

Diocesan Bulletin for Christian Unity
Archdiocese of Southwark

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**YEAR OF FAITH
2012–13**

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IN CHRIST

**Together in Christ, Diocesan Bulletin for Christian Unity,
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EDITORIAL

Thank you for supporting Together in Christ.

TiC is probably the only source of interesting material about Unity in a form that is not too highbrow, or exclusive to intellectuals. This issue keeps up that style.

We complete the talks to Churches Together in South London entitled *What do we pray for when we pray for Unity* with the third speaker Revd Nicola Furley-Smith. Nicola is Moderator of the United Reformed Church, Southern Synod.

Gwen Chiosso, an active member of Southwark Unity Commission and Churches Together in Welling unveils the attraction of the York Mystery Plays.

Fr Michael Lovell recalls the heady days when Pope Benedict visited London and the very special relationship Benedict and Rowan Williams were able to project.

This fascinating time led to the Choir Boys of Westminster Abbey singing at the Vatican.

Barbara Wood and Bishop Paul Hendricks offer two views of their experience at the Churches Together in England Forum.

I hope you find this issue exciting enough to encourage others to read it. Many of our older parish contacts and priests are moving or losing touch. Please help by ensuring I have up-to-date details for the mailing list.

Michael

Westminster Abbey Choirboys Sing in St Peter's

The Westminster Abbey Choir was invited to Rome by Pope Benedict XVI, following his visit to Britain in September 2010, for the canonisation of Bl. John Cardinal Newman. In the course of his visit he had attended an ecumenical service of Evening Prayer at Westminster Abbey, which is dedicated to St Peter. He witnessed there the choir's skill and mentioned them "As we processed to the chancel at the beginning of this service, the choir sang that Christ is our 'sure foundation'". He ended his address by citing the Venerable St Bede whose 'example [may] inspire the Christians of these lands to rediscover their shared legacy, to strengthen what they have in common, and continue their efforts to grow in friendship. May the Risen Lord strengthen our efforts to mend the ruptures of the past and to meet the challenges of the present with hope in the future which, in his providence, he holds out to us and to our world. Amen.' (*Benedict XVI's Address, Friday 17 September 2010 at Westminster Abbey*). This return visit is evidence of the success of the Pope's visit to Great Britain and is a clear demonstration of the closeness already achieved between the Anglican and Catholic churches.

The Choir sang for Pope Benedict XVI, with the Sistine Chapel Choir, at the Papal Mass marking the Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul in St Peter's Basilica, Rome, on Friday 29 June 2012, making it a moment of great significance for the work of Christian Unity. The Choir also sang at Vespers the previous night in the Sistine Chapel. It was the first time in its 500 year history that the Sistine Chapel Choir had sung alongside another choir during a service. The young choristers ended their visit at the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino to sing First Vespers with the monks on Saturday evening July first. Their repertoire included *Tu es Petrus*, *Magnificat* and *Credo* by Palestrina, *Laudibus in Sanctis* (Byrd) and *Hymn to the Mother of God* (Taverner).

The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, Dean of Westminster, noted: participating in these liturgies in Rome has enriched the Abbey and its Choir and the Anglican tradition of worship. Cardinal Bertone, Secretary of State to Pope Benedict XVI, said afterwards it was a tangible sign of our will to walk side by side.

Michael Baldry

WHAT DOES LOVE REQUIRE OF US?

A personal view

Every three years *Churches Together in England* (CTE) holds a gathering of representatives from all its member Churches and Bodies in Association. *The Forum*, as it is called, is a unique opportunity to meet with an amazing variety of Christians – lay and ordained – representing (this year 2012) well over thirty different traditions. I went as the representative for the Archdiocese of Southwark Commission for Christian Unity.

As I reflect on the 2012 CTE Forum I find it has been an important moment in my personal ecumenical journey. It has helped me to see the ecumenical venture from a different perspective. I now see the work of Christian Unity more as a reality to be celebrated than a problem to be solved.

The way the Forum is organised makes the event unique. Rather than the usual format of a Christian conference in which prayer and worship are distinct from the input from speakers, plenary sessions and so forth, taking place at a different time and often in a specially designated place for worship, everything at the Forum is integrated and moves seamlessly from one to the other. Input is wrapped around in prayer, worship flows out of the presentations, and nearly everything takes place in the same hall.

The theme this year was *What does Love require of us?* The backdrop of all the proceedings was 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. This familiar passage was opened up for us in a completely new way by Professor Judith Lieu, the keynote speaker. Her detailed examination of the text showed how St Paul moves back and forth between the general and the particular in his writing. He addresses specific questions and issues that are pertinent to the community to whom he is writing and then

moves on to general principles that are important for every Christian. It was a challenging call to distinguish between those differences between us that belong to the particular situation of a community – historical, social, ethnic, etc. –and to discern those issues that are fundamental to the faith we hold in common.

Central to Professor Lieu’s exegesis and thesis was that spiritual gifts are distributed by the Spirit to each person or community as *the Spirit wills*. Different gifts are given to different communities according to the Divine plan. The gifts Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 are therefore not necessarily universal; Paul might well have mentioned different gifts if he had been writing to a different community. This challenges us to see our different charisms as gifts to be shared rather than possessions to keep to ourselves.

In the midst of Professor Lieu’s learned presentation there suddenly appeared a most unexpected slide of the evolution of the Acacia tree. It showed that despite its common origin the Acacia today has not merely differing characteristics but sometimes opposite characteristics depending on where it grows. As I pondered this there came into my mind’s eye a picture of a splendid tree full of different fruit and flowers. As the bees flew from one flower to another the cross pollination caused new fruit and flowers to appear on the tree. Yet each belonged to that tree. It seemed to me that this was an image of the flowering of Christianity, a flowering to be celebrated rather than a problem to be solved. As Professor Lieu put it, “Diversity is rooted in, and emerges out of, unity.”

Although the image of unity I received at the Forum was this immense tree full of variety which continued to come up with new forms of fruitfulness, this was not in fact the image which we were invited to contemplate. In a marvellous collection of photographs shown throughout the presentations and worship we were shown different coloured

threads of wool and rope and cotton and gradually these were woven together to form a colourful cloth where each colour retained its identity yet contributed to make the whole, an image which came movingly to life at our closing worship.

During the Forum we had met from time to time in small groups to discuss our responses to what we were hearing and experiencing. Each group was given a candle, a piece of coloured cloth and a picture of an icon as a meditative centrepiece and focus to our conversations. When the whole Forum came together for the final act of worship we found that the seating had been rearranged from the usual banks of chairs facing the stage to two blocks of seats facing each other with a wide corridor between them. As we came to the end of the summing up and singing each group leader took their group's cloth and laid it down between the two blocks of chairs until the whole space was covered with the different colours merging together to make a multi-coloured road for all to walk on. It was a very powerful symbol of the positive nature of the diversity within unity.

The theme of the Forum "What does love require of us?" is the question that continues to challenge. The fact remains that we do have differences that appear to separate us. It is not enough to say or even believe that we are one even if it doesn't look like it. Some of our differences seem to be irreconcilable opposites.

It has been said that there are two kinds of problem in the world: convergent problems and divergent problems. Convergent problems are the kinds that can be solved once and for all. The challenges of science or mathematics are convergent; once we have understood them and solved them then the answers are there for all time and can be passed on from one generation to the next. But the real stuff of life is the challenge of divergent problems. These problems are those that each generation has to struggle with: questions like; how do we bring

up our children – with freedom or with discipline? How do we deal with those who break the law – with mercy or with justice? What kind of government should we back – one that allows maximum freedom or one that takes control over everything? These alternatives are irreconcilable opposites and yet they have to be struggled with and accommodated because each is important and is a necessary part of the solution.

The challenge of Christian unity is not a convergent problem that can be solved once and for all; it is a divergent problem that has to be struggled with and lived with. We are faced with reconciling seemingly irreconcilable opposites and this requires holding them both in tension. Irreconcilable opposites can only be held together through love, a love of the other that seeks the truth in their position, a love that serves the other with respect and treat their different understanding as an insight from which we too can learn and grow. It is a love that has the confidence to know that these seemingly irreconcilable opposites each contain truths that can enrich our understanding of God in whom all things are one. It is a love that sees that a different fruit or flower on the tree from our fruit or flower belongs to that tree and adds to its beauty.

Barbara Wood
Chair, SW Area
Southwark Commission
for Christian Unity

Note: Texts and videos of the **Forum 23–25 October 2012** can be found on the CTE website: www.churches-together.net Enter **2012 Forum** in the ‘search the site’ box and it will take you there.

DON'T THROW OUT THE THEOLOGY

A talk given at Barnes in 2012

I recently attended the excellent three-day *Forum of Churches Together in England*. Once every three years, this brings people together for a period of prayer, discussion and reflection – a period which is long enough for us to be changed in various ways by the time we spend together. And to me that's the fascination of dialogue, the stimulus it gives me to re-think my own faith and to let myself be opened to new ideas. The fact that it takes place in the attractive and peaceful setting of Swanwick was an added bonus.

Faith and order issues

Only one thing was making me a bit anxious, the session where I would be helping to lead a special-interest group discussing Faith and Order issues. I knew there would be no difficulty in identifying a range of issues upon which the churches are divided. The problem would be that some of these differences are particularly painful, because they touch us at the place where we are most sensitive, when we are gathered around the altar to celebrate the Eucharist. As we know very well, some denominations feel that their differences shouldn't stop them receiving Holy Communion in each other's churches, while others like my own believe that a greater degree of unity is required before we can do this. Then there is the question whether strict Apostolic succession is required for ordination to be valid – plus of course the argument about whether this is something that has to be restricted to men only. And that's just the beginning of the list of issues. I foresaw that, once we had identified these differences, we'd then be left with the question, 'What do we do about them?' And for me the problem is that there isn't a lot that people like you and me *can* do. We aren't in a position to change the teachings of our respective churches, and we are not perhaps aware of the details of the theological arguments. Perhaps the temptation is then simply to say that our leaders should put our differences on one side and just say that we

should all be united anyway. After all, we know that what unites us is much greater than what divides us. So do the differences really matter? I want to try and explain this evening why I think they do matter, but also why I believe we should not be discouraged by this. And in any case, whether we realise it or not, we can never entirely avoid theological issues. Even if a church decided to drop all doctrine, I can assure you it wouldn't be long before some form of orthodoxy developed amongst its members – a preferred way of interpreting certain key texts of Scripture which happened to be important to its founders. What you get rid of by the front door, sooner or later returns by the back entrance! It has happened before and it will happen again. I've given this talk the title, *Don't Throw Out the Theology* because I suspect that we have all got a bit tired with issues of doctrine, which we've struggled with for so long and not been able to resolve. And at the same time there has been a greater emphasis on shared mission, worship and social action – which is in itself an excellent thing. It brings us together in a very powerful way and is a strong witness to the increasingly secularised society in which we live. But I want to say to you this evening that what we believe does matter, that we need to learn from each other in matters of doctrine and that we have to keep praying for a deeper unity that is more than just about doing things together – important though that is.

I hope to persuade you to think more positively about Christian doctrine, and to give you some assurance that remarkable progress is being made in our theological dialogue between the churches. Though there are issues on which agreement seems a long way off, we are already learning a lot from each other, so that the greater understanding which we have already reached is doing us a lot of good. Let's begin by observing that there are what you might call different levels of belief and practice in our churches. It isn't just a question of taking all the different things which are specific to our different

churches, and somehow smoothing them out – as if we were negotiating some sort of political treaty.

Is theology really divisive?

Actually, that comparison with politics is something we might look at a bit more closely. The media in particular do have a tendency to talk about liberal and traditional Christians, as if theology is just about where you come on a single line that has liberal on the left and traditional on the right, just like secular politics. You then get what I think are rather silly debates about which side is ‘winning’. I’ve always been very much against this, partly because it seems to trivialise something that is much more complex, and partly because I think it isn’t a question of either–or, but rather of both–and. It seems to me that to be a Christian you have to be both liberal and traditional.

Certainly I don’t see how we can avoid taking tradition seriously. Whether we read St Paul or St John, it’s very clear that we have received a very specific set of teachings about Jesus and about various aspects of our relationship with God, and that dire warnings are given about any tendency to alter these teachings to suit our own convenience. In that sense, if we stop being traditional, we are no longer the Church of Christ. We would have invented a new religion – a religion which cannot save us, because it doesn’t come from God.

You have probably heard it said that, just as God created us in his own image and likeness, so we have a natural tendency to create God in our image and likeness, to project our own prejudices and attitudes onto God. That’s why the Bible is so important. It constantly challenges our human attitudes and confronts us with God’s very different way of thinking.

At the same time, it seems to me that there is also a sense in which we have to be liberal. If we simply repeat the words of Scripture or the Creed, without asking how they apply to the circumstances of our time, then our religion is a dead thing, which makes no contact with the realities of our life. That was the criticism Jesus made of the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees. Theirs was an empty observance which had

lost sight of the very purpose of the law which they obeyed so carefully but so unthinkingly. This year we Catholics are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, which was very much concerned with questions of how we respond to the changes in the modern world, without losing our grip on what is essential and can never change. Jesus reveals to us the fullness of truth about who we are and how we relate to God. That doesn't change, but how we put that truth into practice in our own lives will depend on the circumstances in which we live – and that of course does vary over the centuries and in different societies.

In the same way, there are differences between the churches which are not fundamental to Christianity, but which come from particular insights of key individuals in the history of each church. These are things which can be shared by all the churches, to our great enrichment. Even theological issues don't have to be so divisive as you might think at first. There can be room for us to learn from each other, if we focus on the positive aspect of each church's teaching, rather than what seems to be restrictive.

For example, Baptists and Catholics have considerable differences in their attitude to the sacraments. Catholics emphasise the idea that a sacrament like Baptism is an act of God, so that something happens when we receive a sacrament, which doesn't just depend on our faith, our understanding and our commitment. Baptists emphasise the idea that for the sacraments to bear fruit in our lives, we have to receive them in faith and be open to the gifts that God wishes to give us. It's easy to see that in emphasising one aspect, there is a danger of under-emphasising the other. I would say that the solution isn't for Catholics and Baptists to let go of their own characteristic insights. On the contrary, we each need to see the truth in the complementary point of view which the other church has perhaps seen more clearly than we have. In that way, ecumenism doesn't mean Catholics have to become less Catholic or Baptists less Baptist. We keep what we have but also

gain insights which complement, rather than denying, what we already believe.

With regard to this example, there are already some signs that Baptists are moving towards a more sacramental understanding, to recognise that Baptism is more than just a sign of something that has already happened in a person's life. It is a means by which God gives us something we didn't already have. For its part, the Catholic Church has always taught that faith is essential if the sacrament is to bear fruit in a person's life – but now perhaps Catholics are becoming more aware of this than they used to be.

In a similar way, over the years, Catholics have become more aware of the importance of the Word of God in our worship, while the Protestant tradition as a whole has become more aware of the importance of the Eucharist. Particularly since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has emphasised the importance of the priesthood of all the baptised, whilst many Protestant denominations have increasingly seen the value of the ordained ministry.

How dialogue works

There does still remain the question, whether there are aspects of the teachings of different churches which are not in fact complementary but in direct contradiction. To resolve this we need real theological dialogue between experts.

One very good example of this is the *Joint Declaration on Justification*, which is the fruit of many years of dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans. This regards the dispute which started the Protestant Reformation, so it's by no means a minor matter. Until comparatively recently it would have seemed too obvious to need saying, that the Lutherans and the Catholics believed very different things about Justification – and they can't both be right!

So for centuries, Catholic and Lutheran theologians were concerned to point out why they regarded the other church's teaching on Justification as wrong – or at best inadequate or misleading. The possibility that the other church might have some positive insights to

offer didn't tend to be considered. By the time I was doing my theological studies, about thirty years ago, there was already a change. Looking back I can see that there was an emphasis on the fact that salvation is a gift, something that cannot be earned but can only be gratefully accepted. This isn't exactly a new idea in the Catholic tradition – the very word 'grace' implies that what we receive from God is always a gift rather than a reward. Still, I can't help thinking that if the lecturers and preachers had spoken with this sort of emphasis around fifty years ago; people would have thought it sounded a bit Protestant!

In the earlier controversies, Catholics condemned what *they* thought Lutherans were teaching. In recent dialogues on Justification, the Lutherans themselves say how they themselves understand their tradition and the Catholics consider whether this is compatible with their own teaching. And of course the same applies in the other direction. The reality, I'm sure, is a lot more complex, but there is a genuine attempt to understand the other church's teaching and to see what is positive in it.

The *Joint Declaration* which came from this was able to make a series of statements which both Catholics and Lutherans could accept. Each statement was followed by some notes on the particular emphasis that each church gave on that particular point. The conclusion in each case was that there was agreement on all the substantial points. There were differences in emphasis, with each church having its own particular insights – but the conclusion was that these differences were not what they called 'church-dividing'.

I think it's worth reading a short extract from the *Joint Declaration*, so that you can see how this works in practice:

Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification

19. We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in

relation to salvation, for as sinners they stand under God's judgement and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God's grace. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say:

20. When Catholics say that persons 'cooperate' in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.

21. According to Lutheran teaching, human beings are incapable of cooperating in their salvation, because as sinners they actively oppose God and his saving action. Lutherans do not deny that a person can reject the working of grace. When they emphasize that a person can only receive (mere passive) justification, they mean thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one's own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God's Word.

When the Joint Declaration says that there are differences of interpretation between Lutherans and Catholics, but that these do not have to be church-dividing, this is not just a fudge. It recognises that these differences of emphasis fall within the area of legitimate interpretation of the truths which we hold in common. The Catholic Church is known for being strict in matters of doctrine. It sets very clear boundaries in matters of doctrine, and yet there is still room for a wide range of different understandings and interpretations within those boundaries. Over the course of history, for example, there have been various theories of the atonement. Each of these has its value; each has its limitations. No official pronouncement has ever been made which says that only one of them represents true Catholic teaching. So there is more room for different interpretations than we might have thought, even within a single church. In the same way the Joint Declaration shows that it is possible for churches to agree on controversial issues, while recognising that they have certain

differences of emphasis and interpretation. All of this does take time, because we're not just talking about arriving at a superficial agreement, but getting to the heart of what we and our ecumenical partners believe about certain fundamental and deeply-held beliefs. But it does show what is possible.

Conclusion

Let's come back to that Faith and Order session. How did it turn out? Well, we obviously did identify a range of issues on which the churches are divided – the ones I mentioned earlier, plus a number of others. What happened then? Well, the overall theme of the Forum was 'What does love require of us?' and this suggested a way forward. Though you and I probably won't solve the difficult theological issues, but we can ask ourselves what love requires us to do in the face of these differences.

To begin with we can listen to each other – listening, as it were with the heart as well as the mind. We can pay attention to what our ecumenical partners are saying about what they believe, not what we think they believe. We can recognise the pain that our partners feel, with regard to the deficiencies they see in us.

To this I would add that we must continue to pray for a real, deep unity – not just a 'papering over of the cracks', not just some clever form of words that disguises the differences which are still there. We have to recognise that only God can bring true and lasting unity – and it will happen in his own time and in his own way. We can't make it happen: we just have to avoid getting in the way – and so we offer ourselves to God as instruments of his unity, inviting him to use us according to his will.

Rt. Rev. Paul Hendricks
SW Area Auxiliary Bishop
RC Archdiocese of Southwark

FRIENDSHIP AND HOLINESS

Pope Benedict and Dr Rowan Williams in London 2010

As Dr Rowan Williams prepares to leave the national stage and hand over to his successor Justin Welby, this might be a time to look back at the Pope's visit to England and Scotland. I say this as both the Pope and Dr Williams gave addresses at Lambeth Palace and Westminster Abbey, and we may be able to find clues as to their thinking on the progress of Christian Unity in what they had to say to the nation at that time, not so long ago. We know that both of them are deep Christian thinkers and writers. We know that there is a personal bond between them, cemented by their meetings in Rome in particular.

The meeting at Lambeth Palace drew together both Anglican and Catholic Bishops with their respective leaders, something unique in itself. Although it was a brief meeting, one senses the spirit of unity of purpose among them all, not to mention friendships and the sense that the country was watching and listening through the extensive media coverage. The magnificent setting of the Abbey at Westminster symbolised the Christian heritage we all share in this country, made even more significant by the Pope's visit just beforehand to Westminster Hall and all he had to say to our politicians. Lambeth and Westminster Abbey were particular places where Christian Unity, of word and purpose, were the order of the day. The Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions were meeting and at table were sat down. Also, of course God and man at table were sat down. These two consummate communicators could command the type of attention the churches do not normally receive. They spoke to a wide audience from a Christian platform on the theme of the place of Christianity in our present society.

It was ambitious to highlight the theme of holiness but they both did so. They centred holiness in humanity itself. In the Abbey, Benedict reminded us that we share our Baptism and so we share the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We can trust in the Spirit's gifts of unity freely given to us all. Rowan Williams, at Lambeth, spoke of the quest for

holiness. We need to stand against anyone or anything that challenges the importance of the transcendent. To be fully human, to be a true 'humanist' is to affirm the dignity of all people, made in the image and likeness of God. We must be committed to that dignity which leads us to the transcendent. Williams goes on to mention the dignity of life from its beginning to its end. Here was a reference to the sanctity of human life. On this subject, we can surely speak with a united voice at a time when human life is under threat as never before.

The trend, apparent for some years now in the Western world, towards materialism and 'moral relativism' was touched upon by both Benedict and Rowan Williams in Westminster Abbey. Benedict spoke of our need to be free from 'the facile accommodation to the spirit of the age' and 'intellectual conformism'. He detected hostility towards the Christian message and indifference towards it. Rowan spoke of the 'unworthy' style of human living in both labour and leisure in the pursuit of satisfaction and wealth. The ideal of 'service' as something noble in the human spirit was now in decline. A coldness had crept into our lives in place of the love that Christ came to bring.

The two speakers have different ways of expressing themselves, but on the subject of materialism, the convergence was unmistakable. Both seem to be aware of the quest for the spiritual in so many people's lives. Both turned to Christ and to Christian values as the answer to the quest. What divides Christians, said Benedict in the Abbey, is so much less than what we can and should share together. Rowan spoke about creative love and self-giving leading us down the same path. This was Christianity in action. We start with a common heritage. There are still differences to overcome between us. These we cannot overlook. We continue to try to work together wherever possible. We need to work for peace and harmony in the world.

The theme of friendship became apparent in what was said and also in the way the two speakers related to each other. They embraced warmly in the Abbey and the gesture spoke as effectively as the words.

Rowan spoke of the Bishops coming together at Lambeth as symbolic of the one task shared.

As well as sharing our heritage, we share the mission of Christ today. In that regard, we cannot keep Christ to ourselves:

The Church itself has no good except the common good. Wherever it becomes withdrawn and introspective, the confession of Christ withers. The life of Christ ceases to be available when we want it merely for ourselves; it is active only as we are pushed beyond ourselves into mission.

(Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, T&T Clark, 2012, pp. 64-65).

What our two speakers gave us at the time of the Pope's visit was not so much a statement about the journey towards Christian Unity as a demonstration of their unity of purpose. In this sense, visible unity is still an on-going task. The importance of mission is what compels us to work in a united way.

Fr Michael Lovell
Brockley

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6: 6-8)

PRESENTATION THREE

It has often been said about that the United Reform Church (URC) came into existence in order to die. We are almost unique in that, but it reflected the belief, back in 1972, that we were on the way to a wider union of churches. This would itself be a step on the route to the long dreamed of goal of the organic unity of the whole of Christ's church.

This was a dream which began, for many with the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910, a conference which gave rise to the creation of the World Council of Churches, the main international ecumenical body of which the URC is part. The journey has taken other routes and the landscape has changed so that today we speak of 'churches together'. This means that the URC is still here as a distinct denomination, but it is none the less committed to the ecumenical journey and to the belief that God still wills the unity of his Church but that the timescale and the shape of that unity is yet to be fulfilled.

So, at national and local level the URC plays its full part in encouraging contact and understanding between the great variety of Christian traditions which exist and represent the diversity of the Body of Christ.

It is one thing to talk about ecumenism and even to share buildings and make formal agreements. It is another to dig deep into what it means to reach out across the differences and divisions that have grown up over centuries. There are ways and places where it is possible to explore our diversity and our unity and to gain in experience and understanding, in short, to be changed by the experience.

The starting point for Christian Unity must surely be John 17:21 *"that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*

We are not praying for unity as an end in itself – sometimes we think and act as though it is! Ask Churches Together – it is a good thing to do! Ecumenism thrives when it has a purpose, a mission, Christ’s mission. Without a purpose ecumenism will get tired, fractious and neglected.

We are not praying for uniformity. We are praying for a recognition that we are all in Christ, all part of Christ’s body, a recognition that it is Christ who binds us together. Diversity is good. There is strength in diversity: missed opportunities of showing strength; stuff gets duplicated; should come naturally, organically. Sometimes, because ecumenism is at the top of all our agendas in the URC we feel as though we bend over backwards, that we are a tiny drop in the ocean in this country, but we must not forget that world wide the reformed churches are the second largest denomination.

What I am praying for is a passionate commitment to the belief that we are the Church, the whole people of God; more authentically, more credibly and more fruitfully when we are the church together, than when we are the church apart. ***“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me [Jesus] through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”***

There is a mission imperative here for all Christians so that the world may believe. A mission imperative we ignore at our peril!

Rev. Nicola Furley-Smith
Moderator of the United Reformed Church,
Southern Synod

THE YORK MYSTERY PLAYS 2012

Early in the summer I spotted an item in my local Methodist Church magazine (yes, we always exchange magazines) about the forthcoming York Mystery Plays. As I was going to York at the right time, in August, to visit my brother, I asked him if he could book some tickets.

Although I'd heard of the plays, I knew very little about them so was glad to read up about their history in the programme. The text of the plays dates back to at least 1399, being among Britain's oldest surviving play texts. Annual performances took place for around two hundred years until the English reformation suppressed the plays in the 1570s. Originally the plays were performed on wagons in the open air as around fifty individual scenes from the Bible or Apocrypha, each lasting 20-30 minutes. They were performed on the feast of Corpus Christi every summer by craft guilds which owned the wagons. Not just in York but throughout Catholic Britain the story of the world, from Creation to Last Judgement, was regularly performed. With Henry VIII's move to Protestantism came the official suppression of the Mystery Plays nationally and the significant loss and disappearance of texts. Partial play texts have survived from Chester, Wakefield, Cornwall, Norwich and Newcastle, whilst in York uniquely the complete text survived along with supporting information about the production, and pageant wagon route through the city streets.

The 20th century saw a revival of interest in the plays after nearly a 400 year gap. In 1951, York's contribution to the Festival of Britain was a new performance model, a condensed three-hour outdoor production of highlights from the cycle performed in the ruins of St Mary's Abbey. This began a tradition of single staged three-hour productions every three to four years or so, though lately these had become less frequent, the last one having been staged in York Minster in the year 2000.

This year the plays returned to the original site, St Mary's Abbey. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that both the plays and the abbey were suppressed by the English Reformation yet they endure and

survive in a new form. Being so large and alive, the plays do benefit from an outdoor setting. The imposing abbey ruins made a spectacular backdrop to the enormous stage full of actors as the evening drew gradually darker.

Fortunately the day we'd booked to go was dry, but we did have to wrap up well against the chilly night air. I regretted not hiring a blanket at the beginning and by the interval they had all gone, but we managed to get a most welcome hot drink after a very long toilet queue! It was a longer than average performance, running from 7.30 until 11.10 pm, but then the plot did stretch from before the world began to the Day of Judgement – the greatest story ever told.

A huge cast of around five hundred, aged from three to eighty years, was involved, split into two groups so they weren't performing every day, drawn from the city of York. Only two professional actors were used to play the parts of God/Jesus and Satan. Another thousand or more volunteers were used to help with the props, costumes and other areas behind the scenes, and a community choir and band also performed. It was a marvellous feat of organisation which had taken months of work.

The original text had in great part been adhered to, but it had been a little modernised for understanding where necessary, with some Yorkshire expressions kept in for added humour here and there amongst the seriousness of the play. Altogether a thoroughly enjoyable and thought provoking evening and so wonderful to see so many people keen to sit through the epic story – an audience of more than 30,000 throughout August, not to mention all the volunteers who had given up much of their summer to be part of this York heritage. The aim now is to repeat the three-hour long performance every four years. May they succeed in this magnificent venture!

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