

Centro

News from the Anglican Centre in Rome

Volume 15 No 1 Eastertide 2009

The Ecumenical Movement: New Tune and New Tempo

Mary Reath

I caught a new vision of the Ecumenical Movement in January. It was at a conference *Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning* at the Centre for Catholic Studies, at Durham University in England. The event promised:

The conference will gather, by invitation, a mix of 200 church leaders, theologians, ecumenists, ecclesial bureaucrats, social scientists, organizational experts, and local church practitioners to spend four days and nights living, praying and studying together... It will engage a broad range of ecclesial traditions in pursuing the self-critical receptive ecumenical question – ‘What can we and what need we learn with creative integrity from our others?’ and especially to explore the on-the-ground relevance of Receptive Ecumenism”

It sounded good but I wondered what innovative thinking could possibly come from attempts to reinvigorate the 100-year-old movement that seeks the full visible union of literally thousands of very different complex social groups called churches.

So what happened? Did that intense out-pouring of papers and thinking and conversation – from participants gathered from four continents and 18 countries - that was intended to provoke fresh ideas get anywhere?

It did for me, and in a very big way. I realized that instead of fretting about what the Ecumenical Movement has *not* accomplished, the time is right to celebrate what it has done, to build on some of its successes, and to set in motion a new phase. The Ecumenical Movement is in tune with the great historical transition period that we’re living in, as a changing world order establishes its forms, in finance, technology, governance and, yes, Christianity. Many people, especially younger ones, have a renewed passion for the possible and a yearning for social cohesion and problem solving. A re-envisioned Ecumenical Movement within this awareness of a new interdependence, has concrete and useful things to offer the churches, things that they are just beginning to sense that they need, and possibly can’t live without.

Based on the many agreed documents and firm friendships, the initial phase of the Ecumenical Movement,



we could call it the friendship-building and legal phase, has, against all odds, succeeded. Beginning with common baptism, we should recognize that ‘water is thicker than blood,’ and celebrate it.

Firstly, let’s celebrate the fact that previously unimaginable barriers have been broken down and firm relationships are in place. Ecumenical friendships are real and treasured.

Mary Tanner rightly says in the preparatory book for the conference¹ that the personal and the relational is always prior, and that this needs to be built up for all people, not just the theologians and leaders.

Secondly, there is a wealth of agreed theological agreements to be studied. Granted, some are densely argued but aspects of them are not impenetrable, and parts are quite beautiful. They’re an excellent way of examining the breadth of Christian experience and thought, and they have demonstrated some of the incontrovertible elements of shared faith.

For example, very few Christians today disagree about the meaning of baptism. In Durham, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware reminded us that we are not baptized into a particular church or denomination. Christians may have

¹ Murray, Paul D. (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford University Press, 2008) page 268

New Tune and New Tempo

Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning *continued from front page*

differing views on when it should occur, but just about all agree on what it signifies.

How might a reformed Ecumenical Movement be manifest in ways that would interest and serve churches today?

1. We need always to be clear and to emphasize that it is a unity in diversity that is the end goal.

As Benedict XVI explained on January 25, 2009:

"In the legitimate diversity of varying positions we must seek unity in the faith, in our fundamental 'yes' to Christ and to His one Church. And thus diversity will no longer be an obstacle that separates us, but a richness in the multiplicity of expressions of the shared faith".

The differences should be widely examined and studied, but far more unites than divides and all churches are built up when the commonality is emphasized.

2. The churches have similar challenges; there is much they can learn from each other.

While it may not always appear so, all mainline Western churches are grappling with similar questions, and these are not going to go away anytime soon. Whether Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic or Presbyterian, they have ageing church-going populations that are not replicating themselves, a loss of confidence in those in authority, intense internal disagreements regarding human sexuality and morals, and a diversion of energies and resources into managing these issues.²

Of course there are some exceptions, but statistically whether liberal, moderate or conservative, Episcopalian, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, our children have voted with their feet. They're not in church.

At some deep level Christian disunity contributes to the decline in all the established churches. And conversely, it can be commitment to and work on the Ecumenical Movement that points them toward renewal.

3. Ecclesial learning

The Ecumenical Movement can now be situated where it should be, squarely in the middle of the local church, as an exciting center of cross-Christian education, conversation and renewal, a place of learning, discussion, advocacy and testimony, but above all education. We should be in each other's churches, explaining who we are, sharing ashes, singing Christmas carols, renewing baptismal vows, and on and on.

Educational ecumenism may bring a changed psychology of acceptance, a recognition that we share enough theologically and practically to do more together. This may or may not naturally lead to joint work in social justice, a deeper interest in comparative theology, work on inter-religious dialogue, and a greater understanding of Christian identity, but it is time to be learning about each other, Methodist or Moravian.

It will likely start when the grass-tops (church leaders and bishops) see the need to emphasize their friendships and encourage the local churches to mend fences, to get to know each other, and to teach that there is no excuse for not doing as much as they possibly can together.

It is risky, and there will be misunderstandings and mistakes, but that's OK. There is no clear trajectory or certain success here: it will require leadership, sensitivity and steadfast commitment, but the goal is rooted in a firm Biblical mandate.

For Christianity's sake, I want to urge two things:

----- **Establish an Ecumenical Hall of Fame.**

Recognize and celebrate the people and accomplishments of phase one. They've done an amazing job. Ancient and high barriers have fallen, and in spite of the well known questions and problems, theological dialogue is actually making progress and the friendships at the top are real.

---- And then, start phase two. **Take a page from the leaders at the top:** begin building friendships and education at the local level.

We should have local, national and international groups that meet regularly, engaging the best educators to introduce these theological documents, and then sharing information about successful projects. We can also do more to build the types of friendships that are now common in Rome, Canterbury and Geneva. I am assuming a continuation of the important work of ecumenical theology. But, in all likelihood, full visible unity needs the local church and its organic drip, drip, drip of many, many small and large imaginative encounters.

It is misguided and wrong to do nothing together just because we can't do everything (share communion) together. Let's take a lesson from a conversation, attributed to 20th century French marshal, Hubert Lyautey.

"The marshal says to his gardener, 'Could you plant a tree?' The gardener says, 'Come on, it's going to take 50 years before you see anything out of that tree.' The marshal replies, 'It's going to take 50 years? Really? Then plant it this morning.'"

Mary Reath is the author of *Rome & Canterbury, The Elusive Search for Unity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). She serves on the *Anglican Roman Catholic dialogue in the U.S. (ARC/USA)*.



² *Receptive Ecumenism* Brendan Tuohy & Eamonn Conway, page 312