

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

MAY THEY ALL BE ONE, BUT HOW?

Keynote Address at the Conference at St Alban's Cathedral, 17th May 2003

The Revd Elizabeth Welch, United Reformed Church Moderator

I was driving along recently and, coming to a halt at some traffic lights, saw a large poster in front of me. It had a picture of a cafetière and a tea bag and proclaimed in bold terms: 'The Cafetière is the new teapot'. I was struck by this juxtaposition of images and of what it said about the tea merchants trying to encourage people to go on drinking tea. They still believed in tea, but realized that they had to try new ways to persuade people to drink it. They weren't changing their basic product, but they were offering a new shape for it to go in.

I found myself wondering whether this is what's like for the church in Britain at present. We have confidence in all that lies at the heart of our faith, but we're caught up in a search for a new shape. The Church of England introduced the Archbishops' Council; the Church of Scotland began the 'Church without Walls' process and the United Reformed Church is in the middle of a radical review.

The question about shape is more fundamental than management re-organization.

How are we to be God's people at the beginning of the third Millennium? How are we to be God's people, not just on our own, but together with one another? How do we, across many different traditions, discover again the shape that God wants us to take in order that God's Kingdom may come and God's will be done? But even to talk of a 'shape' with the implication that there might only be one shape, begins to raise the question in front of us.

I was interested to read in the opening paragraph for the leaflet for this conference the phrase 'everybody is happy to affirm that Christian unity is important'. I suspect that while there are those of us who would like to think that is the case, some of our difficulties in gaining support for this view are that there alternative views to this one. There is much to celebrate, but there are also new emphases which take away from the affirmation that Christian unity is important.

It's good to take time to celebrate the many ways in which we've moved forward.

I can remember as child, growing up as the daughter of the manse in a Congregationalist family in South Africa, being very anxious about going into an Anglican church for fear of not being accepted. Going into a Catholic church was such a strange experience that it was outside the bounds of anxiety!

However since then, I have had the experience of working alongside the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church for thirteen years in Milton Keynes in a Local Ecumenical Partnership. Sharing life together on a daily basis, in the ways which were possible, put to one side that childhood nervousness and opened up creative ways of working together and sharing the Gospel with the wider community. More recently I have been in a position of meeting regularly with Anglican and Catholic church leaders across the West Midlands, alongside other church leaders of different traditions. There is a level of trust and openness which builds us up together, even in the midst of our differences.

It's not that there aren't still deep rooted divisions; it's more that there's been a sea-change over the last fifty years as to what's now possible.

The last century has seen a great outpouring of activity, trying to heal the wounds of separation in the body of Christ over the previous centuries. It's good to take time to remember and to celebrate the progress that has been made, both internationally and in these islands:

Internationally:

- The 1910 International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh
- The 1948 formation of the World Council of Churches
- The Second Vatican Council
- The outpouring of international dialogues, both multi- and bi-lateral, that have sought to explore openly and honestly some of the issues which have held us apart from one another.

In these islands, since the formation of the British Council of Churches in 1942 we have seen the development of new ecumenical bodies in Scotland, Wales and England, as well as the re-shaped Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

After a break from national schemes for unity after the Covenant proposals failed we now have before us the Anglican Methodist formal conversations and the Anglican/Methodist/United Reformed Church informal conversations, primarily in England and the Scottish Churches Initiative for Unity in Scotland.

I come from a tradition of the church which has a particular calling to work for unity. The United Reformed Church was formed in 1972 from the Congregational Union of England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. Since then we have also united with the Churches of Christ and the Scottish Congregational Church. Our unions might only be gathering relatively small churches together, but they arise out of a fundamental commitment to

being one in Christ, as stated in our Basis of Union and as seen by the number of places in which we're involved in ecumenical initiatives.

At the grassroots in England there has also been an abundance of local initiatives:

- Formal ways of co-operation in Local Ecumenical Partnerships
- Churches Together Groups
- informal co-operation in one off initiatives between a number of churches, e.g. Lent breakfasts
- ecumenical employment of schools and youth workers,
- shared missions
- cell church initiatives across a town

In view of all this ecumenical initiative, it might seem surprising that we haven't already become one. Yet there are also trends at work in our present society which cut against the search for unity.

We live in a time in Western Europe that has been characterised as 'post-modern'. No longer are there the certainties of the 'modern' age. The foundations of science are questioned. Traditional institutions are losing authority. It is said that there is no longer fruit in trying to talk about 'truth' as if it were one, because 'truth' is found through many different paths and through a variety of experiences.

There has been a loss of confidence in the church in the west. Churches across the board don't have the same kind of popular support that they once had, at least in terms of people coming to share in Sunday worship. The church has had to struggle harder to let her voice be heard in public life, and is often grouped under the general heading of 'voluntary organisations' (as for example in the current talks in the West Midlands about government regionalisation). Even within the church there is a questioning about the church and the church's future and the church's role in our society.

In a time of decline and change such as the church has seen in Western Europe, there are two different emphases with which churches have responded that have been seen as needing higher priority than the search for unity.

The first of these is the strengthening of denominational self-identity. It is seen as important to know where a particular church stands and where that church is coming from, in order to respond effectively to the changing times in which we find ourselves. Self-understanding then takes priority over building relationships with different traditions.

The second emphasis is mission. In a time of change, each church, quite rightly, is looking to ways to be more effective in reaching out to people and responding to the challenges of our society. The energy then goes into making mission happen, rather than to seeing ways in which it could happen more effectively with partner churches.

There are some who argue that the church in this country today is well suited for the post-modern age. There are a variety of options from which people can choose. New churches keep springing up to increase the variety. Isn't this what people are looking for in our contemporary society? Isn't encouraging this variety the best way to forward the church's mission?

However, if our ultimate self-identity is in Christ, and our mission is a sharing in God's mission, there continues to be a Gospel imperative on us to go on receiving our Lord's prayer 'that they may all be one'.

It was some years ago, in the midst of the heat that ecumenical working in Milton Keynes could sometimes engender, that I was struck by the impact of this key verse from John's Gospel and the way in which Jesus offered a prayer rather than a command. It was as if he could already see how difficult it might be for his followers to be one and he knew that he needed to entrust the work of unity to his Father.

The title of today's conference in itself presents a dilemma. If unity is ultimately in God's hands, is it possible for us to devise particular schemes or activities to bring unity about? It can begin to seem as if, like some kinds of prayer, we're trying to manipulate God into doing what we want!

While there is a relationship between God's purposes and what is looked to from his people for the fulfilment of these purposes, I want to put in a reminder at this point that our starting point is with God.

Our priority in a time of change and in the search for unity is to wait upon God and to wait together upon God.

Waiting is not very popular in our current culture. We live in a society in which we want instant results, where we can have access to all we want 24 hours a day and 7 days a week and in which the search for short-term strategies is more important than looking for long-term gains. Speed is more important than waiting.

The notion of waiting upon God goes against our management inclinations and our desire to organise and control. We would rather be in charge and know where we're going than take the risk of letting ourselves be led in a new and different direction.

Waiting together upon God means looking at ways in which we can pray and read scripture and take counsel together in order to seek the mind of Christ. Our understanding of that mind in the different parts of the church has been shaped by the way we have separately built on scripture and tradition and experience and reason. Seeking the mind of Christ together means bringing the richness of our own backgrounds so that we may together be enriched.

Building on the priority of waiting upon God, I want to look at four areas that respond to the 'but how' question - ecclesiology, worship, holy space, history and the future.

First, ecclesiology or the doctrine of the nature of the church.

I've been struck in recent years by the way in which some people have come to use the word 'churchy' in a pejorative fashion. It has symbolized for me a certain negative strand in what's been written and spoken about the church. It is as if the church needs to be moved beyond or put to one side. In parallel with this, the church has been seen in institutional or organizational terms, and therefore as body that needs to be well-managed, with appropriate rules for the ordering of her life. While I'm wholly in favour of good management, as being about the effective use of God's resources, I also think that management is a second order issue. We need to re-visit the language we use about church and balance the talk about the institution and the organization with language such as 'the people of the Way', (implies movement) 'the body of Christ' (implies the need for feeding and nurturing) and other biblical images.

There has also been over many years a disconnection between the church and the kingdom. The kingdom is seen as being present in a person's inner life or being the point of God's activity in the world and as somehow separate from the church. When the church goes along with this separation, the church becomes more inward-looking and disconnected from the world. The search for unity is about making the connections between separated churches and about seeing the role of the church within God's purposes for all creation.

Much useful work has been done in the study on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. The Faith and Order text on Ecclesiology launched at the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches goes a small way to taking the issues forward. We differ in many ways in our understanding of the nature of the church. We need to work together on re-claiming a shared understanding of the church and together see whether we can make further progress on the question of the legitimate bounds of diversity in the body of Christ.

One of the dilemmas about our ecclesiological discussion arises out of the way we are different sizes as churches. We are not only different sizes in Britain, but even more so internationally. We face the same dilemma that a democracy faces - how to affirm the role of the minority. I speak as one who comes from a minority church - although our United Reformed web-site is quick to remind visitors that internationally the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is larger than the Anglican Communion!

The question for us as churches is the way in which we give equal weight to the ecclesial concerns held by a minority on the journey of growing together into the one Lord who is the head of us all.

Secondly, worship

Worship lies at the heart of our relationship with God. We approach God in awe and wonder as Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer. God has set the world into being and nurtures it in each succeeding age. God in Jesus Christ has redeemed us and set us free. God the Holy Spirit comes to sustain and empower people and creation.

Our response to the abundant love of the Holy Trinity, poured out freely for all creation, is our offering of worship. Worship is offered as God's people come together with one another and as people dedicate their lives to God's service day by day.

Worship speaks of wonder at God who is mighty and mysterious and yet closer to us than the air that we breath. Worship is the point of our transformation, as we encounter God and are changed into God's likeness.

The sense of wonder which is at the heart of worship is a dimension of life which it is still important for the church to be offering our society.

E.g. The wonder at God's gift of creation leads us on to approach the environment with reverence rather than seeing it as the place for exploitation and commercial gain.

The wonder at people being created in the image of God leads us on to treat people with respect rather than to see people as ciphers or there to be manipulated.

The transformation that occurs in worship in our encounter with the living Christ, speaks of the possibility of forgiveness and change and new beginnings.

Yet worship is also the point at which amongst God's people we are divided. We are divided in two ways - in patterns of worship and in beliefs about worship.

The recent Special Commission of the World Council of Churches set up to respond to concerns of the Orthodox churches, identified so-called 'ecumenical worship' as a real sticking point, rather than a point where unity might be possible.

There is an enormous diversity in worship. Our patterns of worship differ, from that of the charismatic community with its direct experience of some of the more outward gifts of the Holy Spirit, to Quaker silence, to what has been somewhat unkindly described in the free churches as a 'hymn sandwich', to the daily Mass of the Catholic Church, to name but a few different styles and patterns.

We differ not only in the outward pattern but in what we believe about worship. One of the sticking points of the ecumenical journey has been the question 'why can't we receive Holy Communion at a Catholic Mass?' And yet the Roman Catholic Church has quite rightly pointed out the difference that

we have in understanding about the Eucharist - and would it be right to receive from each other while we differ? In the charismatic community, the emphasis on worship in the Holy Spirit and such outward manifestations as speaking in tongues has been seen as a significant point of difference.

Unity is not about uniformity in worship patterns, but is about celebrating that it is the same God we are worshipping. Different patterns are not only valid, but are an enrichment to the whole community of God's people. I have been interested in the trend in some places in recent years during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for people to visit one another's services just as they are, rather than coming together in a pattern that would be different for each one present.

Experiencing each other's worship and learning about each other's worship is part of the ecumenical journey. Offering a broad range of worship to our society is one way of responding to the different spiritual needs people have. Any future pattern of unity needs to build on the richness of worship that is offered and hold that richness together with a sense of shared mutual belonging in Christ.

Third, Holy Space.

I read an article in the newspaper in the last week or two about the insurance company who had reported, according to the headline, that it was safer to keep churches open than keeping them shut. The article was about the incidence of burglaries and vandalism. Some figures that had come out which said that shut churches were burgled and vandalised more often than open ones. Buried deeper in the text was a reference to churches that were open with people in side them to look after them!

I was struck by the reference to open churches being safer than shut churches. It resonated for me in a number of different ways.

It can seem less fearful to be shut and that therefore this is the best option to choose for our long term security - whether we're talking about buildings being closed or personal experience that doesn't want to touch on certain sensitive areas or different Christian traditions feeling that the most secure way forward is to be closed to other ways of being church.

Just as we're in a society in which we're under constant time pressure, so we are also in a society in which there's not enough space. We know this at one level when we look at the plans for housing in the south-east that are being put forward and the enormous pressures this creates on free land. But we see this at another level in terms of people finding the space where they are free to be themselves and to explore the issues that affect them. I'm struck by the number of retreat and conference centres that are opening up and are being used by people looking, not to escape from life, but to get a new perspective on life.

I think that the idea of 'holy space' has much to commend it in the life of the church and in the search for unity.

Great cathedrals such as this one here in St Albans, have epitomized holy space. A place that is open and speaks of God in what the eye can see and the ear can hear; a place that has been prayed in over many years and where worship has been unceasingly offered is a holy place. Church buildings that are open in each community can be places for people to come to, to offer prayer and come closer to God and discover more of themselves in relation to God. Such holy places would be well served by ecumenical teams of people staffing them!

But 'holy space' goes beyond buildings. We need 'holy spaces' in the search for unity - times and places in which we can be in dialogue and discussion and prayer with one another, so that together we can wait upon the one true God.

At their best, ecumenical bodies internationally, nationally or locally provide such holy spaces. But there are times when our coming together, whether in the World Council of Churches, the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland, or a local Churches Together group, can be infused with a spirit of defensiveness of our own traditions rather than openness to the Holy Spirit coming among us. Or we get caught up in the practicalities of the immediate moment - finance, not enough people to do things etc. - rather than seeing the bigger picture of God's purpose for us. Or we see our encounter as the moment when we can seize the opportunity of persuading others to become like us.

In 'holy spaces', we come together as God's people, confident in our own faith and tradition, but free of the defences which help us put up barriers against each other.

In 'holy spaces' where we are waiting together upon God, who is always more than and other than each one of us on our own, we have the possibility of exploring difficult issues together.

There are many issues that are before us. Some of these are matters that are particularly valued in one tradition but can be seen as difficult in other traditions, such as the role of women in leadership in the church, Establishment or the Petrine ministry. Others are matters with which we struggle within each church and across the churches, such as the differing emphases we place upon the authority of scripture, or the area of human sexuality or genetic engineering.

In 'holy spaces' as we wait together on the Spirit and are given to drink from the water of life, we find renewal.

Fourth, history and the future.

The reported remarks of the Education Secretary recently, which were then, inevitably, said to have been misinterpreted, about the way in which teaching mediaeval history is a waste of time, reminded me of the bigger debate about the role of history in our society. As part of a post-modern living in the present, the view has been expressed that history is no longer relevant. I am encouraged that at the same time there are a growing number of historical programmes on the TV!

The question is particularly acute for us in the churches, as we trace our origins back over 2000 years to the life of our Lord. History has shaped us and made us what we are. In our dialogue with each other, whether locally, nationally or internationally, our histories sooner or later come to the fore, sometimes rather acrimoniously.

The Irish churches have helpfully developed thinking about the healing of memories, addressing the hurts that there have been, but helping people to move forward.

In our journey towards unity, we need a perspective which holds the future before us, as the place of God's activity, as much as we hold the past before us, as the place where God has been active. We need to know our histories, but not be confined by our histories. We need to be able to address both the facts of the past, and also the fears of the past and then let the past free us rather than bind us.

In these changing times in the west, our perspectives on the future have become more uncertain, both for the church and for the world. There is less confidence about where the future lies and what shape it will take. Holding an eschatological perspective in the church, with its mixture of hope and judgement, is a healthy counterbalance to the despair that can afflict us about what is to come.

We need an openness to the future that combines both a radical certainty and a radical uncertainty - certainty because it's God future and we've put our trust in God - uncertainty because we're limited by what we can see at any one time and so we can't see the future clearly.

Conclusion

I'm aware that among the many areas I might have addressed, there are two in particular that I have left out but would have touched if I had had the time - the one being Inter-faith dialogue and its boundaries and purpose and the other the question of shared social action.

However, I want to finish with two concluding remarks, about unity and about generosity.

First, unity.

We need a combination of urgency and an eternal perspective as we seek to let our Lord's prayer take root in our midst.

We need urgency because of the imperative for Christian witness in the midst of human suffering and divisions. We don't all have to be in the same church building - but we do need ways of recognising and affirming one another. We need structures loose enough to embrace each other in all our diversity, but close enough to hold us together to the truth of the Gospel.

We need an eternal perspective in order to see our human journeying in the longer view of our faith. Over the years as I've journeyed ecumenically in the church, I've been struck by the way in which the church continues to need renewal. Just as I don't believe that the Kingdom is a goal that we achieve and then move on to something else so I believe that we need to go on working and praying for the unity which our Lord wills for God's people.

Secondly, generosity.

We live by the grace of God, freely poured out for all people in Jesus Christ. Our pilgrimage together as God's people comes alive when that spirit of generosity is set free in our midst. I know that I have been greatly enriched by the ecumenical encounters I have had over many years, whether internationally, nationally or at the grassroots. I am grateful to all those whose generous spirit has made this possible, and I pray that our walk together may continue to be filled with the same generosity toward one another.