

“I Am With You Always – The Transforming Presence of Christ”

Churches Together England Forum

Hayes Conference Centre, Derbyshire, Sept 2018

For me, this was one of the most wonderful events I have attended in recent years, and it was such an incredible privilege to be able to participate, with literally hundreds of others. The whole time there was inspiring, uplifting, renewing, and joyful.

These are my personal thoughts. I understand others will have responded in their own way.

The Forums, held every three years, are the broadest ecumenical gatherings in England, bringing together representatives from the 47 Member Churches and 49 Intermediate Bodies. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) were one of the core founder members when the body was established in 1990.

I was appointed by our Area to be the Churches Together Dorset Representative for this current triennium, and was then appointed by Churches Together Dorset to attend the conference as the Dorset rep, along with our County Ecumenical Officer, Katja Babei.

Day One

Hundreds of people gathered in the large main hall for our Opening Worship. Moderator, Ruth Gee (Methodist) suggested we are all passionate about ecumenism not through choice, but by calling. This was echoed in the many conversations I had with other delegates.

From the beginning, as a Friend, I was struck by how central Quakers were in the whole event. (The other Moderator was Hilary Topp, a Quaker.) The opening worship included hymns, modern worship songs, prayers, readings and poems, together with frequent periods of silence with the following themes – “be still and know that you are in the presence of the Risen Christ”, “we are called to walk together with others on our mission – from street pastors to food banks, from Bible study groups to Bishops’ breakfasts”.

Matthew 28/19 Go and make disciples of all nations.

We must understand the nature of the current age in which we are living, and in which we are called to bear witness and minister. When it comes to the notion of

weaving all the threads together, remember this is an age in which the cloth is being rapidly unwoven. (Janet Scott, a “seasoned” Friend, returned to this theme in her final address which closed the conference.)

We were reminded that, for all our enthusiasm and fire, the largest component of ecumenism must be humility.

Galatians 3/28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Our Presidents

We heard the first three of our six Presidents in conversation, chaired by Hilary Topp (Quaker). These were Archbishop Angaelos of London (Orthodox Churches), Cardinal Vincent Nichols (Roman Catholic Cardinal of Westminster), and The Very Revd Justin Welby (Archbishop of Canterbury).

Some comments that stayed with me ...

30 years ago this event would have been inconceivable – that the Salvation Army rep would have the phone numbers of the Anglican and RC Bishops – or would even want to have them.

Archbishop Angaelos – transformative experience comes through pain. Referring to Orthodox, Anglican and Salvation Army churches responding to refugees, he said “Only by working together can we alleviate the pain suffered by so many”.

Justin Welby – consider what we mean today by gain or loss. (He had been accused in some of the media of polarising the country by his recent comments. He said he had merely pointed out that the country IS polarised.)

The transforming presence of Christ must involve losing something of ourselves, for example our certainty of our particular way, in order to gain Christ fully.

Cardinal Nichols – we all live by the notion that we’ve “got it”.

Much of the present day Church is anaesthetised regarding the enormous problems facing society.

A young Quaker asked at this point, what would a church that is not anaesthetised look like?

Justin Welby said it would be based in prayer.

Archbishop Angaelos said it would be a church that could feel pain and then address it. However, he pointed out that the pain in society now is so great that we can't act individually as denominations. We need to be ecumenical.

The final question of the evening was what in one word, in this day and age, still gives you hope – and the three answers were “Christ”, “resurrection”, and “people”.

The first day ended with Taize Worship.

Day Two

Choices for Morning Worship included Matins, Roman Catholic Mass, Quaker Meeting for Worship, and Celtic Prayer with harp accompaniment. I must say I was quite drawn to the Celtic Prayer with harp, but I went to Quaker Meeting for Worship, having printed out my E-ticket for that one!

Three More Presidents

Pastor Agu Irukwu (Pentecostalist), Revd Canon Billy Kennedy (President for Quakers, New and Lutheran Churches), and Revd Dr Hugh Osgood (Free Churches) were in conversation, chaired by Ruth Gee (Methodist).

Hugh Osgood said we are seeing more and more young people coming to Christ. (Since arriving, I had been struck by the huge number of young people there, and the joy they exuded.)

Pastor Agu reminded us of Jesus with the woman at the well (John 4). The way Jesus treats the woman is the way he expects us to treat people we encounter.

Billy Kennedy reiterated that we need to bring the love of Christ to all our encounters, and spoke of the recent “thy Kingdom come” initiative.

Meeting people who have had a fresh encounter with the Lord refreshes our encounter with Him.

We were reminded of the profound message which can be found in John 12, 24/25.

Other questions included how can we create honest communities where it is safe to express one's pain.

Pastor Agu Irukwu told us that God is with us on the hills and in the valleys of our journey. We must approach those we meet with both humility and love.

There was discussion around finding a hymn, a song, a poem that sums up the transforming presence of Christ. Many suggestions were made, and I thought of the line from the Quaker hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, “oh still small voice of calm”.

Billy Kennedy said his favourite icon is a picture of the “Good Shepherd”. Someone else brought to mind the line “darkness is my closest friend”.

In all our enthusiasm and fire, we were reminded that ecumenism wouldn’t mean anything to the majority of our congregations and meetings. How can we address this?

Cardinal Nichols – the pathway of discernment should be central to us.

After a break, we then met in small groups to listen to each other speak without interruption. What had we heard? What challenged us? What impressed, encouraged or excited us? Each group formulated a question for the Presidents to be included in the plenary session that followed, chaired by Hilary Topp (Quaker).

Discussion revolved around such topics as how can social media be used to advance the Kingdom’s call? Why are numbers falling? How can we find alternative measures of “success” that don’t rely on numbers?

Free Churches President Revd Dr Hugh Osgood said we need to come away from the competitiveness we’ve had between churches, and start measuring the impact we are having on society.

Billy Kennedy - how often are we the “Good Samaritan” and how often do we walk by?

How can we instil a true sense of belonging among congregations and meetings?

Cardinal Nichols – we need to discern and use the variety of gifts among us.

We were reminded of Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple. What table would you turn over within your own denomination? We are all often troubled by assumptions of our own superiority in our particular “way”.

A series of Workshops followed. Choices included The Transforming Presence of Christ in ... prayer, music, science, conflict, the economy, etc. etc. I chose “prayer” and our Workshop was led by Revd Dr Paul Goodliffe, the incoming new General Secretary of CTE, who described himself as a “catholic Baptist, having been brought

up Anglican". This was a really useful and very rich session. We looked at Lectio Divina, contemplative prayer, charismatic/evangelical prayer, and Daily Office.

One participant spoke of using a "prayer rope" with maybe 50 knots to say and repeat the Jesus Prayer.

Paul Goodliffe recommended the chapter on contemplation and mission in Rowan Williams' book "Holy Living". Contemplative prayer is a progression from meditation, and it is possible with practice to progress through various stages – desert, darkness, ascent, and finally ecstatic union with God (spiritual marriage).

A Baptist delegate spoke of the seasons in the Baptist Church year and how helpful they can be to inform our prayers – Pentecost, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent/Passiontide, Easter, Ascension.

A CofE delegate spoke of how helpful the Lectionary (Daily Office) can be to someone bipolar or suffering depression. A rock to hold onto.

After the workshops, there were further meetings in small groups, this time as discussion, and the day concluded with Night Prayer.

Day Three

Our Morning Worship this time was everyone together in the Main Hall, led by four delegates from four different denominations. During the conference we had all been given a thread and these were woven into a tapestry to show our togetherness finally displayed during this service. We were also given on this last morning, three strips of paper to fold into rings and link with everyone else's to make a gigantic paperchain which spread all across the room. Everyone had written on their three links words about Incarnation, Journey, and Unity. I can't describe the glorious feeling when the chain was finally finished and held up high!

After break, there followed a multi-voice Bible study on Luke 24, 13-35. Three speakers each spoke for 30 mins about this inspiring passage – William Kay (Pentecostal), Patricia McDonald (Roman Catholic), and Janet Scott (Quaker). They reminded us that though we may have differing theologies, we are one in the Lord. Bible study should be dynamic, mutually interpreting. Patricia said the unknown stranger can often turn out to be Jesus.

The final speaker of the Conference was Janet Scott (Quaker) who told us one of her favourite hymns is "Abide With Me" which she likes to think of as "Abide With Us". She spoke movingly about the road to Emmaeus and about our present age. She said

the evening is coming and the day is far gone – but it is in the darkness that the most important things happen. The Last Supper would have been during the hours of darkness, the events in the Garden of Gethsemane would have taken place in darkness, and the Resurrection itself happened in darkness - for it was at dawn that the tomb was found empty.

Finally, we all sang The Lord's Prayer in unison and unity and we were then dismissed and sent on our way with the words of George Fox in 1656 ...

“Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.”

I would repeat that the above is my personal “take” on the event. Please forgive me if I have misinterpreted anything.

Chris Webb Sept 2018

Resources

The official press release after the Conference, which sums it up far better than I ever could, is now on the Churches Together England website, along with numerous candid photos taken during the three days. www.cte.org.uk (If you want evidence of the transforming power of Christ, just look at the faces of the people in the photos.)

There is a “bank with a difference” (ethical bank) www.kingdombank.co.uk

T4CG is a registered charity working to encourage people of goodwill to work together across their differences in strengthening civil society.

www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk

Insights into contemporary ecumenism www.theosthinktank.co.uk

International Ecumenical Fellowship British contact:- collis.rick@gmail.com

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