

CTE FORUM 2018

Brief report from Beverley Hollins

I was very actively involved with CTE in its early days, under the leadership of Martin Reardon and Bill Snelson. In those days I was generally seen as a youth rep, and was the radical that sometimes turned up with a baby in tow. Returning after a long gap, I was heartened to find Forum more diverse, with a wider range of churches actively represented and a lot more young people, including a couple with a baby. I was moved by the strong emphasis on the centrality of Jesus and the powerful sense of shared prayer that created strong bonds between people. However, that experience was variable, and depended somewhat on the nature of your small group and the choices of workshop – I sense that I had a better experience than some on that front.

Indeed, the most moving part of the whole of Forum for me as an individual was when the small group that I was part of abandoned the given plan in order to pray – powerfully – for me and for another female Anglican priest/interchurch wife. We had shared stories of how separation at the altar and lack of recognition of our ministries in some places affects us and our families. We had pointed out to our group that our marriage and family life is a microcosm of what Christian unity could be, and of how our experience of division highlights where the churches need to work harder. It's easy to be complacent about ecumenism, and to think we are doing well enough not to prioritise the work, if you don't see the division or feel the pain on a regular basis. Interchurch families should be seen and heard not just because we are hurting personally, but because we are a sign of what the churches need to do to better answer our Lord's prayer that we may be one. Being listened to and prayed for by brothers and sisters from a very different set of traditions from my own was immensely moving and I am very grateful for that gift.

There were missed opportunities. The workshops were variable in quality – I attended an excellent workshop on the transforming presence of Christ in politics, and an acceptable one on the economy – which addressed the workplace rather more than the economy. The former included examples of how churches can work together to bring Christ's presence into politics, while the latter, though it did look at how Christians can make a difference individually, could have been slotted into any denominational event. Overall, the emphasis on individual Christians was sometimes stronger than on the church as a body. There was a lot of 'I', rather than 'we', and that was very noticeable in the modern worship songs that were used. It was a real relief to finish the conference with 'Love divine' which reflects the 'we' that should be our starting point, especially if we read Paul's letters or John's gospel and letters closely.

I regretted the lack of theology and ecclesiology before the last day – had the excellent multi voice bible study come earlier in the Forum it might have made more impact. I loved hearing from the presidents and seeing the example of their working relationships, but I regretted the placing of old church presidents and newer church presidents in contrasting groups, and the lack of opportunity to respond to them. It meant that we enjoyed each other's company, grew together in relationship and in prayer, but looked away from the factors that divide us. I hope that we can build on the many positive aspects of the Forum – the love, the prayer, the focus on Jesus – and move from there to a bolder approach, naming what divides us and tackling the sharp edge of the things that divide theologically, ecclesiologically and most of all in prayerful partnership for unity.