Instead of concentrating on division at the Eucharist, the Society could emphasise in its study the positive fulness of life in the sacrament of baptism common to all churches. This may be 'imperfect' communion, but it is nevertheless real and should be maximised
- iv. Study of the relation between the sacrament of Eucharist and that of matrimony has been neglected. If there is union in Christian marriage, what are the theological grounds for not acting upon that union at the Eucharist? What grounds could be defined that would permit a married couple, in which each spouse belongs to a different church, regularly or on occasion to receive the Eucharist in each others' churches at the same time as building loyalty and allegiance to their respective communions
- v. The discipline of various churches permits those who do not belong to them to receive the Eucharist for special reasons, and allows members to receive the sacraments in a church with which another is not in 'full' communion. As a long lasting ecumenical group which meets to study and take forward the journey to unity, are there such occasions when its members can licitly receive Holy Communion together in defined circumstances?