

Study day on Theological Ecumenism (October 2007) from a Quaker perspective

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Having been appointed as a representative at Yearly Meeting's Committee meeting on 29 September, 2007, I attended the Study Day on Theological Ecumenism organised by the Department of Theological Questions of the Irish Inter-Church Committee (IICC) on Wednesday 24 October, 2007. The event took place at the Emmaus Centre, Swords, Co. Dublin. The Centre is a pleasant complex of buildings in the countryside just north of Swords. The title of the day was: "*The World on our Doorstep – Exploring Developments in Theological Ecumenism from Global and Local Perspectives*".

Reflecting the inter-denominational membership of the IICC, participants (numbering over 60) came from the member churches of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish (R.C.) Episcopal Conference. The largest proportion of those present were students and staff from eight of the theological colleges and institutes of the member churches. The overall day was co-chaired by Ms. Gillian Kingston and Archbishop Sean Brady as co-presidents of IICC and the main sessions were chaired by Professor Brendan Leahy (Maynooth).

The day began with "Morning Prayer", a programme of readings, formal prayers and a hymn led by clergy from the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions. The morning session consisted mainly of an address by Dr. Mary Tanner, an Anglican theologian who, inter alia, is the European President of the World Council of Churches. She gave "*A general overview of bi-lateral dialogues – doors and obstacles from a global perspective*". This proved to be a wide-ranging talk which was clearly based on extensive personal experience of inter-church dialogue. Amongst the themes running through these international dialogues (i.e. conversations between various sets of two churches at their international level) she identified:

- (i) the overarching motivation for entering into dialogue as "the mission of the Church" based on "the possibility to witness together...";
- (ii) the power of the process of dialogue itself, as a spiritual experience, to reconcile "the bitterest of memories";
- (iii) the relationship between Scripture and Tradition with a widening, though not complete across all traditions, convergence of understanding of that relationship;
- (iv) the understanding of what/who constitutes the Church including a newly shared concept of church (referred to as "koinonia") as mutual participation in divine life and love as distinct from a definition in terms of structural boundaries;
- (v) what are the main characteristics (and there are very divergent views on this question) of "full, visible unity" in such areas as belief, morality, sacraments and oversight.

Mary concluded by asking what the practical wider outcomes had been of all these conversations "between the privileged few" in the different traditions. She felt that all the churches involved had developed little understanding as to how to respond, within their own traditions or in relation to other traditions, to the results (incorporated in various written reports) of these theological conversations. While acknowledging specific examples of churches drawing closer (for example, Methodists and Anglicans in Britain and Ireland), she saw a need for the convergence achieved in these theological dialogues to be translated into changed relations between churches locally, regionally and internationally. Her talk was followed by discussion amongst participants in small groups and plenary form.

After lunch (served in the Centre), the afternoon session consisted of four briefer talks each on a different bi-lateral dialogue:

- (i) *Methodist/Roman Catholic International Commission*: Gillian Kingston (Methodist Church in Ireland) spoke of this dialogue which dates from the establishment of the Commission in 1967. Since then, the Commission has worked in a five-year series of meetings and has, to date, presented eight reports (the latest in 2006) to the World Methodist Council and the Vatican. She recommended the seventh report “*Speaking the Truth in Love*” (2001) as an introduction to these two traditions.
- (ii) *World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)/Roman Catholic Dialogue and International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission*: Bishop Tony Farquhar (R.C. Auxiliary Bishop of Down and Connor) who is involved in both these sets of dialogues, spoke of the nature of WARC/Roman Catholic dialogue and mentioned, amongst others, these two aspects from a forthcoming WARC/RC document:
 - the Church and the Kingdom are not co-terminous and
 - we do not build the Kingdom but we can remove obstacles.
- (iii) *Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) (previously the Leuvenberg Church Fellowship)*: Professor Cecil McCullough (Presbyterian Church in Ireland) who is a member of the CPCE Executive spoke of the process (principally in Continental Europe) by which churches which had emerged from the Reformation (mainly Lutheran and Reformed) had, after a period of dialogue dating from the 1930/40s, signed the Leuvenberg Agreement in 1973, to which various other Protestant churches have since then become affiliated.
- (iv) *Methodist Church in Ireland/Church of Ireland dialogue and Anglican-Methodist International Commission*: Revd. Peter Thompson (Church of Ireland) who is a member of the Covenant Council of the Church of Ireland and Methodist Church in Ireland, spoke of the Methodist-Anglican dialogue in Ireland dating from the earlier sets of bi-lateral talks involving Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregational and Anglican Churches in 1963 and culminating in the Covenant signed by both churches (C.of I. and Methodists) in 2002.

The afternoon session concluded with a panel-based plenary discussion in which, inter alia, it was remarked how much more “joyful” ecumenical meetings were now compared to 10/15 years ago. The day ended with Evening Prayer followed by tea/coffee before departure.

I found the day interesting to hear of the process of dialogue which had been and continues to take place between so many parts of the Christian tradition as well as to meet and talk with other participants from various backgrounds. Not being conversant with formal theology, I struggled with such terms as “an ecclesiology of communion”. I wondered, as well, what such keenly discussed topics as mutual recognition of ministries might mean to Friends.....