**Revd Alison J Griffiths Gloucestershire Churches Together Group**

**Reflections on the Churches Together in England Forum 2015**

'Unity is not important, it is indispensible' The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.



This banner stood at the front of the room throughout the conference, reminding everyone the basis upon which we gathered: prayer being a dynamic conversation with our Father in which all His children participate. The Pentecostal bishop who presided over the first meeting stressed the need to gather to seek the face of Christ together through prayer and listening to God and each other. This is a familiar pattern of our gathering as Baptists but to witness this on a grander scale embraced by seemingly diverse traditions, was nothing short of inspirational.

Although I have been involved ecumenically for most of my life, having tasted what several different Protestant traditions have to offer, I was unprepared for the sheer number of other traditions represented. My view of the Church underwent a considerable review. It is simply far bigger and more complex than I had realised! When the Baptists met as a group half way through the conference, it appeared I was not the only one to be taken aback by the diversity of the Church of which we are but a very small part. Churches Together in England has 43 member churches and 6 Presidents representing the major Christian traditions of the member churches: The Archbishop of Canterbury (Archbishop Justin Welby); The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster (Cardinal Vincent Nichols); The Free Churches Moderator (Revd Dr Hugh Osgood); The President nominated by the New Churches, the Religious Society of Friends and the Lutheran and German-speaking Churches (Billy Kennedy); the Orthodox Church (HE Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain); The Pentecostal President (Bishop Dr Eric Brown). The Baptists are represented by the Free Churches Moderator and the list of the Free Churches included many I had never heard of.

As is true in any church meeting where there are disagreements or misunderstandings, it wasn't without some cost to the participants. To listen as fellow Christians defend their viewpoints is uncomfortable because it exposes your own tradition to scrutiny and challenges your thinking to go deeper. As well as the formal group discussions that took place, some of the best conversations occurred over meals, waiting for the next session or whilst wandering from one seminar to the next. I recall talking about the sacrament of communion with a Lutheran minister: can a group of teenagers huddled together in their tent late at night at a festival really celebrate the Eucharist with the jelly babies and coca cola they have to hand? One Roman Catholic shared with me the journey to his tradition which meant leaving the Anglican church just as he was to be ordained as a priest. In one small group I was surprised by a Pentecostal bishop who articulated exactly how God had challenged him during the conference because I had felt challenged in the same way. These are just snapshots of the conversations that took place. The constant rumble of noise in the dining hall and lounge demonstrated that our diverse Church has a lot to say to each other. Everywhere you looked there were small knots of people in deep conversation. There was also a lot of laughter.

In some ways I found I connected more easily with Christians from other traditions than my own in some key aspects. For example, my view of communion is far more sacramental than some of my fellow Baptists and I would never identify as 'Baptist' before 'Christian'. Having once experienced the wrench of leaving a church I love to minister in another because of my convictions, I empathised with the Roman Catholic deacon who had had to leave the church he had loved upon realising he belonged in another tradition. I found more grace and concern for my own ministry situation in conversations with an Anglican Dean and Salvation Army officer than I have found in my own tradition. An English Methodist minister shared how her call to ministry was confirmed by a Russian Orthodox priest in Russia and how her soul is stirred by their icons and worship. There is beauty here for her but also pain as Methodism is considered to be a cult by many Russians.

This sense of deep attraction and yet deeper division seems a common feature of the ecumenical life. When we speak with one another and share our hearts, the barriers feel artificial, erected wrongly in previous times which can only provoke the question: when will they come down?

Each President or representative spoke briefly to introduce their tradition but the newest Presidents from the Pentecostal and Orthodox Churches shared in greater depth about their traditions to aid our understanding of one another through written papers, worship and presentations. The Very Reverend Protopresbyter John Nankivel from the Orthodox Church said that future priorities included the need to break out of the tribalism which affects all of us. Statements are made between different traditions but nothing concrete actually happens - our mentality has to change. General Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria reminded us that the Christians in the Middle East have been drastically reduced in recent years, many of these Christians are from the Orthodox tradition and we need to pray for the one apostolic Church.

For those of us who identify as evangelical there was a clear reminder and justified rebuke that Europe is not unreached as is so often claimed. There are already churches there and our oneness in Christ should bring us together. The Orthodox ended with a plea to continue the conversation. It was clear they felt the pain of the divided Church deeply.

Simo Frestadius, the Academic Dean of Regents Theological College said that Pentecostals saw themselves as preaching the authentic Gospel from the earliest traditions and at their heart were biblical pragmatists. Jesus Christ is always at the centre of Pentecostalism and supernatural aspect of faith is vital. The expectation of a personal encounter with Jesus as Saviour, Healer, the coming King, Sanctifier and Baptiser in the Holy Spirit is classical Pentecostalism even though there are many different strands of this tradition. Pentecostals discern beliefs and practice from the biblical texts but also want to see how they work in practice and although they can be quite passionate about their structures they will contextualise their practise so are structurally fluid. The Dr Reverend David Muir, lecturer at Roehampton University, spoke of his love of scripture and belief that Pentecostalism, if it returned to its roots, could be instrumental in healing racism in the UK. Pentecostalism was all about celebrating life in Christ and the testimony of transformation.

Diverse styles of worship, liturgy, practice and vocabulary can mask common ground and when we take the time to dig beneath these styles and preferences we can discover unexpected similarities.

The Orthodox priests led us in morning worship and then explained their worship had to involve all the senses as we are physical beings as well as spiritual: hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching. My initial reaction was to feel challenged because in my own tradition the emphasis is usually on the spiritual but when the Pentecostals led us in worship I noticed we all stood, some people with hands outstretched and I realised that we also expect our bodies to be involved. We do not cross ourselves repeatedly to remind and demonstrate that all our lives are under the cross of Christ as the Orthodox do, but we usually stand to sing, sometimes dance or kneel and we eat the bread of the Eucharist and drink the wine, light candles and use art to reflect on. We may not use incense but I like to use freshly baked bread when celebrating communion, the smell when it's torn reminding me of the promise of good food that satisfies and nourishes the body. At times I invite those gathered to smell the bread as they take communion. It was enlightening to recognise some things we do instinctively have a theological basis rather than being the result of mere cultural style or personal preference. I felt enriched and enhanced by the insights of the Orthodox Church.

The celebration of diversity was particularly helpful to grasp. The pursuit of unity is not a 'free for all'. We gather around the Person of Jesus and it is in our diverse unity we are a more perfect reflection of our Founder and Master. So often Christians assume that unity means uniformity but this is not on the ecumenical agenda and maybe this point needs to be emphasised more. The focus is on enjoying and appreciating the diversity of the family of God which is the Church.

If we remember Paul's comparison of the Church to that of a Body this makes sense. We don't expect everyone to be the same within our local church so why would the wider Church be any different? The varying emphasis put on particular doctrines, practices and beliefs are all needed in order to reflect the God we worship. How can any single tradition be experienced or insightful enough to grasp all that there is of the nature of God? It is only when all the different understandings and experiences of God are gathered together that we are confronted with a bigger, more multi faceted, gloriously magnificent God than we could possibly see by ourselves. Understanding, and even more importantly, appreciating other Christian traditions, leads to the enlargement of our own vision and deepens our appreciation of our Creator and Lord.

In engaging with other Christian traditions we learn to handle our particular way of being church with more care, asking searching questions of our practice and belief. Denominational pride is a stumbling block: accepting that we have much to learn from other Christian traditions is not always an easy thing to do. That it can be exceptionally uncomfortable is no reason to duck the challenge nor is a new obstacle to unity. The Apostle Paul was well aware of how we should approach each other:

*'Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.… ' Ephesians 4: 1 - 3*

My initial impression of the biggest stumbling block to genuine unity is the unwillingness to adopt humility and gentleness as our attitude and practice in order to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Little wonder we find this so difficult and countless Christians have shied away from it.

Have we allowed the Church of Jesus Christ to become contaminated by our culture and worldly attitudes? When we look at the divisions amongst us then we can only say 'Yes!' We ape the world when we insist that only our way is the right way, that we can keep our distance, practice tolerance when we should have genuine respect for each other, when we judge another's doctrine insisting on our 'truth' being dominant, when we make secondary issues primary ones and when we insist we have a monopoly on truth, leaving no room for dissent and doubt. When we can only see through a glass darkly we should not lightly claim to have the clearest perspective.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was a privilege to have worshipped and prayed with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ for that short time at the Forum - a taste of the wholeness sadly denied to most of us on a weekly basis but still a promise of the Banquet to come in which we will all sit at the same Table and share the feast together. We should pray 'may Your Kingdom come' and unity is kingdom work: the unity of the Body of Christ now is a foretaste of the Kingdom that is and will be. When David Cornick, the General Secretary of Churches Together in England, brought the gathering to a close he emphasised that unity is only achieved whilst walking together and it is cyclical: each generation has to grasp it anew.

What was impressed on me as I left the conference is that a pursuit of unity demands that we are willing to be moved by the Spirit ourselves - transformed by the Spirit into people who will pursue peace, who refuse to accept that there are boundaries to our traditions and who will make the necessary sacrifices for a diverse unity to be a regular, genuine and visible reality. It demands that we work for it - unity starts with us - we have experienced divorce and the work of reconciliation has started. As Alison Gelder, a Roman Catholic delegate put it, somehow we must not let go of the vision of unity but in the meantime, we must find a way of living in the mess.

1. 1 Corinthians 13 v 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)