

**APPENDIX F**

**REPORT ON THE ASSEMBLY OF**

**CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND**

In search of the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, as I made my way to my first Churches Together in Britain and Ireland Assembly, the adventurer in me was looking forward to this new venture, the sceptic in me wondering if I was just going to be part of an ecumenical talking shop. Running from Tuesday 26 February to Friday 1 March, the conference involved a number of addresses, discussions within small groups, worship, Bible engagement and workshops..... oh, and a little time to eat and sleep!

The theme of the assembly was In search of Holy Ground, and aimed to “explore where people today encounter God (recognising that it is so often not through the Church), and how the churches can make available to them the resources of Christian faith and tradition”.

The assembly was addressed by a variety of speakers coming from different backgrounds and different angles, including Dr John Drane, Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Aberdeen and Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, California; Dr Grace Davie, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Exeter University; and Dr Mary Grey, Professor of Pastoral Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter and Fellow of Sarum College, Salisbury.

The assembly opened with over 300 people from varying Christian denominations and backgrounds across Britain and Ireland joining together for worship. Earth which had been brought from the four nations of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, representing our richness and diversity, was mingled together, becoming a symbol of the one earth - the earth created and made holy by God, the earth that he trod, the same earth that we tread. Worship continued to be a prominent element of the assembly with an early morning Eucharist, evening worship and various other prayer/worship slots throughout each day.

Each morning the Bible Society offered some challenging new ways of handling the Bible. Looking, at the area of reconciliation, we focused on Rwanda, a country which has experienced much division and death; we explored how the Bible has helped people discover ways to reconciliation, and how we can apply its teaching to our own lives. Focusing on the importance of narrative in every human society, we explored how, through the stories of the Bible, we can speak afresh to our society.

Finally, we focused on secular cinema in order to discover the ‘sacred spaces’ which are to be found there and how the issues raised through contemporary film can be set in dialogue with the Bible. Within this was the attempt to assist us in our use of the Bible as a tool for finding common ground with our world, and discerning how it can become holy ground.

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The opportunity for more intimate discussion was provided for within our reflection groups which consisted of about 12 people with a balance of nation, denomination, gender and age (as far as age could be balanced!). Meeting at various points during the assembly many experiences, hopes and fears were shared.

Did the assembly achieve its aim? It did to the extent that it ‘explored’. The assembly's aim was not to solve the difficulties and challenges that, as soon became obvious, faced all denominations present. Its purpose was to explore and discuss, and this it did and in the process perhaps highlighted more prominently the challenges that face us all.

Surely we, as the Church, as members of the body of Christ, can engage with the changing society around us and together search for holy ground, together search for those spaces where people encounter the holy, those spaces where contemporary lifestyles and gospel truths can be brought together. It will involve reaching out and meeting people where they are. It will involve standing alongside those who turn to the media, to cinema, to various social activities for spiritual answers, seeking together how to relate these forms to gospel truths. It will involve working with, as Dr Drane put it, “spiritual icons of today's culture”, working with what we have within our culture to convey our message, as Christ himself did.

As with any religious gathering the ‘youth’ came up again and again. I suppose the fact that I was one of about 18 people under the age of 35 at the assembly spoke volumes. We could have talked from one end of the day to the other about young people. But perhaps that's one of the problems - talking. At no stage during the assembly did we hear from a person under the age of 35 who was totally disillusioned with the Church as a religious institution, who had had to search for spiritual answers elsewhere, who could share his/her hopes and fears, frustrations and difficulties with us. Would that have been too much of a challenge for us? Perhaps, but it was a personal experience that needed to be heard.

The theme of the assembly was a very topical one when we consider the world and culture in which we live. The assembly is over, the discussion is not. The search for holy ground is a continuous one. People, wanting to enjoy the gift of freedom that God has given, want and need to discover God for themselves. May the Church guide and support them in this by bringing together the Christian faith and the search for those sacred spaces, in the knowledge that God is present and active in all areas of our world and of our lives.