

Churches Together in England Forum March 2022

General Secretary's Address

It is my privilege to offer an overview of the ecumenical life of the churches since the last Forum. It is not primarily an account of the work of the Churches Together in England's staff team, nor the programme of work embodied in our Strategic Plan, but a sketch of how we, the churches in England have journeyed together since September 2018.

I do so against the background of four of the most challenging years in decades. Internal to our ecumenical journey, we began with a disagreement about human sexuality arising from the nomination by the Fourth Presidency Group of their appointed President. I want to at the outset express my profound gratitude to that group of churches, and especially to Hannah, their current Convenor¹, for the grace and patience with which they have walked this journey. The empty Presidential chair that resulted is a sign of our continued **brokenness** as a community of churches over this neuralgic issue for the church. But we rose to that challenge of potential fragmentation, with a renewed commitment to be in pilgrimage together. Then from two years ago we were responding to a global pandemic, and the resulting renewed depth of relationship between churches during these past two years has been an extraordinary sign of **hope** in a broken world. Yes, the challenges resulting from that are immense, but we face them together, and that is the way of Christ. We also responded together to the evil of racism, with a renewed commitment to challenge it in our churches and in society, and lit candles of justice on the anniversary of the death of George Floyd last May. And then in the past month it seems as if a whole new chapter in the world order is beginning, one considerably more unpredictable and potentially destructive for us all, beginning with the tragedy of Ukraine. And we will face that with **courage** and trust in the God who heals the world's brokenness through the cross of Jesus Christ. His church shares in that way by taking up our cross and following. The theme of our Forum, the reconciling love of God through a broken church brings hope for a broken world has been our experience.

At risk of becoming the Professor Jonathan Van Tam of the ecumenical world — he of the increasingly extravagant analogy or metaphor — I want us to hold three **images** in our minds as I outline the account:

¹ Hannah was their appointed President, but she was unable to take up that office at the request of Enabling Group.

1. the one that I used when I stood here four years ago and laid out a vision of what ecumenism might be — a large tent or marquee under which the churches gather together, with the side walls or flaps rolled up to let the wind of the Spirit flow in and out, accompanying us as we did the same — going out as we participate in the mission of God together, and returning for the nourishment provided inside: fuel for the journey. Inside we gather, sometimes in our families of Free Church or Orthodox or Pentecostal, but often we are all mixed together, growing in our appreciation of one another's gifts that we receive in the outworking of receptive ecumenism. That, I think, has been our experience over the past four years — we have served our communities as churches together, lit candles of hope and prayed, and nationally we have engaged with Government in the deepest crisis of a generation, and our stock has risen. It's quite important to note that the tent is not the gathering, but the place *for* the gathering. CTE is not a church, but remains the space where churches can meet to think, pray and work ecumenically.
2. My predecessor as General Secretary, Dr David Cornick, gave this address in 2018 and spoke about the green shoots of ecumenism emerging following a prolonged winter. Those shoots have continued to grow, and flower buds are even appearing in some places. There was a sharp frost quite early on during the four years since 2018 — that profound disagreement about the theology and ethics of same-sex relationships and marriage — but it did not prevent the shoots continuing to grow. Indeed, in some ways, perhaps, the struggles we have encountered as we continue to work out how to keep walking together, how to learn to live with difference, have energised the growth, in the ways that, say, a tulip bulb requires a bit of frost to really get it going. The gracious way in which we have continued on this journey together is testimony to the maturity of the ecumenical movement in England, one of those two great innovative and restorative movements of the past century that have done so much to renew the global church, and in this century are woven together — the ecumenical and the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.
3. The third analogy arises from the recent experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been the experience of some whose illness has been severe, and recovery prolonged, that they have almost needed to learn

how to breathe again. We take breathing for granted, and never give it a second thought until we find ourselves out-of-breath after a steep climb or recovering from a severe lung infection. Breathing suddenly becomes a conscious effort. Then the physiotherapists tell us we've been breathing poorly all along, and now is the time to learn how to breathe better and regain our fitness. Ecumenism has become almost the 'air we breathe' in English Christianity, and we have been in danger of taking it for granted, because it simply surrounds so much of our existence. Few churches would start a Food Bank these days without asking for cooperation from the other churches in town, and often Alpha Courses are run across churches in a co-ordinated way. We campaign together for climate and racial justice and share in the celebrations that mark our year. It is rare to find places where church leaders, local or regional, do not meet in fellowship and prayer. It used to be that the ecumenists were the exception, it is now those that are **not** ecumenical who are the rare breed. But that very familiarity has perhaps taken our attention away from how best to breathe this ecumenical air of the Spirit. Our breathing has become habitually shallow, and the oxygen of the Spirit has not been taken deep enough into the lungs of the Body of Christ — see how Van Tam-ish I have become! — and so we need to learn to breathe better. Maybe, to slow down so that ecumenical considerations become the **first** thought, and not an after-thought. I was encouraged when two member churches with all the resources they needed to undertake some work on life after Covid, stopped at the first step and said 'we need to do this across the ecumenical spectrum', and so the Post-Covid Theology Project was born, and all the better for being thoroughly ecumenical. I anticipate that our response to the challenge of welcoming Ukrainian refugees will be a similar ecumenical sign of hope.

How easy it might be to congratulate ourselves in our growth in breadth. From 16 member churches when we were formed 31 years ago, we are now 52, including many Orthodox and Pentecostals who have joined us on the journey, and those newer members are sometimes very ancient, such as the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, founded in the very earliest apostolic times, and which became a member in 2021. At other times those members are really quite new, such as Vineyard Churches UK, also joining us in 2021 and not more than 40 years old as a church from its beginnings in the ministry of John Wimber. Those are quite typical of newer member churches.

But growth in numbers is not the same as effective ecumenical endeavour, or growth in depth, and it is there that we need to learn how to breathe better and deeper, how to collaborate in mission, how to share in our joys and sorrows, challenges and opportunities, always alert to the pernicious virus of empire-building and self-preservation at the expense of our sisters and brothers.

Covid-19 threw churches together, nationally and locally, and has been one of the fertilizers of those green shoots. Just as Government discovered it needed the churches — and how big a *volte face* was that! — so we discovered we needed one another, and all sorts of frequent ecumenical encounters emerged, all aided by the blessed zoom conference tool. It also propelled churches into a digital age as worship went online, and while that is not without its shadow side, it enabled connectivity for which many were grateful, and the resulting hybrid worship, which shows no sign of decline, has created new mission opportunities, even if numbers are, thankfully, returning to in-building worship.

So, in true Van Tam fashion, let me mix those analogies into a wonderfully exotic image — we continue to gather in the ecumenical marquee, not as strangers huddling from a storm, but as pilgrims and friends discovering in one another the resources for our mission. In that marquee we need to learn how to breathe better, with the tent flaps rolled up not only to give us access, and to welcome the breeze of the Spirit, but in true Covid-preventative measure, to ventilate away the viruses of self-importance, self-preservation and self-interest which bring so much illness to the Body of Christ. But the tent is planted in a field only partly full of green shoots — not equally distributed like some miracle of modern farming, to be sure, and still very patchy. For every flourishing corner, there's another still-bare patch. To be honest, in some places ecumenical life is dying, and we should not shy away from that reality. Two Intermediate Bodies have effectively closed in recent months, and many continue to struggle from a withdrawal of finance and an indifference from church leaders. But as we tell the stories and not shy away from the challenges, we can hope to see a new harvest in due time, a community of churches committed to ever-closer collaboration and fellowship, recognising that way beyond our field there are others, fields white unto harvest, to which the risen Christ beckons us. New churches will join us on the pilgrimage, and new networks of conversation and collaboration enrich our life and witness, while existing ones deepen, all ordered towards the goal of that unity for which Christ prays, and his mission to the world God loves. Let Forum be a

place where we take a deep breath of the ecumenical Spirit of God, as we gather in Jesus' name, to the glory of the Father.

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