

Mission & Unity in Today's Church by The Revd Dr Andrew Wood

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I want to begin with a story, a story of what is possible when ecumenism, our being together, finds an expression locally.

Churches Together in Surbiton – as a young minister I was chair of CTS, probably because I was too inexperienced to get out of the way quickly enough! But together we dreamed of something we could do, and a plan emerged of sharing Sunday morning worship – hardly the rocket science of ecumenism you might think! However, I believe that our unity, that daring journey at one time called “not strangers but pilgrims together”, our unity only begins to be understood when we are giving something up. Even if it is our worship space - so we planned to meet in a local sports centre as the only venue big enough for the 800 plus people who might come. There was some scepticism – and some of my ecumenical colleagues gently enquired whether I did really understand what we were asking but we asked, and it happened, and we had a time together which raised a number of questions among the sport-going public of the centre that Sunday morning. And a colleague was brave and honest enough to say to that gathering that although he had not believed at first this the right thing to do, he could see now that he was mistaken. A moment of grace. Because we were brave and would not let go of the spiritual intuition that we were some things are better done together.

It's a story which speaks about risk and grace and how our mission, the art of explaining and living out our faith in the public space, works well when it expresses our unity in Christ. We must be bold and do not lose that sense!

The church, whether in the prayer of Christ in John 17 so beloved of ecumenists, or the more concrete struggles say of Acts 15 - the struggle for the mind of Christ is the struggle to be together. The Methodist church prizes its sense of being a connexion – that all parts are interconnected, interdependent and share common oversight, discipline, resources and identity. That is what we believe is a gift to the wider church.

It is sometimes said that we live in an ecumenical winter – but I also like the saying that we make our own weather!

Now, none of our denominations has clean hands, we have all fallen short and I stand before you as a leader in the church which, with the URC, has ended its participation in local ecumenical courses like Sarum.

But like the call to transformational leadership in the church, which is the call that all members live with, we do ecumenism not because it is easy but because it is hard, and to finish that quote from JF Kennedy and because “that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills”. I believe that – and Sarum in its initial ministerial training, in its lay training and as it serves the learning of the whole people of God stands for that belief. And because of that you take your learning from here in the service of the whole church of Christ.

There is a tempting clarion call around which says that mission is essential and ecumenism is a luxury (imagine Jesus saying that - that they may be one so long as it is convenient and effective!), which says that putting our own houses in order is a priority; there is the fear factor of our churches future - with which we all live. All these can somehow appear more urgent than our presence together. This cannot be true.

I might share in that tempting belief if it were not that I am convinced that local ecumenism is the repository of its life – and as you go from here back to parishes, churches and communities my prayer is that you will carry the hope of a church that is one in mission, which expresses unity in its diversity and which therefore demonstrates in the end the oneness of Christ, which is all in all.

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