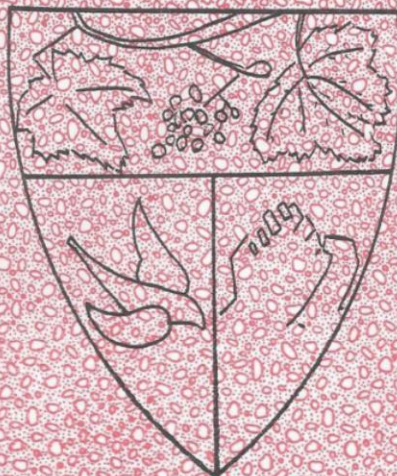


Together in Christ 60p



MAY THEY ALL BE ONE

Vol 8 No 27
June 1990

MAIN CONTENTS

- | | | |
|----|--|-------------------------|
| 1 | Editorial | |
| 2 | Unity Week Sermon | Bishop Michael Turnbull |
| 4 | The Lessons of Lent | Margaret Harvey |
| 5 | Thomas More, Parishioner
and champion of the Church | Una Ratcliff (Review) |
| 6 | Around the Parishes | |
| 9 | A Busy Day | Canon Clements |
| 12 | The United Reformed Church | Rev John Hall |
| 15 | The Hidden Factor | Sidney Ratcliff |

Together in Christ is published by the Christian Unity Commission for the Diocese of Southwark

Copyright © 1990. All rights reserved.

Price 60p per copy, Annual subscription £1.80
For postal subscribers postage extra.

Material for publication and all correspondence to be sent to the Editor: Mrs Una Ratcliffe.

The opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the Editor nor of the Ecumenical Commission.

Officers of the Area Commissions:

The Rt Rev C J Henderson

S E Area:

Sister Eileen Hewlett (Chair) Mrs. Margaret Moloney (Sec)

S W Area;

Miss Celia Blackden (Chair) Miss Mary Hardy (Sec)

Kent Area:

Mrs Dorothy Morris (Chair) Sr Margaret Mary O'Grady (Sec)

EDITORIAL

"Behold, I make all things new."

The assurance of God's Word throughout Scripture of His making the whole of creation new is one which uplifts and encourages us, us to respond in prayer and praise.

The service for Swanwick participants and others, kindly hosted by Archbishop Runcie at Lambeth Palace on March 5th, vividly reflected this theme through Scripture, hymns, psalms and prayers; we mention a few here:

Sing a new hymn to Yahweh (Isaiah 42: 10)

Sing a new song to the Lord (Psalm 98: 1)

You renew the face of the earth (Psalm 104: 30)

And for anyone In Christ there is a new creation (2 Cor. 5: 17)

A new heart I give you and a new spirit I will put within you (Ez. 36: 26)

This my commandment: love one another as I have loved you (Jn 15: 12)

If ecumenical energies flag in the face of obstacles and the sin of disunity, it is the wonders of God's creative love and the marvels He works which will cause us to be open to the action of the Holy Spirit in us. St Paul tells us what is right". (2 Thess 3:13)

This issue of Together in Christ highlights new initiatives and attitudes which should give us constant encouragement. it is our privilege to welcome Bishop Michael Turnbull's inspiring sermon, and through Canon Clement's "Busy Day" to hear the moving thoughts of Cardinal Hume and Bishop Ronald Bowlby.

Many thank to Rev John Hall for his clear presentation of the United Reformed Church, and to Dr Margaret Harvey for the fascinating peep into a study group, with much to be learnt. from it.

Congratulations to the Bexley Deanery for news around their parishes. IWe hope this will spur others to send in contributions! The "hidden factor" of Sidney Ratcliff's article links us with the message of trust in the new surprises from the hand of God: may He bless you all.

THE DIOCESAN COMMISSION Welcome to the new officers (the three Commissions now have ladies as Chairs and Secretaries. . Deep appreciation of their work and many thanks go to retiring officers: Canon Clements (S E Area) who has served for 11 years, and Norman Lee (Kent); their expertise will be valuable in their continuing work as Commission members.

RING IN THE NEW The inauguration of the new ecumenical instruments takes place on September 1st for the English and Welsh bodies, and September 8th the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Celebrate this locally on September 2nd, and continue to pray for this new endeavour.

SERMON PREACHED BY THE BISHOP OF ROCHESTER
in Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 1990, for Sidcup Churches

We must begin with a sense of thanksgiving for what God has done for his universal church this century. When perhaps our impatience makes us frustrated with seemingly slow progress we need to remind ourselves of the enormous strides that have been made. One has only to mention the establishment of the World Council of Churches, the inspiration of Vatican II and our own personal reflections of how our attitudes have changed over the last twenty or thirty years. And now in 1990 we have the promise of an ecumenical decade of evangelism and in Britain new ecumenical instruments with their emphasis not on schemes but on a pilgrimage together.

But while we are thankful we are also conscious of the need for penitence because our continued disunity represents our unfaithfulness to the clear will of Christ. We can think of many arenas in the world where our lack of unity has damaged our witness to the peace which the world sorely needs and which only Christ can bring. In Sri Lanka the church has lost an opportunity to witness to peace amongst the injustice and civil war of religious strife. In Eastern Europe we witness the suffering of the churches and yet they themselves are divided when unity is most needed. Even the on going agony of Northern Ireland is still perceived by the world as having religious roots. In our own county of Kent we cannot get our act together even to plan our united mission on the fast developing housing estates.

If, in our personal life, we sin and repent and yet go on sinning we recognise there is something radically wrong and yet in our corporate life within the universal church we have grown so used to the sin of disunity that we sometimes lose consciousness of it. It has become what the Psalmist called a "secret sin" . So in our pilgrimage together we need to go back to our Lord — for our disunity is a denial of St John's Gospel and particularly of John 17. What does he say there?

In verses 1 - 8 he stresses that the beginning of our unity is our oneness in the need for God. We have that shared need with all people. Dare we say there is unity in our sinfulness? And yet Jesus speaks of his work of salvation as being complete and finished. He has made known God's glory. Thus the obverse side of our unity in sinfulness is our unity in Jesus and in His work of salvation we find our unity.

In verses 9 - 19 the next stage of our understanding of our unity is to note what Christ said of his disciples. They are to be one with him but also with one another. The conclusion is plain. Without full unity our knowledge of God is incomplete. It follows that when the church is one then great blessings flow. God is longing to

shower his blessings on his church but he looks first for true repentance and acts of obedience.

In verses 20 - 26 the third stage of our understanding of the unity which Christ requires is contained in the prayer which Christ offers for his church. He asks that they may be one — not for their own comfort, not for shop window dressing, not for economic reasons of convenience — but "that the world may believe that thou did send me". If we think of unity only for convenience sake then we shall fall short of God's plan for our unity. We must never think that the reason for unity is so that we can save money by having fewer churches or deploy our clergy more effectively. Those may be by-products of unity but they are not the reason for it. The reason is that the world may believe. By our disunity we are robbing the world of that chance.

So the quest for unity is directly related to our evangelism — the announcement of God's activity in his world. So long as we are separate in the essentials of the gospel our preaching is questionable. And the essentials are:

God is one — Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Cod has revealed himself completely in Jesus Christ

Cod has healed mankind in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

Cod looks for mankind's response — and the church is the means of making that response.

We are not yet one in worship and mission. It is doubtful whether it is right to expect oneness in organisation for that is secondary. But we must pray and make our prejudices vulnerable to the power of the Holy Spirit in order that in worship and mission we may be one.

Only then our evangelism have full integrity. It is likely that, if in the next decade we give ourselves to proclamation, then, unity will be a by-product of our concern for the world.

For that we pray this week and wait expectantly to see how God will answer. Holding ourselves ready for the answer is the risk we take when we join in Christ's prayer — may we be one that the world may see the Christ who is our Lord for ever and ever.

Bishop Michael Turnbull

THE LESSONS OF LENT

We are proud of our discussion group. We have stayed together since we first argued about "Not Strangers but Pilgrims", toiling away once a month between 'Lents', tackling bits of the Bible. We have got know and like each other very much; absent members sent postcards— "To the Saints who meet in the house of ..." quite a typical group of urban Christians, well-educated, middle aged, middle class and with views mostly middle of a rather broad road.

This Lent was different. We agreed to take extras and the group will never be the same again.

It is mostly because of our new Catholic. Maggie is quite different from us. She is a catechism Catholic and not, by our standards, well-educated at all. She told us, rather shyly, one night, that she left school at fourteen. White-haired, stooped, and with knotted joints, she must be well on into her seventies. Her accent betrays that she is anything but middle-class, and her views are anything but middle-of-the-road. She is just beginning to read the Bible and has a new and shiny Jerusalem version, which she is finding very surprising. After one of the tapes, when a member of the group suggested that God's justice was not like ours, she agreed warmly. "Look at Cain and Abel", she said, "I've just been reading how Cain's sacrifice was not acceptable to God and I thought "That's not fair".' She left the Anglican members gaping with shock by making it clear that she did not think that Anglicans celebrated the Eucharist.

But it is all being very educational. The non-Catholics have never met anyone like this and she has never talked to people like them. The value of the encounter became apparent when we were discussing how difficult it is to change. Maggie explained how, as a girl, she had decided one evening with friends that, despite not being allowed to take part in "the services or prayers of a false religion" God could not forbid her to pray with them. So she had. But, she said later, change could be very difficult. We've all had this new liturgy", she explained to the non-Catholics, who nodded sympathetically, mindful of the Alternative Service Book, the New Methodist Hymn Book, and such-like. She had loved the Latin Mass and the old hymns, and she wouldn't have minded so much but everyone had treated people like her as if they were stupid... And she was not stupid, she just liked the old liturgy better than this. "Mind you, there's a lot that's better. I think in our parish we're kinder to each other and there's a friendlier spirit... . But I don't think people should say that all we had before was bad, because it wasn't".

I was probably the only person present who knows that she goes to Mass daily, but the rest of the group looked at its broad road, down the middle of which it so confidently walks, and went home quiet and thoughtful, examining its conscience.

(Dr) Margaret Harvey

THOMAS MORE, PARISHIONER AND CHAMPION OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

I was delighted to receive recently from L'Abbe Germain Marc'hadour, a leading world authority on St. Thomas More, a paper with the above title, which was included in *Thomas Morus Jahrbuch 1989* and which makes fruitful and stimulating reading.

Of particular ecumenical interest are the latter sections entitled "More's vision of the Church!" "Is more a patron for ecumenists?" "Between Rome and Canterbury"; and "More was no Ultramontane Catholic".

In considering More as a patron for ecumenism and the question - "Isn't his intransigence rather an obstacle to genuine dialogue?", Fr. Germain points out that the Anglicans do not seem to think so; they have included More as "a martyr for conscience" in their calendar of Saints. More, we are told, "fought the principle of *adiaphore*, that is of truths which were supposed to make "no difference" within a shared Faith". This is exemplified with regard to Christ's presence in the Eucharist. John Frith asserted that what matters is the reception of the sacrament with gratitude and veneration irrespective of belief in Christ's presence as real or symbolic; More retorted that "kneeling to the consecrated species without believing that Christ is corporally there is as blasphemous as the mock homage "given to Christ in his Passion.. Fr Germeir, continues: More admits a hierarchy of truths and especially a variety of practices, but the unity he seeks is not a cheap expression of doctrinal permissiveness". More believes that "the Christian revelation is an ongoing phenomenon; all the seeds of it may be in the Bible, but their annunciation is progressive, the Spirit of Truth is leading the faithful all the time into a fuller grasp of the Truth (Jn 16:13).

In the present climate of thought on papal supremacy when the principle of collegiality has been reasserted and the need for a symbol and instrument of global unity is being more keenly felt. More is seen by Fr. Germain as "a fitting prophet"... "his mood was clearly conciliarist."

Ecclesiology is prominent in most dialogues today: Fr. Germaints presentation of More's views and their prophetic nature is an excellent contribution deserving further study.

Una Ratcliff

AROUND THE PARISHES

Ecumenical Notes From Sidcup (Kent)

St Lawrence's was full on 21st January for Sidcup's annual Church Unity service, at which the Bishop of Rochester preached an inspiring sermon. Half of the collection went to the Ethiopian Famine Relief Fund.

Did you see members of the Sidcup Council of Churches taking part in BBC Question Time in January?

All the Churches contributed to the Music Festival at St. Barnabas Church on 19th May.

There were 16 venues in Sidcup for this year's Lent Course (Radio Kent) most well attended and ecumenical. A joint concluding celebration "Face to Face" was held in Rochester Cathedral on 5th April.

Sidcup's Palm Sunday Procession left the War Memorial at 3 p.m. and arrived at All Sainte, Footscray, for a service. Many dressed in Jewish costume or as Roman soldiers.

Holy Trinity, Lamorbey, and St. Lawrence's held joint Passion and Palm Sunday services.

A Procession of Witness was held on Good Friday, and a service on The Green, where the address was given by Rev. David Reast, and the prayers and readings were shared by the Churches.

Fr. J.P. Murphy, SM

OLD BEXLEY (Kent) GROUP OF CHURCHES: Forthcoming Events

10 June : St Barnabas Church 10th Birthday celebration

1 July Interchurch lunchtime picnic, at the Five Arches, North Cray Road.

7/8 July: Flower Festival and Saturday Evening Concert (7th) at the URC.

15 July . United Service at St John Fisher 6 p.m.

7 October: United Service at Badwyns Park Baptist Church 6.30 p.m. (40th Church anniversary). Two or three representatives from each church are asked to attend.

13 October: Social celebration at the U R C to complement

14 October.: United Service at U R C (Hurst Road) .- Centenary anniversary

3/4 November: St Mary's will hold a Missionary Exhibition.

E.T. Watts (Unity contact)

SCARECROWS -

Crayford Churches Scarecrow Holiday Club

Last Summer at St Mary's Centre, 47 young people aged 7- 13 attended the Holiday Club, plus 12 little ones aged 2 - 5, from the Methodist, St Paulinus and St Mary's Churches, from 30th August to 1st September.

The young people took over the whole centre. Each sweetcorn, had their own group to which they belonged: mouse/marrow, squirrel/ turkey/tomato, pig/potato, cow/ carrot and the little scarecrows. They created their identity within that group. They changed a room or floor space into a den with blankets, carpets, quilts, cushions, and one group even had a washing line! They made it their home for 3 days.

WHAT DID THEY DO? Had fun, talked and talked, made various items - name badges with family and interests on them, vegetables, animals various worlds for the display boards and their dens and of course, "Scarecrows" ; played games, prayed, cooked, sang, visited all three churches and had a short time in each; barbecue disco, made lots of noise at times, made new friends, had a really good time.

WHAT TOPICS WERE COVERED? Family and friends, what was right and wrong; were they old enough to have a choice in certain areas of their lives? ; relationships with family, friends. one another, and listening to God; the care we should show to each other and the world God created. Through all of these topics we tried to show that God loves each and every one of us and that He is our friend.

HOW DID IT END? The conclusion of all their work and efforts was offered up in their Service of Praise showing us and God the world in we live - their family; interests -cubs,brownies, football etc.; the Church (we are all joined together by one God); Noah's Ark (the joy that listening to God can bring); the Environment (extinction, destruction and poverty)

WHO RAN THE SCARECROW HOLIDAY CLUB? The crèche was run by four nuns from St.Mary's and twelve people from the three Churches ran the older section. The commitment, time, energy and effort which they all gave to this club was enormous, but all this was outweighed by the enjoyment received from being involved with such a nice group of young people who gave all they had to their holiday club.

Win Threlfall
(Unity Contact)

WELLING (Kent) COVENANT: January 23, 1990

MINISTER'S LETTER - Welling Methodist Church

Dear Friends, one of the items in the act of worship for the signing of the Covenant was called "Celebration", and it summed up the atmosphere of the evening. I would imagine that it was the largest congregation seen in our church for many years.

Pentecostal, Baptist, United Reform, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Church of England, Salvation Army, all together for worship! Bishop Charles Henderson, Bishop Michael Turnbull and Rev. Dr. Mervyn Willshaw represented the wider church.

Now it is our task to work harder for unity and support each other by prayer and through practical ways. Join a Lent group. Come to the monthly prayer meeting in the Salvation Army Citadel, first Saturday in the month. There are many opportunities to share in if we keep our eyes and ears open!

The clergy of Welling meet once a month for prayer and consultation. Lay and clergy gather together to share concerns and fellowship bi-monthly.

January 23rd was the start of a new life among us; let each one pray that God will continue to guide us as we seek new avenues of fellowship.

Yours sincerely,

Raymond Hawthorne

(This letter appeared in The messenger, and is reproduced here by kind permission of the Rev. R Hawthorne.)

THE BEXLEYHEATH FELLOWSHIP OF CHURCHES is the new name adopted for what was The Broadway Fellowship, because several other churches beyond the immediate Broadway area have joined the Fellowship.

Holy week was a great time of sharing worship, events included "The Love Service" at the Salvation Army Citadel on Monday; stations of the Cross at St John Vianney's on Tuesday. Good Friday saw a procession of witness to the United Reformed Church where a united service was held. Dawn communion at 5.30 at St Martin's and worship at sunrise in Gravel Hill Fields at 5.45 a.m. were followed by breakfast for both groups at St Martin's.

A BUSY DAY

Sometimes, looking at my diary, the prospect seems too crowded for comfort. If only those four or five events, all happening on one day, could be spread a little more thinly!

For me, Sunday, 28th January was "one of those days! Yet, in retrospect, it was a very full and happy day, leaving me with an abiding feeling of satisfaction.

At ten in the morning I listened to a homily preached by Ronald Bowlby, Anglican Bishop of Southwark, who was visiting Thamesmead. His wise leadership of his diocese has provided a focus for unity for the many different strands of thought which make up the Church of England. He has helped many people to face up to the challenging issues of the day. On this occasion he preached a very clear and moving sermon on the theology of suffering as found in the writings of St. Paul. It was an uplifting talk, full of hope. "God is present in every situation" was his theme. We all give a notional assent to this, but we need to hear it again and again if our assent is to be real. God is present in your pain; in my pain, It is a fact simply stated, but profound in content and meaning. He quoted Bishop John Robinson (of 'Honest to God!' fame) who recognised God's presence in his own cancer. How often do we fail to recognise God's presence in the day-to-day situations of our lives. We shrink from pain, yet we need to go through pain to get to the reality within. "It's like" said the Bishop, "peeling an onion." As we peel off each layer, our eyes are filled with more and more tears. It's a risk we have to take to get to the centre. I think we all felt moved by the depth and sincerity of the Bishop's words, and by his honest effort to deal with one of the great mysteries of life, the problem of suffering.

After Mass, we all had coffee together, but I had to make my excuses and dash off to St. Benet's Church, Abbey Wood, for a celebration of the 1300th anniversary of the death of St. Benet Biscop. In this little church, which barely seats 100 people, the feast of their patron is duly celebrated each year on 12th January. Last summer, the parish priest, Fr. Anthony Plummer, organised a pilgrimage for his parishioners to various places connected with the Saint, ending up in Wearmouth and Jarrow, in Northumbria.

Celebrating the feast last year, we suddenly had the idea of inviting Cardinal Basil Hume, fellow-monk and fellow-Northumbrian, to come and celebrate with us the anniversary of St. Benet's death. To our great delight he agreed to be the principal celebrant and preacher on the nearest day he could make it.

The Knights of St. Columba formed a guard of honour along Abbey Grove as the procession moved to the small, packed church. The Cardinal, a born teacher, gave us the life story of this fellow-monk in such a way that you felt that the two were well acquainted. showed us st. Benet Biscop's important place in strengthening and uniting the diverse Celtic and Roman traditions in his day, and his talent for organisation which enabled him to establish a great centre of spirituality and scholarship at Wearmouth.

Biscop Baducing was born in 628, of a noble Northumbrian family, and served in the court of King Oswy until he was 25, when he decided to become a monk, being professed at the great monastery of Lerins, in Gaul and taking the name of Benedict (or Benet) He journeyed to Rome no fewer than six times during his life. On the third such visit he was asked to accompany St. Theodore (a Greek monk) to England on his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury. Benet was made Abbot of St. Augustin's Abbey, Canterbury, but in 674, at the age of 46, he set out for Wearmouth, in Northumbria, where he founded the monastery of St. Peter.

Seven years later, he founded a sister monastery of St. Paul at Jarrow a few miles away. These were centres of strict Benedictine monasticism but with an emphasis on intellectual pursuits. From his frequent journeys to Rome, St. Benet brought back the stimulus of Italian scholarship, music and art. He brought books to build up large libraries. Then the monks copied and distributed the books to other monasteries. He brought stained glass for windows, painted panels for monastery buildings, statues and vestments. He also brought craftsmen in stained glass, and masons who taught the monks to build in stone. He managed to persuade Rome's chief cantor to come to teach the Gregorian chant to his monks. By the beginning of the 8th century, Wearmouth and Jarrow together formed one flourishing centre of scholarship in Western Europe.

It was into St. Benet's care that the boy Bede came at Wearmouth in the year 680. For more than 50 years the Venerable Bede devoted himself to the prayer and outstanding scholarship which were to make his name known throughout Christendom. As a Doctor of the Church, the writings of the Venerable Bede are still read by priests in their breviaries today. His commentaries on the Holy Scriptures are fresh and inspiring. His Ecclesiastical History is the prime source book for the early history of England.

These two great men of the North, said the Cardinal, one the great traveller, builder and administrator; the other the scholar and contemplative, have together played a great part in the history of Church in our country.

We all came out from Church feeling very proud of our Saint. The Cardinal spent an hour in the parish hall talking to the people, and then had lunch with the local clergy,

During Mass, the Cardinal presented the *Benemorenti medal* to Mrs. Marie Hine, long-serving sacristan at St. Benet's, and to Mrs. Eileen Wilson, founder of the local Union of Catholic Mothers.

We very much enjoyed having the Cardinal with us, and I had the impression that he enjoyed himself too. Altogether, a full and happy day.

Bringing the two events of that day together in my mind, and thinking of those two sermons, one preached by an Anglican Bishop, the other by a Cardinal, I began to think how important it is to work and pray for the full unity which is the mind of Christ.

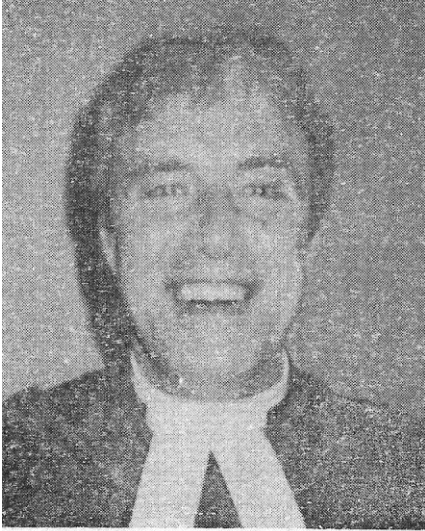
Such unity was brought about in our country through the work and prayer of men like Benet and Bede. Now, sadly, we are once more divided. But we have come a long way in the last few years. May the lives of these two great Saints inspire us to go on working and praying for unity. And may their prayers from heaven help us on the journey.

Canon William Clements

A PRAYER OF ST BEDE THE VENERABLE

I implore you, good Jesus,
That as in your mercy you
Have given me to drink in
With delight the words of
your knowledge, so of your
Loving kindness you will also
Grant me one day to come to
you. the fountain of all
Wisdom, and to stand for ever
before your face. Amen.

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH



John Hall

In 1972 a new Church was born in England and Wales. Its parents were a rather staid old couple who represented most of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of England and Wales. Although this infant Church was born small and has succeeded in staying small despite our best efforts, it is part of a large family. The Presbyterian/ Reformed Churches are the third largest church group in Britain, mainly thanks to the bulk of The Church of Scotland. In global terms, W. E. Orchard in his excellent C.T.S. booklet quoted us as being "the largest of all Protestant denominations in the world". This still seems to be the case: this time we follow the Roman and Orthodox churches in size.

Since 1972 we have been joined by the "Churches of Christ" (Disciples), who are basically an American Presbyterian group. This group brought practices which have enhanced our own already diverse approaches to worship. I suspect that it is possibly more true of us than most. groups, that if you sat six of us down and asked us what we do as a church you would get at least six different answers. What we have in common is that in structure, if not theology, we are all sons and daughters of John Calvin. Therefore it is worth spending a few moments to consider this remarkable man.

Calvin was a Frenchman, trained both as a lawyer and a priest - a formidable combination. He trained in Paris and was contemporary with Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier. As time went by, he became part of a French group seeking to reform the Church. In those days one did not question the authority of the Church - to do so often offered a starring role in a local bonfire. Therefore when persecution threatened In 1536 Calvin fled to Geneva, from which his side of the Reformation and Presbyterianism were to spring.

There was nothing really new in Calvin's thinking. His great work "*The Institutes of Christian Religion*" contain ideas that can be traced back to many earlier sources: these encompass not only St. Paul and St Augustine of Hippo, but also John Wycliffe and Jan Huss. Calvin's gift was to be able to codify his views on a

Reformed Church and set out these thoughts in a logical pattern. In Geneva he was further enabled to run the city on the principles he considered right a Democratic Theocracy.

In Calvin's concept of ministry, the minister, although set apart for lengthy training, was not to be seen in a priestly role, rather he and later she was to be the teacher, who would help the laity understand the Bible and live by its teachings. Under this system everybody has a "calling" to serve God. This is the basic belief that underlies the principle of the "priesthood of all believers".

Another belief of prime importance to us is that only God in Christ may be head of the Church; we also happen to have no equivalent to an Episcopacy. This has not always endeared us to the establishment. The most quoted line on this has been attributed to James the First - "No Bishops — No King". In fact, certainly in this country whenever we have looked as if we are doing well numerically, we have always found a way to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. In the seventeenth century we adopted Universalism and Unitarianism, twin heresies that served only to divide and confuse our churches in England.

The independents, or Congregationalists, survived the rigours of chance, change and politics far better in this country. They stressed the centrality of the local, rather than the national church councils as decision making bodies. The first man to really work out these ideas was Robert Brown (1550 - 1633) . These gave people a strong sense that their views were of value. The Presbyterians tended to lose direction once communications between local, district and national councils were severed, as was the case when persecution did come — by contrast, the Congregationalists came through virtually intact.

Our structure in the United Reformed Church owes much to both of these systems. Within each of our local churches, certain of its members are elected to serve as Elders (Presbyters) — these are men or women ordained to a spiritual office for life, whilst continuing to earn a living in secular employment. People with such a "calling" share with the Minister in the government and pastoral care of the church.

The local church is governed by a "session" composed, usually, but not always, of a minister and Elders of that church. Any major decisions taken by the Elders, or another elected group, known as the Deacons (or Managers); a body whose main function is to care for daily running and fabric of the Church — are referred to the church meeting, a coming together of all the members for final approval.

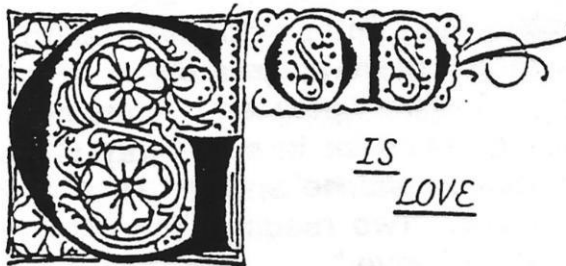
All the churches in a given region (District) are under the guidance of a District Council, which has a leader elected from its number. District councils are made up of representative ministers and Elders from local churches. Several Districts grouped together form a Province; there are twelve Provinces in the United Reformed Church. Our highest court is the General Assembly, which meets once a year. Both Provincial and General meetings elect from their own ranks a person to act as a moderator. Moderators serve as a "first among equals" to constitute courts and preside over various meetings. A Moderator will serve for a fixed term of office and the post is open to all members. male or female, ordained or lay.

I am very aware that the negative views of certain minorities within the Presbyterian/Reformed Church are often taken to typify views of the majority. Nothing could be further from the truth: a statement "concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the Reformed Church", which we use in certain of our services as a set of beliefs to which we all accede. This is the final paragraph, I can think of no better way to end this brief sketch of my church:-

"The United Reformed Church declares its Intention, in fellowship with all the churches, to pray and work for such visible unity of the whole Church as Christ wills and in the way he wills, in order that men and nations may be led more and more to glorify the Father in heaven". Amen.

John Hall

* * * * *



THE HIDDEN FACTOR



Sidney Ratcliff

When I was baptized by a Roman Catholic priest 40 years ago, a week before my 34th birthday, the claims and teachings of the Catholic Church were so clearly right that I was puzzled by the fact that there was an awful lot of people who rejected them, and at every opportunity I had tried to get an answer to this puzzle.

The most frequent response I had from Catholic priests was that I was lucky to have been chosen by God to receive his gift of the Catholic faith. This was unsatisfactory since God has no favourites, his infinite love and gifts are available to all without exception. A less frequent response, which was even more unsatisfactory, and, knowing as I did, so many folk who were not Roman Catholics, even

(unintentionally) insulting, was that "they" were not in good faith. My oldest friend, who saw missionary service in a leper colony in West Africa and in another in India and eventually became an Anglican (Evangelical) priest, thought I had gone mad (we remained very good friends), other good people who were not committed to any church just remarked that "You all make the same claims".

For about 25 years, as a member of the Catholic Evidence Guild, weather permitting, I did a weekly stint on an outdoor platform, expounding Catholic apologetics to whoever would listen. As far as I am aware, no one moved nearer to the Roman Catholic Church through my efforts, but the experience taught me a tremendous amount. Paradoxically, the certainty in the "rightness" of my own Church was confirmed, and, I think, my devotion, especially to the Mass and the Sacraments progressively developed, and yet, my respect for the people I was speaking to, together with an appreciation of their own churches also progressively developed. They were obviously experiencing the same degree of certainty in the "rightness" of their beliefs as I was.

It is not surprising then, that in connection with the recent attendance of Archbishop Runcie at a Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul, it was reported that Dr David Samuel, leader of the Anglican Evangelical group had said: "We do not feel that the prospects for unity are realistic. We are all for friendly relations, but the whole question of doctrinal unity is not realistic and never has been". ⁽¹⁾

This view of ecumenism is one which is not restricted to Dr Samuel and the group he leads, it is one that is shared by many Roman Catholics, at least. After all, it is as inconceivable that our friends in the Free Churches or in the Evangelical Alliance will accept (for example) the Sacramental principle propounded by the Catholic Church, or the Mass as Roman Catholics are likely to abandon them.

It is true that we already enjoy a large degree of unity, thus, when a Christian feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick and so on, he is not demonstrating an Anglican love, a Baptist love, a Catholic love or any other denominational love; he is expressing the one love of Jesus Christ. Vatican II has also given examples of our incomplete unity: the Word of God, the gifts of the Spirit ⁽²⁾ etc., but there remain those areas of essential doctrinal belief which still keep us apart.

We pray for Christian unity as and how God wants it, but surely, our prayers must reflect the basis on which our individual Christian faith rests. I mean, in view of his deep reverence for Holy Scripture and his commitment to its rigid and literal application, what Biblical Fundamentalist could possibly be open to the acceptance of the primacy of the Pope (for example) or to his infallibility, even within the very limited bounds of this dogma? In view of the nature and authority of his faith what Roman Catholic could possibly be open to the suggestion that he has got it all wrong?

Which brings me to *the Hidden Factor* of the title of this article.

The foolishness of God,

Our approach to the unity of all Christians is on the basis that it is the will of God for his people, as expressed by Jesus in his frequently quoted prayer:

"May they be one.... so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me."⁽³⁾

and we see in the Bible, that in effecting his plans for his people, God frequently has recourse to doing something foolish.

Take Moses, for example: an assassin who ran away from Egypt to escape the consequences of his deed. Wasn't it a foolish thing to do, to send Moses, now a shepherd, back to Egypt against his will, to Pharaoh and demand of him the release of all his Hebrew slaves? ⁽⁴⁾

Wasn't it a foolish thing to tell Joshua that he had to capture Jericho by the expedient of marching round the city a certain number of times blowing trumpets and shouting? ⁽⁵⁾

Wasn't it a foolish thing to tell Gideon that his army was too large and had it reduced from the original 32,000 to 300 men who drank water in a certain way?

The tale could be extended, but the ultimate folly must be mentioned — the folly of the Cross.

No sensible human person would be guilty of any of these follies, but then, we must remember that the foolishness of God is wiser than men. ⁽⁷⁾

In quite a different context, Polonius said of Hamlet's actions: "Though this be madness, yet there is method to't."

and do we but look we can see the method in God's madness.

No one could possibly claim that Moses, by his statesmanship and great powers of persuasion brought the People of God out of the land of Egypt; no one could claim that it was as a result of Joshua's great generalship that Jericho was captured; no one can say that the Midianites were overcome by the strength of Gideon's army, and least of all, no one can say that he has achieved his own salvation.

God is active not only in preserving his own people, often in spite of themselves, but also in vindicating his own holy name against those who would turn to other gods.

In our attempts to carry out God's will for the unity of his Church, all sorts of activity is taking place. In particular we have our theologians, philosophers and other wise persons attempting to bridge the gaps of our differing beliefs; the various inter-denominational commissions have made such progress as would not have been imagined a few years ago. But there are still many obstacles to overcome and also, the progress so far reported has, sadly, not always reached the Christian in the pew, or in some cases, where it does, is not acceptable to him.

But then, this is human wisdom.

We pray for the continuing progress of these committees, but in the rapidly increasing need for the world to be shown that Jesus was indeed sent by the Father, and its need to experience his love, and in order to preserve his own people and to vindicate his holy name against those who would go after other

gods, we may yet find that God will have recourse to a further act of that divine foolishness that is wiser than men.

He may yet produce another Moses in some guise or mode to approach the Pharaoh of disunity and make the demand:

"Set my people free."

Sidney Ratcliff.

1. The Universe: 17.9.89.

2. cf. Decree on Ecumenism; Art 3.

3. cf. Gospel of St John, 17: 20-22.

4. Exodus chs. 3 and 4

5. Joshua ch. 6.

6. Judges ch. 7

7. Cor 25. (RSV)

