**Forum Reflections**

The CTE Forum in Swanwick involved a wide group of people, all committed to the ecumenical cause, drawn from a particularly wide range of English churches, some of them nominated by the respective churches and others chosen to represent intermediate ecumenical bodies and their particular work.

The Forum offered plenty of food for thought and theological reflection. What follows are my personal reflections, far from comprehensive, but which I hope may give members of the Theology and Unity Group, particularly those who were not at the Forum, some idea of the matters discussed and pondered.

I have attended the forums since the beginning of this millennium and have no hesitation is saying that this was the best yet. The various activities were well balanced. The Group sessions worked well under the rule that everyone should speak in turn without interruption on the issues requested until everyone had had a chance to voice their views. I felt this helped anyone who might feel hesitant and gave them the confidence of knowing that they would be able to say their piece as they wanted without the danger of being thrown off balance in the middle. The worship was well integrated and on one morning allowed a choice of styles of worship, of value to those who wanted to explore as well as those who wanted to feel at home with something they were familiar with. On the Tuesday morning, there was half an hour of Orthodox prayer, enough to give anyone unacquainted with it a real flavour of it without running the danger of being too much for those far more used to more succinct styles of prayer.

Early in the proceedings, David Cornick gave a short account of changes in the ecumenical landscape since the previous Forum in 2012. Some contextual global developments were sobering, even threatening, the rise of Islamic State and the partly resultant refugee crisis. There were however, some very encouraging developments, the election of Pope Francis and the enthusiasm generated by *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si!*, the decision of the Church of England to accept women bishops and some very important developments in practical co-operative local ecumenism in particular cities and regions, such as the associations of church leaders in various cities, meeting regularly together to pray for local communities and councils, the development of interesting partnerships in mission, such as that between the Pioneer Group and Methodists in Southampton and the creation of the ecumenical area in Cumbria, involving very close co-operative use of buildings and resources between the Anglican diocese, the Methodist district and the URC.

*The Widening Circle of CTE*.

Above all, David drew attention to the rapidly widening circle of churches in membership in CTE, now 43 in all. This was changing the ecumenical landscape radically. The more recent joiners tended to come from four distinct groups, Orthodox churches ( primarily Oriental), the black-led churches, Pentecostal churches and the ‘new’ churches, often groupings that had emerged from and after the house church movement of the sixties to eighties.

These changes meant that there were now more voices than ever seeking to be heard. There was no longer any one dominant voice. To most of the newer members the old style of faith and order ecumenism, which had been so important to Anglicans, the traditional free churches and, from the sixties, Roman Catholics, had little relevance. Co-operation in mission and in presenting a Christian front in a more secularised world were important. Listening to and learning from each other remained important.

I have already referred to the fact that similar points were also noted at the TCTCV consultation. I would add that, globally, the Pentecostals are now the second largest Christian community in the world even though not having anything like the cohesion and organisation that the Roman Catholic Church has! All these new Christian constituencies have a right to be heard in global Christian councils and we need to decide how to welcome strong participation from them in TUG and listen carefully to the agendas they want to pursue in theological reflection.

At the Forum I had the pleasure of meeting Llew Edwards, present representing the Seventh Day Adventists, who currently have observer status with us. The Adventist have grown considerably since the 1980’s and now have a global membership of 18 million. They are an orthodox trinitarian church.. As has been shown in a recent study[[1]](#footnote-1), their theology basically derives from English Puritan sources and apart from their insistence on the seventh day Sabbath and rather greater emphasis than elsewhere on the second coming, their theology differs little from that of other evangelical churches in the Puritan tradition. It is true that they have previously tended to hold aloof from the Ecumenical Movement (though they did hold dialogues with the Lutherans and Reformed, which issued reports in 1998 and 2001). It seems they are currently reassessing their attitude to the Ecumenical Movement and LLew has invited me to remain in touch with him.

*The Orthodox and the Pentecostalists*.

In pursuit of CTE’s aim of widening the circle and welcoming newer members, a whole session was devoted to engaging with Orthodox and Pentecostals. In the first, Fr John Nankivell (Chalcedonian Orthodox) and Bishop Angaelos (Coptic, Oriental Orthodox)gave brief accounts of central points about their faith. Fr John stressed the absolute centrality of worship, the Church as a church of Holy Scripture (there is scarcely a line in the liturgy that does not quote Scripture), the Church’s apostolicity, its close communion with the saints and the way in which all the sense are used in worship. Bishop Angaelos thanked CTE for instituting an Orthodox presidency alongside the others and spoke of dialogues with other churches. He argued that the split over the formula of Chalcedon had been about ‘bad language and worse politics’.

The two priests were followed by an English convert to the Russian Orthodox Church, Gillian Crow, who stressed her own pilgrimage to what she described as an holistic Church, a church which did not see the inherent goodness of humanity lost in the Fall, rather perhaps overlain with grime, but not totally destroyed. She referred to the concern of Bartholomew, the Green Patriarch for all of creation and to the way in which the Orthodox saw the entire people of God as a priesthood called to offer the creation back to God in joy and thanksgiving. She saw her religion as supremely a religion of love. She said she would be attending Quaker worship the next morning as she felt the stillness of it came closer to Orthodoxy than anything else in the western Christian tradition.

Finally, Nicola Vidamour, a Methodist minister and former mission partner in Russia gave an account of her spiritual debt to Orthodoxy and the depths that she had learnt from it.

All four testimonies were given simply, irenically and effectively.

Pentecostalism was introduced by a bishop from a black- led church and an Elim pastor. Both stressed the variety amongst them, coming from many backgrounds, black, white, Latin American Indian, and others. Bishop Eric stressed that Pentecostalism was above all about celebration of life in Christ, most importantly testimony to it. The priesthood of all believers was practised.

The Elim minister stressed the foursquare gospel, Jesus as Saviour, healer, Baptizer in the Spirit and Coming King (some would add sanctifier as a fifth point). He stressed the christocentric and supernatural elements in Pentecostal faith and added that the Pentecostals were biblical pragmatists, reading the Bible experientially and insisting that its truth must be encountered personally. Church structures were fluid, some episcopal, some Presbyterian, some congregational.

Mention was made of the Bradley thesis that God was using the afro-caribbean churches to re-evangelise Britain. This was a great challenge; if accepted, it would involve them in doing more than meeting their own people. Mention was also made of the dangers of the prosperity gospel and the way in which it might divert attention from the way of the Cross. A stress on empowerment through the Gospel was one thing; prosperity theology in a crude form another.

A URC Synod Moderator gave testimony to the inspiration he had received through Pentecostalism and, in particular, through the joy and celebration evident in its worship.

Finally, five priorities for contemporary Pentecostals were outlined.

* Keeping the word of God central.
* Training and development of their leadership.
* Evangelism and mission to remain at the heart of all their activity.
* Commitment to reaching the next generation of young people.
* Collaboration for greater unity within the Body of Christ.

*Young people, the future of the Church*.

The other key stress of the Forum was in meeting and engaging with young people. Central to thinking about this was the watching of a short video of a visit by twelve youngsters, aged between 18 and 30 to a camp in France organised by the *Chemin Neuf* Community and involving a wide range both of spiritual and playful activities. The twelve youngsters, drawn from a wide variety of denominations, gave eloquent testimony to what they had learnt, both about the faith in general and the ways in which it was lived out and prayed in their different denominations. A young fifth generation Salvationist talked of how she had not previously known anything about Mass or communion, but had been very excited to discover ‘other ways of coming close to God’ and that it had been beautiful to see so many young folk worshipping God in different ways. ‘We have our differences but we have Christ in common. When we meet, not only does our mutual respect increase, but also our faith and relationship with God’. This summed up what they all felt.

This session was deeply encouraging to all of us who know all too well that the time is coming when we will have to let go and hand over to others. To see young people growing in faith, and, particularly, in spiritual and receptive ecumenism, is a tonic and a promise of good things to come, maybe in ways very different to the ones we have pursued.

*Some concluding personal reflections*.

First of all, deep thankfulness to the CTE staff and others who prepared such an excellent Forum, particularly to Jenny Bond and Lorraine Shannon who worked so incredibly hard.

Next, a reflection on accommodating the old and the new. Traditional faith and order ecumenism, as David Cornick stated, is a foreign language to many in our newer member churches. That does not mean it is redundant. It is still important in many of the relationships of particular member churches eg within the Anglican-Methodist Covenant relationship and within developing conversations between the C of E and both Baptists and the URC. It remains vital in our dialogues with Roman Catholics.

Our ‘traditional’ churches do understand the importance of relationships with the newer churches (the Church of England acknowledged this in its response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision[[2]](#footnote-2)*). At the moment, the newer churches seek closer relationships in mission. I suspect that as joint mission develops more widely, they will begin to appreciate the need for ways and even structures of mutual accountability which may well make some of the traditional faith and order questions more meaningful to them than has hitherto been the case. However, it is possible that the traditional search for organic unity per se may be over, to be replaced by links that allow fuller communion and exchange of ministers without necessarily involving organic merger. Time will tell; it is too early to prophesy an exact pattern.

A final word is about relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis, by both his gestures and his teaching is opening up exciting perspectives. He is making the concept of a global ministry of leadership attractive to other churches. He is appealing to all Christians to renew their relationship with Christ. He is stating Christian basics on which we are all at one, basics in discipleship, in service of the poorest in society, in care for the whole of creation. He is reaching out to others, seeking forgiveness for past persecution as he did recently with the Waldensians, reaching out to Pentecostals, both in Latin America and Italy, praying with their pastors and letting them pray over him.

Moreover, he may be preparing for the effective withering away of those elements of papal power that have been so unacceptable to all other churches, particularly the immediate jurisdiction over all local churches. He clearly wants national bishops’ conferences to have more independence and has even asked them to let him know their views on permitting a married priesthood (I gather none have yet replied, presumably because the views of many of the conferences are divided). I have rightly been warned that I should not be too hopeful, but there are at least some signs for hope.

In this context, I will mention a book I recently received for review. It is Paul McPartlan’s *A Service of* *Love: Papal Primacy, the Eucharist and Church Unity*. McPartlan, an expert on Catholic-Orthodox relationships and a major contributor to the international dialogue, argues that Roman Catholics should aim at a more conciliar framework for Petrine ministry which would allow far greater independence to local churches, with any papal interference being restricted to serious disputes between churches over matters with strict doctrinal import. The situation is more hopeful than at any time since Vatican II itself.

Despite the sombre state of the contemporary world, there is still much to rejoice in within the context of the churches’ search for greater unity.

David Carter

1. Bryan W. Ball, The English Connection. *The Puritan Roots of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://ctbi.org.uk/church-towards-common-vision> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)