**REPORT BY ROBIN ORTON ON THE CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND FORUM, SWANWICK, 28-30 SEPTEMBER 2015**

I was one of the representatives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark Christian Unity Commission at the Forum, and originally wrote this as a report back to them. It is a purely personal response but necessarily reflects a Roman Catholic perspective.

This was the first time I had the privilege of attending the Forum. I came away feeling I’d learned a lot in all sorts of ways, but at the same time in some respects a bit frustrated.

The Forum’s title was ‘Churches Listening Together.’ Listening to (which implies not arguing with) other Christians was the main focus of all the formal sessions. In particular, we were invited to listen to some voices which it was felt have been largely unheard in ‘traditional’ecumenism in this country: those of the Pentecostal Churches, of the Orthodox (both ‘Eastern’, i.e. Chalcedonian and Byzantine, and ‘Oriental’), and of young Christians.

Amongst the four Orthodox speakers, I would pick out the contribution from the head of the Coptic Church (‘Oriental’) in Britain, Bishop Angaelos, brought up in Australia, and a very engaging speaker. (He told us later that someone had tweeted that he could if necessary take up stand-up comedy if there were problems with the day job!) He gave a brief but lucid account of the Oriental Orthodox interpretation of the relation between Christ’s humanity and his divinity ( ‘One nature of Christ the Word incarnate’) and of the recent (successful?) dialogues about this with the Eastern Orthodox. Also thought-provoking was a talk by an ex-Anglican laywoman, Gillian Crowe, who gave a moving account of the ‘holistic’ spirituality she found in Eastern (Russian Exarchate) Orthodoxy.

The Pentecostal speakers were all excellent; they gave us lots of interesting theology and certainly subtly changed my perspective on Pentecostalism. Dr David Muir, a theologian, offered a sharp critique of the ‘prosperity gospel’ – he compared it with Tetzel’s sale of indulgences in the sixteenth century! The efficient and good-humoured Moderator of the whole Forum was Archbishop Doyé Agama, the head of the Apostolic Pastoral Convention, a ‘High Church’ Pentecostal church which claims the apostolic succession for its bishops – he blessed himself and us using the sign of the Cross, which is something one doesn’t readily associate with Pentecostals.

Representative of other church traditions – Anglican, Roman Catholic, Free Churches, the ‘new Churches’, Lutheran, Quakers – were given five minute each in the opening session to tell us ‘why I am an X.’ Barbara Wood, my fellow –representative from Southwark Archdiocese, represented the Roman Catholics. She gave what was (in my totally unprejudiced opinion!) a wonderful talk, theologically and spiritually very rich. (I believe she was congratulated on it by many people, including a number of Roman Catholic clergy. And not just Roman Catholics – a Methodist I was talking to afterwards said it expressed very well his own feelings about Methodism!) I hope she will circulate the text. She referred to the miracle of the eucharist, celebrated many times every hour of the day and night around the world, and the connectedness which we experienced, through the living eucharistic Christ, with our fellow Christians, the saints and the whole of the physical creation.

‘Young Christians’ were represented by twelve youngsters from different traditions (and all with a very firm Christian background – how typical were they, some wondered?) CTE had funded them to attend the Chemin Neuf community’s ‘Welcome to Paradise’ youth camp in France in August – we were shown a high-production-values video with young people rock-climbing, water-skiing, dancing, making their confessions etc. During their report back to us, they were asked how the churches should be responding to the needs of young Christians. Amongst the responses were that we should try to bring on young leaders within the church and give them ‘space’, and that we should try to meet the needs of the increasing number of young people suffering from mental illness. One young Pentecostal said that ‘Welcome to Paradise’ had helped her to come to a better understanding of her own tradition; as somebody pointed out later, successful ecumenical dialogue is possible only if all the participants are fully informed about the teaching of their own church. However, another young Christian took a more ‘post-denominational’ position and suggested that young people should be encouraged to attend a church of any denomination which happened to meet their spiritual needs at that particular stage of their life.

Worship played a central role in the proceedings. Prayer and praise punctuated all the formal sessions. It was led by Noel Robinson, ‘a British [Christian musician](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_music), who primarily plays a [traditional black gospel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_black_gospel) style of [gospel music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_music)’ (quote from Wikipaedia), with an excellent supporting group. Although that style is not normally my thing, I liked it and from time to time felt quite moved by it (particularly Wesley’s ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ sung to a souped-up version of the old ‘fuguing’ tune ‘Lyngham’.) One comment read out in the wash-up session on the last morning was something like, ‘I found God where I did not expect him – in noise! Thank you from the depths of my gut!’ Others however, I know, found it uncomfortable, too loud and too unforgivingly up-beat, and said they would have preferred more of a mix of musical styles. One Anglican said to me in private that he suspected that the antipathy that many people felt was based on the perception that ‘it’s not our sort of noise’, a defensiveness towards an assertive and what they saw as a rather alien Christian worship culture which gospel music and evangelical choruses represented and which they feared was taking over from more traditional styles as the norm in England.

There were also morning prayer sessions before breakfast. On the first day, this was celebrated (in English) using an Orthodox liturgy. I liked the fact that we were invited to pray ‘for travellers by water, by sea, by land, by space and by air.’ Who says the Orthodox liturgy hasn’t moved on since the fifth century? Also ‘for our sovereign lady, Queen Elizabeth, the Royal Family, Her Majesty’s Government, all Civil Authorities and our armed forces everywhere.’ I wish we did that in our church.

On the second day various options were offered, and we were encouraged to attend services ‘outside our usual comfort zone.’ The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster presided at a mass, which I gather a lot of non-Catholics attended; I was told he had struck just the right note. As a guilty unreconstructed patriarchalist male, I thought I had better go to the ‘simple quiet agapè, sharing bread and water ...inclusive language and style. Round table fellowship in the style of the book *Women Included*.’ Unsurprisingly perhaps, the majority of the (quite small) number of attenders were men. I at least found it inspiring and not at all uncomfortable, except that some of the sub-Gerard Manley Hopkins (or Dylan Thomas?) prayers - ‘this is the birth /day of life and of love and wings: of the gay/great happening illimitably earth’ and so on – jarred a bit with me personally.

There was a rather boring ‘Presidents’ panel’ in which the CTE presidents (leaders in England of the various denominations) answered questions. Some, rather unchallenging, ones, devised by CTE, had been submitted well in advance, and we saw those Presidents who were not able to be present in the flesh, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and the (charming but largely incomprehensible) Greek Orthodox Archbishop Gregorios, reply to them on a pre-recorded video.

 Some questions were also selected from those submitted in advance by us participants. I was lucky enough to have mine chosen, about how to hold the balance between unity and diversity. It was assigned to Cardinal Nichols, who gave a wonderful reply (which, if I may be allowed to name-drop, I had the opportunity of thanking him for in the bar that evening). He said, quoting Pope Francis, that (I paraphrase) it is only the Holy Spirit that can ensure that unity and diversity in the Church are held together in such a way that they do not topple over into oppressive centralism on the one hand or centrifugal anarchy on the other. And he also said that the special charism of the Bishop of Rome, given by the Spirit, was to maintain the unity of the Church. Couldn’t have put it better myself.

Some interesting issues about the nature of unity came up in the final wash-up session. David Cornick, the CTE General Secretary, referred to the work of Frances Young, the Methodist patristics scholar and theologian, and her notion that union could be both ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ (analogous in some in some ways to C.H Dodd’s ‘realised eschatology’) and that we should use ‘critical ecumenism’ to focus on the ‘penultimate church’ rather than on the ultimate union which she relegates to an (ahistorical?) Eschaton. I felt that as a Catholic I ought to challenge this rather gloomy view, but didn’t have the opportunity.

David had referred earlier to the fact that ‘one person’s diversity is another person’s fragmentation’ and suggested that until the East-West schism of 1054 there had been no diversity within the Church. (At least that’s what I wrote down. Very odd, even if he meant ‘disunity’ rather than ‘diversity’- what about the Oriental Orthodox!) On the other hand, in his closing address he referred to an alleged recent remark of Pope Francis (which I can’t trace online) to the effect that diversity was present in the Church from the very beginning.

The main thing that irritated me about the Forum was that there was little opportunity for any direct interaction (at any rate in public) between the speakers and the rest of us (e.g. by being able to ask them questions.) ‘Churches Listening Together’ – but I heard someone wondering whether those on the platform wanted to ‘listen’ to us in the body of the hall! We did have the opportunity of discussing what we had heard privately in small groups, but the feedback from these discussions was summarised at the end by David Cornick only in very selective terms, with anything faintly negative suppressed (although we were promised a fuller version later.) Perhaps the organisers might, understandably enough, have wanted to be tactful and avoid any public challenges or expressions of theological dissent. One got the impression that, like the worship songs, everything had therefore to be relentlessly upbeat - it sometimes, I must say, felt to me more like a rally than a forum!

The best, most illuminating and most fruitful discussions at the Forum were, predictably, over meals and coffee and in the bar. I am sure informal personal links will have been formed and that many of them will be developed further.

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