



## Receptive Ecumenism

A report from Revd Dr David Cornick, General Secretary of Churches Together in England  
From the International conference on Receptive Ecumenism, June 2014

As we worshipped daily in the Egan Chapel during the Third International Receptive Ecumenism conference at the Jesuit's Fairfield University in Connecticut we couldn't escape the influence and inspiration of St Ignatius. The chapel windows traced his spiritual journey, and outside is a remarkable sculpture of the man, by two young sculptors from New York, Joel Benefiel and Jeremy Leichman. The title of the piece is 'examen', the daily prayer exercise that Ignatius taught, an examination of life to discover the presence of God in its warp and weft. Ignatius, as it were looks long and hard at himself.



We were there to look long and hard at our life as churches at this particular phase in history. As Professor Paul Murray suggested in his opening words, we have reached a stage in our ecumenical journey where all the 'soft wood' of theological misunderstanding and misperception has been cleared away, leaving the 'hard wood' of long term differences like the place of women in ministry and the episcopate, and understandings of human sexuality. Those are issues that will not be solved overnight, so we need a way of ecumenical living which respects God's faithfulness. We have not journeyed thus far in vain. God will give us sustenance for the remainder of the way. We are all on pilgrimage together, growing more completely into Christ. Because we are together, and because God is with each of us, we can discover the gifts of God in each other. Receptive ecumenism asks us to have the courage to share our woundedness with each other, and to have the humility to receive healing balm from the gifts that God has given to our partners. It is about asking, 'What do I need to receive?' rather than 'What can I give that they so obviously need?'.

Receptive ecumenism is now a strapping teenager, ready to leave its university home and take on a mature life in the churches. John Gibaut of the World Council of Churches introduced us early on, with tongue only just slightly in cheek, to the 'NATO' ecumenism of the northern world where theological reception is well practised, and contrasted that with the experience of the global south. Leaving home, it seems, means taking your context seriously. This was to be a significant theme.

And so it was. In Canada the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission (ARC) has flourished through warm friendships between church leaders and the production of guidelines on the transfer of clergy between the two churches as well as on interchurch marriage. When asked to reflect on why that should be so, Bishops Don Boden and Linda Nicholls noted that Catholics and Anglicans didn't have a history of division, so their experience was profoundly different to that of (say) Lutherans and Catholics in Germany. In South Australia, Receptive Ecumenism has been a bracing tonic which has completely re-invigorated the life of churches over the past five years. They rejoice in what they understand to be a movement of the Spirit.

Remaining in 'NATO' for the moment, the most far-reaching academic research which has been undertaken was by the Durham group with nine participating denominations in the North East of England. That too is a very specific context - post-industrial, economically deprived, far less ethnically mixed than other areas of England. The five year project (which is continuing) seeks to help churches reflect on three areas of their life - governance and finance, learning and formation, and ministry and leadership - and then to ask whether the giftedness of other churches has something to offer their areas of weakness and woundedness. Examples from the project included the suggestions that Catholicism could benefit from the experience of lay participation at Synodical level of the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, and that the United

Reformed Church might find value in the diaconal ministry as experience in the Catholic, Methodist and Anglican churches as it develops new patterns of local church life in the North East. As the work continues, the possibilities of developing resources for local churches expand, and CTE will be working on that.

Beyond NATO, we visited Latin America first, to hear two Latino theologians, the Catholic Peter Casarella and the Pentecostal Nestor Medina, explore the ways in which their traditions were learning from each other about Mariology. This was particularly interesting because Marian devotion is an explosive issue in popular devotion and culture in Latin America, where Pentecostals perceive Catholics to be worshipping Mary rather than Jesus. At the level of theological dialogue (the Roman Catholic - Pentecostal dialogue has been continuous since 1972) a measure of consensus, if not agreement, has been reached. Mary can, for example, be understood as a model of the charismatic life. However, popular devotion operates in a very different way - Medina suggested that the devotional pattern reflected the struggles of the people, simultaneously liberative and colonially repressive. In Latin America then, receptive ecumenism struggles to be translated from academic theology into the realities of church life. Culture, as Juan Gomes of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity noted in his response, needs to be taken just as seriously as theology.

From Latin America we jumped to Africa where Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator SJ, the Jesuit Provincial of East Africa, gave us a sketch of both the heritage and future of African Christianity. It was inherently ecumenically ambiguous because of the shockingly diverse colonial introduction of Christianity into the continent. It was as if it was programmed to divide, and its experience of ecumenism was not so much about reconciling divided denominations as uniting Christians to deal with injustice, HIV, AIDS and political concerns like election monitoring. There was little experience as yet of receptive ecumenism, but the ground was fertile because Africans have a deep ethic of hospitality and mutuality, and there is much informal ecumenism going on which needs to be weighed in the balance against the lack of formal ecumenism. Bishop Tangatenga agreed, noting that ecumenism was a lived experience in Africa, from below rather than above. That would work in Africa, whereas reception is normally modelled as a magisterium imposed from above. That might suit the North and the West, but it wouldn't work in the South.

Asia Christianity is different yet again. In general, Asia churches are minorities in majority cultures. Some, as Renta Nishihara of Japan pointed out, are so small that they have to be ecumenical. Their historical experience, however, is of being 'receivers'. They know what it is to be 'learning' churches, so reception is part of their DNA. Their methodology though, has to be to establish a native rather than a colonial identity, and for this reason they stand with the weak and powerless. Compassion for the suffering is of great importance. Japan again offers an example - although Christians make up just 1% of the population, they have ploughed resources into schools, hospitals and universities for all, which are widely respected and used. Asian ecumenical methodology though is about a triple dialogue with the poor, with other faiths, and with the culture.

The conference ended with a fine paper from Francis Clooney SJ, a scholar of Hinduism from Harvard who pondered the ways in which receptive ecumenism offered insights into his work, and the inevitable constraints, for in his work, the end of all being one in Christ is not possible.

It was an intense, whistle-stop tour which lasted three days, also containing a plethora of shorter presentations and papers, held together by moving acts of worship from the opening service at which the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Frank Griswold, preached to the concluding Methodist Covenant service at which Fr Tony Currer of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity gave the homily.

Receptive ecumenism has come of age. It needs now to take on new lives in the world's churches, embedded in the humility of churches who are unafraid to admit their failures and seek enrichment through the gifts God has given to other Christian traditions.

This report is available from the website of Churches Together in England

[www.cte.org.uk/receptive-ecumenism](http://www.cte.org.uk/receptive-ecumenism)

.....