

50 Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

CTBI/CTUG CONSULTATION ON WCC DOCUMENT "NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH.

High Leigh 12-13 June 2008.

David Cornick welcomed everybody to the consultation, quoting from Bill Rusch's book *Ecumenical Reception-Its Challenge and Opportunity* with stress upon the fact that reception was never easy, that it involved the process of remaining true to one's own tradition whilst simultaneously being drawn into a taking on of things that did not fully reflect one's own tradition. It was never easy, it was always a gift of God's Spirit. David then offered a brief opening prayer

Churches' Responses to the *Nature and Mission of the Church*.

Roman Catholic Church.

Colin Carr stressed that his was *not* an official response.

Colin commented on the similarity of much of the language in *Nature and Mission* to that of *Lumen Gentium*. He stated that when Roman Catholics discovered, to their surprise, how much they had in common with other churches they could be either delighted or, alternatively, indignant that others dared to sing from their hymn sheet. In general, the more positive mood was coming to prevail.

He stressed that the concept of the sacraments making the Church emphasised the primacy within it of God's gifts. The Church does not possess and dole out the sacraments; rather, it receives them as God's gift to its life, which always remains precarious.

He added that the report mentioned the issue of primacy rather than petrine ministry and referred to John Paul II's call in *Ut Unum Sint* to other church leaders and theologians to help him develop a style of primacy that was a service of unity rather than a stumbling block to it.

Finally, he argued that the issue of mission in a multi-cultural society needed to be addressed and that the culture of the Vatican needed to be changed in order to make it more responsive to the ecumenical challenge.

In the ensuing conversation, it was stressed that no one denomination had a uniform view on every subject, that little was said about mission in the report in contrast to the stress on it in *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World). It was the God of mission that had a church rather than the Church that had a mission.

United Reformed Church.

Richard Mortimer said the URC was very grateful for the profound treatment of ecclesiology and the traditional ecumenical agenda in the report. He drew attention to the following points.

The way in which the sheer amount of material in the boxes revealed the distance *still* to be travelled in the search for convergence; however, we could all identify with the questions being asked.

The URC accepted that the questions asked by its sisters and brothers of other traditions had to become its questions; however, this process must become reciprocal.

The document was stronger on the nature of the Church than on mission; the URC would also like to see more on the relationship with other faiths. There was concern that not more attention was given to the questions raised by churches of the global south e.g. about economic justice. The URC would also like to see more fleshing out of the text with concrete examples.

The stress on the 'sinlessness' of the Church did not help us engage with those who saw the Church as a corrupt colonial institution.

In the context of the discussion of the limits of diversity and the stress on confessional identity, there should also be some discussion in terms of the united churches and the sacrifices that they had made of previously separate identities for the sake of unity.

The affirmation of the sign nature of the Church should also take into account the fact that God sometimes goes on ahead of the Church. How can it discern the divine presence 'going on in front'?

There was an insufficient account of the recent discussions concerning the role of baptism in initiation; the URC would also have liked to see some discussion of discipline as a mark of the Church.

There should be more discussion as to the extent to which perception of the essence of the Church were unchanging or culturally conditioned.

In the ensuing discussion, Richard confirmed that this was a draft still awaiting final approval. Angela asked how a stress on the liberating work of the Church might be held in fruitful tension with discipline as a necessary mark. David Carter pointed to the complex nature of tradition and to the fact that it was constantly in a state of development. He also referred to the enormous step taken by some Baptists in N. India when they had entered into an episcopal church, a mark of how far one could travel in pursuit of unity. Colin Carr stressed that Tradition allows real change. Elizabeth stressed that Faith and Order and Life and Work could not be kept separate and that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches had seen the questions of race and poverty as involving *status confessionis*. Reciprocity had to involve the concerns of non-episcopal churches in their relations with the episcopal sector of Christendom.

Church of Scotland.

Paul Nimmo circulated a paper containing a response not yet ratified by the General Assembly. The Group was appreciative of the revisions to the preceding document, of its honesty about differences and stressed the need for continued dialogue. He also stressed the following points.

That many of the differences recorded existed *within* particular churches and were not per se church dividing e.g. there was disagreement within the Church of Scotland about the 'sinlessness' of the Church. Perhaps more should have been said about how differing views might in general be held in tension within a single church.

That more should be said about the Church and other faiths.

There was also the question of dissemination-how was the *whole* of the Church to engage with the document?

The language of communion could be used more judiciously. Full communion might be seen by some as a purely eschatological concept.

In the following discussion, which ranged well beyond the immediate Scottish response, Tom asked for elaboration on this last point. The question of the reality of the exercise of oversight within *any one* tradition came up Elizabeth said that *Nature and Purpose* did not seem to mesh theological exploration with any real sociological analysis. David Carter briefly explained the problems of the Methodist working party on episcopate and episcopacy in identifying accurately the *empirical* exercise of episcopate within the current Methodist structures. Bob stressed the influence of national cultures on church life, illustrating this by averring that there was a very presbyterian feel to his own Scottish Episcopal Church in this respect as a result of the democratic nature of Scottish society. Paul said there was concern within the Church of Scotland about the extent to which decisions were sewn up in the corridors of power with insufficient wider consultation. Andrew said that there was a two way process of ecclesiology affecting a local culture and of the local culture affecting the Church.

Bill Gabb felt that the document would have very little affect on the smaller independent churches whose concerns were scarcely addressed. David Carter asked how the question of 'local church' could be opened up to more fruitful dialogue and mutual questioning between churches with an independent ecclesiology and those with episcopal, presbyterian or connexional ecclesiologies. David Cornick said that we were back to the problem of reception and instanced an example of a very able student working on the Reformation who had no awareness of the recent Joint Declaration on Justification. Elizabeth asked whether there was a critical mass of popular support that had to be forthcoming before we could have real rapprochement between different traditions; she felt that we might have come near to this at the time of the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims Process* in the 80's.

Andrew Kleissen asked how we kept an eye on the methodology that we generated.. We needed to reflect on what it meant to be the church in the four nations. There was a two way ecumenical process, at the official level but also at the local level of spontaneity. Angela reminded us that many congregations were now of diverse confessional background.

Baptist Union.

Graham Sparkes presented the Baptist response. He felt they could affirm a great deal about the report, especially they way in which it so clearly set out key issues. He had three general comments.

The text needed contextual development

They should invite stories in response.

The whole understanding of mission needed to be further spelt out.

He specified three key issues.

The tension between local and universal. Universal was to the fore in the document but Baptists

wanted more attention given to the local. They stressed, however, that their doctrine was not one of the *autonomy* of local churches but of their *interdependence*.

The section on baptism. The recent Anglican-Baptist conversations on this and the move towards seeing baptism as a point on a journey, carried out at different stages in different traditions, would be helpful here.

The issue of church-state relations where some wanted a close relationship, others wanted to stand outside, even in opposition to the state. All this needed further exploration.

In the following discussion, Colin Price mentioned that the Congregationalist Federation would be in broad agreement, though it saw infant baptism primarily as a witness to the faith of the parents of the child being baptised rather than as part of a fuller pattern of initiation. Janet mentioned that the WCC was about to produce a book on baptism, edited by Tom Best.

Church of England.

Martin Davie said that the Church of England was broadly happy with the consensus registered, but that some areas of the report could be improved. More could be said about the relationship of the proclamation of the kingdom to mission. More should be said about the Church in the New Testament. Worship was central but had been largely treated as peripheral. The question of the fullness of the Church and the degree of its embodiment within the local Church needed to be examined more fully.

More was also needed on

The goal of the ecumenical process and whether this involved a structurally united church or a communion of churches in reconciled diversity.

Levels of decision making.

Territoriality. Can a particular country be the exclusive territory of a particular church?

Christian anthropology (not just ordination)

The divisiveness of differing stances on ethical matters.

Salvation in relation to membership of the visible church.

It was also felt the text was too abstract and concentrated too much upon the institutional as opposed to the dynamic in the Church.

Martin said he would be happy to let anyone who wanted it have a copy of the full FOAG Text.

The Main Papers.

(Paul Avis' was distributed and so I only record subsequent discussion. Andrew Walls' paper will be circulated later, so I preface the discussion with a brief summary of it)

Paul Avis- Hermeneutics of Unity.

Paul's very thorough paper was most warmly received and applauded. In the ensuing discussion, Jin Bryden asked how we knew when God was speaking to us and Myles Rearden also raised the question of discernment. Alan Morris said that in theological dialogue one discovered more clearly who one was. He also discovered that he was something other than he had thought himself to be as a direct result of the engagement. Ideally, dialogue formed apart of the discernment process of hearing what the Lord was saying.

Paul, in responding to these comments, affirmed that God was a god who communicated unstintingly with his creation, pouring his very being into it. We need to exercise our human responsibility to the full in listening him. This could only be done fully on an ecumenical basis. We deceived ourselves if we thought that we could hear him purely on an individual basis or even as isolated churches. His word was mediated to us and refracted through many channels. Paul himself stood with those Anglican theologians who said that probability was the guide of life and that God gave us sufficient light by which to travel (a point also made in *Called To Love and Praise*). Janet added that discernment was enhanced in action; one discerned through acting on the word. One can then make authentic statements that arise out of lived and enacted experience.

Elizabeth said that in ecumenism there was a tightrope between proper patience and proper impatience. David Cornick asked whether there was a role for prophetic proleptic activity e.g. that of the Taizé Community. He also said that he did not always recognise his own church in the way others described it. Graham pointed to the tension between those who wanted to advance the cause of unity through common action and those who insisted on theological convergence. He also asked whether there were limits to reception. Tom asserted that Faith and Order issues were fundamental and that without a proper sense of Christian solidarity joint evangelisation could not be undertaken.

Paul said that the relationship between praxis (which he clearly distinguished, as informed by right thinking, from practice) and theory was circular. The churches needed help with reflection on praxis. The process of reception required a degree of communion, not just sacramental.

Angela asked how Paul's paper could be related to the teaming processes of local churches. How could we raise the level of theological literacy so that it was not just theologians who understood the issues and vocabulary? Colin Carr mentioned the problems posed by the fact that many in the Church could not see how alien their church culture was to others. Justin asked how wall-embracing was the imperative of unity. David Carter gave instances in his experience of the *sensus fidelium* concerning unity as active amongst some who would certainly not consider themselves theologians or be familiar with ecumenical jargon.

Paul, in conclusion, affirmed that there was a hunger amongst people to understand more fully. There was a tension between the dividedness of the Church and its inherent God-given unity and we had to use every opportunity and take every step to be open to all ecumenical partners.

Andrew Walls. Missiological Perspective.

Andrew began by emphasising God's design to gather all creation under the lordship of Christ. He argued that the nature and mission of the Church constituted not two topics but one sole topic.

He then expounded the role of Israel in the mission of God. The role of the Messiah was to

renew Israel as light to the nations and the early chapters of Acts recounted precisely the community life of the renewed messianic Israel. It should be borne in mind that there was no original gentile mission plan but that the mission to the gentiles had only emerged as a result of nudges. When gentiles joined the Church, they became members of Israel but without having to live as Jews. We dared not lose the organic connection with Israel.

Andrew next argued that cross cultural mission required theological translation. New developments in mission did not necessarily derive from deliberate planning but from the spontaneous action of very ordinary Christians. The move into Greek culture involved new questions e.g. about being and essence that could not be answered in the previous language of the Church and led to new developments in the theology of the Incarnation and Trinity. Each crossing of a new cultural frontier involved new questions about what to think and also to do (as in 1 Corinthians). The cultures of Africa and Asia would produce new cross-roads for Christian decision and finding answers would involve intense activity.

A key contemporary issue was the interface with Islam, rather the interfaces since there are so many forms of Islam. For 1400 years, muslims had not really heard the gospel, though they might think that they knew what Christians believed. When muslims came to hear it, it would be within the context of the umma rather than as individuals. Andrew then shared with us some interesting examples of how some communities, often sufi, in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Bangladesh, were coming to pray to Isa and to experience a communitarian moral renewal as a result of their newfound faith in him. How would the Church relate to these movements? Could the nexus with them possibly involve the Nicene Creed?

Andrew then argued that cultural diversity had been built into the Church since the time of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The one community, with two lifestyles, one Jewish, one gentile, was central to the NT, especially to the thought of the writer of Ephesians who argued that only together do we come to the full stature of Christ. Paul had been indignant at any idea that the gentile Galatians should be expected to adopt a Jewish lifestyle. The schisms of the fifth century in which the Coptic/Syriac expression of Christianity had become separated from the Greek/Latin expression had sadly made further, later division easier.

Finally, Andrew addressed the twentieth century context. The latter had seen the end of the great European migrations of the previous four centuries and the beginning of a reverse process of migration into the European and North American world. Christianity had receded in Europe and N. America and exploded in Africa and expanded elsewhere with the result that two thirds of Christians were now in the global South. We could now realise what he called the 'Ephesian moment' with the many cultures converted to Christ becoming part of a new Temple.

Finally, he stressed that there were two great commissions, that of Matt 28 referring to the discipling of the nations (not just individuals within them) and that of John 20 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' with the proclamation of good news for the poor and the year of jubilee.

Andrew's outstanding lecture was received with applause and deep appreciation.

In the ensuing discussion, Janet asked about the nature of the Church as counter-cultural, referring to her experience of seeing members of different castes gathered around the Lord's table to receive communion together. Andrew stressed that God receives us as we are. Christ had not become generalised humanity, he had taken on the specific culture of a first century Jew. He did, however, stress that in Christ there is both an indigenisation and a universalisation

that take place and that we cannot have too much of either, though often we have had too little of both.

A question was asked about how we can be liberated from our current church culture so as to more effectively proclaim the gospel. Andrew replied that we were past the era in which revival in the old sense was possible and that we now had to approach our current non-Christian culture cross-culturally.

Martin asked what we were to make of proposals that we should not attempt to convert Jews. He also asked whether the big division in the contemporary church was between those who believe that western post enlightenment culture is compatible with Christian faith and those who believe that it is inimical to it and therefore that people have to be summoned out of it. Andrew said this was part of the story but not the whole. We must certainly not confine Christian theology to current western horizons; arguably, it would be too limited for Africa and elsewhere.

Lively discussion continued in the groups.

Groups.

Four met on two occasions. Their questions for the final panel are listed under that heading. Here I list points not otherwise dealt with elsewhere in this text and points stressed by two or more groups and thus of wide concern amongst the participants at this consultation.

Points made by two or more groups.

The need for clarification of the goal of the ecumenical process.

The need for a more concrete text with more stories and more emphasis upon the dynamic and non-institutional aspects of Church rather than the institutional.

The need for more active conversation between ‘interfaith’ and ‘faith and order’ people.

Other points.

How far is the Church Christ? If it is, then how can one dissent from the view that outside it, there is no salvation? What is salvation?

How does Paul Avis’ paper help churches with completely different theological views overcome their differences?

How do variations in social context, including class, education, language affect the importance /non-importance of the issues raised in the document?

How do we assess the significance in this context of the degree to which so many Christians now sit light to denominational heritages and agendas?

How do we find a common language? Does it emerge out of worship or common service or must it come first?.

How do we engage with those marginalised or even alienated by the form and language of the

document?

How do we hear and receive global perspectives in the text?

Final panel.

1. Tension between the classic Faith and Order agenda and ‘fresh expressions of church’. How do we hold them together?

Ephrem stressed that ecumenists live in a strange bubble bearing little relationship to the life of ordinary Christians who are not that worried about the differences. Angela feared that if we were not very careful the tension could result in fresh division. How do we enable emerging forms of church to find their place within the one holy, catholic and apostolic church? Paul felt it would be useful for CTBI to do some work on this though perhaps not in the immediate future. He also said that it was important to see how traditional expressions of church could be refreshed and renewed.

2. Religious language, communication and receptivity.

Paul said that ecumenical reception and rapprochement were great new works of the Holy Spirit and that they must go on at every level. He felt that very often the ordained failed to communicate relevant knowledge and challenges despite the fact that amongst the laity there was a great hunger for them. It was observed that some of our language is very complex, in contrast to our Lord’s ability to use very simple language. Ephrem pointed to the useful concept of re-reception, the rediscovery of what we should have been continuing to do all along. What we really needed was a fresh expression of an *enduring* vocation. It was all too easy to imagine that some more recent practices were universally authentic-this was how many Orthodox regarded the infrequency of receiving communion even though it was not the practice of the early Church.

3. To what extent does inculturation make any ecclesiological document a provisional rather than a static one?

Paul stressed that Nature and Mission was only intended to be a provisional text capable of a universal reception certainly but only in so far as a current western frame of reference was involved. In future generations, its insights would need complementing with those of other cultures. Andrew argued that the continuing decline of the church in the West would almost certainly force considerable ecclesiological rethinking.

4. How do we find the right language by which to relate Gospel and culture. How can we do this, working together ecumenically?

Andrew asked whether there was any one answer to this conundrum. He talked of the disaster of the nineteenth century Protestant missionary movement. He said that the average contemporary African, Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian was a charismatic woman in her mid-20’s. God had over-ridden much of the original missionary influence cross-culturally. The missionary consciousness of the Chinese church was developing and there was an intense desire to re-evangelise the West. He wanted to see us learn a new language together. Paul said we could only speak our own language and be true to ourselves. We needed the whole Church to speak, each part in its own language. Unity must be a missionary unity.

Concluding remarks.

These were made by Rev. Bob Fyffe, thanking everyone for their participation and expressing the hope that CTBI could continue to serve the four nations in this and other relevant concerns.

A personal reflection.

First of all, thankfulness to CTBI, Bob and Peter in particular, for taking this initiative and restoring Faith and Order work to a key position in their agenda.

In this consultation, many key questions were asked which now call for systematic follow-up and perhaps prolonged study and reflection, a matter that CTBI and the national instruments now need to address and communicate to the churches.

Key issues of reception and ecumenical education need to be aired. Elizabeth talked of the necessity of reaching a point where there is a critical mass of support from the pews for the ecumenical task; at the moment, many have little apparent interest in it, though we should not overlook the degree of trans-denominational goodwill that does exist in many places.

Education in ecumenism, even for ordinands, is generally underplayed in this country. Those teachers in higher education who are ecumenically committed generally have other major academic and teaching commitments-this is in contrast with the situation in the Roman Catholic faculties in the near-continent who often have a member of staff with specific responsibility for ecumenism and ecclesiology (my friend, Joseph Fameree at Louvain-la-Neuve is one such).

Apart perhaps from the *Tablet*, there is a lack of journals dealing with ecumenical matters which address the seriously interested Christian who is not an academic expert in the subject. There is no exact or near equivalent to the French *Unite des Chretiens* or the American *Ecumenical Trends*. There is little between the very simplistic and the very academic *One in Christ* and *Ecumenical Review*.

Recently, when County Ecumenical Officer for Bristol, I suggested to the training officers of the Anglican diocese and Methodist district, that it might be a good idea to develop a short course in ecumenism suitable for the sort of lay leaders (elders, church wardens, lay preachers etc) on whom so much depends at the local level. The idea fell on deaf ears and may not be a particularly good way to arouse their enthusiasm but how to enthuse such local lay leaders remains an issue we must tackle.

I resonated with much in Paul's paper, particular his twin emphases that all ecumenism must be spiritual ecumenism and also involve an element of receptive ecumenism. We must return to the spirit of William Shrewsbury and Paul Couturier. Our ecumenism must be an affair of the heart, of our love for the Holy Spirit and his work in others, of our love for our fellow Christians; as Paul C put it how can we not love those who also bear the name of Christ?

Some years ago, one of the many connexional financial appeals within Methodism adopted the slogan *Giving-A Methodist Way of Living*. I would suggest to my fellow Methodists that as far as ecumenism is concerned we adapt this to read *Receiving -A Methodist Way of Living*, remembering Shrewsbury's reminder to the Methodist people of his time that the Methodists were debtors to the rest of the Christian world, to the Puritans, the Caroline high churchmen, the Moravians and

other continental pietists, all of whom had so strongly influenced the Wesleys and the pattern of early Methodism.

Such a motto should, of course, be transferable to all other Christian traditions. Ideally, of course, as Richard Mortimer pointed out, such relationships should be fully reciprocal, each tradition open to both giving and receiving. Vital above all is an attitude of kenotic generosity in which each church, able to set aside historical hurts and pride, is more concerned to receive than with the extent to which its concerns are being heard elsewhere. The attitudes that Paul commends to individual Christians in their relations with each other, tenderness, forgiveness, longsuffering, forbearing and patience are surely those that should prevail between the churches in their corporate relationships. One accepts that this is not an easy discipline: as both Paul Couturier and subsequently, the Groupe des Dombes, stated, so much pride is invested in corporate belonging, in the Church as well as outside of it. The ideal way is of course that of dialogue in which we allow the witness of our sister churches to speak to our consciences as to whether there are aspects of the apostolic tradition that we may have neglected and now need to re-receive or even receive for the first time. It is important also to participate as far as we can in others' traditions, bearing in mind the statement of the Nottingham Conference of 1987 in the Not Strangers But Pilgrims Process that unity comes alive as we learn to live in one another's traditions.

None of this, of course, obviates the need for continued hard theological and ecclesiological work on those points on which an honest and rigorously developed differentiated consensus still eludes us.

Two points raised in the consultation strike me as particularly requiring further work. One is the sense of churches, particularly smaller denominations, in the 'independent' tradition for whom local church is the local congregation (not diocese or a larger unit) that their witness is not really being listened to. I suggest a dialogue between those in that tradition and the episcopal and connexional churches in which the latter listen to the witness of the independents concerning the nature of the church meeting acting under the invisible headship of Christ while at the same time enquiring how they see that member churches of voluntary unions maintain real bonds of fellowship and common responsibility for the handing on of the apostolic tradition. I think there are valuable things that could be received from that tradition into the life of worshipping parish congregations in the other traditions and without impairing their witness to the importance of episcopacy or connexionalism.

The other is that if the Church as New Israel really, is as Andrew Walls asserts, the appointed light to the nations, then we must ask how the theology and practice of koinonia can contribute to human community development and relationships and how our discussions on the relationship of local and universal may say something to a world that increasingly needs a new order if it is to avoid runaway disaster. Some of our ecumenical ecclesiological discussions, abstract as their jargon may seem, may be of more relevance to the world than we think despite our fears that they are scarcely even relevant to our own ordinary ecclesial constituencies.

These are just a few of the points for a possible future agenda.

David Carter. 16.6.2008.