

Churches Together in England

WORSHIP AT ECUMENICAL OCCASIONS

The Revd Sheila Maxey was Chaplain to the 1997 Forum of Churches Together in England. She had been appointed Chaplain to the Enabling Group of Churches Together in England in April 1996, and as Secretary for Ecumenical Relations for the United Reformed Church had been deeply involved in the Called To Be One process for which the Forum was the focus. This paper contains her reflections on the worship at the Forum.

The Forum's special nature

The 1997 Forum of Churches Together in England was intended to be, and turned out to be, a very important one. The *Called To Be One* process, which over the previous three years had urged the churches to articulate what they meant by the word 'Church' and what kind of unity they were actually committed to, culminated in this Forum. This meant that both the plenary sessions and the denominational groups and the ecumenical regional groups worked intensively to pool the thinking of the previous few years and to try to discern and agree on the next steps for the English ecumenical pilgrimage.

Great Expectations

I was aware of the pressure of expectation on the 1997 Forum created by the *Called To Be One* process. It was therefore immediately clear to me that the worship of that Forum must sustain and nourish it, by turning it time and again back to God, but that it must not make too many demands on the participants whose energy priority would be elsewhere. This meant that the chaplain's role would need to go beyond enabling - to leadership.

Guiding Principles

During the summer of 1996 I came, through reading and reflection,

to formulate some guiding principles (or observations) for the worship of the 1997 Forum.

Firstly, the Forum should worship together as far as possible as shared worship was the means as well as the goal of unity. This principle was to prove somewhat controversial as in the past there had been the opportunity to choose to worship in various traditions and in this way the minority churches had had a slightly higher profile. This principle was also a contributory factor to the Roman Catholic Church decision to offer a service of Evening Prayer and not a Mass.

Secondly conference worship is different from the worship of the local congregation and that should be borne in mind.

Thirdly, the worship of all the member churches is evolving and being changed both by their ecumenical relationships and in response to a changing society.

These last two principles were a plea for worship appropriate to this particular conference and a plea to the churches to resist retreating into traditional ways which were actually not their present reality. I also, in consultation with the Forum Preparation Group, decided the theme and the readings for each day's worship.

No agreed form

There is no agreed form for ecumenical worship. There cannot be as the ecumenical bodies bring together churches with a fixed liturgy, those with a more flexible liturgy, and those who expect, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to create a new liturgy on each occasion of worship. Of course, the ecumenical gathering can worship through the liturgies of particular churches - but even they will be, to a greater or lesser extent, changed by the presence of those from other traditions.

Whether creating an act of worship for a particular occasion or agreeing to worship through one tradition, consultation is critical. I therefore gathered a small group together to advise and guide me in the preparation. I invited someone from the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of Friends, Salvation Army and the Black-majority Churches.

In addition, I invited someone who had had a leading role in the preparation of the ecumenical worship for the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, who happened to be Anglican, and my music adviser, who happened to be from the United Reformed Church. We met for a whole day in September 1996 and then again in January 1997. I also consulted them by phone.

Different approaches

So the creation process began. The different traditions approached the worship very differently - at times, conflictually - and brought different offerings.

The Orthodox consciousness of time in worship gave us the rhythm of each day.

The Anglican tradition of matins and evensong also pointed that way.

My own ecumenical exposure to the Anglican monastic tradition made me warm to this, and my desire to sustain the conference in its very strenuous work also fitted well with this and so we planned *Worship for the Morning*, *Worship at Mid-day*, *Worship for the Evening*, and *At the End of the Day*.

The Salvation Army member of the group longed for more rousing and cheerful worship than the quiet, meditative pattern which was emerging.

Many of the Reformed and Free Church members of Churches Together in England, including my own church, had particular treasured practices and convictions to offer - the preaching of the Word, the leadership by lay people, the practice of extempore prayer.

So each morning and evening there was a preaching of the Word - but in deference to the conference time-table and to the plea, not only from the Quakers, for more silence in worship, it was kept to five minutes. I also gave it the Roman Catholic title *The Breaking of the Word*.

The prayers at mid-day took place in small groups where free intercession was not only more practicable but also more acceptable to most. At the end of the day, a lay member of the conference led the prayers.

Using tradition

Ecumenical worship does not, of course, start with a blank sheet. The early morning and late evening worship was a simple putting together of a few elements - praise and thanksgiving in the morning, along with the hearing and the breaking of the Word.

At the end of the day, there was a reflection from one of the Presidents, and prayers of confession, intercession and committing the day and the night to God.

The worship before supper was led, in turn, by some of the main church traditions according to their liturgies. That place in the day was filled by an Anglican Eucharist, Orthodox Vespers and Roman Catholic evening prayer. At the end of Saturday, the Black majority churches led the worship in a combination of their styles.

The early morning worship on the Sunday was in the form of a Quaker Meeting.

Each lunch-time the Salvation Army led the singing of Grace. The final act of worship was a United Reformed Church Service of Holy Communion.

Reaching out

But even in these acts of worship from particular traditions, an act of ecumenical creation took place - a reaching out to one another. The Anglicans, Orthodox and Roman Catholics accepted the Gospel reading I had chosen - although neither Vespers nor Evening Prayer would normally have a Gospel reading, and the Anglican Eucharist would normally have a reading from the Old Testament and from an Epistle as well.

The Orthodox allowed the congregation to sit.

The Black-majority churches agreed to submit a brief order of service for the booklet although that is not in their tradition.

The Salvation Army had to produce word-sheets for the Grace when, among their own people, they would have been known and sung much more lustily.

The bread and wine at the United Reformed Church Service of Holy Communion could not be passed from person to person as they sat so that all could eat together, because that would have compromised the position of those who could neither receive nor serve others.

The role of the chaplain in negotiating with the churches in whose traditions the Forum will be

worshipping was a delicate one - it was their worship, but it had to fit into the overall coherence of the worship of the whole Forum.

Sacrifice

This reaching out to each other, seeking to accommodate and appreciate one another, involves an element of sacrifice, or at least restraint. There is a fine tradition of saying the Benedictus each morning and the Magnificat each evening. But for many in the Reformed and Free Church traditions, the rationale is not obvious and such repetition not conducive to worship.

A Service Book

My decision to have a worship booklet which contained almost every word said, except for the preaching, the free intercession in groups, and the prayer at the end of the day, felt like a strait-jacket to many from the Free Church traditions and even those from the more evangelical Anglican tradition. I felt it was more important that such a diverse gathering should feel secure.

Laborious explanation can kill a spirit of worship and yet we cannot take for granted in ecumenical gatherings what we, perhaps not always rightly, take for granted in our own churches. I therefore invited those submitting orders of service to give a brief introduction to the service and had to point out to the Roman Catholics that if they just put *Lord's Prayer* different versions of different length would be said. The booklet also contained what could be seen as intrusive instructions about sitting and standing and about when and how often to sing a refrain or a chorus. Ecumenical worship is hard work to prepare and participation is often also hard work.

Music

Probably the most sensitive issue was the choice of hymns and songs. Music plays a very significant role in almost all worship traditions and arouses deep feelings. For many, their faith pilgrimage is bound up with hymns and, today, with choruses. I

chose as my musical adviser someone who had not only a very catholic taste in religious music, but who was interested in keeping up with the constantly changing scene. With his help, I tried to aim for what would enable as many of the gathered people as possible to sing their faith together, to worship God together, and to express their common commitment.

To enable all to participate, I used a cantor so that the congregation could be led in simple responses. I took most of the responsive songs from new Roman Catholic sources, but also from Taizé.

I tried to use a few of the historic hymns known to almost everyone and linking us with the centuries of Christian history. I also used a few new hymns - a sign that the Church is alive today. Because of the weight of the conference programme, I was most concerned that no hymns would have to be practised and that there would be some repetition so that at the beginning and the end of the day, the people could relax into the singing of something familiar which also began to build a worshipping community. However, the result was a grand mixture and probably not fully satisfying to anyone.

The Eucharist

The other sensitive issue was the question of Holy Communion/ Eucharist/ Mass. Previous Fora had followed the then World Council of Churches practice of having one eucharist, usually Anglican or Reformed or Methodist, where most could communicate and one, usually Roman Catholic but occasionally Orthodox, where most could not.

My worship advisory group did not favour this policy with both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox members preferring not to offer a service to the whole Forum in which most would not be able to take part fully. There was, therefore, an Anglican Eucharist and a United Reformed Church Service of Holy Communion.

As the Orthodox Church rarely celebrates the eucharistic liturgy more than once a week, there was no need to make any other arrangements for the Orthodox members.

However, the Roman Catholic members not only needed to be able to celebrate the Mass on Sunday or on Saturday evening, but many (although not all) would expect to attend Mass daily when at a Christian conference. It was decided that at 7am each morning Mass would be celebrated in the small conference hall.

It seemed to me to be of the essence of ecumenical relations that the Forum supported the Roman Catholics in their observance and so I saw to it that a large Easter hanging from the community at Turvey Abbey hung in that hall and that there was also a candle which matched those in the chapel.

Visual aids

Although I believe it is true that no-one can be quite at home in ecumenical worship it seemed important, through beautiful and through significant symbols, to help the conference to recognise the chapel as its church building. It was helpful that the Swanwick chapel was neutral ground.

The Orthodox offered two icons. A silver cross came from the chapel in Inter-Church House in London, a huge paschal candle from a community in Brazil via CAFOD, the commemorative lamp from the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, a lectern Bible from a local United Reformed Church, gorgeous hangings from the community of nuns at Turvey Abbey committed to praying for unity, embroideries from a United Reformed Church elder, some of the commemorative shells from the 1987 Swanwick conference, and candles from a Swedish Lutheran congregation near Stockholm. There were two huge buckets of scented flowers.

The Forum, unlike international ecumenical gatherings, had a common language - English - but I felt that in the midst of so many words it would be good to use something symbolic and material which might bind us together. I therefore asked all members to bring a pebble to be used as a focus for prayer in the small mid-day groups and then, at the end, to be placed round a plaque which

commemorated ten years since Swanwick 87. They would thus represent the prayers and the commitment of the members of this Forum.

What happened

Because of the *Called To Be One* process and therefore the long period of preparation for this Forum and because of the developing ecumenical life in England the 350 representatives came with expectancy and a considerable degree of openness. That could be felt from the first brief act of worship.

The diverse gathering mostly seemed to feel sufficiently at home in the chapel to move things for the worship of the different traditions and to behave as they would do in their home church.

So for the Anglican Eucharist there were two candles side by side on the altar, for most of the time there was just a Bible and a cross, and for the Orthodox Vespers there were two candles far apart.

The Orthodox members came forward at the start of each service to kiss their icons, quite a new sight for many of the members of the conference.

A Roman Catholic expressed her deep gratitude to the Orthodox for bringing an icon of Mary when she is so often left out of ecumenical gatherings.

At the late evening service led by the Black-majority churches, many of the congregation began to dance as well as sing.

The Society of Friends felt least at home with the chapel arrangement and for the service for which they were responsible they completely re-arranged the seating into concentric circles round a small table to which they brought the flowers. They did not light the candles and turned the backs of the people to the icons and the communion table/altar.

The pebbles were not a universally appreciated symbol. Some felt it a kind of idol worship to hold a pebble while praying. Others found the sheer mechanics of getting them to and from the group and also into the chapel more trouble than they were worth. They became a source of

much laughter as I kept having to explain what to do with them. However, many did find them an effective focus for prayer and then a meaningful sign of the prayers of the people both in the baskets in the chapel and at the Roman Catholic Mass, and when, in a long silent procession, they were placed round the plaque.

Young people's views

More members from the evangelical wings of some of the member churches seemed to be present on this occasion, together with interested visitors from some independent evangelical churches. Many of them were young and they felt their 'tradition' or style of music was quite unrepresented. My music adviser and his son, an excellent organist, invited instrumentalists to play for the worship. They also ran a workshop about the variety and history of music for worship. Several of the young critics came to the workshop and also played instruments. In the former they were able to voice their criticism and to discuss their music and the music of other traditions in a serious and thoughtful way, and through the latter they were able to experience music they did not know, and some they did, through imaginative arrangements. This section of the Forum found expression for their style of worship in the service led by the Black-majority Churches. They also met together late one evening to sing their kind of hymns and songs. This criticism of the choice of music went with some criticism of the lack of freedom in worship.

The Mass

The early morning Roman Catholic Mass played an interesting role in the Forum. Some non-catholics attended quite regularly. The Roman Catholics themselves had mixed views about this special treatment, some finding it generous and some finding it an unnecessary consideration at such an ecumenical occasion. In one of the plenary sessions, it was a Roman Catholic who pleaded for eucharistic sharing. I think that the combination of the encouragement from

ecumenical partners to celebrate the Mass each morning with the fact that the pressure for inter-communion was only publicly voiced by a highly respected Roman Catholic lay woman made it possible for Bishop Crispian Hollis to say in his Saturday evening homily on the breakfast the risen Christ offered his disciples, 'it reminds us that Christ invites us to his table and perhaps it is not for us to say who should receive those gifts or not.'

Uncharted territory

Ecumenical worship has an element of risk to it because the participants, as they worship in unfamiliar ways and seek to interpret that experience, may step into uncharted territory. What does it mean to receive a blessing from an ordained minister whose ordination you do not accept as valid? What does it mean to be so warmly welcomed to the Roman Catholic Mass and invited to read the lesson and exchange the peace, although you cannot receive communion?

Those who acted as elders in distributing the bread and wine at the United Reformed Church Service of Holy Communion came from Methodist, Moravian, Baptist and Anglican churches as well as from the United Reformed Church. They were authorised to distribute the elements in their own churches. Were they doing the same thing on this occasion? They clearly experienced it as the same and yet different and therein lies the stepping into new uncharted territory.

Learning through difference

Ecumenical worship also offers an important learning through difference which does not take place if it always tries to please everyone. A young man who had come to Christian faith entirely through house churches and their style of music, discovered what he called 'the wonderful theology' of the old hymn *O worship the King, all glorious above*.

The joyful abandon of the singing and dancing which developed during the worship led by the Black-majority Churches caught up many people not used to such worship, including Orthodox members.

Some conclusions

Preparing ecumenical worship is very hard work but also a privileged learning experience. Careful consultation is very important. I think that an *ad hoc* group of interested and committed people, who nevertheless know whom to consult officially if there is a sensitive issue, was ideal. I would like to pay tribute to my group.

I found it crucial to have a music person of my choice with whom I could work from the beginning but who never tried to impose his own agenda or taste.

A worship book has much to recommend it, but it also represents much hard work, lots of phone-calls, plenty time to check on copyright, and someone like my husband who likes to use desk-top publishing creatively.

I also found it helpful to visit the conference centre some months beforehand.

Close working with the Forum preparation group was very important as the worship must undergird and inspire that particular meeting of those particular people.

Ecclesiology

It is important not to under-rate the ecclesiological and theological implications of preparing ecumenical worship. I had to become much more aware of who is authorised to do what in which church and what the significance of certain words and actions were in different churches. The range of worship styles and their theological rationale within churches also needs consideration. It is not a matter of trying to please everyone, but of understanding what is at stake and then consulting carefully. The chaplain is appointed both to serve the churches and to exercise creative leadership on behalf of the churches.