

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

What Next?

Pointers from the Holy Spirit for the next steps on the ecumenical pilgrimage

Report of a day conference at St Peter's Meeting Hall, Eaton Square, London SW1 on Saturday 8th November 2003

Martin Conway

Present were some 28 SES members and guests; apologies from others were noted, including those from the Revd Ian McIntosh, Director of the Cambridge Centre for Ecumenical Studies, and from the Revd Mark Woodruff, Secretary of SfES.

The Revd Gareth Powell, Methodist Chaplain at Cardiff University and member of the SfES Executive, led an Opening Act of Worship.

Dr Martin Conway, Chairman of the Society, welcomed participants and introduced the successive speakers.

Morning Session

A. The Revd Noel Davies, President of the Welsh National Centre for Ecumenical Studies, based at Trinity College, Carmarthen, spoke of this Centre, established in 2001, as the focus of academic studies in Wales on the ecumenical movement, through which the churches of Wales could reflect together on their obedience and relate to the wider ecumenical community. He warmly welcomed the opportunity provided by this day for forging wider relationships and partnerships around the British Isles.

The aims of the Welsh Centre are these:

- to further the appreciation and study of the ecumenical movement
- to encourage and develop research within the School of Theology and Religious Studies

- to provide academic support for those involved in inter-church dialogue and joint Christian action for justice and reconciliation today
- to relate international academic study and inter-church dialogue and social action to the Welsh situation
- and to work in partnership with CYTUN (Churches Together in Wales) and ENFYS (the Commission of the Covenanted Churches) and other inter-church bodies – within Wales and beyond – in the tasks of nurturing mutual understanding and partnership among the churches and denominations of Wales, locally, nationally and internationally.

In its first years the Centre has focussed on the teaching of an MTh in Ecumenical Studies, now in its third year, on developing a more extensive library and archive, on offering a range of other educational and training opportunities, and on collaboration with CYTUN / ENFYS, not least in relation to their Faith and Order programme on 'National Identity, Ethnic Identity and the Unity of the Church', and in relation to the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence. Looking to the future, he saw four main directions for the Centre:

- a) Academic Courses: Since the MTh is the only such post-graduate programme on offer in Wales, the Centre hopes to develop it both for full-time and part-time students, also within a year or two as possible by Distance Learning. Its modules can lead to a post-graduate Certificate (three modules) or a Diploma (six modules); the modules can also be studied singly. We shall be exploring how these various options could help the churches as part of their training and educational resources.
- b) The Centre sees its collaboration with CYTUN and ENFYS as a priority, along with its involvements in WCC programmes, and hopes that these partners will identify other areas of study on which the Centre could offer significant expertise.
- c) The Centre also greatly looks forward to developing partnership with other comparable centres, and was delighted to share in a three-way conversation recently with the Cambridge and Selly Oak Centres. That conversation explored the possibilities of each using the other two for a share in the teaching of post-graduate degrees, of developing a collaborative teaching programme, of benefiting from each others' engagement with local and

regional ecumenical explorations in their own regions, and of developing a shared approach to publications.

- d) The Centre intends to develop the considerable potential of its growing ecumenical library and archive for research purposes. This will need to be explored within the University and its constituent institutions, but hopes to find ways of encouraging much fuller use of them.

Turning then to what he could identify as '**emerging themes**' Noel Davies spoke of four that seemed to him important, even as he recognised the – as yet – very limited resources available to the new Centre.

- i) **The search for Christian Unity and union in Wales.** Here, the recent failure of the proposals for a United 'Free' Church in Wales and the current process of evaluating the Covenant for Union, inaugurated by five churches as long ago as 1975, are both raising with some urgency the issue of how we view the call and search for unity and union. Some talk of a 'death knell', others believe that we must urgently re-define the nature of Christian unity (e.g. in view of the partnership agreements in England between the Methodist and URC Churches, and between the Church of England and the Methodists). What precisely are the longer-term goals of these? Are they intending to produce a 'structural' and/or 'organic' vision of unity, or are they defining this in terms of more creative and constructive relationships? What precisely is the call of God to the one church of Christ? To explore and research this could be a key point for our Centre.
- ii) **The Ecumenical task as political engagement.** In the four years that we have had limited self-government in Wales through the National Assembly, we have realised, chiefly through CYTUN's Assembly Liaison Officer, just how valuable and important is the two-way communication between the churches and the Assembly. There is much that deserves more careful reflection involved here – for instance, how the collaboration between the churches and the Assembly might be extended into a broader engagement with issues being talked about at different levels, not least the international level. Precisely what is the nature of the churches' common 'prophetic' task in Wales today? How can ecumenical partnerships best contribute to that task? What is its relation to 'the unity we seek' in God's name? CTBI and other all-UK instruments have worked on this for some time, but there is a quite new

importance for Christians in Wales to be reflecting carefully on it, given the new situation of devolved government.

- iii) **Identity and Unity.** Wales is full of concern about various identities – of cultures, languages, traditions, political and socio-economic relationships, let alone about identity based on moral/ethical principles ... How can diversity – which we have more of than outsiders often realise – and unity be held together, in terms of Christian faith, and of social and communal realities ? The Centre believes this is a field which rather urgently deserves careful attention, and has already held a consultation in Bangor on scriptural principles that deserve to be brought to bear on it all. We would be most interested in any potential collaboration with other centres in the UK and Ireland.

- iv) **The global and pluralist setting.** Three years ago, Professor Michael Taylor gave an address at our inauguration, highlighting the need to explore the nature of the ecumenical vision in the light of growing globalization and the increasingly plural nature of Western society. We have started work on a research proposal, but have not yet discovered any funding for it. We judge it to be quite an ambitious proposal, but are eager to reshape it to match current priorities and resources. Is our ecumenical vision large enough?

In relation to a **question**, Noel Davies referred to the thesis in Alistair McGrath's *The Future of Christianity* to the effect that the ecumenical movement is essentially a waste of time, since the future of 'historic Protestantism' is not hopeful at all – if it has a future it will only be in and through the growing forces of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, which have no time for the ecumenical movement. This can of course be contested, but there is much in Wales that might seem to confirm it. “We in Wales need to think hard” - all the more reason to have a strong Centre encouraging and enabling us to do so.

B. The Revd Dr Tim Macquiban, from Sarum College, Salisbury, said he was glad to be made to think about the future contribution of Sarum College. It is now sponsored by four churches – Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and Roman Catholic – with staff members, both on the academic side and the administrative, representing these four traditions and working with the Ecumenical Officers for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight as well as Wiltshire and Dorset. We offer courses for lay people and for continuing ministerial

education, chiefly so far in Christian spirituality and political theology, though our worship includes both Buddhist meditation and the Orthodox liturgy. So while we well know that we 'are ecumenical', we wonder quite how this is properly to be reflected in our teaching programme.

We become aware of all sorts of what Graham Smith, formerly Ecumenical Officer for Oxfordshire, has called 'hidden ecumenism', but are also trying to face the question more deliberately. For instance:

- in relation to staff training, so that we can more genuinely together represent the several traditions that are sponsoring us;
- in conversation with our partner churches, to discover how we can best serve their needs;
- as a member of ACATE (Association of Colleges of Advanced Theological Education) how can we best engage in theological education from our four different denominations?

We are also very interested in Europe, and have held a consultation about the future of the European Ideal, focussing not least on the way Christian values underpin so much in European traditions (viz. the copy of *Magna Carta* in Salisbury Cathedral). We are already in partnership with a Lutheran college in Finland, and a Roman Catholic one in Prague, with a view to a three-way conference in Salisbury in 2005, focussing on 'What is Theological and Ecumenical Education?', across the divisions between our churches, the different world faiths, the diversities of identity, etc.

Simon Oxley, the Education secretary of the World Council of Churches, is helping us by stressing, for example in his book *Creative Ecumenical Education*, that we need to be enabling a process of **contextual, participatory education that is open to new horizons**, not so much the transmission of knowledge as the transformation of attitudes, where we can learn in community, and by means of the wholeness of a truly ecumenical process, to struggle with the diversities that God has given, not just to us but to the entire human race.

C. The Revd Dr Kenneth Kearon, Director of the Irish School of Ecumenics, explained that the ISE was now part of Trinity College, Dublin, and as a direct result of receiving state funding with integration into the Irish higher education system had been

able greatly to expand its scope. It now has some 120 post-graduate students working in its three main programmes: ecumenical, peace, and reconciliation studies. In addition it gives adult education courses in 20 centres in N. Ireland and 8 in the Republic, and has an 'outreach programme' with 5 full-time staff, working with church leaders on peace-building, and producing materials and training opportunities for youth leaders and school teachers.

In speaking not long ago to ISE post-graduates about the development of the World Council of Churches, and as part of that looking afresh at the Message from the inaugural Assembly of the WCC at Amsterdam, he was struck at the emphasis there on all Christians being called to act as witnesses and servants to their neighbours, on the churches being a voice for those with no voice, so that the world could know that the power of evil does not have the last word. This Message made it absolutely clear that the ecumenical journey is very much *not* only concerned with the Church, still less with church joinery. Already then the 'both / and' approach in regard to the concern for church unity and the concern for the unity of humanity was clear and persuasive.

So the ISE is surely not out of line in making the concern for **reconciliation** central to ecumenical studies, in seeing reconciliation at the heart of the entire ecumenical movement. To break down the barriers that divide, and so to re-make the church, humanity's faith in God, and the world community as a whole, all belong together on the same journey. So 'ecumenical studies' can never only be a purely theological matter, it must always also involve the other social sciences with equal quality and penetration. Relationships among Christians are always to be seen as potentially a foretaste of God's Kingdom made known in Jesus of Nazareth – which is why the dis-unity of the actual churches is such a counter-witness.

Over the last year we in ISE have been trying to develop a 'research strategy', with 5 clusters:

- i) The nature and role of civil society, and of religious people and groups within that, at national and international levels. In this we are collaborating with the Public Issues Centre of the University of Edinburgh;
- ii) The trafficking in women, across Europe, on which we hope to work with colleagues in gender studies;
- iii) The role(s) of religion in conflict and peace-making;
- iv) The study of 'Religion' as such – why is it so divisive while also intrinsically

committed to peace ? It is a major factor all over the world, and has been so for a very long time, yet still as ever horribly misused (from within) and misunderstood (from without). Here colleagues in both sociology and Asian studies are major allies;

- v) What precisely is Fundamentalism ? What causes it ? Our friend Gabriel Daly puts something at the heart of this neatly when he says:
- a) “If anybody ever dies for the sake of ecumenism, it will have been from a stab in the back” ! (i.e. from a member of her/his own church !), and
 - b) “Fundamentalism is the 'other' for ecumenism” – i.e. those who refuse to enter onto the paths of reconciliation.

Here we shall need studies in 'religion and the ideological imagination', for which our earlier work on 'sectarianism' should be helpful.

For obvious reasons we shall be using Northern Ireland as a case-study for several of these research projects, illuminating in various ways also for many other contexts, since religion has so often been used there for political and other purposes.

Pointers from the morning's discussion. After these three introductions, discussion began from the difficulty of knowing anything exact about the matter of 'identity' – not least because the social sciences seem to be no less flummoxed by it than the theologians! David Carter said he was aware of at least four quite different, even opposing Methodist 'identities'! Martin Conway suggested that we need to see identity as something that is always in a process of growing and changing, usually in response to context. He pointed to Kenneth Cragg's *The Church and the Faiths* as a work of extraordinary religious imagination, in which Cragg tries to describe what each of the great world religious traditions will contribute to the worship of heaven out of its own specific faith and experience. Alan Rainer mentioned the centrality for Jews and Judaism of the 'family of Abraham' in a quite literal sense. The Jewish scriptures were full of ethnic animosities.

Martin Cressey spoke of the Leuenberg Concord as successfully leading to changed relationships between Lutheran and Reformed churches around Europe, which was not intending any fuller structural change. It had already lasted 30 years – could it be seen as 'real unity'? Martin Conway suggested that repentance was a key component for the reconciliation of any quarrel or split; without it one could hardly believe in real reconciliation. Alan Morley-Fletcher strongly supported that. In the Chemin Neuf Community a whole day is regularly set apart for prayer leading to repentance. He was

aware of occasions when some very tough things were brought to light – he instanced the time when a citizen of Congo was able to open up the history of slavery being imposed on African communities by French and English invaders.

Sister Sophia said that religion must be seen not as a prison but as a home, and therefore as something forward-looking, not backward, something which 'enlarged identities' rather than defending or cramping them. Mary Tanner reminded us of the slogan 'unity of all in each place, united with all in every place', and Colin Marsh spoke of identity being virtually always in some way linked up with 'power' – which makes the question of how to enter into relationship with those who feel *powerless* so vital. Stephan Peter spoke of the necessary identity of the community Jesus founded with the ever-moving identity of the community being led by the Holy Spirit into new contexts.

Kenneth Kearon pointed out that in Ireland academics had had to learn how to teach history in ways that could be shared with English historians, and then reflect that in 'stories in the kitchens'. The ISE project some years ago on 'Reconciliation of Memories' had showed how vital it is to go on simply listening to one another across the divides until we find we have grown together. There is so often the lurking 'dark truth' that in all our denominations we care more for our 'own' identity than for the possible new identity of a united church. Martin Cressey said we need to move beyond the *ideal* picture of who we are to the more *actual* awareness of what we look like to others ! Nor must we forget that our 'small' identity (that referring to the immediate/village community in which we live) may well not really match what we like to think of as our 'large' identity (in national and international terms) !

Afternoon Session

D. The Revd Dr Colin Marsh, Director of the Selly Oak Ecumenical Initiative for Study and Action, spoke to a descriptive paper he had circulated (appendix 1 - available soon). He emphasised that the situation and expectations in Selly Oak were constantly developing and changing, there as much as anywhere. The Mission Department which in the 1960s had been enthralled with the call to unity had become by the turn of the century much more fragmented; today the United College of the Ascension is the only college in Selly Oak which visibly demonstrates the tradition of ecumenical and cross-cultural mission education.

The relationship between SOEISA and the Society for Ecumenical Studies is especially significant, since the inauguration of SOEISA took place in the context of your meeting in Birmingham at the United College of the Ascension (UCA) in November 2002. Since then, SOEISA has been seeking to find ways of building on the Selly Oak ecumenical heritage. In a climate of changing understanding of the ecumenical journey, it is now exploring how the commitments to mission and unity belong together. Looking back on the many experiences of ecumenical collaboration over the past fifty years, where are the ecumenical stories that can be shared with a wider audience? Can SOEISA contribute by helping to write up reflective accounts of ecumenical endeavour in mission?

The starting point for this is work SOEISA is undertaking with Local Ecumenical Partnerships in Birmingham and the West Midlands. A consultation on February 28th at the UCA will bring together a number of churches who will share how ecumenical co-operation is enabling them to engage in mission. The hope is for SOEISA to publish these stories – is there perhaps a role for the SfES to help in the process of preparing these for publication?

SOEISA is in the early stages of development. Its first postgraduate research scholar will arrive from Malawi in January to undertake an MPhil at the University of Birmingham. The ecumenical and multi-cultural mission context of the United College of the Ascension is a wonderful resource and home for SOEISA. Suggestions as to how SOEISA can be further developed, particularly in the area of funding, will be most welcome.

E. Alan and Ione Morley-Fletcher, from the Communauté du Chemin Neuf, spoke on 'Unity as an indivisible commitment'.

They told of their community having been founded some 30 years ago, with Christian unity its fundamental mission. Very much a charismatic venture, it profoundly believes in waiting for the Spirit to move, and follows Ignatius Loyola's discipline of discerning how the Spirit is wanting us to move. It is a Roman Catholic foundation, yet since the outset has had several members from other churches in full membership.

Initially it sought to be a mission of and for married couples. This led to the CANA courses which became our vanguard, weekends and longer sessions for the refreshment and

renewal of marriage. It was one of these, involving some UK citizens, that had led to the Community establishing itself in England. At first children were not expected, but that provoked quite a reaction, and after prayer there was unanimous agreement that they should be included in such courses. In the 1980s we began organising courses for young adults, and for single retreatants. In the 1990s we were invited into Eastern Europe and Africa. The needs we there encountered for reconciliation between people and nations (often involving appalling hatreds and resentments) led us into working on reconciliation and the accompanying commitment to unity within each person no less than within the history that has been inherited. Ephesians 4: 15-16 – the body growing up into Christ as each part is working properly – points to an inner healing, apt also for those involved in a divorce.

So today the CCN has members who are single, who are married and with children, and also some consecrated celibate men and women. We accept one another's respective callings, each having distinctive contributions to the whole. We also embrace different denominations (we are ourselves Anglicans), each learning the path of reconciliation inevitably with some pain – especially in our common worship – while learning to respect one another in our differences.

We remain passionate for unity – within each one of us, within our own churches, as well as working for unity between the churches and in the wider world. One sign of how this relates to our churches is that each member must secure the approval of his/her own church before s/he can become a full member – it once took a Mennonite woman in France several years to win that permission ! For us the call, the commitment, the pilgrimage to unity is indivisible – the personal level together with the corporate, the unity of Christ's church together with and for the unity of humanity and the world, unity at the local level no less than at wider levels, and the commitment to mission intertwining with that to unity in Christ. This clearly links with Paul Couturier's idea of the 'invisible unity' in Christ, that he appointed as the theme for prayer on Thursday evenings.

Our International Ecumenical Fellowship, which now involves some 4,000 people in groups in many different countries, circulates a video each month to each group to help them pray and work together. They are mostly quite ordinary people. Jesus' call to unity reaches out to everyone, What matters most is that God is making peace among all things and people in this, God's world.

In response to a **question** about the community's future, Alan Morley-Fletcher remarked that God's healing, in and for persons, as for denominations and churches, cannot be imposed by any hierarchy. It can only grow out of a profound respect and love for others, never overlooking differences of any sort, but not letting itself become fixated on any of them. So also in respect to the relation between reconciliation and evangelism: it must not be a choice for one against the other, but of obedience in each of these changing and transforming our understanding and practice of the other.

F. The Revd Professor Nicholas Sagovsky, from Liverpool Hope University, spoke on 'Ecumenical Commitment in Higher Education – the Experience of Liverpool Hope'.

He said he was still relatively new at Liverpool Hope, and therefore still busy learning about it all, but had recently taken part in a most striking event, when the University had 'installed' a new Rector. This was Prof. Gerald Pillay, an Indian from South Africa, working in New Zealand, an Anglican layman now leading an ecumenical Catholic and Anglican University. The event took place in the sports hall, lavishly decorated with banners representing the 68 nations in the student body, and celebrated no less lavishly in prayer and song. It was particularly striking that several students from other world religions were no less enthusiastic and happy about it than the Christians.

Liverpool Hope was founded out of two separate colleges, one Anglican, one Catholic (this latter already an amalgamation of two previous Catholic colleges), on opposite sides of the same road, yet which had had high walls laid out between them. They had come together as a joint college already 25 years ago, and then in 1990 developed into a new university with an unusual, but significant title. They still kept their different architectures, but now without the walls !

Already in the early 1990s there had been a huge expansion, to a total of now over 7,000 students. All this had grown out of, and much depended on, the pioneering friendship and partnership between the Catholic Archbishop Derek Worlock and the Anglican Bishop David Sheppard (whose dual-author books *Better Together – Christian Partnership in a Hurt City*, Penguin 1988, and *With Hope in our Hearts*, Hodder & Stoughton 1994, still deserve to be read, as does *The Foundation of Hope*, edited by John Elford). One part of Hope's campus is in Everton, a badly deprived area of the city, the larger part in a quite

different area, yet also hardly one where a traditional university might predictably be found.

So the ecumenical character of the university is deeply embedded in its history and patterns, rather than being a specific area of study. In the staff we ask ourselves all the time: 'Where is this college going, as a Christian college?' For instance, in looking at last year's White Paper on Higher Education, we read of money for widening participation from poorer backgrounds and for 2-year 'foundation degrees', with not a hint of any essential link between research and teaching (though I for one was appointed because of my 'research capacity!'), with the strong suggestion that the really 'modern' universities will be fully occupied with their teaching, moreover teaching that will almost entirely be geared to commercial and 'private sector' purposes. These last look to departments such as business studies and information and communication technology (ICT), as to wealthy students from other countries who can pay well over the going rate for the locals.

So where can money to develop Liverpool Hope come from? The college has no rich alumni to subsidise it, and its sponsoring churches are already stretched to the limit. There is much talk about 'top-up fees', but the amounts mentioned, even if they are approved, are hardly princely. Already now, on the financial side, it is a biting struggle for a Christian university college simply to survive. Our authorities are generous in not hassling students who cannot pay their fees exactly on time. Most students have to take part-time, often pretty menial jobs.

The ecumenical commitment of and to the institution is evidently very strong. The degree of pastoral care made available is also remarkable. Each day begins with morning prayers, alternately in the Anglican and Catholic chapels, only attended admittedly by a handful of people yet who care deeply. It would be good if before long both of these chapels could be 'dually consecrated' so that both would be felt to belong to everybody. There is *no* Sunday worship; Christian students are encouraged to join one of the city churches. But the chaplaincy, staffed by full-time Anglican and Roman Catholic priests and by a part-time Methodist minister, is central to the whole place, and to the experience of many staff and students. Only when teaching in the field of ethics have I had to be careful to spell out our different understandings and teachings.

As for next steps, the financial situation has become so tight that with quite a number of teaching posts having to be cut, Prof. Sagovsky has accepted the post of Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey but will be able to continue as a Visiting Professor at

Liverpool Hope. He looks forward to developing MA tracks for post-graduate studies in both Anglican and Catholic theology, and – at last – to seeing a single chapel becoming available and central to the entire Liverpool Hope community.

In **discussion**, Prof. Sagovsky's approach was favourably commended, in contrast to a 'post-modern' approach of deliberate forgetting of all traditions, especially of all religious traditions! Ione Fletcher remarked that the CCN had discovered that in order to build an effective bridge you had to have solid foundations in the supporting pillars at both ends – the strength of the bridge as a whole depends on those foundations even more than it does on what happens in the middle of the span !

Mention was made of the value for ecumenical partnership of joint pilgrimages to significant holy places, that all the partners could recognise and value. More than once it was stressed that whatever we are doing and seeking to do from within the church(es) must be seen primarily and always *for the sake of the world, that the world may believe*, not for the sake only of those immediately involved, nor just for the church alone.

To close the day, the Revd Gareth Powell led us in **An Office for the Unity of Christians**, based on one used by the Communauté du Chemin Neuf, to express in worship the vision of Fr Paul Couturier, first used at the conference in June 2003 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his death.