All Aboard?

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In the summer of 1992 I was on my way for the first time to eastern Germany, to my father's home which he had last seen in 1945. The fall of the Berlin Wall had made little apparent difference in the West but as we drew close to the River Elbe the signs of change were easier to read. Now it was simply a river in the middle of a reunited country, but the memory of what it had been, part of that scar of division which had traumatised Europe, was all too obvious. At the river edge were the remains of a railway bridge, its arches intact to the water's edge, but then sheared off, the rest of the structure blown up in 1945. Downstream the graceful arcs of a new bridge were to be seen, yet for the moment remained tantalisingly incomplete. The only way across was by ferry, and so smart Volkswagens from the West queued with modest Trabants from the East. Plying to and fro, linking East to West, was a little ferry, and over its wheelhouse the motto 'Gott mit uns'.

That ferry seemed to me one of the most vivid embodiments of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical vision is not the narrow – although ambitious – aim of inter-church unity. Its root lies in the vocation to rebuild human community and through that a whole created order which is healed and restored. It is animated by a vision of the reintegration of all that is fragmented. And it faces very practical and specific challenges from a world in which the lives of people are overwhelmed by political, cultural and economic change.

The movement towards European integration forms one of the contexts for contemporary Scots, and is changing and enriching the life of our nation. But the vision of the new Europe is sold short if it focuses only on regional economics and politics. The building of bridges, like the opening of borders, is a step towards remaking a wider and more inclusive human community. The free flow of insights and experience, the exchange of story and fresh points of connectedness is the real prize the bridged border offers us. And this is as true of the ecumenical task as it is of the political one.

I find myself returning to an insight which comes from the seventeenth-century Quaker William Penn:

> *True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavour to mend it* […] *Christians should keep the helm and guide the vessel to its port: not meanly steal out at the stern of the world and leave those that are in it without a pilot to be driven by the fury of evil times upon the rock or sand of ruin.* [1]

Small surprise that the motif of the ecumenical movement worldwide is the little boat. What kind of landscape is glimpsed from the ecumenical ferry? Who shares the journey?

I would like to suggest that there are two fundamental approaches in our ecumenical engagement. They can be found in any part of the divided body which is the Church and are not related necessarily to matters of polity, although one may be stronger within one confessional tradition than another. These approaches are, perhaps, the outward expression of an inner disposition, perhaps even of temperament. They are **restoration** and **exploration**. I suspect the play between the two temperaments is necessary to the health of the ecumenical adventure and may offer a key which unlocks fresh truths about ecumenical life in Scotland.

What does it mean to speak of our ecumenical life as a search for restoration? It suggests our life together is one lived in the shadow of loss. It affirms a former common belonging which in our time is glimpsed only in fragmentary form. It is profoundly interested in the path which leads to now. It laments the broken arches and abandoned ways. It speaks of our diminishment and hungers for the restoration of fullness. The model of restoration is animated by an ecumenical vision which is built around healing.

One of the most interesting articulators of this vision is James Macmillan. One effect of his now celebrated speech at the Edinburgh

Festival some years ago was to open up a new way of seeing the ecumenical task. In that speech the press heard the accusation that Scotland was intrinsically and institutionally marked by sectarianism. It was a serious charge but underneath that accusation lay a vision of what a faithful Scotland had once been. When Macmillan spoke of the loss of the old faithful Scotland he was speaking more about the loss of a religious culture than the decline of institutions. He argued that the loss of a common cultural identity expressed in high art, in the music of Robert Carver and the carved stone of the Border abbeys, and in day-to-day custom, was in its way the root of sectarianism and all else that speaks of disintegration and brokenness. Macmillan saw too that the route to healing is as much a matter for the spirit and for music as it is for the mind and for theology. For this temperament the ecumenical vocation is part of the salvific work of Christ, the restorer of our common humanity and of our relatedness to God. For this temperament too the role of memory is vital to the ecumenical future. To trace where we have been, where we have come from, is integrated with the glimpse of where we are called to be.

The vision of unity restored is not soft-hued. It demands toughness and honesty, a healing from the roots. This is what we see in the work done by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran tradition in their work on justification – an historic wound if ever there was one. This is what we see in the work done by the ARCIC process in its approach to matters of authority. Healing from the roots means doing our history well, being willing to return to the dark times of division and controversy. For the Scottish churches it may imply that it is right to seek the healing of wounds within one confessional family as a first step towards a greater healing. And by that I mean that the work done within the famously fissiparous Presbyterian tradition to examine the historic splits which give their origins to its contemporary expression is matter for ecumenical encouragement.

This great theme of restoration is sometimes misread when it is articulated from within the Roman Catholic Church. It is mistaken as an institutional theme when it is a relational one. It is not a call to return as if the Catholic Church had remained unchanged. The

brokenness of the church leaves all living fragmentary lives, less whole, less integrated. It speaks of an ecumenical spiritual disposition rather than an institutional solidity.

In 2003 the Conference of European Churches chose 'Healing and Reconciliation' as the theme for its 12th assembly in Trondheim. CEC, the pan-Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox ecumenical body, has worked tirelessly to heal the divisions within Europe, like the boat on the Elbe quite literally connecting East and West during the coldest frosts of the Cold War. In its preparatory documents for Trondheim, CEC had this to say:

> *Reconciliation opens up a new future but it also deals with the past. How people remember profoundly affects how they behave in the present. Unhealed memories can enslave and condemn us to a seemingly endless living out of the past. [...] Dealing with the past may mean walking through our history together, particularly visiting together those points that continue to have a painful sting. Walking through our past together may help us recover what we have forgotten, denied, covered up and silenced.* [2]

We hear again the hard demand of restorative ecumenism, and one which, I suspect speaks to the heart of the entrenched sectarianism which disfigures Scotland.

If this is your religious temperament the questions you bring to ecumenical life in Scotland are: 'Are we any closer to healing the roots of our disunity?', 'Do we as people of faith and as communities of faith set every act and every initiative we take in this light?', 'Do we patiently work with Christ's spirit, the agent of human healing, to heal his body?'

The second approach, that of exploration, is rather easier to speak of because it is intrinsically reticent about the pull and weight of the past. The exploratory ecumenical temperament takes as its starting

point the dividedness and disarray of the present, and works forward and away from them. I suppose it is the temperament which was most uncomfortable when the new ecumenical bodies were formed in Britain in the late 1980s, the temperament which had always seen ecumenism as a movement rather than a set of structured relationships. At that time there were those who were wary of giving any kind of institutional expression to ecumenical life, suspicious, and perhaps with reason, that the churches would prove to be more cautious in their life as 'churches together' than had been the case in the older Scottish Churches Council. At a time when the Council, and others like it, brought together the passionate ecumenical advocates, there was even a sense that the ecumenical community was counter-cultural, bringing together the most imaginative and impatient people in the Christian community.

In the face of the apparently inexorable decline of some historic churches, and aware too of the modest success of the restorationist project, the explorer asks what the ecumenical vision requires of us as people of faith in today's reality. Does the ecumenical venture still lie within the churches? Or even, has it moved beyond them?

This question is not as fanciful as it might appear. If we were to chart the places where ecumenical activity is at its most vital what would we identify? Especially for the young, but by no means exclusively for them, the coming together as people of faith, along with others of good will, around a common theme of peace and justice may be the natural locus for ecumenical engagement. The explorer is attracted to the specific, to an ecumenism as it were of the kingdom than of the church. Or again we might look to popular movements within the Christian family, such as Focolare or L'Arche, where it would seem that an ecumenical affect is natural and implicit.

It is those committed to the cause of ecumenism as *quest* who are most urgent in asking us to look beyond the historic denominations to new ways of being church. And it is those committed to the quest who are urgent in asking us to look beyond the Christian family of churches to the faith communities, to what we still refer to as 'the other' faith

communities. The most recent statistics demonstrate how numerically small they are but increasingly important to parliament and executive. Indeed in some parts of the worldwide ecumenical scene Councils of Churches have been subsumed into larger Interfaith Councils.

Many of these dynamics are at work in the worldwide ecumenical process begun by the World Council of Churches under its former General Secretary Konrad Raiser. The search for a new *'ecumenical configuration'* is a search for a new way of relating and working which tries to build into the ecumenical conversation the well-established ecumenical bodies at global and regional levels, understood increasingly as fellowships of churches, the world communions like the Lutheran World Federation and the Anglican Communion, and the international faith-based aid agencies. Here we see the interplay between denominational belonging, ecumenical co-operation and accountability and practical common action in a complex dance of relatedness. How this will issue in a new configuration time will tell, but note that this barely touches on the intricacies and excitements of the relations of the WCC to the Roman Catholic Church and to the fast-growing Pentecostal tradition. Indeed it is perhaps these latter two which as they live alongside one another in parts of Latin America may help us all see something of the common future.

It's always tempting of course to see the questers as the more exciting and dynamic part of the ecumenical community. Certainly their gift to us is that they nudge us beyond an ecumenical agenda which is only the delineated common ground, and urge us constantly to move beyond.

In this endeavour the churches have chosen particular ways of working together and bodies to enable that work, and in the Scottish context that body is ACTS. The participation by the Roman Catholic Church in national councils of churches is a phenomenon which has grown consistently since the Second Vatican Council. Of some 120 within the global Christian context the Catholic church is now a full member in more than 70. In Europe, Africa, Oceania and in the Caribbean there are many concrete examples, and there are others in Asia, and in North

and Latin America. Councils of Churches differ widely in their history and in their contexts. Sometimes they are called Councils, sometimes Conferences, sometimes Christian Councils. But all in some measure can be seen as:

> *… institutional expression of the ecumenical movement, in which representatives of separated and autonomous Christian churches within a given area covenant together to become an enduring fellowship for making visible and effective the unity and mission of the church.* [3]

That is part of the definition of one of the state councils of the USA but it serves well as a way of establishing the nature of the national council.

It was only in 1990 that ACTS came into being, as the successor body to the long-established Scottish Churches Council. What was signalled in 1990 was not simply a change of name. Although ACTS fell heir to a distinquished tradition of effective ecumenical engagement it marked a new beginning in some important regards. What marked the new model out was that now the emphasis was on the **togetherness** of the churches. They did not delegate their ecumenical vocation to an outside body but took full responsibility within a mutually accountable structure for the furtherance of the search for visible unity.

Observers looking in on the churches together model, and on the basis it has in the search for consensus, see it as a hopeful if painstaking approach: hopeful because it provides no distance between the churches and the council, painstaking because the constant accountability of togetherness requires patience and discipline. In the older models the churches could and did disown a council's work if it ceased to be grounded in their perception of their denominational and ecumenical agendas. In the churches together model the checks and balances are highly tuned.

The churches together model is most vital where the Catholic church is wholly part of a council's life. Indeed might it be accurate to suggest

that it is the model best suited to the Catholic church's ecclesiology and ecumenical methodology. And so full Catholic participation in the ecumenical bodies in Britain both required and made possible the churches together model, even if the peculiar charism of the model took time to flower.

All of this reinforces the fact that ACTS, especially if it is identified as the general secretariat with its small staff, is not the ecumenical movement! Nor is it the only ecumenical actor. Certainly it has an important symbolic function, the public expression of the churches' search for unity, and placed where it is, working at a crossing-point where the churches' ecumenical vocation is played out, does give it a privileged glimpse into the work the spirit is accomplishing. Perhaps because that work is so varied, Pentecostal in its variety, the ecumenical body finds itself surrounded by differing descriptions of its role. In fact there is a whole playground of metaphors, signals of the ferment, the creativity and also the contested ground of ecumenism.

ACTS is most commonly described as an instrument, that is something which has a specific use and function. This is more than a metaphor. It describes its very purpose. It gives the primacy of action to the churches, for theirs is the task, and ACTS the instrument for it. Yet the role of an instrument goes beyond a narrow functional one. It and its sister bodies are themselves signs of intent and commitment. In the words of Lukas Vischer such an instrument may at times be called upon to be:

> … *the thorn in the flesh of the churches* [… it] *constitute*[s] *the setting, created by the churches themselves, within which the promise of renewal may be heard.* [4]

As the churches in Britain reflect upon the varied ecumenical instruments at their disposal we increasingly speak of the role of the ecumenical instruments as one of providing an environment, a kind of garden where the churches carry out their work and reflection together. This environment needs to be tended and protected, animated by prayer and expertise, if it is to become a space where all feel at

home and where the tools of furthering the pilgrimage are to hand. At best the instruments offer a space which opens up at points where the journey becomes difficult, a space where restorers and explorers work and pray and act together. In that common space it would be good to have in front of us some wise words from Cardinal Walter Kasper, too many for a boathouse but ideal while we wait for the ferry to dock:

> *I wonder whether it may be useful* […] *to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit may not be such a naïve being as many may suppose. The Holy Spirit as pioneer of the ecumenical movement calls us to reflect upon the nature of our journey, for the Spirit is dynamic, is life, is freedom. The Holy Spirit is always good for a surprise. In this perspective, it is not possible to draw a blueprint of the future unity of the church. The light the Spirit casts is similar to a lantern that lights our next step and that shines only as we go ahead.* [5]

1 Joseph Besse, ed., *A Collection of the Works of William Penn* (London: J, Sowle, 1726), I, 295-96.

2 Conference of European Churches 12th Assembly, 25 June - 2 July 2003, Trondheim, Norway: theme paper, 25-26.

3 Committee on Purposes and Goals of Ecumenism, Massachusetts Council of Churches, *Odyssey toward Unity: Foundations and Functions of Ecumenism and Conciliarism* (Boston: Massachusetts Council of Churches, 1977), 30.

4 Lukas Vischer, "Christian Councils – Instruments of Ecclesial Communion," *Ecumenical Review* 24 (1972): 80.

5 Walter Kasper, "May They All Be One? But how? A Vision of Christian Unity for the Next Generation." Address given at St Alban's Abbey, 17th May, 2003, reproduced in *The Tablet*, 24 May, 2003: 32.