

Report of the Committee for Christian Unity

The Rev Canon Trevor R. Williams (Down)

(Embargoed until Delivery)

A number of years ago the Church Unity Committee was renamed the Committee for Christian Unity. Christian Unity is something I am excited about, because it brings us to the centre of what Jesus Christ was about 2000 years ago and it is what He is about in our world today.

The Christian Unity Committee has two basic questions. “What is the Unity that Christ wants? And “How do we, as the Church of Ireland, work for, and promote that Unity.”

Division, rivalry and violence we know about. International war, troubles in local communities, family disputes, and even though we often too polite to admit it, destructive conflict within our parishes.

It is in this context that Christian Unity really is Good News.

Colossians 1.19 For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.

In the Christian faith there is a healing for our divided world.

Reconciliation is central to the Gospel and I believe the person who said, “If the Churches have nothing to say about Reconciliation, they have nothing to say” I believe he is right.

The Church of Ireland as a Christian Church is committed to reconciliation, to the healing of past hurts, to building bridges over divisions, to making peace. This is what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. To love one another as he has loved us.

Jesus took the place of the victim. He asks us to do the same. To follow him means to stand with the oppressed, the outcasts, and the downtrodden. By our presence with them, the voiceless can find a voice, the outcast can find their worth, and the oppressed may discover the freedom they so desperately crave. The great heavenly banquet that Jesus talked about when the invitation went out and all the nice people made excuses, the servants were sent out again and again, to invite in all who would come, the poor, the wretched, the disabled, the sinners. That's Christian Unity. God values us all. God has no favourites.

Inter Faith

We have inter-faith issues on the Agenda of the Christian Unity Committee. We are only starting, but it is an intentional start. Some of us should know what it means to be a tiny minority, forced into silence because of our lack of numbers, being ignored when decisions are being made which affect your life, having something to offer but being overlooked through thoughtlessness. It is dehumanising. And I haven't even mentioned the vulnerability of small minorities to violence just because they are different. That is what it is like for members of other faith communities in Ireland today, North and South. They need to be offered a place of respect among us. Because they are new, because they are few, they need someone to stand with them, to make their concerns visible, to celebrate the richness of diversity they bring to our common life, to give them a place.

Throughout the scripture faithfulness to God is demonstrated by the welcome given to the stranger in the midst.

When we meet one another, the fear of ‘other faiths’ will be replaced by the experience of how our own Christian faith can be enriched as we learn about them. Nurturing relationships with people of other faith traditions is central to the Unity that Christ wishes.

The plight of Asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland North and South is a real test on whether our Christian faith has any relevance to our everyday lives. This IS our concern. As local faith communities we can extend the hand of friendship, find ways to welcome newcomers to our area, and be with them at the difficult start of their life among us.

When did we see you Jesus naked, in prison, or a stranger, In as much as you cared for the least of my family, you did it to me. Says Jesus, on the last day.

Inter Church meetings

So what is the importance of Inter Church Meetings? They are essential. If we choose to ignore other Christian traditions we are responsible for the widening chasm between the followers of Jesus in our world. Our divisions are a scandal to the Christian faith.

Disunity undermines everything that the Good News of Jesus has to offer our world.

Secondly we need to repent of our past. We have been content to mark our identity as the Church of Ireland as being over against other Christian traditions. We argue we couldn’t possibly do that in our worship, because that is what they do. This denominationalism, this divisiveness is now so normal we don’t even notice it. We need to repent. To change from self satisfied pride, to seeking a humble encounter with other Christian traditions to

learn from them and to discover together we can heal the hurts of the past. Different churches, our enemies at times, are the very people who can show us the aspects of our faith we have avoided. They can confront our normality and say, it can be different. This learning from those of other denominations can lead us to a fuller appreciation of the faith we profess. We can't learn this on our own. Our so-called enemies are the people who have most to teach us.

Recent Lessons from Inter Church Encounters.

Charta Oecumenica – Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe is the fruit of two European Inter Church Assemblies. The theme of the Graz Assembly in 1997 was "Reconciliation, Gift of God and Source of New Life" 10,000 people attended. Out of that meeting, Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic and Protestant churches, together with the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, drew up guidelines of how these Churches should work together. They start with the call to unity quoting Ephesians 4 v 3. Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit..etc. They flesh that out in how we should proclaim the Gospel together, how we should overcome our divisions how we can act together, pray together and continue in dialogue together. Each of these topics is followed by concrete commitments. The second half of the document has practical suggestions how Christian Churches can contribute to the European structures as they develop. This document is practical, relevant and reflects the glorious vision of that Unity which is God's purpose for his creation.

Meanwhile the World Council of Churches calls us to a Decade to Overcome Violence. This could be a valuable resource as we seek to serve a society increasingly torn apart by violence. There are resources here for us to use and a process we can contribute to and learn from.

The Churches Together in Britain and Ireland held an Assembly this year. The Church of Ireland sent a large delegation. Here we learned what it means to communicate to world which seems to be ever more secular. But that isn't the case we learnt. People are turning away from the Churches, but they are turning to other sources to satisfy their hunger for spirituality. Here was a real challenge, but again great resources to feed the Church of Ireland's mission.

The Irish Inter Church meeting had as its theme "Pathways to Peace building" where we examined the system of sectarianism we have grown up with in Ireland and how we can find ways out of it. We learnt of the growing number of inter church activities springing up all over the North. Again it was a challenge and offered resources and above all a fresh vision of what it means to be part of the answer to Jesus prayer, that they may be one.

We are part of a much wider Christian family. We are not Sinn Feiners, believing that Ourselves is best. To quote Archbishops Derrick Warlock and David Shepherd, it is better together. You have got to believe it. It's the way of Jesus.