

## Receptive ecumenism conference 2009 – final session

I have been asked to reflect on the conference from the point of view of local ecumenism – using the word in the vernacular sense, not as diocese. Within Churches Together in England and in partnership with John Bradley, it is my privilege to support and resource those whose task it is directly to encourage and promote grass roots ecumenism – so, in fact, I work at one remove from the local. Because of that, my Ecumenical Officer colleagues here, from both Scotland and England, who are at the coal face, have generously offered me their wisdom and insights, so what I have to say comes not only from me but from them.

The presentation of the Receptive Ecumenism project indicated the need for receptive ecumenism to be operative not just between the Churches but also between the academic world and the world of local ecumenism. Please don't analyse those categories! The words aren't right but I hope you have a sense of what I am trying to indicate. My Ecumenical Officer colleagues are all very aware of the need for us to reflect on this conference and to discern how we may enable local ecumenism to receive some of its insights. We are planning to meet soon precisely to do that. In the meantime we have been excited and stimulated by the papers presented at this conference and I have been asked to thank you most sincerely for all the work you do. It's crucial.

My focus now, therefore, is not what local ecumenism might receive from you, but what we suggest the world of scholarship may receive from local ecumenism.

The excitement generated in the session before lunch is partly due, I suggest, to the way the Receptive Ecumenism project is rooted in the local. Thank you, Andrea, for telling Paul to get real – I wouldn't have dared! And that is the core of what my colleagues and I want to say to you. Everything you do in the academic field must be rooted in the local and must be tested in the crucible of the local. This is so important that I was extremely tempted to say just that, to write it up in large letters on the screen, and then invite you to sit in silence for the rest of my six minutes, pondering that message. But I didn't think I would get away with that!

We've already heard a bit about the local in Britain – in the mainstream Churches at least. We've heard of dwindling, aging, congregations and increasing demands on ministers. Yet, despite being over-stretched and tired, people care. Yes, we do need to hear people's laments, and not just their laments. We need to listen to, hear and share in people's frustrations and anger, their incredulity when they hit against some incomprehensible ecclesiastical rule which stops them doing what they want to do. We need to hear people's joy, to rejoice and celebrate with them – and there is a lot to celebrate too.

All that must inform everything you do as you ponder and write about ecumenism. It is crucial for academia to be receptive to and learn from the reality of the local situation, the place where people work out in daily living how to be Church – not just within denominational boundaries, but ecumenically. It is no accident that here in Britain we favour the term, Churches Together. It's not spin, it's simultaneously what we are and what we aspire to be. *Churches Together.*

We work at being Churches Together in many different arenas. This conference has reflected on the parish, and there are many very fruitful and grace-filled partnerships between Churches at local level, working together without fanfares and taking for granted quite how amazing is their collaboration. In our workshop – sadly without overalls! – one person said that, in the USA, she talks about ARCIC either to Anglican or Catholic groups. Yes, that might happen in Britain, but it would be more usual for an ecumenical group to come together for something like that. But we take that sort of thing very much for granted, for we are friends and colleagues – and we are so used to being friends and colleagues that we forget how much of a gift and a grace that is.

Partnership at local level in England can be *informal*, whether or not it is within a Churches Together group, or it can be *formalised* in an LEP, a Local Ecumenical Partnership – and here I use the word 'local' both in the vernacular but also in the more technical sense, for a Local Ecumenical Partnership isn't just an agreement between local congregations but a formal agreement between Church authorities, diocese, district, synod or whatever. While there are many questions about LEPs and a general agreement that they are not necessarily the shape of the Church to come, as once had been hoped, nevertheless hard graft is involved when different denominations share a church building, become a single congregation with one minister or enter into a formal covenant. As I said earlier, the local is the crucible of ecumenism and an LEP is an even more intense crucible. All of us need to learn from the lived experience of LEPs – perhaps they offer us the ultimate 'get real' challenge.

When we were reflecting together yesterday, my Ecumenical Officer colleagues also asked me to remind you that imaginative and vibrant ecumenical partnership happens in other arenas too. Ecumenical crucibles are not limited to local congregations but we must also look to the experience of ministerial collaboration in the context of hospitals and prisons, in university and school chaplaincies, in industrial mission and all sorts of other places where the Churches in these islands work not just alongside each other, but together.

But, please, if there is one thing only you remember from what I have said, please let it be this: get real, stay real, and be rooted in the local.

Jenny Bond

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