

Reflections on the Churches Together in England Forum

The Churches Together in England (CTE) Forum is held every three years, and brings together over 300 representatives from all 43 members of CTE.

The Forum is not a deliberative meeting, more a gathering of those engaged in the ecumenical journey. Its purposes are deliberately loosely defined:

- To engage in worship and discussion;
- To make suggestions to Member Churches about such matters as it believes should be addressed jointly;
- To support and encourage Intermediate Bodies (IBs);
- To share its reflections on the future activities and programmes of CTE.

Baptists Together appointed six representatives who attended the Forum on our behalf:

- Graham Ensor
- Claire Nicholls
- Ruth Bottoms
- Sandra Crawford
- Lynn Green
- Hilary Treavis

There were also a number of Baptists there as representatives from their own IB, or from other bodies associated with CTE. We held a Baptist meeting on one afternoon, and there were 15 people present. Excerpts from their reflections are contained in this report, and for a well-balanced overview, please do read the reflections from Claire Nicholls at the end of this report.

Programme

The 2015 Forum was intended to enable delegates to understand and encounter something of the diversity of English Christianity. We therefore engaged with two particular groupings of Churches to discover some of the gifts of God within their traditions:

- The Orthodox Churches
- Pentecostalism

Additionally, there was an emphasis on Younger People. An ecumenical group of 12 young people had been funded to attend to the Chemin Neuf *Welcome to Paradise* festival in France over the summer, and led a session one evening reporting on their experience and what they had learned about ecumenism.

“The most powerful session in the forum was the one that was led and facilitated by a dozen young people. It was clear that despite being committed to the traditions in which they found themselves, their identity as Christians was primary. Their call to the church leaders was, in essence, to put their differences aside for the sake of the gospel, and to focus on the practical task of seeing God’s Kingdom come in our world. Vicky, for example, asked us why we get so upset, or think we’ve done something ‘wrong’, when one of our young people chooses to go to the church down the road – they’re still in church aren’t they?!” (Simon Goddard)

CTE has six Presidents, covering the different denominational 'families' of the 43 members of CTE. Four were able to be at the Forum, and take part in a 'President's Panel' in one session, answering questions which had been raised in advance by delegates. The other two took part by pre-recorded video.

"I was disappointed with the President's Panel ... Archbishop Justin Welby made one of the best comments that 'unity was not important, but indispensable', but the fact that he did not attend in person took away a great deal of the credibility of what he said." (Joe Story)

Whilst mostly meeting in plenary sessions, delegates were divided into small groups for reflect on their experience. Additionally, during the input sessions, there was a prolific use of buzz groups to respond to what had been said. There was a mixed reaction to these, with some finding both buzz groups and small groups helpful, and others feeling that they were not useful.

Overall

"It seems to me that the mood music of ecumenism is changing – with the emphasis on structural unity now gradually being overtaken by a more pragmatic unity that sees us serving together in response to God's mission." (Simon Goddard)

"I acknowledge the huge difficulty in putting together a programme that will be appreciated by everyone and in the main I believe this was a good, and largely successful attempt to do so. The one omission that I felt, and I did feel strongly, was any real attempt to engage in differences between denominations that are actually causing problems. I fully appreciate the emphasis on celebrating differences, but sometimes the impression is given that ALL differences should be celebrated when of course some of them are to be regretted. As someone who is fully and unequivocally committed to ecumenism, I did find it somewhat surreal to be in an ecumenical gathering that was so emphatically positive, when at ground level I experience situations which are often predominantly negative." (Joe Story)

"Overall I'd have to say that I was a bit disappointed with the experience as it worked from the lowest common denominator and was more descriptive of different church traditions without fully engaging the challenges for our ecumenical journey." (Graham Ensor)

Hilary Treavis
October 2015

CTE Forum – Reflection – Claire Nicholls

Forty three denominations gather together to listen. I was encouraged right at the beginning of the CTE Forum when the commitment was to listen to many voices and not just one – recognising that listening, speaking and good relationships are at the heart of the ecumenical journey where “unity is achieved whilst walking”. The three main voices we heard – Orthodox, Pentecostal and Young Adults were important voices that had not been a big part of the ecumenical conversation before and there was an opportunity for all to contribute in small groups and discussion time.

I was encouraged particularly by the voices of the Young Adults for whom denominational identity was important, but who challenged the forum to think outside the box, beyond structures, to building relationships that were genuine and were able to tackle the difficult issues together. The issue of mental health came up and a number of times we talked about the weight of the burden that young people in particular carry as they try to create identity in a society where identity matters, but is difficult to define. I talked with a group about the issues that church faces and they were challenged by the idea of being involved in conversations about gender roles and sexuality and the fact that these were some of the issues that mattered to young people. There was a lot of concern about aging congregations, and there were people who were looking for ways in which the trend could be reversed. I hope, that as a result of forum, these conversations will continue and the Young Adults contribution will not become a token gesture – that young adults will be invited to help steer the conversations that are happening ecumenically.

I struggled a bit at times with the forum, because it seemed that the majority of people who were there were only interested in the exciting bits of ecumenism (understandable) but didn’t really want to talk about how difficult it is sometimes – particularly when you are dealing with church structures in a local context. I felt that there needed to be some space for some honesty about our frustrations beyond our own denominations. However, when I spoke about how difficult my journey had been at times there was an element of surprise and a move to fix me, when all I wanted to do was express myself! I felt that the thought was that ecumenism had moved beyond those conversations because they’d been had before, but as someone new to the movement, I found that unhelpful. Also I believe if we are still finding it frustrating locally, the conversation needs to be revisited and there needs to be space for lament as well as celebration. Honesty builds trust and trust builds good relationships.

In his closing address the General Secretary spoke about how “ecumenism is iterative not linear”. I took this to mean that as relationships are being built and trust is growing, that we need to keep revisiting the things that hold us back, that make things difficult and that are historically hard work, so that the stuff that was bypassed can be dealt with or bypassed again if it is not the right time! I also took it to mean that we need to revisit the good stories – how our history has got us to where we are today – look at how relationships have been built, share stories beyond forum and learn from the passion of those in the ecumenical movement who are able to hold it up as something good and transformational.

A couple of different people talked about how Baptists have something unique to offer to the ecumenical journey – how we act as a bit of a bridge between old and new – churches that are able to work independently and interdependently within a loose structure that enables freedom for movement built on trust. That’s something I’ve recognised as important on a local level as we’ve worked as an LEP within and beyond Methodist circuit structures. I wonder how, as Baptists, we go about sharing our story to enable us to do that more effectively within the wider ecumenical movement?