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**Forum 2015**

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I was privileged to be present at CTE Forum for the first time. Held every three years since 1987 this event is a gathering of those who are engaged in the ecumenical journeys of faith across England. Its purposes are loosely defined as:

* To engage in worship and discussion;
* To make suggestions to Member Churches about such matters as it believes should be addressed jointly;
* To support and encourage Intermediate Bodies;
* To share its reflections on the future activities and programmes of CTE.

Now that CTE has such a diversity of membership, it is clear that no one voice can speak for all. The programme reflected that.

CTE funded two places for Devon’ – the Enabling Group asked me as County Ecumenical Officer and Michael Lester who had been selected to go on the summer activity to ‘Chemin Neuf’ as one of the young people. There were also several other representatives from different denominations in Devon present there.

Please find brief reports from four of us giving a cross section of personal denominational responses:

Ruth Whitehead – United Reformed Church

Mary Ann James – Roman Catholic

Ash Leighton Plom – Church of England

Sue Macbeth - CEO Churches Together in Devon

CTE Forum: a personal response. Rev Ruth Whitehead

URC members were present in strength (not only as URC representatives but as ecumenical officers, CTE staff members, and CTE trustees).

It was good to hear from the Orthodox and Pentecostal churches and from the inspiring group of young people. We are definitely entering a new phase of ecumenism, where receptivity and vision will replace what has been seen as a desire to ‘bolt together’ different denominations.

The challenge remains before us all to strive for unity and celebrate where we have made progress together, acknowledging that this is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who takes our imperfections and our inadequate efforts and fashions something beautiful from them. At the same time, we must know that full and perfect unity is not achievable in the human realm but is part of the fullness of God’s coming kingdom.

I believe that the URC has a role to play in continuing to be a prophetic voice which claims that we can achieve fuller unity, by God’s grace, and that this is not a fringe activity of the church but is our core calling. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation as the imperfect but united body of Christ seeks to serve a broken world, until the kingdom comes.

Forum 2015, 28-30 Sept 2015: Mary Ann James, Roman Catholic EO Plymouth Diocese

‘Churches Listening Together’ was the theme of Forum 2015, highlighting the idea that we can learn through listening. Knowledge leads to understanding. We can learn about one another by *listening together* to one another. This theme was clearly stated in the Welcome Session on the first day and it set a positive tone for the whole Forum.

Within this positive atmosphere there was an emphasis on what we share and how to use it for mission and for worship, rather than discussing differences and how to overcome them.

The themes of ‘unity without uniformity’ and ‘differences without divisions’ were echoed by various speakers.

* Diversity is reflected in the growth of CTE’s membership from 16 to now 43, a tangible rainbow of Christian life.
* Words from Galatians 5 were quoted, ‘it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’

Positively phrased questions were asked of panel members from various churches, such as ‘What do you value about your church?’ These questions drew forth points others identified with such as Christocentric life and love and respect for Scripture. Bishop Eric Brown, the CTE Pentecostal President, urged, ‘keep the Word of God central.’

David Cornick, the General Secretary of Churches Together in England. said that by some ‘diversity’ may be viewed as ‘fragmentation’ and the rainbow of Christian life as ‘disunity’. He quoted from Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium* that ‘unity is achieved whilst walking.’ That idea of ‘walking,’ of being on a journey, was taken up by others.

This Hymn refrain based on Ephesians was sung between speakers’ contributions: ‘No more strangers as we walk’.

God dwells in his church; His presence is in His people. We were urged to ‘go on walking together.’ The idea of being led by the Holy Spirit was expressed. Relationships was offered as one of the priorities, especially relationships and friendships in prayer. One of the projects reported was a Birmingham CT website for communication and connection.

Forum 2015 was structured to enable listening to two particular Christian traditions :

* the Orthodox Churches, who are not widely understood or encountered, and
* Pentecostal Churches, who have grown in recent times.

The declared aim of these sessions was to enable delegates to understand and encounter these traditions, their richness, and what they bring to the ecumenical journey. A short background paper on each tradition was circulated in advance. We heard that Orthodoxy is Trinitarian, Scriptural, Apostolic, and looks to the saints, especially Mary. The experience of the Holy Spirit was mentioned by Pentecostals, who see their church being a Spirit led church

Another opportunity for listening which was a unique feature of Forum 2015 was the testimony given by a team of twelve young people who had gone together to a week long event called ‘Welcome to Parisdise’. Their enthusiasm was uplifting.

In the final session called Gathering Up, three threads were mentioned:

* >ecumenism is iterative rather than linear so there is a need to repeat and reiterate, to grow and walk forward,
* >unity is indispensible today,
* >old ideas of churches are out dated.

We need unity for mission. Unity serves mission, and mission and service go together, for the good of all. It was suggested that a way forward was to work for unity to strengthen the message we proclaim. The hope was voiced that ‘what unifies us is greater than what separates us’.

In an email from Ash Leighton Plom to Rev Roger Paul (CoE NEO)

Dear Roger

I too found it (Forum) very encouraging and vitalising.

Reflecting in the questions, there are more of us walking together than previously, I think, a more diverse mix. But also more determined. I think the Christian landscape in England has become more interconnected and more energised in recent years as churches that hadn't previously connected with others now are doing so more and more, and are bringing their vitality and charisms to the corporate Church.

At parish level we need to encourage clergy and lay people to continue befriending Christians from our ecumenical partner churches. Obviously from parish to parish this will vary greatly, but a movement of the Holy Spirit is stirring churches as liturgically diverse as Orthodox and Pentecostal to seek our friendship, and we should be intentional and persistent in seeking theirs. This is a task for everyone, in clerical collars or in the pews!

On a diocesan level I would think we need to continue to be more intentional about our networking with other church leaderships in our areas. Ecumenists need to persuade others to move ecumenism from an item on the agenda to a component part of every item on the agenda (i.e. every for agenda item we should consider, is there an ecumenical component to this?)

We are clearly living in a time when other church leaders will be receptive to our friendship, and happy to co-work with us in our dioceses. Such good news; operationally necessary in some places where we cannot continue alone, and theologically imperative everywhere in light of some of the Scripture shared this week such as Ephesians 4:3, 13, John 17, and Revelation 2.

The Archbishop of Canterbury described himself as a "magpie", treasuring what he sees shining in other fellowships and 'lining' his 'nest' with the things he finds of value elsewhere. I find this concept of "magpie ecumenism" very good, one which goes further than "receptive ecumenism", as we are not merely 'listening', but affably absorbing and cherishing what we may.

In my opinion, the Church (of England) is open in various places to reform and input from either Pentecostal or Orthodox churches; I think if we can be consistently open to both (and more) across the country, we'll be listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches!

Finally, I think one of the most important voices at Forum was expressed by several of the young people, including Michael: that young people have ministries of their own (eg. to other young people) and we need to help equip and empower them to \*be\* the Church amongst their peers, pastoring, evangelising, discipling, etc. I would say this is one of the most urgent needs for us to respond to. The Archbishop of Canterbury of course is already doing some very good stuff in this direction.

Sue Macbeth, County Ecumenical Officer , Churches Together in Devon. 12th October 2015

**Monday**

Around 250 people gathered for the opening session: engaging in worship with strangers. Setting the tone for worship throughout Forum was a music group led by Noel Robinson a well-known worship leader, music pastor, song-writer and producer. Noel has worked extensively with Pentecostal churches and with charismatic groups of many different denominations. He feels called to cross cultures and aimed to bring a spectrum of different music to the Forum. His heart is to see unity across the body of Christ and he believes that this unity of the church is a key component to revival. Noel has recently signed an Artist Deal with Integrity music, the first British born person of African-Caribbean heritage to have done so. The richness he brought was experienced in different ways over the three days. As those of us who are used to curating worship know, the input of music reflects the wholeness of the gathering. This along with visual images as well as the spoken word helped us use all our senses in worship. One of the aims of Forum was to experience different traditions of our church family- Orthodoxy and Pentecostalism.

We also had a poet-in-residence Sarah Larkin ( a poet with a purpose) who asked to reflect on our experiences and write our own poems. Her contribution next day: *Sun sets over us, heavens display His splendour, lean in to listen.*

The opening input- ***Reflection on the ecumenical journey so far***: was led by the General Secretary Revd Dr David Cornick. Starting with 1053 and accepting that there is no agreement in what the goal of the ecumenical journey actually is he reminded us that since the last Forum three years ago the world has seen major events which impact on the life of CTE:

* The world is a more dangerous place for many Christians
* There is a new Pope and a new Archbishop of Canterbury both heralding mood changes in denominational approaches to furthering unity
* We have experienced a Scottish referendum
* Diversity in membership of CTE now standing at 43 groups

We then spent time in one of two listening group sessions hearing from each other about what challenges us and what excites us. We completed the day with a corporate Night Prayer Service in our small groups.

**Tuesday** morning saw start the day in the traditional Orthodox Morning Prayer with two priests leading. After breakfast a session devoted to ***Engaging in the Orthodox Tradition*** enabled us to hear about background and changes in the tradition, what it means to belong and worship in Russian Orthodoxy and personal contributions as to how orthodoxy had enriched traditional denominationalism.

Bishop Angaelos, Coptic Orthodox Church (Oriental) reminded us that what brings us together is greater than that which separates us (an echo of Pope Francis too). Martyrdom is a way of life and death for some and courtesy of the media we are all involved in this in our news bulletins. In many areas of the world Christians are still persecuted for their faith and especially in the Middle East.

After coffee we embarked on engaging in another ***Engaging experience-*** that of ***Pentecostalism***. Various learned people gave inputs but again it was the stories of personal experiences that I found most moving. Esther and John two young people shared with us their involvement in local churches. Throughout both sessions we were encouraged to break into small buzz groups to take on board what we had discovered so far.

A brief session in denominational meetings organised by National Officers made me realise how many of ‘my lot’ were present at the Forum event.

***Engaging with the Presidents*** enabled us to hear their responses to prepared questions; two of the presidents -The Orthodox President HE Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Justin Welby the Archbishop of Canterbury (an ecumenical magpie) appearing on film enabled us to hear just what they thought about their ecumenical journeys. Bishop Dr Eric Brown from the Pentecostal point of view made me aware of how important just being present for 25 years before the final invitation to share at that presidential level had been. Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Revd Dr Hugh Osgood as the Free Churches President offered their opinions. Mr Billy Kennedy referred to himself as representing ‘the rest’ as the President for the New Churches, the Quakers and the German-speaking Churches.

The evening session was about ***Engaging with young people***. We heard from a dozen young people who had been selected to attend a residential week in France at ‘Chemin Neuf’ entitled *Welcome to Paradise*. Such a residential experienced appeared to broaden and enrich their understanding of and engagement in ecumenical ministries in which they are already engaged. The challenge for those of us not in that age group is to acknowledge this and let them have flight in formation of ecumenical journeys before they become as old as we are! Oh to have the energy of youth set alongside the knowledge and experience gained through life.

**Wednesday** morning. Although most worship was corporate in the main hall this morning we were offered the opportunity to attend worship and experience something outside of our comfort zone. I along with thirty others attended the Quaker Meeting morning prayer and found the half hour of silence passed quite quickly.

***Gathering up threads and looking to the future*** on Wednesday morning was a question and answer session involving some people already mentioned as well as Alison Gelder (Housing Justice) who represents Bodies In Association (wide range of organisations and networks drawing Christians of all churches together around common causes, projects and interests)on CTE Trustees.

During the final act of worship led by Rev Ruth Gee, Deputy Moderator of Forum 2005, Sarah Larkin presented some of her moving poems (which hopefully will be on CTE website soon) *A walk in progress, whether in darkness or light, walk by faith –not sight.*

**The banner** ‘All are called’ by Joan Burgess, its prayer and history were part of the rich visual tapestry in the hall. The message is clear: *We are called. We gather together and we pray – the cross of Jesus Christ with us.*

Art work naming the 43 member churches and 45 Bodies in Association was on display.

**Some memorable quotes:**

Bishop Angaelos *Being ecumenical is learning to accept contradiction without crisis*

David Cornick - *Ecumenism is iterative not linear Unity is both gospel and gift Old ecumenical paradigms don’t sit on the new map of ecumenism today Concentrate on the penultimate church in all its brokenness and diversity rather than on the ultimate church.*

Pope Francis – *Unity is achieved whilst walking* Noel Robinson(set to music)- *No more strangers as we walk this land, No more strangers for Christ has made us one.* Michael Lester – Devon (arising out of Chemin Neuf experience)- *It is bonkers and brilliant together*

**So where now?** The challenge is in a continuation of the listening process, a working out of a greater understanding of what each tradition brings to the whole, and a more fuller understanding of the individual needs of ordinary people.