

## **The Ecumenical Margins**

Society for Ecumenical Studies

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## **Education and Ecumenism: the story of the Centre for Black Theology**

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As we seek to relate to other members of the Ecumenical Family, we are often faced with the problem of an ecumenical epistemology. How do we know what we know about each other?

Very often some Pentecostals may believe what they have heard and have always held closely to their hearts; namely, that the decline of the large mainline churches is a result of *Ichabod*. That "the glory has departed" from these Churches is a generally well held view. Sometimes, the view from the other side is that these Pentecostals have very little substance, they are a happy-clappy people and they hardly have any idea of the glory of God that is conveyed by cathedrals and incense and outer garments, that are often very colourful, depending on the Church's seasons. The problem for us all is that our views of each other are handed down through so many myths and legends, and no one stops to appreciate the diversity of the faith we share and the diversity of the community to which we belong. In addition, most of our black leaders do not always have the time, because of their general busyness, to develop a keener knowledge of other churches' structures, nor do bishops and other church leaders in the various main-line denominations take time to understand what is often seen as a lack of structure in some evangelical organisations. The issue is: how do we move away from positions of sniping and suspicion? I am firmly of the opinion that our foxholes that members of the Ecumenical Family have made for themselves are dug so well and so deeply that we no longer see each other and, therefore, continue to erect false ideas of each other based on ignorance. So firstly, we must be committed to the task of understanding and getting to know the Ecumenical Family.

### **Personal Vision - Journey and Commitment**

My own personal journey is an ecumenical journey. I was brought up as an Anglo-Catholic in Trinidad and Tobago, and can look back to being an acolyte and an officer of the Church Lads Brigade, as well as a choir member. I left the Church; and was brought back to it by an English Anglican girl, who surprised me by her desire to know Christ and to be committed to the faith.

However, I later learnt, before we got married, that this was Low Anglicanism, an area of knowledge that I lacked before. I will always be grateful for realising that the presence of High Anglicans meant that there were Low Anglicans, a reality that I thought was an impossibility. Later we joined the Baptists in Trinidad, as she could not cope with my form of Anglicanism in Trinidad - and of course I became more and more involved with evangelical churches when I became President of the University Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in Trinidad. It was still a shock when, two years later, I was studying at St. John's College, Nottingham, under Michael Green and others, as it was a Damascus Road experience for me to accept that Anglicans had anything to teach me about being a Christian and, what's more, whether I would later be accepted in Trinidad, as someone who was trained in the Anglican Church to pastor an evangelical church. My own journey has helped in this process, and has been helped by so much of my work with the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, as the work of the Orthodox was unknown to me, except through Church History and the *filioque* clause. I continue this work and this growing into understanding.

### **The vision - an organisation committed to the Ecumenical Family**

I speak of the now defunct Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership (CBWCP) that was committed to enabling Black Church leaders in their discussions with their ecumenical partners, to ensure that they were not just listeners but active participants and contributors to such discussions. This presented a problem as, in the early days, many of the black-led churches had leaders who worked full-time and could only work in their house fellowships/churches on Sundays or the occasional Bible Study. They were unlettered, but full of enthusiasm for the things of God, and certainly committed to the people of God. They loved the Scriptures and were literalists in their interpretation and application of the Word of God. The Centre saw that it needed to do two essential things in building this ecumenical work: firstly, to create a space where black and white students can work together theologically; and, secondly, to create a space simultaneously where people can "fellowship" together. The curriculum was important and an essential element was the module of church visiting, where over two years students would visit 20 churches and, after the service, meet with the leaders for 20-30 minutes, free to ask questions about their history, their worship, their doctrine *et al*. This module now forms part of an access to theology certificate course at the Centre for Black Theology at Birmingham University. It has been tweaked further, so that, at the end of two years, students can show that they understood various issues by handing in an extended essay which deals with some deeper aspect of reflection on ministry, the Gifts of the Spirit as exercised in some of the Churches visited, the role and ministry of women, views of Communion, baptism, etc. The result of all this is that after 26 years of this kind of teaching, the legacy of the first Centre, and its successor, can look back and see relationships that developed, and have continued, between people who, because of different ecclesiologies, would not have met normally. And students have had life changing experiences; but more of that later. We have also trained people in leadership in

various black-led churches, some in lay ministry in main-line denominations and some now doing doctorates, or even having finished doctorates.

### **Our Commitment to Ecumenical Education**

The Centre for Black Theology at the University of Birmingham has also taken this aspect of the old Centre's (CBWCP) work still further, following the merger of the Centre within the University. The course works nationally and, over the last few years, internationally, as the students are from various churches around the world - from Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Jamaica and the UK. There are Baptists; Anglicans; some in para-church ministries; house churches; some in African Indigenous Churches; historic Black Churches (e. g. AME Zion); Roman Catholics and Pentecostals. All have developed good friendships and are no longer suspicious of each other. Whether we visit the Aladura Churches, where we have to take off our shoes, or the Christian Brethren, where the women cover their heads, respect is shown and we leave with some greater understanding as a result of that particular experience.

Our modules cover the following:

- Old Testament
- New Testament
- Christian Doctrine
- Church 'Portfolio'
- Study Skills
- Black and Asian Christian Studies
- Introduction to Christian Mission

All of these are looked at through the lens of the black experience, as we view theology as contextual. As a result of this course, which has so developed through the years that its early participants will hardly recognise it, very much has been achieved.

### **Some Achievements**

In terms of academic achievement, many of our past students now have higher degrees that they have taken as a result of this course. They have not done first degrees, just simply moved on from the Certificate to the Master's programme. We currently have one student on the PhD course at Birmingham too. True to our initial purposes, most of our students may never have had an A level, nor any other form of certification. In what is now called *widening participation*, this is how it has always been in the past with our courses. We work with many of the churches in Birmingham, certainly with many of the black-led churches.

In terms of changing individuals, in Ghana, at this moment, a Baptist student who worked as a senior Maths and English secondary teacher has taken one year out and is teaching at a Presbyterian school and helping in the local Presbyterian church. She blames the course for opening up her mind to such possibilities, but she will return with a greater vision of the

ecumenical family and one hopes that she would have left her students in Ghana with interesting views of Baptists. She had never been to Africa before, this black British young woman. Some of my students have changed their careers since doing the course. Every year, I have a Roman Catholic ex-student who reminds me that his home is available for any student who may need to spend overnight in Birmingham. His hospitality has meant a lot to students, as well as for him and his wife, as has the fellowship and friendship of many of our students.

In terms of changing ecumenical perspectives, I offer a recent anecdote. I took 16 students in October 2004 to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Hampton-in-Arden. For many of our students, the experience of a service in different languages, incense and movement and activity was overpowering. But I had given a briefing before; and now the proof of the pudding was certainly in the eating. At the end of the service, I was invited to the front to speak to the congregation about the course and to convey and receive messages of unity and fellowship. The priest invited us to sit with him and instead of the normal 15 minutes, my students, who were fed physically and spiritually, did not realise that 40 minutes had passed and they were enjoying all the explanations given by the priest of the Orthodox Church. As we left, one student said,

“When I went into that Church, I said, ‘Here we go again; what have we to learn here?’  
And now I am ashamed, because I was taught so much by this priest.”

Others marvelled at the sense of worship and felt that, as Pentecostals, they had lost a sense of worship that had touched their lives that day. I suspect that for many of my students that day, many myths were put to flight and some new insights were gained about this ecumenical family.

### **Finally - The Dangers to This Enterprise**

This is a project that has been highly sought after and highly subsidised; and 2006 sees our University able to charge substantially higher fees for its courses. I am not sure that, although viable, that this will be a good thing for my course, as the University is not committed to ecumenical outreach. Because of the student numbers, it could be seen as a cash cow, and therefore high fees could represent a major stumbling block for many who would like to attend and have the backing of their church. I still wish that I could have built a bursary fund, but I will continue my quest and by God's Grace we will build the Ecumenical Family of nations and races.