

CHURCH TIMES

Obituary: The Revd Bill Snelson

08 JANUARY 2021

Roger Arguile writes:

IN CONVERSATION with Bill Snelson, a former General Secretary of Churches Together in England, on a matter of mutual concern, one might encounter a thoughtful stare which might then soften to an imperceptibly emerging smile. There may



be no recipe for success in the complex task of ecumenism, but, if anyone could make progress by his ability to question, to encompass, and to engage, it was Bill.

William Snelson was born in Chester in 1945, moving to Birkenhead at the age of five. His first degree at Exeter College, Oxford, was followed by his ordination training at Westcott House, and a degree at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. Ordained deacon in 1969, he served his title in Godalming and then at Leeds Parish Church (now Leeds Minster) under Graham Foley. Aged 33, in his first incumbency at Allerton, he suffered an aortic aneurism, usually fatal. In 1991, he was told that he would probably drop dead in the street without further surgery. After a tricky but successful further operation, his surgeon remarked, "We've done the plumbing; you do the praying." It appears to have worked.

A second incumbency at Bardsey and East Keswick involved work with local radio. He also set up a multi-faith advisory board, which provided communication skills. In 1986, he was appointed diocesan ecumenical officer and, in 1993, undertook a wider brief for West Yorkshire. His "apprenticeship" there entailed working with three Anglican dioceses, one Roman Catholic diocese, two Methodist districts, Baptist, the United Reformed Church, and the Society of Friends, which he extended to the Black Majority Churches and the Lutheran Church. In 1997, he became General Secretary of Churches Together in England (CTE), a post that he held for 11 years. During that difficult time ecumenically, he produced his book *Enriching Communion* in which he, eucharistically hearted, argued

for a wider understanding of the doctrine. It was, he said, not for his own Church to become “a Eucharistic sect”.

He encouraged and witnessed an expansion of CTE’s membership, in particular to the Pentecostal constituency. Peter Whittaker, one-time chairman of trustees, noted that he was able to look ahead. He could see that the Millennium celebrations were an opportunity to draw the nation into a celebration of the Lord’s birth, to make the connection between private meaning and public hope. He helped to navigate the Churches through the celebrations and reflections surrounding it.

When the Queen’s Golden Jubilee celebrations came two years later, he organised the first ever ecumenical service in St George’s Chapel, Windsor, after which the CTE Presidents signed a personal covenant, witnessed by the Queen. This opened with a statement of uncompromising commitment “to the Triune God”. It was a tribute to him that those bodies that do not adhere to credal statements were able to remain on board.

Bill remained rooted in the parish ministry, and while at CTE moved to be in commuting distance of London in St Neots, Cambridgeshire, where he took services in the villages.

Later, he was instrumental in the Set All Free project, encouraging appropriate commemoration and learning by the Churches for the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. And, as CTE approached its 20th anniversary, Bill encouraged a review. Its report, *Moving Together*, challenged the Churches to continue their journey as pilgrims with Christ, the head of the Church.

It was said of his administrative abilities that “Bill wrote minutes of a meeting before it took place! The truth behind that observation is testament to his grasp of the complexities and sensitivities of subjects tackled within Churches Together in England. His ability to create succinct notes was greatly appreciated by busy people engaging with topics and programmes.”

Retiring in 2008, he was appointed to the Anglican Centre in Rome, serving for a short time as its interim director. As his successor, Bishop David Moxon, wrote, he combined wit with humility. He retired properly, although still not completely, in 2015. With Beryl, his hugely supportive wife of more than 50 years, he moved to Knaresborough. There, he served wherever asked, until he was suddenly stricken by a particularly painful cancer, which he bore uncomplainingly. His funeral would in other circumstances have been a

large occasion. As it was, it was very personal and ecumenical. He would have wished for no other.

He died on 17 December aged 75, and is survived by Beryl, children, Claire and Matthew, and grandchildren, Katy, Emma, Emma, and Harry.

© Church Times 2021. All rights reserved.