

Churches Together in England.

One in Christ Jesus, engaged in God's mission, empowered by the Spirit.

As we begin a new chapter in CTE's life, with the implementation of the 2017 *Theos* report our priority, what will be our vision for the life of CTE, and, indeed, the life of the churches together in England in uncertain — perhaps, perilous — times?

1. First and foremost, we must develop our renewed ecumenical identity with greater focus upon our common witness and collaboration in mission. The churches in membership with CTE have identified and called for this, and the challenge of the times demands it. Not that CTE is called to become another mission agency, but rather, an ecumenical space where greater collaboration in mission becomes possible, and even inevitable — a broad tent under which we can gather and share life. The growing ecumenical character of the Archbishop of Canterbury's initiative, *Thy Kingdom Come* reflects such a move. The broad tent resembles, more accurately, a marquee, with the sides wide open to receive the breeze of God's Spirit and enable ready access to the world beyond. At its very centre is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the head of the body, pointing us to the Father through the Spirit, present within and also beyond those gathered under the shelter of the canvas. The very first direction of our gaze must always be the triune God, even as he then calls us to join with him in looking to the whole of creation and the world he creates, sustains and loves.

This collaborative approach to God's mission is cashed out where conversations about initiatives are readily shared at the earliest stages of their conception and birth, so that the maximum benefit might be gained from their implementation; where trust and fellowship between the churches is so deep that initiatives that might previously have been thought of as suspect or alien are welcomed and embraced; and where, at the very least, we inform one another about the particular initiatives our churches are taking, with the expectation that we shall join them in prayer even if we cannot join them in execution.

We might describe this as a kind of "missional receptive ecumenism" — where we welcome the very different ways of engaging in mission that arise from our diverse traditions and histories, rather than distancing ourselves from them. Receptive ecumenism is already well-established as the way to ask the question, not what must I insist upon as we enter conversation, but what can I receive from the other? What gift-exchange is there as we encounter one another, an exchange that enriches us both? I see a *missional* receptive ecumenism in similar terms. An older reticence about engaging in evangelism together was informed by the perceived irreconcilable differences in the character of the gospel proclaimed and the nature of the salvation to be received. Much of that mutual suspicion has receded and has been replaced with a renewed confidence that we can indeed proclaim the same good news of salvation (witness the way in which at a local churches level, many different traditions cooperate in running *Alpha*, for instance, from Catholics to Baptists to

Methodists and Pentecostals.) Recent research for the CCU¹ has revealed that the churches in towns surveyed were keen to work together for the first mark of mission, proclaiming the good news. This note was surprising, and there is a need for further research, but I sense that there is already a new readiness to evangelise together.

Missional receptive ecumenism might look like this: the strength of Catholic work with families in depth, through Church Schools and Parish life accompanied by the very personal evangelism and focus upon conversion that is an Evangelical emphasis, for instance, or the tradition of working with the marginalised that is woven into Salvation Army and Methodist experience alongside and enriched by the new monasticism, messy church or chaplaincy. The combinations are almost endless. CTE does not need to develop any new initiatives, but rather, to serve the churches by enabling greater collaboration with what is already in existence or will soon be.

The work of the Enabling Group in discussing mission earlier in 2018 is a good first step in working out what such collaborative mission might look like, and the results of the previous Enabling Group conversations about mission have been consolidated by Jim Currin.

2. In particular, I believe there is significant work to be done through collaboration in deepening discipleship amongst English Christians. I have often thought that what we need more than some new initiative or technique — helpful though these are — are Christians with a more winsome faith and lifestyle, greater courage to share their faith and better equipped for the rough and tumble of living out their following of Jesus in an indifferent or even hostile culture. There is nothing 'automatic' about deep discipleship, or formation in the life of faith — it is both 'caught' from others who exemplify it, and 'taught' through intentional catechetical processes. Could we not find ways of discipling Christians together, so that the most natural thing is to first welcome one another, before noticing our differences?

I detect a Spirit-initiated breeze blowing through the churches in this direction: The WCC *World Mission and Evangelism Conference* in Arusha, Tanzania, this March had discipleship as its major emphasis; Methodists, United Reformed Church and Baptist Union are highlighting its importance; Catholics are planning a year of the Bible, accompanied by The Bible Society and many others.

Through the *Bible Reading Fellowship*, the Methodist Church has developed a new initiative — *Holy Habits* (now being commended to the URC and Baptists Together); while Faith2Share (a global network of 36 Christian mission movements, including Church Mission Society and OMF International) has developed its *Whole-life Discipleship* programme. There are others, too, and I suspect that God is drawing us into a deeper expression of faith, even as the context within which we live that faith becomes more challenging.

¹ Research undertaken by CCU intern, and CTE staff member, Amelia Sutcliffe.

3. Alongside this vital venture in collaborative mission and discipleship is the yearning from the churches that we speak with one voice into the public square. On some issues, this will prove very difficult, as we do not share a common outlook on such divisive issues as human sexuality, economic policy, educational policy or defence strategy. But there are many areas where speaking out the Christian gospel together is possible — our deep sorrow at injustice, racism and the marginalising of the weak; our anger and sadness at the continuing violence of war and terrorism; and our urgent concern for the long-term stability of life on a warming planet. These are issues that we share with men and women of goodwill and of many faiths, and the absence of our united voice heard clearly in the public square is bewildering to many and weakens our witness.

4. The WCC statement on "Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes", *Together Towards Life*, adopted at the most recent Assembly, in Busan in 2013, calls for a holistic mission in the power of the Holy Spirit, "Life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission, the core of why we do what we do and how we live our lives This mission spirituality has a dynamic of transformation which, through the spiritual commitment of people, is capable of transforming the world in God's grace."² In our readiness to engage in social action together, and the lowering of expectations for early progress towards visible unity, I wonder if we have not ignored a vital and unforced or managed ecumenical journey — the way in which we have come to share so much in one another's spiritualities and practices of prayer. Evangelicals go on retreat, Catholics are excited about Scripture, Pentecostals and Baptists explore new monasticism, and almost everybody lights candles these days! In discovering how much we share in our practices of prayer — another form of receptive ecumenism — and determinedly embracing a new sharing in prayer and worship, we might discover the resources through which the Spirit is empowering us as disciples together for the mission we are called to share in — the *missio Dei*, God's mission. This is not a dismissal of those practices that are central to our various traditions but a call to become ever-more open to the ways in which God has met with his people through the ages — from icons to Bible reading notes, from Ignatian retreats to speaking in tongues, from the structure of the rosary to the informality of the prayer-triplet. Pentecostals have their nights of prayer, others a Daily Office, and others the sound of silence — and all can be used by the Spirit to fulfil God's purposes in deeper and more faithful ways.

5. As we work together in mission and pray together with shared spiritualities, then perhaps, will come fresh ways of making our unity-in-diversity visible to a watching world. I wonder if, after a century of ecumenical endeavour, we are discovering that while our early aims were right, and our hope strong, the order by which we achieve the unity for which Christ prayed and for which we all long, has been mistaken — putting theological conformity before lived spirituality, or organisational integrity

² (ed.) Jooseop Keum, *Together Towards Life* (2013) Geneva: WCC Publications. 4–5

before missional imperatives. If I return to the image of the marquee, with its open sides, underneath its shelter are a number of tables, around which we sit and eat, tell stories, pay the bills, and laugh, cry and love one another. At present there are separate tables to share the eucharist — and this is a cause of great sadness to us, provoking a longing for the day when this will no longer be the case. But even if we gather around separate tables, to break bread and drink wine, we can reach across to those at another table, grasp their hands and offer blessing, recognising that each table is valid and part of the whole, albeit fragmented whole. The tables can be reconfigured for other acts of worship, prayer, witness and solidarity, so that they become one large array; while at other times, they enable intense and honest debate about those remaining matters that divide us, always conducted in a spirit that conforms to Christ and in accord with “how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (1 Tim 3:15)

6. Alongside this we cannot ignore the steady progress of embracing churches yet to join CTE, and in some cases, being proactive in reaching out rather than waiting for them to find us. Some have wonderful gifts to offer the rest of the churches, and my prayer is that we shall be able to integrate them nationally, just as locally they have already begun that journey.
7. Nor can we avoid the hard work of ensuring that none are marginalised, be they new churches or ancient, founding denominations or the newest member, large in number or few, planted everywhere, or concentrated regionally. As newer churches join, older churches can feel their influence diminished; newer churches can feel somewhat ignored when others have worked out how to be ecumenical over decades. The truth is probably that within our society as a whole, even when we stand strong together, we can be marginalised and feel ignored in the overwhelmingly secular culture. We do not serve the purposes of God when we act in similar ways towards one another — even when that is almost unconscious.
8. But all of these ways in which we might develop the effectiveness of CTE — so that churches find real benefits, both financial and missional, from participating — we cannot ignore the very real challenges facing the churches. Some might be particularly concerned for falling church membership and participation, but to limit our concerns to that would be to retreat into our own religious huddle. The recent *Conference of European Churches* assembly in Novi Sad, Serbia, June 2018, drew attention to the threats from climate change, populism and migration. We cannot ignore how closely inter-woven are those three challenges to freedom and the flourishing of all. In Britain we face the particular (and downright peculiar) threat from Brexit if delivered incompetently, while on the international stage, the extraordinary political events of a Trump presidency, a re-surgent Russia (with all the renewed risks of a hot war) and the shift to the Right in European politics (with our political life not immune to this) are all changing the relatively settled post-war international and economic order. When Francis Fukuyama wrote "The End of History" in 1992, he saw the fall of Marxism as the end of the great 20th century

conflict between Communism and Capitalism — epitomised in NATO versus the Soviet Bloc, or the USA and the USSR — but how wrong can a historian be? It seems the Russian bear might be wearing different political clothes, but its desire to control its own sphere straddling East and West is undiminished. The erosion of solidarity in the West (embodied in NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations) makes the future capability to withstand those who wish to unhinge the international order and the rule of law all the more uncertain. Add to this the extraordinary growth in economic inequality, an international kleptomaniac elite, the strange demise of public truth and the concomitant rise in both social media as a force for ill as well as good, the transformation of political identity based upon class and economic context to one based upon identity and person-hood — gender-based, issue-based and age-related; and the impact of AI — well, we certainly live in interesting times. So interesting, that the churches cannot afford any extended delay in their deepening collaboration for both their own sake and that of the societies they are called to serve, and most important all to the glory of the triune God.

You might even say that the slowness in developing deep ecumenical collaboration for mission, peace and justice is just as sinful — or certainly foolish — as the way in which galvanising the political will to challenge a runaway global warming is seemingly-corroded by narrow national interest and global greed. Faltering progress in this regard only increases the likelihood of climate change that, ultimately, would signal the demise of ordered life on this planet.

9. In giving some metaphorical and Biblical heft to this challenge I have become convinced that the church is heading towards, if not already emerged into, a kind of exile. Like the readers of Jeremiah's letter in Jeremiah 29 that was written to counter the false hopes preached by Hananiah and his ilk, who prophesied a swift return home and a recovery of glory, we need to hear the unpalatable news that there are no quick-fixes to our current decline. Jeremiah, that old prophet, often misunderstood as gloomy, called for the exiles to come to terms with being in Babylon for the long haul. Seventy years would have to pass before they returned home, and most, if not all, of those who heard the letter being read would die in exile and those who did return would carry the image of the former temple's glory only from second-hand descriptions or barely-recalled childhood memories. I suspect that few, if any, of us will live to see the tide turn in a significant way, and for none of us will it be so much return from exile, as a moving into a new place — at this point the metaphor of exile breaks down: there is no going back to some perceived golden age. Our journey into a post-Christian Britain might feel exilic, but a return to Christendom is most unlikely. Jeremiah's admonition to his readers was to remain committed to both their God and the society they found themselves joined to — plant vineyards, become gardeners, get married — and to pray for the peace of the city of which they were now reluctant citizens. Understanding our context as exilic does not mean we retreat into moated huddles and withdraw into pious or despairing isolation, but exile means remaining committed to being the church, proclaiming the gospel, being salt and light, even if the times are not propitious for easy recovery. Indeed, the new context for Christian witness and life has the potential for flourishing congregational life, and strong public engagement and

witness. Through all of this journey, we must hold firm the faith, passing it on and continuing to seek after God as disciples of Jesus Christ.

10. While we live in this new world where the churches are no longer the serious 'power in the land' of an older political and social settlement and culture, and where secularism rubs shoulders with multi-faith society, there is much we can continue to pursue. Strengthen the work of ecumenism at the level of intermediate bodies and in its local, town-wide/village-wide embodiment that is the ecumenical currency for most Christians; resource that local ecumenism with stories, imaginative experiments, and personal support from County Ecumenical Officers and church leaders; build strong relationships with the emerging informal ecumenism of, for instance, *Gather*; encourage the kind of theological conversation that addresses the differences between traditions with mutual respect and our finest minds; and find ways of continuing to provide the financial resources we need to fulfil our mandate, while demonstrating to those who give generously that engaging *together* in mission, witness and worship is much more cost-effective than attempting to do so in isolation from one another. Whether we embrace it, or denounce it, we cannot be isolated from the consumerist 'spirit of the age', and churches and intermediate bodies justifiably want to know that they are getting value for money when they fund CTE.

11. Can we rise to a fresh desire for unity in Christ? By the Spirit, certainly. Can we find fresh reserves of passion for the Kingdom of God to come through social justice and personal discipleship, even in exile? Together, mutually-accountable and inspired by Jesus' prayer that we might be one so that the world will know, I believe so. Are there challenges that will seek to thwart our greater effectiveness in mission together? Yes, of course, both from within the church of Jesus Christ and beyond. The financial commitment to ecumenism is patchy, and that means more than continuing funding for CTE so that it can do what the churches ask of it; government will want to co-opt the churches to its own agendas, and on its own terms, and this can distort our kingdom values and identity; and a frustration with the sometimes slow pace of change can result in a dismissal of the whole ecumenical enterprise as irrelevant for a culture that demands immediate results. Awareness of the challenges is the first step in meeting them with faith and courage.

But the times and the Spirit call for us to be resolute, hopeful, imaginative, faithful and prayerful as we serve Christ together. By the grace of God, we can say "yes" to that call.

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