

The Archbishop spoke of "an ecumenism of action" at the World Council of Churches 70th anniversary celebration in Geneva.

WCC
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Read the text of the Archbishop's speech:

Thank you to the General Secretary, and thank you to all of you for coming on a Friday afternoon. When I was in the oil industry I spent a lot of time working in Norway – are you sure that winter is only half the year? (Laughter.)

I'm glad you remember the visit of Rowan Williams – an extraordinary man, one of our greatest Archbishops. Remember what he did and what he said, for I think in a few years people will look back and think what a remarkable Archbishop he was. He is much underestimated.

I am very glad to be here during the seventieth anniversary year of the World Council of Churches. My predecessor Geoffrey Fisher chaired the session at the First Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 in which the World Council was brought into being. The Churches of the Anglican Communion have been involved in the work of the WCC and other parts of the ecumenical movement at all levels since the very beginning – and indeed before the very beginning, with the great call to the churches of the Lambeth Conference in 1920, and also the work of Archbishop William Temple in the period up to and including his time as Archbishop of Canterbury.

I would like to say that the more I see of the WCC, having had little contact with it before I took on this position some five years ago, the more I see its necessity. It is a privilege to be with you and I continue to pray for God's blessing on your work, a blessing without which nothing can prosper.

There was a clear tension, well known to historians of the church in the twentieth century, between those whose appetite was for theological discussion and those who preferred to leave all that to one side and get on with serving God's people together. Put crudely this was a divide between 'Faith and Order' and 'Life and Work', two movements brought together by the WCC.

Theological dialogue has borne great fruit. During the twentieth century we witnessed major theological and doctrinal rapprochement between the Eastern and the Oriental Orthodox on Christology, and between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on justification.

Remember – these were the issues on which major schisms in the church were based.

From the perspective of the Anglican Communion, inter-church bi-lateral dialogue led to unity schemes between Anglicans and hitherto non-episcopal churches in South Asia, and relationships of communion between Anglicans and Lutherans in North America and Northern Europe, and between Anglicans and Methodists in Ireland. And yet it continues, which is why I speak of an ecumenical spring.

Just last Friday, in a debate at the General Synod of the Church of England, there was a seventy-five per cent majority – three to one – in the Synod for moving ahead with negotiations, discussions, dialogue, towards the mutual recognition of ministry with the British Methodists. That is an extraordinary thing. This would involve them accepting episcopacy in a personalised form, as opposed to the episcopate resting in the Methodist conference. It would involve the Church of England allowing the ministry of Methodist presbyters in Church of England churches who had not been ordained episcopally – at least, for a while that would happen: a period called the so-called ‘bearable anomaly’. Very Anglican. (Laughter.)

The agreement arises out of the covenant signed between the two churches more than 10 years ago, and out of extensive and detailed theological dialogue. It is a step along a journey, but one of considerable significance, and instructively, has the support of all our other ecumenical partners. Let no one say that theological dialogue is vain, or mere academia. It is far more than that.

However, it is more than twenty-five years since there was first talk of ‘ecumenical winter’. In a lecture in this building nearly 25 years ago Konrad Raiser, then General Secretary of the WCC, mentioned ‘ecumenical winter’, commenting that it should be noted that winter is followed by spring. Except in Norway, when winter is followed by winter. Or in London, where winter is followed by rain. (Laughter.)

Indeed, it was after that lecture in 1993 that most of the agreements I outlined earlier took place. Cardinal Walter Kasper wrote a book entitled



‘The Ecumenical Winter’, but it was a winter in which much fruit was

Peter Williams/WCC

Negotiated Frontiers

Many, if not all, divisions in the Church were over matters of principle: be it doctrine, questions of power and authority, or territorial disputes. In doctrinal and principled dispute the barriers come up and the territory is demarcated: you believe this, I believe that; you do this, I do that; you are wrong, I am right. We set up our barriers.

Bi- and multi-lateral theological dialogue over the course of the twentieth century bore much fruit, but at times it could be appear to be akin to diplomatic renegotiation of frontiers; the barriers to communion still exist, they've just been moved a bit. The negotiation of the ways in which frontiers are set down by states, and which they are crossed, is one of the most difficult aspects of international relations at times of tension.

We have moved the frontiers. For instance, there was a watershed agreement on the doctrine of justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. This was the defining doctrinal disagreement of the European Reformation, but it didn't bring the two churches into communion – it shifted the frontier to a different point.

It is, of course, real, tangible ecumenical progress for that agreement to have been made. And I am very pleased that the Anglican Consultative Council, in 2016, has affirmed the substance of the agreement and – as much as Anglicans ever join together in anything (laughter) – has become part of that agreement. Such agreements make progress on other issues more possible, but they are not the whole story.

Frontiers imply difference. They say to us that on the other side of the frontier is the 'other' – the other person, the other culture, the other race, the other nation, type, sort of people. Ecumenism that looks as though it is about the negotiation of frontiers is an ecumenism that is based on theological foundations of sand. Indeed, one might argue that it is not based on foundations at all.

All ecclesiology begins with Christology. The problem with our divisions, to put it in its simplest terms, is that they say to the world that Christ is divided. By ourselves being divided, we call the attention of the outsider – of those who look – away from the extraordinarily beautiful person of Jesus Christ, who draws to Himself and to His love every human being who has been born, who lives and who ever will be born, and instead by our divisions we don't say, "Look at Christ", we say, "Look at us."

Like the evil fairy in so many folk stories that comes to the birth or christening of a princess, division waves its wand and the world turns to look at the Church itself, and does not much like what it sees. The role of the Church is not to point to itself but to Christ. When that happens the world finds that it is convicted of sin, of righteousness and of judgement.

Negotiated frontiers start with barriers. They reveal others, and otherness. They diminish our capacity to pray, they reduce our assurance of the gift of salvation, and they deeply impede our mission. If you will excuse British irony, apart from those three problems, denominations and divisions are entirely advantageous.

Open Borders

Open borders, by contrast, allow the other to be part of ourselves. They permit movement and transfer, exhibiting not division but diversity. In their openness, they invite encounter, as opposed to frontiers which require resilience and courage to cross.

The ecclesiology of an open border is to say that we are one with differences – rather than we are many seeking what it is to be one.

Theologically, Christologically and ecclesologically, to see ourselves as one with fractures is vastly more authentic to the work and purpose of God in Christ through creation, through salvation history, through the work of the spirit today and towards the revealing of the kingdom of God, than it is to see ourselves as different, as other.

Yet the practical application of open borders is immensely difficult, because we are used to clearly demarcated frontiers. For five hundred years

with some parts of the Church for almost a thousand years. They are not frontiers that they could move, that they could cease to be.



Peter Williams / WCC

As I have said before, the way we live is like a family where the relationships have broken down. They may live in the same house, but they live in separate rooms, they have separate lives and they do not talk to each other, politely, too easily.

We become too used to it. We begin to think, "This is normal." It is not normal. It is deceiving. We are deceived and we deceive the world into the purpose and power of Christ.

But frontiers give us security, and a sense of definition and identity, even if it is only negative: "We are not like them." The effort of recognising that the Spirit of God is at work equally among others is hard to assimilate. Within churches our legal structures preclude the support of other churches across the frontier. If an English bishop in the Church of England sees that there is a church of another denomination doing wonderful work, it is immensely complicated to bless that work by supporting that church, licensing its pastor and enabling it to work with us and us with them. The paper work is that thick, and ends with the word "No."

We tie ourselves down through our inability to imagine who we really are. The beloved people of God.

For the proper theologian (and I do not consider myself as such) there will be a tendency to say, "Tell me something I don't know!" They are right. However, being right is not the same as being agonised by our divisions.

The point of the Church, the objective of the Church, is worship and mission: justice and peace in all creation – with creation, through creation. Peace with God, peace with one another. Justice for the poor and the suffering. Everything else apart from worship and mission is decoration. It may be very nice decoration. *Good* decoration. Not decoration you wish to lose. But it is not the essential.

Something that impedes our mission and hinders our worship is therefore something that destroys the object of the Church's existence. For this very reason alone, we must deal not only at the theological, Christological and ecclesiological levels, but at the psychological levels. Our habits of division. Our ways of looking at one another. Our instinctive approach. It is at the psychological level that we struggle almost beyond endurance.

For even if we admit that theologically, Christologically and ecclesiologically we are one with differences; psychologically and missiologically we do not look like it. For this reason, and even if there were no other reason, for this reason alone the work of ecumenism is not merely an urgent question for the churches: it is existential one.

One of the great gifts of the ecumenical movement is that it has allowed Christians from different denominations, who might once have kept separate from one another, to get to know one another. There were times before, say, the 1960s, when people of one denomination might never have entered the church building of another. Indeed many may have feared to go in either for fear of either being turfed out or, worse, contaminated by the place itself. Then something changed. Christians found common cause in all sorts of forums – political life; spirituality and prayer; community service; education; children's work.

Important examples of this cross-denominational work are the civil rights movement in the USA and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. New religious communities sprang up with an ecumenical charism, such as Taizé or Focolare.

This shifting tension between closed frontiers and open borders is not new in the life of the church across the world. One of the many less than welcome gifts that the church in Europe bequeathed to the rest of the world through emigration and missionary expansion was Christian division. It did not take that long for Christian missionaries to realise that competing for the same souls for Christ was not entirely productive. There was productive co-operation, but there was also the dividing of territory and the setting up of frontiers.

When you travel around sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, as I do fairly frequently, you come across areas, sometimes whole countries, that are predominantly of one Christian denomination or another, and then move across an invisible frontier to a stronghold of another church. It was the missionary movement, though, through early evangelistic crusades and then leading on to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, where the early principles of open borders were born. They were at the same time the problem and the beginnings of the solution.

However, a great deal of such ecumenical action remains hidden from the official ecumenical organs. Research in England around the turn of the millennium showed that there was a great deal of ecumenical activity that went under the radar of the ecumenical movement. Christians simply got on with expressing their ministry of prayer, evangelism and service, together with friends from other churches.



Peter Williams / WCC

In England today, and I am sure it is true in other parts of the world, many congregations are made up of people who started their Christian life in other churches. The result of this is that traditions, ideas and worship styles from one church are brought into the other.

The wind of the spirit, which has brought such movements into reality, is blowing ever more powerfully. In many places it is becoming a hurricane. Let me give you an example.

Three years ago, looking at the condition of the Church of England, the Archbishop of York and I made a joint call to parishes in England to join together in the period between Ascension and Pentecost to pray for the mission of the Church and especially its proclamation of the Gospel. Focussing on those whom we knew and loved, but who did not have the assurance and peace and understanding of grace that comes as a gift from being a disciple of Jesus Christ. We called this appeal 'Thy Kingdom Come'.

In the first year we were optimistic, by English standards, and we thought that perhaps four or five thousand people involved across the Church of England. There were a hundred thousand, including large numbers from churches other than the Church of England. A very large number of cathedrals took part and were filled, as much to their surprise as to ours.

In the second year, last year, churches in 85 countries participated, including numerous provinces of the Anglican Communion. This year it seems likely to be a far greater number, including churches from every denomination that we encounter.

The blessing of this movement of prayer for mission and evangelism is that it is not centrally directed, but moved by the Spirit. We do not set out forms of prayer. We give out resources on the web, and we simply say pray in whatever way is right for you.

More than that – even better – it has grown from a Church of England thing to being something that is not in any way recognisably Anglican. Probably most people who are involved in the prayer, whether as individuals or through their churches or more widely, will have no idea that it originated in the Church of England. I praise God for that ignorance: may it deepen. We do not want this to be Anglican. We want the Church to pray – a prayer of Christians for those who do not know the love of Christ, and who are not reached by the Church's obedience to the mission of God.

Another example with which I am familiar (there will be hundreds with which I am unfamiliar; my apologies for that) is the Reconciling Leaders Network (RLN). Again this is something that springs from a Gospel imperative to be those involved in peace-making. It is part of your slogan at this time. Your own General Secretary is one of the great embodiments of this passion, as is his own country of Norway. Yet we find that as we work on this more and more people are caught up by the desire to be part of reconciliation.

One particular aspect, Women on the Frontline, with which my wife is closely involved, will seek to mobilise the voices and the activities of women through training and formation, in some of the most difficult and violent parts of the world, where women remain objects of sexual violence and conflict and the suffering subjects of the deepest oppression. On top of that they mourn and bury their dead, and have to live with the consequences of being refugees.

This RLN seems to be getting well beyond our control. Well beyond our leadership. Praise God for that. We can only make it less good. The Spirit will lead it into the hearts of people if that is right.

Pope Francis and I, after the meeting we had for the fiftieth anniversary of the meeting of Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsay, spoke in our joint declaration of an ecumenism of action. By action we did not mean that Protestant vice of running around constantly trying to do things, while occasionally remembering to ask God to bless them. It means rather an ecumenism which is seen in the visible solidarity of Christians in the cause of mission, of the living out of the Gospel among the poor and the struggling, and evangelism.

Thus in England, we see the ecumenism of action through prayer like Thy Kingdom Come, through food banks, through night shelters, through debt counselling and support for marriage, through the Near Neighbours programme which brings together different faiths so that by love we tackle extremism. We see the ecumenism of action in the Great Lakes Peace Initiative in Africa, and the ecumenism of action in serving the poor in the townships around Johannesburg.

The ecumenism of action is deeply based in the truth of the oneness of Christ. It is, if you will forgive a family story, the ecumenism that was shown between two of our children, when the boyfriend of a daughter was rude about the daughter's elder brother. The daughter and her elder brother never stopped arguing at that time, some years ago. But an attack by an outsider produced an ecumenical movement which led to the boyfriend being ditched almost instantly. The ecumenism of action says that faced with evil, we come together in love and show that we are one. As the preacher to the papal household, Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, said in a sermon for the opening of the General Synod of the Church of England in 2015, in front of the Queen in Westminster Abbey – now can you imagine that 70 years ago! That shows how we've changed – he said: "When they kill us they do not ask whether we are Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostal, or Anglican. They ask if we are Christians."

It would be easy from this account to fall into the error of thinking that all ecumenism that is effective is from the life and work stream. Yet as I hope I have already shown in speaking of our relationship with English Methodists ecumenism must also be rooted in theological dialogue, or it becomes merely utilitarian.

Receptive Ecumenism

One of the most important of recent ecumenical developments has been the concept of 'Receptive Ecumenism'. This concept, based predominantly on the work of Professor Paul Murray at Durham University, takes as its premise that no single church or denomination within the divided body of Christ can be wholly without need of the gift of the other churches and denominations. Much of the ecumenism of negotiated frontiers is based on drawing up a list of red lines (a phrase that we heard the whole time in the Brexit negotiations – and that is the only time I will mention Brexit in this lecture...) over which you will not cross. Receptive Ecumenism looks beyond those frontiers and asks what it is that we can receive from another church or tradition. It turns negotiated frontiers into open borders.

As pointed out above the experience of the church in England at least is that people are less constrained by denominational boundaries than in the past. Boundaries between churches are more fluid. When a Christian family or individual moves to a new area, particularly in towns and cities, the church to which they go is normally a choice. It is as likely to be a choice based on style, music, children's work, accessibility, where their friends go or where they fit in socially, as it is to be based on the denomination of the church concerned.

As a bishop conducting confirmations I regularly confirm those who have been adult members of non-episcopal churches, and receive into the Communion of the Church of England adults who have been confirmed in the Catholic or Orthodox churches. My friend and colleague the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster does exactly the same thing the other way round. And as we receive people we receive their traditions, their stories and their spirituality, and this affects and improves our own.

So looking forward, what I pray for is an ecumenism of action theologically underpinned.

One of my favourite quotes, which I suspect I use far too often, comes from the writings of Edward Gibbon, the great historian of the late eighteenth-century, whose monumental books 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' in six volumes remains the finest piece of English prose, and a great work of history. My wife gave me all six volumes when we first married, and I worked my way through them during aeroplane flights over the next 20 years.

Gibbons says in his introduction: 'The religions of the Roman Empire were, to the people, all equally true; to the philosophers, all equally false; and to the magistrates, all equally useful.'

There is a great danger that the ecumenism of action turns into the ecumenism of being useful. We can easily fall into the trap of believing that if we cannot agree, then we can at least do something together that is nice and useful. But this is massively to understate and to misrepresent the nature of the ecumenism of action.

The ecumenism of action springs out of prayer, and I would argue especially out of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we find the Body of Christ broken, and the Blood of Christ poured out and shared. And as the Church is empowered and renewed by its reception, so our memory and understanding of the frailty and risk of the incarnation is restored to the centre of our minds, and to the impulsion of our hearts and spirits. In the incarnation Jesus bears all the sin and fragility of the world, and in the host we see that fragility, renewed constantly in fresh life and power.

The ecumenism of action springs from that cycle of death and resurrection, of frailty and renewal, and its creation within us again and again and again of the compassion of God for a world of frailty, sin and darkness, in which without the witness of Christ there is no light of resurrection, no dawn of a coming kingdom.

The world is crying out in need. As we know more and more of each other, and experience more and more of each other ever more rapidly through social media and international communication, our capacity to love one another is increasingly overburdened and inadequate. We do not deal well with the other.

Our capacity to deal with difference is overburdened because we know so much. It's not that we know less: we know far, far more – and we know it now, not in a few seconds or few weeks. There is no time to stop and reflect, and we do not deal well with each other.

In the United Kingdom at the moment, one of the great arguments is over international aid. In the early years of this decade the United Kingdom reached the United Nations target of 0.7% of GDP in international development funding. Much of the press opposes that vigorously, and uses the otherness of the other to demonstrate the vanity of spending money in such ways. In the past that would have been difficult for lack of information; today they can get it off social media and use it day after day, with new stories and new headlines. Because we know more, we seem to love less.

The ecumenism of action is threatened by our knowledge, not by our ignorance.

The world is crying out in need, not only in the obvious ways in which our newspapers tell us, but in the spiritual need of incapacity to forgive each other's sins; incapacity to be reconciled to one another; and to live as one, beautifully diverse, utterly extraordinary creation to represent the oneness of God in Christ.

The ecumenism of action theologically underpinned should be our response to seeing such darkness. We must say that we will carry the light of Christ together into the darkness.

We must not allow ourselves to believe that great and ancient lie, that darkness may overcome light, held as untruth ever since the prologue of St. John was first written in the dark paganism of the first century. It is not simply that we do things better together. It is that we are the Church when we are together. We are obedient when we are together. We are open to the spirit of God blowing in power through us into a world becalmed in suffering, when we are together.

We can become too pragmatic about this, forgetting its theological foundations. At the declaration of American independence in July 1776, one of its great leaders, Benjamin Franklyn, said to the colonists about to fight the might of the British Empire, 'we must surely hang together, or we will most certainly hang separately'.

That is, or may be, true for the Church in many places, but it is not the reason for our ecumenism of action theologically founded, and if we allow ourselves to be useful, and self-protected as the motivation for ecumenism, we have, to use a profound phrase – that is often said to me – lost the plot.

The ecumenism of action theologically founded is also based in this reality that need does not wait for theological argument, but for the compassion of Christ.

St John Paul II said in *Ut Unum Sint*:

‘How indeed can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians? However true it is that the Church, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of indefectibility, has preached and still preaches the Gospel to all nations, it is also true that she must face the difficulties which derive from the lack of unity. When non-believers meet missionaries who do not agree among themselves, even though they all appeal to Christ, will they be in a position to receive the true message? Will they not think that the Gospel is a cause of division, despite the fact that it is presented as the fundamental law of love?’

He went on:

‘The unity brought about by action together in the service of Christ makes the other less a stranger and more a Christian brother or sister. At this point, by the grace of God, the theological and ecclesiological dialogue become easier. The two are not exclusive of one another.’

It is not the case that an ecumenism of action leaves theology outside the room. The action that the churches and Christians take together is an outworking of the spiritual unity that exists between all who proclaim that Jesus is Lord. The Lund Declaration, another great touchstone of the story of the ecumenical movement, declares that churches should do all things together save those things which, in conscience, they must do apart.

One of the finest characteristics of the WCC was, from very early on, to hold together the theological, diaconal and evangelistic ecumenical movements. They are one and the same – working, to use a military metaphor, in a pincer movement against division and enmity. Theological dialogue and discussion brings people closer together and sets up the framework for joint action. Joint action brings people closer together, and sets up the relationship that enables theological dialogue and discussion.

Conclusion

In the early days of his pontificate, which started two days before I took up my present office, Pope Francis made several public statements in which he used the metaphor of the sheep, the shepherd and the sheepfold. I had cause to look at these statements again last year when I was invited to write a reflection on them for a collection of reflections on the words of Pope Francis.

The most famous of these statements was when he exhorted the clergy, the pastors, to have the 'smell of the sheep', so close were they to their people, the flock. But in other statements he spoke of the sheepfold as being like the Church. His interesting take on this is that as well as the traditional understanding of the absolute need to go out and seek the lost to bring them back into the safety of the sheepfold, he saw that it was possible for the sheepfold to be as a frontier, a barrier – not only keeping out the wolves but also other sheep.

The state of the Church today is such that in many places – particularly in Europe – we can see ninety-nine outside the fold and only one inside. It's almost true in England: 1.7 percent of the population attend the Church of England.

The task is great. It is appropriate, right and imperative that the churches work together to seek out the lost wherever they may be. To find that when we bring them into the safety of the fold should be one fold, not many – and that the flock is one flock, with one shepherd, the Good Shepherd himself, who prays that we may be one.

Thank you.

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