

Anglican-Lutheran Society

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

The Rev Canon Neville Black : Liverpool Experiences of Ecumenism (I)

I'll start with my personal story. I was born in Bootle about five miles from here. I was converted into a very evangelical tradition of Christianity when I was in the Lower Sixth of the Grammar School there. I met the person who was to become my wife and in our minds we were mission bound, and we offered to go to Rwanda. The Bishop decided that my wife should remain in Liverpool while I went off to Theological College, the cultural 'finishing-school' of the Church of England! So went to the very conservative Oak Hill College in north London. When I was ordained I went to work in what's called Liverpool 8, and it was while we were there that we felt a very distinct call to be ministers in the inner city.

The Liverpool scene is a very interesting one. There was a church here called St Michael-in-the-City which was a replica of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. In the late 1800s Liverpool had had a very ambitious church building programme. However, when the economic crash came in the 1920s, four churches in the area where we are now meeting remained unfinished. The City Council, largely Tory (Conservative Party) and Protestant, took on the responsibility for finishing those buildings. One characteristic of Liverpool was that it was very Conservative politically. It even had a working class Tory Party and I don't know how many other places had that. And around the cathedral area there were four political wards (voting districts) represented on the Council by members of the Protestant Party in alliance with the Tories. When I worked in Everton it was rather similar, with strong representation on the Council by very conservative Protestant councillors.

So I arrived here in 1964 as a young curate with a very strong conservative Protestant theology. I had a 'mission-package' to off-load onto the people. I was part of a Team Ministry in Everton, led by a wonderful priest named Richard Allen, and we set about getting involved in the community. I very soon became aware that in that context my evangelical formation had very little to offer to that community. I spent the next ten years having to reconstruct my own inner formation in order to engage more meaningfully with that community. One of the things I learned then was what, in working class terms, we call the 'Splash Philosophy'. Wherever you find a working class community you will find people who create certain occasions every year when they celebrate like blazes (with enormous enthusiasm). Those communities are often locked into patterns of oppression, of work and very little other activity, and when the celebration comes they really let their hair down. So St Patrick's Day and Corpus Christi were days of real celebration (having a 'splash') for the Protestants and for the Roman Catholics in an area that was largely defined by religious boundaries – Catholic and Protestant.

So it was after a couple of years that I decided that we had to start getting involved in the Everton community. I was living in a multi-storey block of flats right on the dividing line between Protestant and Catholic communities. One of my first jobs was to try to get some educational projects going for the kids in the local secondary school, where parents had the right to withdraw their children from Religious education. I went round the block of flats and got 98% approval for bringing the children together to learn.

So far as worshipping congregations were concerned, mine was a small, struggling community. Then there was a strong Jesuit Church. I knocked on the Presbytery door, and I had my dog-collar on, and they didn't know what to do with me. The housekeeper said 'Wait here!' Eventually I was led in to meet the priests and it was just impossible. But that didn't stop us – we started to work it through. But, as happens, a new priest arrived there who was keen to

teach the faith to his people. He was very open-minded and it was *he* who knocked on *our* door and said, 'Are there any things that we could do together?'

Well, as it happened, by that time they had built in Everton three multi-storey blocks of flats that had been filled with young families most of whom had started with the married couple living in the home of one set of parents. Then children were born, and rows started, and it was impossible to keep living there. So these families were rehoused by the Council in these flats. Many of them didn't know how to budget, how to use the electricity properly, and in no time they were building up massive debt. The electricity was cut off, the buildings became full of condensation, and within about ten years or so these blocks of flats were condemned.

But there were a lot of children there. So the priest and I put together a little after-school play group on a piece of ground that belonged to the Catholic Church. I went to the Christian Union at the University here, and students came to help and that was our first movement into ecumenical life.

It was very difficult because the community was still very divided. The Anglican church was in the grip of an eclectic group of professional people. I don't know if you understand that, as I saw it then, the training of Church of England clergy was the best finishing school for access to British middle-class life for working-class people like me. Men wore jackets and ties, women wore posh coats and hats, they all developed a non-Liverpool accent – and that was typical of inner city churches right across the country. An incoming group of people take control, wield all the power and deny access to the church to the local people. So my task was to break that down.

Working on the principle of the 'Splash philosophy', and the church being dedicated to St George, I set up a St George's Day Festival. I said to Catholics and Protestants, 'We want to share with you the ability to celebrate.' We were lucky because we got a massive response from the schools, 12 primary schools got involved, and that event proved an amazing catalyst. For the first time ever the Catholic children came into the Church of England school, and the Anglican kids visited the Catholic school. It had never happened in Everton before and it released a lot of good energy.

Because we had so many pensioners in the area we worked together to run a pastoral care scheme for one thousand pensioners. And it was fascinating bringing the people together in these ways, and it gives you a flavour of what Liverpool was like before David Sheppard arrived as Anglican Bishop of Liverpool. He began to approach things in a very creative way, calling together all the bishops of the dioceses in the north of England to a conference centre in Yorkshire called Scargill. They started a movement called 'Call to the North' and it was mind-bogglingly effective. For the first time in Everton we met Catholic priests and lay people round the Bible, just becoming aware of each other and learning that the differences between us, which we thought were great, were in fact not so significant.

Everton embarked on a slum-clearance project, so I had no alternative but to get involved in the business of community development. The Catholic priest and I used to sit in front of meetings of two or three hundred people who were all very anxious about being displaced by the slum-clearance programme. My involvement in that created a massive response from the Orange Lodge (the extremely Protestant community) who circulated 5000 leaflets accusing me of having 'the mark of the Beast' because I was working with the Catholics because that's how the atmosphere was. But 'Call to the North' began to break that down very significantly.

Just finally, speaking for myself, you will see that I have struggled with my own original evangelical formation. Some of it is still part of me, but I've had to reconfigure it. Something that was significant at that time was liberation theology which young Anglican priests like myself

found had a much stronger resonance with the radical elements and the Catholic priests than we had with some of our own evangelical colleagues. And that led me into deeper understanding of what the Church of England had to address in order to bridge the terrible cleavage between Churches and ordinary people, and between people of different tradition and background within our communities.