



**Diary of my visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva
and the Chemin Neuf Community at Hautecombe Abbey,
France, funded by the Bill Snelson Young Ecumenists Fund**

Thursday 15th to Saturday 24th February 2024

Written by Sam Rigby, Ordinand at Emmanuel Theological College

Thursday 15th February

Today, I travelled to Geneva to begin the first part of my trip, visiting the World Council of Churches in Geneva and meeting various staff members there, representing a wide variety of the different programme areas of the WCC. My hope for this visit is that it would offer me a broader perspective on ecumenism on a global scale and complement my current studies at Emmanuel Theological College looking at Missional Theology in a Global Context. I was met at Geneva Airport by Christian Müggler, a member of the Roman Catholic ecumenical community Focolare Movement, who is currently based in Geneva and has an office at the WCC. I was connected to Christian through Elisabeth Hachmoeller, the ecumenical officer for CTE in Merseyside who first informed me about the Bill Snelson Fund and supported my application. Christian helped to facilitate my visit to the WCC and put me in touch with some of the key people I was hoping to meet, including Rev Dr Mikie A. Roberts (pictured with me, right), the Programme Executive for Spiritual Life and Faith and Order, who helped to organise the programme of my visit.

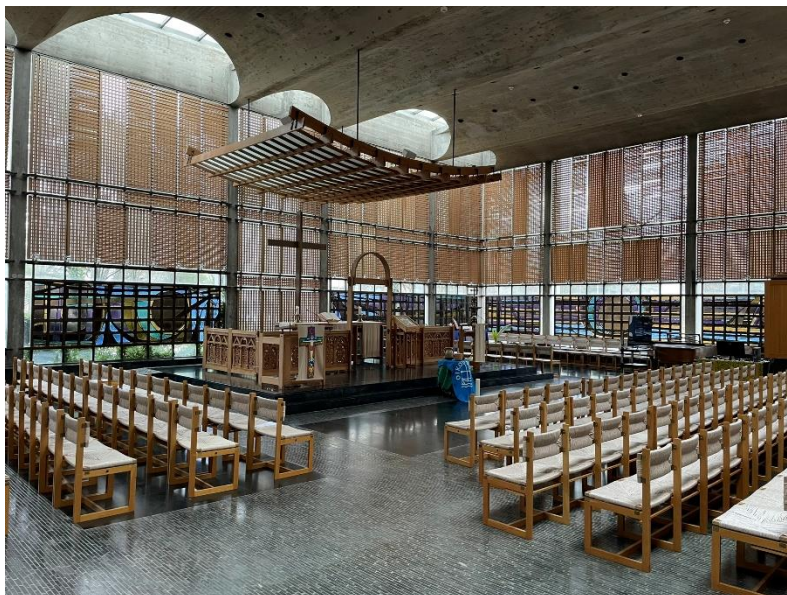
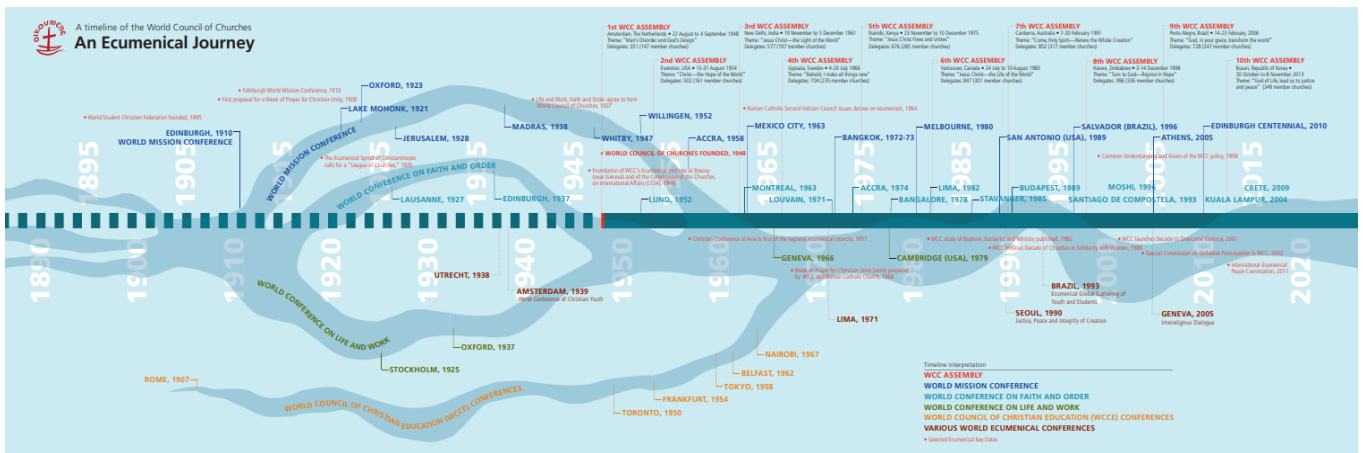


My programme for the two days I was at the WCC was packed full of meetings and opportunities to discuss various areas of ecumenism. I will try to outline them all briefly!

In my meeting with Dr Andrej Jeftic, I learned about the WCC's Faith and Order Commission and its current work on working for the visible unity of the church and preparing for the commemorations of the 1700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. Andrej also introduced me to the Faith and Order Commission's various publications on justice and peace, ecclesiology and moral discernment (I ended up returning home with many books and booklets published by the WCC on a wide variety of areas – my backpack on the way home was very heavy!) It was also particularly interesting to learn that the Faith and Order Commission is the one part of the WCC that has official membership of the Roman Catholic Church and is responsible for preparing materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Following this, I had a meeting with Rev Dr Kuzipa Nalwamba, and was introduced to the history of the ecumenical movement, which the WCC uses a river and tributaries model to

depict (pictured below), starting at the Edinburgh World Mission Conference in 1910 and flowing through to the present day. Kuzipa also outlined some of the Council's current missional priorities, particularly around climate change and decolonialisation.



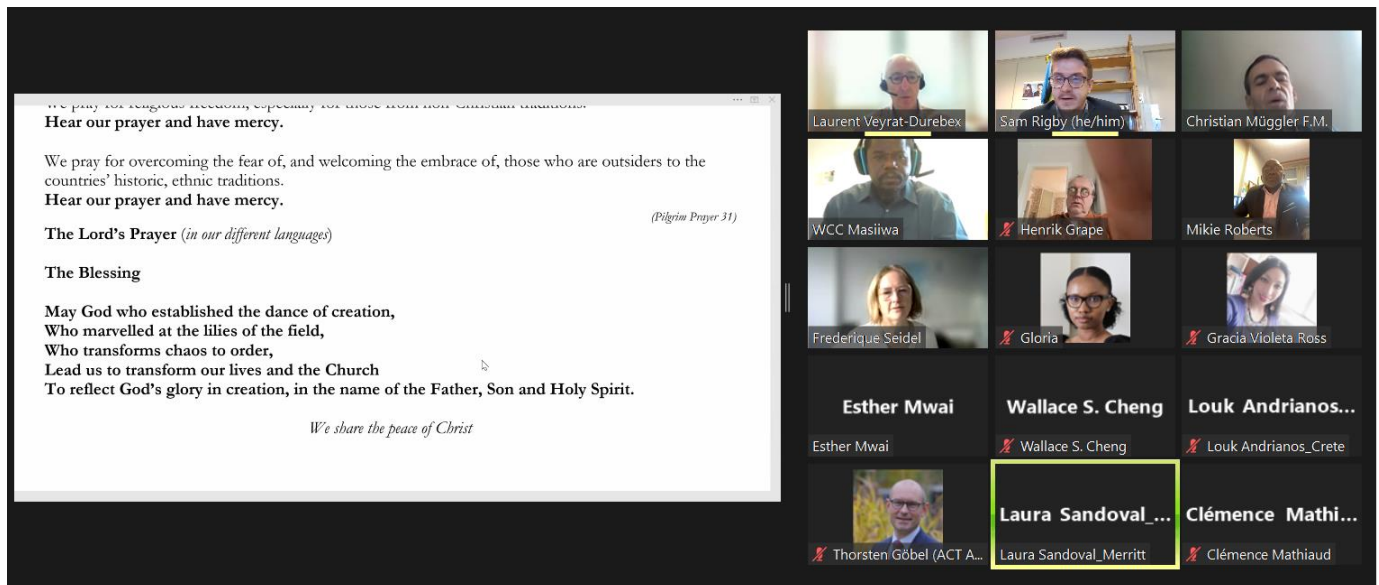
After this meeting, I was given a guided tour around the WCC premises, and I was particularly struck by the ecumenical chapel, (pictured left) furnished with items representing the different traditions of the church across the world and many given as gifts to the WCC. The chapel is a place of prayer for Christians of all traditions and denominations, and is a protected monument.

Following this fascinating tour, I was invited by Christian to join him and his fellow members of the Focolare Movement in Geneva for dinner at their community house in the suburbs of Geneva. This was a wonderful evening during which I learned more about the work of the Focolare Movement and was also able to share my story of discerning a call to ordained ministry in the Church of England and the current issues facing our denomination.

Friday 16th February

Today's programme started with me being invited to lead the WCC's online Morning Prayer service. These daily times of prayer are always inter-confessional and draw on liturgical materials from the WCC's Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, which throughout the year prays each week for the churches of a different group of countries. This week, we were praying for the churches of Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland. The service was mainly in English, other than the bible reading which was in French and everyone was invited at the end of the

service to unmute their microphones to pray the Lord's Prayer in their own language, which led to a holy cacophony of different voices praying the prayer that unites Christians of all denomination across the world. Below is a screenshot I took of us all doing just this!



Today's meetings covered a broad range of the WCC's areas of work. The first meeting I had was with Mikie, talking more intentionally about his work on Spiritual Life and both the joys and difficulties of ecumenical prayer and worship. He described the real manifestation of ecumenism and unity is when we pray together. He described how 'worship' can be a more problematic word, with denominations having different understandings of that that entails, whereas inter-confessional prayer gives greater flexibility and includes all member churches.

Next, I met with Dr Mwai Makoka, the WCC's programme executive on Health and Healing. Mwai is a medical doctor from Malawi and told me about the development of church-provided healthcare in his home country that were unified by the Christian Health Association. He also described how the role of the church in health is self-evident, as health in the gospel is integral with the various stories of Jesus' miracles bringing the restoration of health and healing. Mwai introduced me to the materials he has produced regarding 'health-promoting churches', giving basic information and biblical reflections on different health issues and what the local church can do to make health integral to the church's mission.

After this, I met with Dr. Massiwa Ragies Gunda, the WCC's programme executive on overcoming racism, xenophobia and related discrimination. He outlined the previous successful work done in this area by the WCC, particularly through the Program to Combat Racism that was particularly involved in challenging apartheid in South Africa and campaigning for civil rights in the USA. He also explained how the WCC's current work on tackling racism and other forms of discrimination has a global focus and 4 key areas: awareness-raising, advocacy through UN mechanisms, networking through the development of a Collective for Anti-Racism Ecumenism, and the Week of Prayer for Overcoming Racism.

My next engagement was with the WCC's archivist, Anne-Emmanuelle, who showed me around the extensive archive of the WCC's publications since its establishment which

consists of more than 3000 shelf metres of files and archive boxes. It was fascinating to see the history of the ecumenical movement represented by the sheer quantity of publications it has issued, all seeking to bring about the greater visible unity of Christians the world over.



I was taken by Mikie to the WCC's ecumenical theological institute at Chateau de Bossey (pictured left) to see the facilities used by the students there in its beautiful setting on the shore of Lake Geneva. The institute provides courses in ecumenical studies validated by the University of Geneva and brings together students from around the world to live and study together in community. Bossey is clearly a very special place and I would be keen to

return to Geneva at some point in the future to take part in some of the ecumenical institute's activities. After visiting Bossey, Mikie kindly took me out for dinner with his wife, Winelle, who is also ordained and pastors the Moravian Church in Geneva. This brought to an end a wonderful visit to WCC where I met such a wide range of people, including those I didn't have formal sit-down meetings with, who all contribute to bringing about greater unity between Christians of all traditions and seeking the common good across the globe.

Saturday 17th February

Today was a more relaxed day to explore Geneva city centre and learn more about its significance as the so-called 'Protestant Rome'. After a walking tour around the city, I visited the St. Pierre Cathedral (including the towers giving a panoramic view over Geneva, including the Jet d'Eau, as pictured below). This was the adopted home church of John Calvin and is adjacent to the International Museum of the Reformation which I also visited, in the building where Geneva decided to adopt Protestantism, also pictured below.



Sunday 18th February

This morning, I joined the congregation of Holy Trinity Geneva, part of the Church of England's Diocese in Europe, for their Sunday morning service. After this, I made my way to Gare de Cornavin ready to make my way by train to the second part of my ecumenical experience at Hautecombe Abbey. I was picked up from Culoz by a member of the Hautecombe Discipleship School (HDS), made up of young adults living alongside the brothers and sisters of the Chemin Neuf community and engaging a gap year of theological learning and Christian service. From the outset, I had to apologise for my lack of French! I knew this week could be quite difficult given I don't speak French and all the worship and input was given in French. However, the community at Hautecombe is very international and most people were kind enough to speak to me in English. When I arrived at Hautecombe, I was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the place, nestled on the shores of Lake Bourget, the 'Riviera of the Alps'. I was also given what is known as the Bishop's Room to stay in for the duration of my stay at Hautecombe. As you can see below, this room was far grander than what one would expect in a monastic community! However, I was sure that this room would be very conducive to the reading and reflection I wanted to do whilst at Hautecombe, particularly on the ways in which charismatic and catholic spirituality combine in worship, which is the spiritual tradition of Chemin Neuf and also the focus of the independent learning project I am currently undertaking in my final year of study at Emmanuel College.



After settling into my room and having an initial tour around the premises, it was time for the first worship of my stay, with a time of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and Vespers. There is clearly a very strong emphasis on singing in the Chemin Neuf community, as pretty much the whole of Vespers was chanted, using a special liturgy book for Lent, or in French, Carême. I was at first overwhelmed by all the French liturgy, but was able to use the camera function of Google Translate to understand what was being said and sung. Thank goodness for modern technology! I was also struck by the reality that it doesn't really matter what language is being spoken in prayer, as we are still joining in with the prayers of the church universal. I was then given a warm welcome over dinner, and began to meet members of the community, sharing my story and telling people about the Anglican tradition I come from. There is clearly a strong ecumenical spirit at Hautecombe. People are keen to learn about

other denominations and there is a wide variety of traditions represented in both the consecrated brothers and sisters and HDS, including Lutherans, Baptists and Pentecostals.

Monday 19th February

My first full day at Hautecombe started with Lauds (Morning Prayer), which was also nearly entirely sung like Vespers, and finished with the community's prayer for the unity of Christians. This prayer is central to the life of the community and I found out is prayed daily. It is so important that it is printed on the back of their 'Chants' song book. The prayer goes:

Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one, we pray to you for the unity of Christians, according to your will, according to your means. May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin and to hope beyond all hope. Amen.

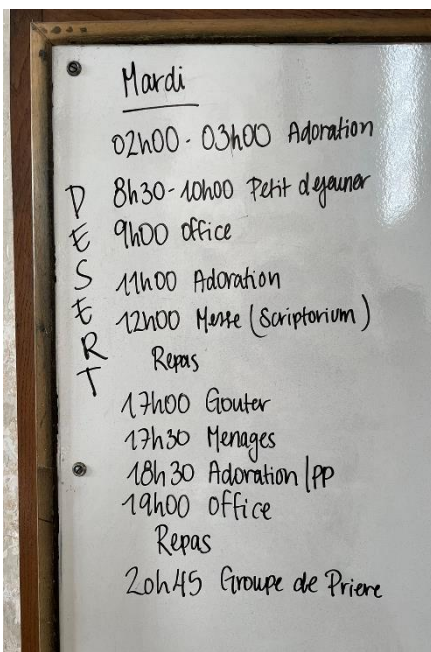
Despite the prayer being said and printed in French, I immediately recognised it as the same prayer that is often used in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, as we did this year each day at Morning Prayer at Liverpool Cathedral, where I'm based. The ecumenical vocation of the community was further demonstrated at Mass which is celebrated

each day at noon. I discovered that the community at Hautecombe has been given special dispensation by their Archbishop to allow any Christian who believes in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist (no further stipulation given) to receive the sacrament if they discern that it is right for them to. This is in recognition of the distinctly ecumenical work that Chemin Neuf is seeking to live out. This was quite a jaw dropping revelation for me, having always before been prohibited from receiving communion in RC churches, despite my professed belief in the Real Presence as an Anglo-Catholic Anglican. My immediate reaction was "why can't this be modelled everywhere?!", as something which is a clear sign of hope for the unity of the Church. My contribution to the working life of the community also started today, and I was assigned to the kitchen to help prepare lunch. It was a joy to participate in the shared life of the community, preparing food for one another and those visiting the abbey. The day concluded with a candlelit service of Compline (Night Prayer) to

prepare for the community's silent day tomorrow. Before this, I had dinner with a smaller group who were also staying with the community at Hautecombe as visitors this week like myself, from a variety of backgrounds.

Tuesday 20th February

Tuesdays at Hautecombe are kept as the 'Desert' day, a key part of the Ignatian spiritual life of the community when they take time to retreat, be silent and connect with God. The abbey is closed to tourists today in order to preserve the silence and sanctuary. To the left is the schedule for the day, which was updated daily giving the community information about community services and the day's worship pattern. The only times for speaking during the 'Desert' day was in the times of communal prayer and Mass.



In today's Mass, after the homily, there was an extended time for examination of conscience, with the opportunity for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This time also involved members of the community going up to one another and stepping outside the chapel. I asked a couple of the members about this who informed me this was an opportunity to make amends or apologise for something to another member, or indeed to say thank you for something they have done or ask them to pray for you. This is apparently one of the key things that strengthens the fraternal life at Hautecombe and being accountable to one another.

The desert time finished at 5pm with a snack, followed by a time for domestic jobs around the abbey. This particular part of the day gave me an insight into the environmentally-friendly approach to community life. First, the snack was made up of rescued out-of-date food from a supermarket, including donuts and little cakes. I also found out that much of the food used in the kitchen is rescued as part of the community's ecological commitment to minimal waste. Then, in my domestic task, I helped to move firewood from the woodstore. All these logs are from the forest near the abbey and every tree used naturally fell and wasn't cut down. The rooms in the abbey that have fireplaces do not use radiators as burning the naturally felled wood is a more renewable energy source. This was an example of how the community at Hautecombe has been significantly influenced by Pope Francis' encyclical 'Laudato Si' and the Christian vocation for caring for God's creation.

Following dinner was a very special experience: the weekly 'Groupe de Priere' or 'Soirée de Louange'. This is a particular expression of the charismatic spirituality of Chemin Neuf, with extended times of sung contemporary worship, extempore prayer, sharing verses of scripture and prophetic words and images. Whilst I enjoyed singing contemporary worship songs that were in French, I was particularly moved when we sang a song in English and also a song I know in English but translated into French. This has also been the case in other services so far, where English songs have been translated. I have included below some of the words to one of the worship songs we sang in French that I particularly enjoyed singing:

<p>Il guérit, restaure, rend vivants les morts Mon plus grand trésor C'est l'amour de notre Père O feu qui dévore, baptise-moi encore Esprit, âme et corps Dans l'amour de notre Père</p>	<p><i>He heals, restores, brings the dead to life</i> <i>My greatest treasure</i> <i>This is the love of our Father</i> <i>O consuming fire, baptize me again</i> <i>Spirit, soul and body</i> <i>In the love of our Father</i></p>
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It was a powerful experience to see the community utterly surrendered to God in worship, just as they would be at Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. This time however was with hands raised and singing and praying in tongues. It is a true example of how charismatic worship practices can be just as powerfully and authentically expressed in a catholic setting, which is a key part of my current research at college for my Independent Learning Project.

Wednesday 21st February

Today I was back on house services in the morning and served in the kitchen again to make lunch. After Mass and lunch, I observed the Liturgy class for the HDS students who were learning new music for the Offices during Lent. The combination of choral and contemporary

music at Chemin Neuf works really well, with a deep sense of reverence and adoration flowing from both. In the evening today was the Children's Office, doing a mini version of Stations of the Cross looking at the Lenten themes of fasting, sharing and prayer. This gave me some good ideas for similar activities for the young members of my church back home!

Thursday 22nd February

By today, I feel far more settled into the community and continually grateful for the number of people willing to speak in English to make my stay at Hautecombe as fruitful as possible. So many people have kindly offered to translate some of the announcements being made and the homilies given during the times of worship. Today, I once again found myself in the kitchen, this time with the task of baking enough banana bread for 70 people! I was quite happy with how well my banana bread turned out, as pictured here, and they went down very well with the community!



PRIERE POUR L'UNITE DES CHRETIENS

Seigneur Jésus,
Qui as prié pour que tous soient un,
Nous te prions pour l'unité des chrétiens,
Telle que tu la veux, par les moyens que tu veux.
Que ton Esprit nous donne
D'éprouver la souffrance de la séparation,
De voir notre péché,
Et d'espérer au delà de toute espérance.
Amen

Ce texte a été composé par des membres de la communauté du Chemin-Neuf à partir de la prière de l'abbé Paul Couturier.

SECLI : D58 - 35 © Les Abbatés du Chemin Neuf PARTITION - CDO Unité des Chrétiens

At Vespers tonight, there was another powerful demonstration of the ecumenical vocation of the Chemin Neuf community. On Thursday evening, the night Jesus gave the Eucharist to his Church at the Last Supper, the sacred vessels used at the Mass are brought up to the altar during the office hymn, but are empty. The chalice and paten serve as a sign of the common meal of Christianity, but their emptiness reflects the divisions that exist between many denominations, which Chemin Neuf daily pray for the healing of. During today's office we sang the prayer for the unity of Christians I mentioned on Monday, the music for which is pictured to the left. After singing this prayer, we moved to form a big

circle around the altar and prayed the Lord's Prayer together, the Christian family prayer, whilst holding hands and having in mind the particular intention of being united around one table and the hope of one day, being able to all share in the one bread and one cup.

Friday 23rd February

My last full day at Hautecombe has been more relaxed. Despite being down to be on 'Parc' today for the household services tending to the gardens, I found myself in the kitchen once more to bake more cakes. Sadly, these ones were a bit of a disaster, as I had a miscalculation

of baking powder! Never mind...! I spent some time in the afternoon today exploring the abbey grounds in more of a touristic fashion, using the audio guide provided for tourists visiting the abbey. Tourism is a key source of income for the community, with thousands of tourists visiting annually, especially to see many of the tombs of the House of Savoy which are here, including the tomb of the last King of Italy, Umberto II. I particularly wanted to find the tomb of Boniface of Savoy, who was an Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 13th century and buried at Hautecombe. I'm pleased that I was able to find Boniface's tomb at the east end of the abbey, as pictured right.



For Vespers this evening, there was a shortened Stations of the Cross, with an ecological focus. This was also interesting to participate in as it combined the traditional elements of Stations with what felt similar to Lectio Divina, with participants invited to share a particular word or phrase that stood out to them from what was read: a short passage from the Passion narrative and then an excerpt from Laudato Si. Again, the reverence and adoration the community has for Christ was clear in the deeply spiritual way each station was engaged with, which went far beyond any sense of Stations of the Cross being merely a rote ritual.

For dinner each Friday, the community have 'International Night' when members of the community from different countries are invited to prepare food that is traditional in their homeland. Today was Polish night as there are two Polish members of the community, one of whom is Sr Kasia, who was integral in arranging my visit to the abbey and liaising with me ahead of my arrival. We sang a Polish grace before the meal, which even involved dancing! After dinner, it was time for 'Soirée a la carte' which allows community members to have some leisure time to celebrate the end of the week. I chose to participate in the Karaoke night, which was a great time of fun and fellowship with many members of the community who have helped my time here at Hautecombe to be so fruitful and enjoyable. I am quite sad to be leaving Hautecombe tomorrow but will take back with me so many good memories of seeing how God is at work in this wonderful community. Chemin Neuf is clearly a force for good in the church, with a real passion for seeing more unity between Christians, visible in every time of prayer, and seeing lives and the world transformed and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. God is doing something very special here at Hautecombe and I believe there is a lot the wider church can learn from their commitment to ecumenism.

Saturday 24th February

Today, I bade farewell to Hautecombe and made my way back to Geneva by train ready to board my evening flight back to Liverpool, with a courtesy stop to buy some Swiss chocolate for my wife! I have had a wonderful ecumenical experience over the last 10 days and am very grateful to the Bill Snelson Young Ecumenists Fund for making it possible. I have gained some valuable insights for my future ministry and learning and I am so encouraged from the ecumenical work I observed and experienced at both the WCC and Hautecombe Abbey.