

# Another Ecumenical Experience: A Personal Odyssey

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Ross McLaren's article in the Autumn 2001 issue of the *Journal* moved me to give some account of my own ecumenical pilgrimage with some reflections on the ecumenical chattering classes and what form of ecumenism is likely to be the way ahead.

I was brought up in the 'Auld Kirk' in Newburgh, Fife which Ross of the village Congregational Church held in such awe. I owe my earliest ecumenical awakenings to what I regarded as the remarkably friendly and Christian relationship that existed between the two congregations. Whenever we went to a service in the E.U. Congregational Church as occasionally we did, I felt perfectly at home, was made to feel welcome and that we belonged together in Christ. Indeed I wondered at the separation when the service seemed exactly the same as that down the road using all the same books and same order of service! I still have and frequently refer to a large analytical reference Bible given to me by the Congregational minister of the time, a man whose memory I still hold very dear.

This was the start of a pilgrimage in three continents. Throughout I always sought and welcomed the friendship and fellowship of Christians of differing traditions: as a student at St. Andrews challenged and inspired by one of the largest student societies in the university, the Student Christian Movement; a year of post graduate study at the Kennedy School of Missions, part of the Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut, U.S.A., the foundation of which was the direct result of the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910; a missionary to a United Church in what became Zambia. I had periods of service on the staff of each of the two Colleges of Education administered by the Christian Council of Zambia which embraced almost all the Protestant groups in the country: Anglicans, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists and conservative American Holiness Churches in addition to the United Church of Zambia.

Back to Scotland and the parish ministry in Dumfries. There a Catholic brother and I headed the local Council of Clergy, later to develop into a Council of Churches. Then during fourteen years as Education Secretary of the Church of Scotland I was deeply involved in the ecumenical structures of both Scotland and the U.K. As the sole Scot on the Education Committee of the then British Council of Churches I tried to represent all Scottish interests and found myself in the rather odd position of keeping the English Catholic Church informed of what the Scottish Catholic Church was doing in education as they didn't seem to correspond with each other! My involvement with Scottish Catholics in education arose out of a personal altercation with Cardinal, then Archbishop. Winning which led to continuing dialogue and co-operation between the two Churches with some remarkable results: helping break the log jam in the teachers' strike in the mid 1980's and securing the Westminster legislation that allowed inspection of religious education to be introduced to Scottish schools!

For the last eleven years since returning to parish ministry, then in retirement, I have headed up a small group of Scottish people with an interest in both Eastern Europe and religious education under the auspices of the Christian Education Movement, now the Religious Education Movement in Scotland. Following the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact of the various countries of Eastern and Central Europe, we have sought various ways of offering assistance, support and contacts to those in Ministries of Education, Churches, colleges and schools who have been concerned with and involved in the re-instatement of religious education into the schools of their countries. Our most recent venture was a conference held in Edinburgh last summer attended by twenty teachers and lecturers from fifteen different countries. In the group were eight Orthodox from various brands of Orthodoxy, seven Protestants of various persuasions, four Roman Catholics and one Moslem. Having reflected on how many crusades, jihads, intafadas and persecutions history could provide from such a mix, what was most striking about this remarkable assembly was the wonderful group dynamic and common purpose that developed. My account of the reason for this bonhomie was their deep and common concern for the good of the children of their countries

faced as many were with pathetic levels of resourcing and other support in their countries. Their common commitment was impressive, exemplified by the Moslem professor from Bosnia committed to trying to initiate an enlightened liberal Moslem religious education programme for Bosnian schools.

In all this ecumenical pilgrimage I had always found that personal involvement and relationships transcended and appeared to negate the bitter historical and theological arguments that had riven Christ's church over the centuries. The long-standing and at times very bitter divide of Catholic and Protestant of my Scottish background had always challenged me. Many very varied personal experiences throughout my career always seemed to point to a common allegiance to Jesus Christ and awareness of his guiding presence that made these experiences effective in setting aside the historical agendas that had proved so divisive.

From this experience I have now formed the thesis that the way forward in ecumenical relations must major on the relational. It leads me to offer comment on various forms of ecumenical activity.

## **Structural Ecumenism**

Often signified by the words 'union', 'united' and 'uniting', there is an innate lack of flexibility, often the result of the encrustation of centuries of tradition and loyalty to the tradition that makes effective and resilient union difficult if not almost impossible. The original commitment to a particular stance on doctrinal or other grounds in time becomes institutionalised with buildings, administrative systems and dedicated people in its service, clergy of whatever category. These produce loyalties that tend to perpetuate themselves with the original commitment retained as a historical statement but no longer a living reality. There is considerable creaking at the joints. Splinters are common by those who wish to adhere strictly to some small portion of the original. The effect is often that of a broken ceramic, glued together but with significant pieces missing, that offend the overall aesthetic. Any attempt to achieve a jointless, agreeably and acceptably

formed whole with a new form that suits the combined parts and presents itself with no evidence of the cracks is unlikely to be achieved. The procedures that are incurred in seeking structural ecumenism can, I believe, only succeed when the other forms of ecumenism have featured in a major way and become irresistably cogent.

Whether through ecumenical councils, inter-Church conversations, conferences of the enthusiasts to force a commitment such as Nottingham 1964 with its compact for union by 1980, attempts to lay the foundations for Church unions such as between Catholic and Anglicans, Anglicans and Methodists, the Leuenberg Concordat, the ARCIC (Anglican/Roman Catholic) experience of the 1980's, the current Scottish efforts of SCIFU (The Scottish Church Initiative for Union), the Ecumenical Charter of the Council of European Churches and the Council of European Catholic Bishops, and no doubt other efforts that will follow, all fail to achieve the dynamism required to fulfil their aims. The weakness is that they start from the top and rarely if ever reach the bottom which is required for an effective outcome.

### **Theological Ecumenism**

The various attempts made to deal with the theological issues have resulted in statements and documents that have gone far to reconciling the differences that have come to exist. The various commendable and carefully thought out and argued reports from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and comparable reports from the theologians of the Vatican have demonstrated a remarkable degree of compatability on a wide range of theological topics with only a very few that critically differentiate Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic positions, though these are very stubbornly defended. While furthering the quest for an ecumenical outcome, such statements are usually the result of some of these other forms of ecumenism operating through leading Church personalities with the intellectual abilities to deal with the issues at a cognitive level. At times there have been remarkable results with a great reduction in the issues that continue to divide. There is difficulty, however, in translating this process into structural ecumenism and in dealing with the remaining unresolved agenda that does not betray or allow the previous achievements to

atrophy. While I have not participated in this process, I am pleased however to acknowledge its outcomes and to commend them to others in pursuit of that to which I am deeply committed. I pray that in time the issues that remain unresolved may achieve resolution as I believe they can through the common source of all Christian theological reflection and enquiry, the person of Jesus Christ.

## **Biblical Ecumenism**

The words of Jesus in his final great prayer in the Upper Room for all who have faith in him, 'that all may be one' or the Latin 'ut omnes unum sint', the motto for the World Student Christian Federation and no doubt other ecumenical groups, challenge and inspire. '*oikumene*' occurs a number of times throughout the New Testament and refers to the inhabited earth – certainly implying people but not their bonding into a unified religious organisation as 'ecumenical' is currently usually regarded as implying. The Biblical references to the nations – '*ta ethne*' – the Gentiles, usually indicate all people who are not Jews and again not necessarily a unified group. References in John's gospel to Jesus being the one shepherd and to one fold, a few references in the epistles to one body and use of a few words prefixed by '*omo*' (single... or like...), almost all in Acts, are greatly outnumbered by the frequent and varied use of the prefix '*sun*' (fellow...). This significantly marked the tone of the early Church, signifying the importance of the fellowship rather than any stress on structural or administrative unity being sought for the early communities of Christians. And so I think '*koinonia*' (fellowship) is better than '*enotes*' (unity) in depicting the commonality for which we should strive, acknowledging our common humanity as well as our differences, rather than unity which is a difficult concept to assimilate and promote in a world where we have come to recognise and respect the many differences that exist, not least in the faith stances of those who sincerely yet differently seek a theological critique for existence along other lines.

## **Relational Ecumenism**

This operates at an interpersonal level. Most effective with individuals and small groups, it has the potency of a conversion experience. Perceptions, attitudes and the ensuing commitment can result in lifelong

inculcation and commitment. When such experiences become almost normative because of their scope and frequency, they force the other forms of ecumenism into resolution in the areas where they are functioning. I believe they can be powerfully effective in a way similar to that of the giants in history whose characters have left a profound mark on countless others who have been challenged first by the person then by the person's 'Weltanschauung'. Persecution of Christians, especially where the Church has to go underground, tends to result in the diminishing of commitment to structural forms and organisation and to the enhancement of the faith commitment of the individual. Yet such people desperately seek and cling to the fellowship of others with the same commitment. Persecution of Christians under some Marxist regimes, Christians in wartime prisoner of war camps, the Church in China following the Cultural Revolution and current extremist Islamic groups illustrate the process. This attitude to religion may be achieved through a variety of processes. In addition to it being the result of local inter-personal contacts, it may be the consequence of frustration from the apparent failure or ineffectiveness of the other forms of ecumenism. It is often the result of the failure of the existing structures to meet personal needs. It could be the result of the implosion of the structures and those parts of the structures regarded as essential for their continuation or from destructive influences from the secular world outwith the religious institutions. I believe this is a significant feature in the spiritual and religious life of Britain and probably other 'western' nations at present. In Scotland the lack of vocations for the Catholic priesthood and the Kirk's ministry are nearing the point where others in these communities may be forced into processes that overwhelm and overturn the traditional structures as their foundations no longer exist. This has happened within the Roman Catholic Church in some places elsewhere with a variety of not always orthodox remedies.

## Conclusion

I do not wish to propose the dissolution of all ecumenical councils, inter-Church experiments and structures, commissions and committees seeking the resolution of differences and the construction of models

for Churches uniting or relating better to each other – far from it! There is still a place and need for such, even if only to keep on attracting and inspiring people to join or continue in what I began by calling the ecumenical chattering classes. They may be likened to the stem of a plant that provides for the energising sap to get through to the real points of growth.

I believe now that effective, dynamic ecumenism will come through the need for it and the realisation that this is Christ's way for those who, as people of faith, seek to live out their lives of faith in relation to each other with a rich diversity of ways of expressing that faith in worship and action. Such will leave behind the often outdated, atrophied and to modern societies increasingly irrelevant traditions from the past.

Like buttercups that send new shoots in all directions, rooting themselves then creating yet more shoots, this type of dynamism is the feature of Christians in those parts of the world, rarely now in Western Europe, where Christianity is vibrant and rapidly growing. That is indeed progress towards ALL becoming ONE: in and through Christ.