

**Churches Together in South London  
Council meeting on 1 November 2008**

**'The ecumenical vision'  
Address by Rev Dr David Cornick  
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Thank you for the opportunity of this meeting. This is for me part of a steep learning curve as I get to know CTE. I think such conversations are of real importance in a world which is changing as rapidly as ours.

CTE is what it says on the tin, its England's churches together, and when they do things together it becomes a reality. And that happens in hundreds of diverse ways in villages, suburbs and cities, and occasionally across the nation. It happens when the local churches decide to work together and create a night shelter. It happens when some local congregations decide to clear up the local rec. as part of Hope 08. It happens with the Good Friday Walk of Witness, or the activities of the WCPU. It happens when the Methodist and United Reformed churches across the street from each other decide that one worshipping congregation is a better bet than two. It happens when a group of training institutions decide that the most efficient and effective way to service their constituencies is to do it together. It happens when the Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission meet. It happens when Inter-church families come together for their annual gathering, It happens when the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary meet in conference or put out another volume of essays. It happens, if you like, in both structured and spontaneous ways. My colleague in South London, where one of the important influences on church life are black-led independent Pentecostal churches, thinks that the balance is moving towards the spontaneous. I'd be interested to know if that is reflected in your experience. If it is, its worth noting that we are better equipped institutionally to deal with the structured rather than the spontaneous, and that we might need to do some thinking about how we can most helpfully respond to new realities.

But , that is all part of ecumenism, which happens when Christians choose to do things together rather than apart. They might not give it that name, but that is the reality, a little bit of growing together as they grow nearer to the Christ whom they seek to serve, who is one Christ, not 38 Christs. Whenever any of that goes on, CTE becomes real.

And I don't see any diminution of that reality. It is all around us, now praise God, a normal and accepted way of going about being church. And sometimes we need to pause there, and remember that it wasn't 50 years ago, and be grateful for those who have brought us to where we are.

If I were to point to one great achievement of English ecumenism, it would be that we have broadened the table as English Christianity has broadened. We are I think, the most varied ecumenical community in the world. Coptic Orthodox sits with Quaker, Black Pentecostal with Anglo-Catholic, Roman Catholic with Congregationalist. That has only been possible because of the far-sighted, Spirit-guided decision of those gathered at Swanwick in 1987 to replace the BCC with CT, thus allowing churches with profoundly different authority structures to come together as equal partners at one table. In a sense, that decision has enabled ecumenism to respond to the profound changes which globalisation and migration have caused in British society in the last 20 years.

The world church is no longer something 'over there' it is here, and it is reflected in our table, in all its complexities and tensions. The Swanwick structure has accommodated that diversity, and we rejoice in it. We have been less successful in bending our minds around what it actually means to be 'churches together'. Nobody admitted in 1987, or as far as I can see since, that it is much easier to be a council of churches than CT, and my colleagues on the ground tell me that some CT groups still mistake themselves for councils of churches. But we are not about deciding what everyone will do, rather we are about the business of sharing charisms, and if CTE as an organisation has a specific charism to contribute, it is simply that it is gifted at bringing people together around a table.

So, the first challenge for us is to work out what it means to be 'churches together'. The famed marigold booklet explained how the 'churches together' philosophy could be translated into ecclesial reality. There should be '...a conscious self-denial by the churches, so that when new work is proposed...each does not simply go ahead as before, as if no-one else existed' and it spoke of '...a process of consultation between churches which will result in shared ownership of work.' My hope is that that is more manifest at diocesan, intermediate and local levels than it sometimes appears nationally. My overall suspicion is that it is not that the Swanwick ideal has been tried and found wanting, rather it has been found difficult and not tried – with due apologies to G K Chesterton.

So, the success of CT isn't primarily about money and funding, it is about commitment, theology and ecclesiology.

The second challenge is that we need to be realistic about the table and its partners. What we mean by 'church' is changing almost as we speak. I am a cynical old historian by background, so I believe in a mixed ecclesiastical economy. Institutions show remarkable resilience, and despite the rhetoric of the advocates of pioneer mission, I do not believe that the institutional church is on its last legs. As Cardinal Cormac dryly noted, they said that in 1789 and the French church is still there. Discourteous comments about 'phantom ecumenism' and 'churches about to die' should have no place in the debates of our churches. However, I do believe profoundly that around those institutions new forms of discipleship and being church are coming into being.

We are seeing that in the evolving form of black-led churches where small umbrella organisations bring together groups of entrepreneurial and enthusiastic pastors in the hope that they will grow, spin off and create new groupings – most of which remain in fellowship with each other. We see it too in the network of radical Christian discipleship, loosely Anabaptists, nurtured by the gentle and self-effacing London Mennonite Centre. And we see it in the more institutionalised (although they would hate the word, but they do have an office in Lambeth Palace, which in my book is a rather distinguished, long-standing institution) 'Fresh Expressions.'

So, challenge 2 is, have we got the structures right? Do our categories of membership and belonging reflect this complicated scene? How can we allow our partners to have the conversations that are appropriate to each of them? How can England's Christian leaders come together, given the fact that there is now such a huge mis-match of scale? How can the historic denominations, the new churches and the black-led churches share their charisms with each other?

Challenge 3 is very similar, but translated into the local. Within the space of a week, a widely experienced CEO, a leader of Fresh Expressions and a group of denominational regional church leaders all groaned at me about LEPs and what they perceived to be heavy and cumbersome ways of doing things which needed lightening. On the other hand as soon as you start paying someone, or a building is rented or bought, lawyers get very interested and it is in everyone's best interest that things are done properly and well. But have we got it right?

I suspect that goes deeper than mere structure. Ecumenism has a bad name in some places. It is perceived as energy-sapping rather than energy-giving, an old-fashioned drag rather than a call to the cutting edge. That, to use a useful if limited management term, is a question of branding. My sense is that Christians are still excited and delighted to be Christians and churches together, but the easiest way to ensure that any meeting consists of three old ladies and a dog is to label it ecumenical. And that isn't intended to be sexist or indeed anti-cat.

I enjoy reading Cardinal Kasper's work. He seems to me such a shrewd, sure-footed theologian. When he talks about us being in an age of 'spiritual ecumenism', he does so not out a sense of frustration but celebration. We have reached the point in the ecumenical pilgrimage where we've worked our way through to the profound theological realities that deeply divide us – the meaning of the eucharist, the nature of the episcopate and so on. It is only the patient and prayerful work of scholars that will enable us to solve such questions – and lest we despair about that, lets remember the joint Catholic-Lutheran statement on justification which is bringing to an end half a millennium of misunderstanding and division. In the meantime, what matters is the sharing of spiritual treasures, praying together, being together.

The particular gift of Anglo-Saxon ecumenism has been what one might call institutional unity – Robert Runcie came back from Milton Keynes and said, 'I've seen the future and it works.' That form of unity is here to stay, and it is our responsibility to service it and encourage it. But I do wonder if the next stage is not to be far more serious about 'spiritual ecumenism'. Working out what that might mean is challenge 4.

I believe profoundly in ecumenism. That is why I do this job. On another occasion I would defend it theologically, but for the moment let me say that it embraces diversity and does not destroy it. It speaks of God's world in a way that is only confirmed by the pictures we have seen from space of this fragile globe spinning so wonderfully and of what ecologists like James Lovelock have taught us of 'Gaia', and it is a working out both of our Lord's prayer that we might be in him as he is in the Father and the Father in him, and that Spirit-given vision of Ephesians of all things gathered up, in their integrity and difference into the Christ, who as I said earlier, is one not 38.