

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting, 8th March 2014, at Gustaf Adolf Church, Liverpool

The Rev David Leslie : Liverpool Experiences of Ecumenism (2)

Thank you for inviting me to speak at your Annual Meeting and to reflect on the partnership between David Sheppard and Derek Worlock who, along with Norwyn Denny, John Newton and other Church leaders, encouraged the ecumenical movement in Liverpool for the last quarter of the twentieth century. I intend to restrict my remarks to my experience of working ecumenically in one particular local context and then go on to reflect on some reasons why that ecumenical enthusiasm seems to have been lost or at least diminished in recent years.

David Sheppard came to Liverpool in 1975 after twelve years at the Mayflower Family Centre in East London and then five years or so as Bishop of Woolwich. His experiences in London focused on “doing ordinary things together” (1) and his time at Woolwich included work on a supplementary ministry (2) scheme which tried to break through the dominant model of ministerial education which stretched back to the nineteenth century and, despite the two World Wars, remained pretty much intact into the 1960s and 70s. David came to Liverpool with his book “Built as a City” published the previous year. The following year he welcomed Derek Worlock to Liverpool. Derek had attended every session of the Second Vatican Council and became Bishop of Portsmouth before moving to Liverpool.

David and Derek's ministry spanned a lively time for the Church. Vatican II had provided a spur for Liberation Theology which - not without difficulty - was being translated into a European context. It was a time for liturgical change and the advent of supplementary ministry schemes like the one David was involved with on the South Bank of the Thames - that part of London already associated with so-called “South Bank religion” at the time of another Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, author of “Honest to God”. David was keen to explore working in teams and when David came to Liverpool Neville Black was to play a leading role in what came to be known as GUML - the Group for Urban Ministry and Leadership. It was also the time for more formal clerical team ministries - like Kirkby, for example, where I worked for over eight years in the late seventies and early eighties. Spurred on by leaders such as David Derek and John Newton, churches of several denominations working in the same local area were encouraged to set up Local Ecumenical Partnerships - LEPs. Then, after years of wrangling, women were at last ordained as priests in 1992. This last development saw David and Derek on different sides of the argument but their close co-operation was sufficiently secure to prevent any fragmentation of their partnership. There was also the ARCIC - the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission - which sought a greater unity for those two denominations but which, despite agreement on the Eucharist, foundered on questions of authority. Altogether it was a heady mix - an exciting time when the hierarchical assumptions that under-girded so much of Church life seemed to be giving way.

I want to spend part of this paper reflecting on my own experience of working ecumenically. After my spell in Kirkby where I had an opportunity to become involved with the educational process that was taking shape to train GUML teams - I went to work in Widnes south of here where the river Mersey turns east. I found myself, as Team Rector of the parish, having some responsibility for the recently shared church of St Basil and All Saints - a Roman Catholic and Anglican church. David and Derek had opened it just two years previously. Blessed with some good local leaders, both clerical, and lay this significant project went from strength to strength. The Anglican Team Ministry included two other local churches, a small Anglican church, St Thomas', operating in a Methodist building, and St Michael's, the traditional parish church out of which other two projects had developed. The Methodist church building across the road from St Michael's was in a parlous state and so the opportunity arose to close it and welcome the Methodists to worship at St Michael's. In time three separate LEP's were operating with the bounds of the Anglican parish - two Methodist and Anglican, one Roman Catholic and Anglican.

The Methodist Church was pulled down and an ecumenical Youth and Community Centre was built in its place - opened by David Sheppard and John Newton.

The Anglican Team clergy worked closely with the Roman Catholic priest and with the Methodist Circuit ministers. The clergy committed themselves to meet together regularly and joint councils were set up to meet the requirements of the separate denominations. Encouraged by Derek, David and John Newton, the three projects worked well. Methodist worship at St Thomas' and at St Michael's injected greater freedom into Anglican liturgies and St Basil and All Saints went so far as to have what were called "simultaneous Eucharists" where both priests - Anglican and Roman Catholic - would preside together on special days using a combined Eucharistic rite that contained the necessary denominational requirements. The three projects even managed to work out a three-way process for appointing clerical staff across the three denominations. On one occasion the Anglicans wanted to appoint a team vicar who had been divorced. The Roman Catholic priest felt that he could not go along with this so, painful though it was, we decided not to go ahead with the appointment. On another occasion the Archdiocese appointed a priest - a good choice as it turned out - without prior consultation with the other members of the ecumenical clergy team. I protested to David Sheppard but he said that I was expecting too much if I thought the Roman Catholic Church would consult in that way. It was a touch of reality, I suppose - a recognition of how vulnerable local co-operation was.

But our partnership wasn't just clerical - it shaped the local congregations who began to plan their social and pastoral work on ecumenical lines. Expectations were high. St Michael's, for example, set up an ecumenical GUML team - with Methodist as well as Anglican members. This team was joined at a later date by members of St Thomas' Church. Much of the social, pastoral and liturgical aspects of the parish were shared by the clerical and lay members of that GUML team. The GUML team, in time, would produce three Ordained Local Ministers (OLMs) - who emerged from the team and were able to reflect theologically on their life experience and knowledge of their particular community. Working with that team was enjoyable and we all learnt a lot from one another.

Another significant aspect of ecumenical co-operation was the setting up of a borough wide forum. The borough of Halton consists of the towns of Widnes and Runcorn - two big towns that sit either side of the Mersey. David Sheppard, with the support of the Chief Executive at the time, encouraged us to create a forum - we called it FAITH - Forum for Action and Interests Together in Halton - which brought together local churches from two Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses, plus two Methodist Districts to work alongside councillors and council officers on a wide range of contemporary issues.

But, sadly, in time, things began to unravel. St Basil and All Saints found itself in trouble over a shared tabernacle with two shelves and one key. Keen, at that time, to broadcast their ecumenical co-operation as widely as possible the local leaders found that it backfired. The Liverpool Catholic Press (The Catholic Pictorial) and the national Catholic Herald picked up the story. In Rome Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, put pressure on Basil Hume the Archbishop of Westminster who got onto Derek Warlock who, in turn, pressured us to have separate keys to the tabernacle. As far as I know the situation has remained unchanged. In time, long after Derek's death, the simultaneous Eucharists were discontinued. And just a couple of months ago the Methodist and Anglican LEP at St Michael's Church - now joined with St Thomas' as one congregation - ceased to exist. The website for the Sankey Valley Methodist Circuit still has a heading that says, "Please pray for the small number of Methodist members and their Anglican friends as permission is sought to terminate this Ecumenical Partnership". From what I hear this is not an isolated breakdown in ecumenical working. The enthusiasm generated by Derek and David seems to have evaporated right across the board. What follows are some broad reflections about issues which may have contributed to this.

Holding to a vision for ecumenism in broad terms

A statement from the tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches which took place last year in Korea includes these words: "The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity

of the whole creation are interconnected". In what is sometimes described as a post-Christian world, many people who are trying to make sense of their lives in spiritual terms have - perhaps largely through the internet - sought a broad diversity of understandings about the way we can make sense of life in spiritual terms. They have broken free of the confines of institutional religion - not just in terms of dogmatic assertions from the big religious institutions but because of the top-down power games these organisations play (3).

Finance and bureaucracy

Churches tend to turn in on themselves when money is short. Denominations desperately attempt to shore-up their structures at a time of economic turn-down. Instead of engaging with agencies beyond the institutional walls when budgets are tight, the fundamentally important part of ecumenism which dares to reach out beyond the stranglehold of committee structures, appears to be a step too far. When I think back to the time when we were setting up our local ecumenical partnerships in Widnes, I shudder to think of the amount of time spent on duplicating denominational requirements in order to qualify as proper ecumenical partners. Yet, ironically, I understand that it is with recourse to those same legalistic requirements that now justify the breaking up of such partnerships!

I believe we must never lose sight of the fundamental aim of *oikumene* - embracing all people, the whole of creation. Ecumenism needs to reach beyond local churches to engage with other agencies of good will, which - going right back to the aims of the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 - is fundamental to ecumenism. Why is there increased resistance to ecumenism by many of the clergy? Is it simply the increased demands of administration that have accompanied new understanding of the minister's role? A friend of mine said to me the other day that he believes there is no lack of enthusiasm among the laity. Why the resistance? Increasing bureaucracy is part of the answer but there is much more to say about the role of the clergy. I want to spend some time reflecting on the education of the clergy and end by returning to the big ecumenical theme - how Churches working together can help to generate a renewed sense of community in a world where power, wealth and competition take precedence over poverty and peace.

Ministerial Education

One of the big problems for Churches is hierarchy - the hierarchical structure of so much of organised religion. Islam manages with a horizontal leadership, why not Christianity? There is a mighty resistance - presumably closely associated with issues of power and control - to bottom-up structures.

Back in 1948 Theodore Adorno published "Remarks on The Authoritarian Personality" (4). I wonder whether the training of clergy, for all its talk about collaborative working takes sufficient note of the psychology of the authoritarian personality. Clergy training remains largely competitive and individualistic. I remember comments made to me by a tutor - fourteen years ago - at The Church Divinity School of the Pacific at Berkeley California who said that "in my opinion only a minority of our students seem to understand the implications of a more shared approach to ministry. Efforts towards more collaborative training clash with competitive expectations, especially among the more academically gifted"(5). This chimes in with Edward Farley's work (6) about what he called a 'habitus' - a holistic practical wisdom about God which became systematised with the advent of theological encyclopaedias in the second half of the eighteenth century. Theology, he says, was then broken into subject areas - Bible, systematic theology, church history and practical theology. It was a pattern, he argues, that was turned into what he called "strategic know-how" for ministers.

The Liverpool OLM Course

For ten years we ran a training course for OLMs (Ordained Local Ministers) in this diocese based on an understanding that education cannot be compartmentalised. It was a course based on an understanding of learning as the interpretation and application of experience. It was a course that was aware of the insights of developmental psychology and faith development theory (7). It was a course that encouraged the participants to think critically and that tried to balance the traditional components of the Christian faith tradition with those that focus on the social context for local ministry. The

learning outcomes (8) - the principal means of assessment for the course - were deliberately open-ended to pick up David Kolb's warning that the vogue for defining learning in terms of outcomes is tantamount to an admission of non-learning because narrowly defined outcomes prevent the modification of ideas as the result of gained experience. (9) It was a model for theological education that believed learning is not disclosed theoretically in advance but by its implementation. It survived for ten years until it was taken over by the standardised package of Regional Training Partnerships.

More recently, as some of you may know, the Church of England has opted for a single validating structure for ministerial education based on the University of Durham which would provide a suite of common awards through its Department of Theology and Religion. How flexible this arrangement will turn out to be is unclear. This new system has been made necessary by the withdrawal of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding which has exposed the Church of England to a significant net rise in the cost of study for awards validated by the various universities. One theological educator in the Midlands said to me last year that there was concern how his institution's particular angle on contextual theological education would fit the new package. I am reminded, too, of The Scottish Churches Open College - which, I think, no longer exists - which used social, political and economic issues to drive their 'Living Theology' programme.

Standardised educational packages

The top down delivery of education measured by standardised competencies which suggest a competitive and individualistic transmission and reproduction of knowledge already neatly packaged is in danger of encouraging learners to rate their acquisition of competencies and the accolade of accreditation above their ability to think critically. (10) When the quality of educational provision depends on glitzy advertising and the need to channel sufficient students through a process to make an educational institution economically viable, then there is a risk that the integrity of what is delivered is compromised. Somehow we have lost the idea of education for education's sake. Education risks forfeiting its independence when it can no longer offer criticism of the system that has taken it prisoner.

I am suggesting that one of the reasons why ecumenical cooperation has dwindled is that the Churches have been largely unaware of the extent to which they have hitched their wagon to the consumerist, celebrity culture where the worth of everything is measured by its marketable value. Education has become a branded commodity. Technical 'know-how' seems more important than learning to work collaboratively for emancipation - for a freedom that recognises difference and seeks reconciliation. This is where, to me, the liberation theology idea of education as "a process of sharing content with people in the context of their community and society" (11) matters as much here in Europe as in Latin America. Here is the challenge to reach out beyond the comfort zone (one of David Sheppard's expressions) to work alongside other people of different traditions on a learning journey which requires them to "let go" some of their previously acquired understandings (12) and reach out to the complex and often chaotic world from which it is easy for Churches to hide.

True and False Values

When I was doing my research some years ago I was drawn very much to the work of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research - which flourished in Germany between the wars and then transferred to the United States. I remember a theological educator in Liverpool who was puzzled, aghast even, that I had made such a strong connection between critical theory and religious faith. But now that we know more than ever before how corrupt the dominant economic system has become, the critical insights of the Frankfurt School of Philosophy has brought some of its leading thinkers to prominence once more (13). False consciousness is the technical term that describes our failure to distinguish how things really are in themselves from how they are presented to us. Those who wield power can have a vested interest in shaping the selection and distribution of information now made speedily available to us through a plethora of media devices. What the Frankfurt philosophers called "the culture industry" - that great escape from the chaotic mundane world - maintains a quiescent and uniformed domestic audience with little interest in international affairs. Global capitalism's powerful control of symbolic

mediation through the social media increasingly limits the manoeuvrability of politicians. It is a system where the poor lose heart and the rich protect themselves behind gated estates; a system where the creative and imaginative potential of human beings gives way to bland conformity.

Perhaps the Churches need to move away from defensive arguments about doctrine and Church order and address themselves more to questions of justice in the light of poverty, marginalisation and oppression. Hence the present significance of public theology (14).

The fantastic advantages of modern communication and information exchange enables those who are willing to think outside the box to catch something of the variety of religious or spiritual experience now available to us. This raises uncomfortable questions for denominational structures that, knowingly or not, use power and control mechanisms to achieve a measure of doctrinal and structural conformity. Is it any wonder that so many turn away from big hierarchical institutions? "Where there is hope there is religion, but where there is religion there is not always hope", said Ernst Bloch (15). I am reminded, too, of words from one of Steven Shakespeare's "Prayers for an Inclusive Church" (16) (Steven lectures in philosophy at Liverpool Hope) asking God to "free us from the need to possess, define and silence others".

Perhaps - to finish - I would like to emphasise my view that ecumenical co-operation works best when the supporting denominations give permission - trust - to those who understand the local context - rather than the bureaucratic mess of attempting to impose uniformity of practice from above. Derek and David were quite autocratic but they were able to use their authority to clear the space and give freedom and encouragement for local projects to flourish. Churches need to confront paradox and ambiguity and not be defensive about difference. As people struggle to make sense of their lives and face the subtle but illusory clamour of market forces, the work of the ecumenical movement has a profoundly important role to play both in exposing falsehood and by reaching across barriers.

Notes :

- (1) Obituary notice in 'The Guardian' 7th. March 2005 by Alan Webster
- (2) See Roberts, E. Partners and Ministers, London, Falcon Books, about the Bethnal Green experiment and Local Ministry in Working Class Areas, the report of a working party chaired by the Bishops of Stepney and Woolwich, London, Mowbray 1972
- (3) See O'Murchu, D. (2011), Adult Faith : Growing in Wisdom and Understanding, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books
- (4) Adorno, T.A., (1948), Remarks on The Authoritarian Personality by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levison, Sandford
- (5) Kater, J. (2000), personal correspondence
- (6) Farley, E. (1983), Theologia :The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education, Philadelphia, Fortress Press
- (7) See James Fowler and Fritz Oser on Faith Development. See Freud, Ricoeur and Rizzuto on the God Representation.
- (8) The Eight Learning Outcomes of the Liverpool OLM Course were - "Have I grown in faith? Have I grown in understanding? Have I connected what I have learnt with my experience of life? Have I been able to interpret what I have learnt for my community and church? Have I 'seen through things'? Have I accepted change? Have I acquired skills to minister collaboratively? Have I the ability to work alone?"
- (9) Kolb, D. (1984), Experiential Learning, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall
- (10) Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C., (1990), Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, London, Sage Publications
- (11) Pazmiño, R.W. (1994), Latin American Journey : Insights for Christian Education in North America, Cleveland Ohio, United Church Press
- (12) Brookfield, S.D. (2005), The Power of Critical Thinking for Adult Learning and Teaching, Maidenhead, Open University Press

- (13) For example, Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Fromm, Habermas, Horkheimer, Marcuse
- (14) Graham, E. (2013) Between a Rock and a Hard Place : Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age, London, SCM Press
- (15) Bloch, E. (1972) Atheism in Christianity : The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom, Herder and Herder
- (16) Shakespeare, S. (2008) Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Norwich, Canterbury Press