

Hello, the purpose of this AGM is to discuss my experience at Forum and explain the impact that it has had on my understanding of ecumenism and how we will utilise this in our own contexts.

So firstly, a bit of background. Forum is the largest ecumenical gathering in the UK and is normally held at The Hayes Conference Centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire and takes place every three years. Around 280 Church leaders from a variety of different denominations attended and joined together for a time of reflection and fellowship. The theme for this year's Forum was "One But Not the Same: Celebrating Diversity – Living with Difference" and covered a myriad of topics from reflecting on synodality to racial justice and reparations. There were smaller workshops that took place which allowed space for reflection and discussion in smaller groups to talk about different situations and the impact they can make ecumenically.

One of the talks that deeply moved me was the racial justice and reparations talk led by Dr Rev Tessa Henry Robinson, a Minister of the URC and who has recently been appointed as the Moderator of the Free Churches Group. She spoke about how people need to unite and understand what it means to be "responsible for unity." We are all responsible in working towards unity. She explained that there needs to be a "grace filled work of communion." This is pivotal in discussing issues that are tender and need to be navigated carefully with "grace in abundance" at the centre of it. One of the points made that has stuck with me is, "reparations are for truth and healing"; [not to be carried out because we are feeling guilty or fearful.] It is all about what is motivating us to move forward with reparations and about choosing to take accountability going forward. Outside of the context of racial justice, it is important to remain accountable to the spirit of unity that Jesus calls us to in John 17. I believe that ecumenism is working well in Herefordshire and believe as a county we uphold that spirit of unity that is so essential in emulating the body of Christ. This further emphasises the importance of togetherness that we are already doing. Nonetheless, it is still essential to consistently evaluate our hearts and continue to respond to the call of representing the body of Christ as Jesus asks us to emulate in John 17. It is definitely food for thought and brought to light again that our motivations matter when seeking to repair relationships and ensure that we offer "grace in abundance", not only within the context of racial justice, but on a regular basis to our fellow congregational members and to our ecumenical brothers and sisters.

There was a talk on synodality that also was very helpful in hearing different perspectives on the process of collaboration and discernment when walking alongside our Christian brothers and sisters. Cardinal Vincent Nichols stressed the importance of "proclaiming the full gospel and not minimising the demands strengthens synodality" which then means that our "hearts are set correctly towards our neighbour." Archbishop Nikitas highlighted that "the aim is to defend truth not to define

it” in synodality and walk together in our Christian faith. We work together to stand up for the Gospel, unite over the desire to again emulate the body of Christ and convene to ensure that truth is continuously preached. The Quaker perspective referred to synodality as the worshipful discernment of the will of God and to ensure synodality is rooted in love. As a County, we need to ensure that our synodality is consistently rooted in love, our discussions and preparations for activities. When we collaborate, it is important that our discernment continues to be rooted in love and grace. We need to continue to have the same focus and the same collective drive in order to work together ecumenically. It is important to take the time to discern the next steps that God wants each individual group to take and step forwards towards that collective goal.

This year also marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. This is an important ecumenical anniversary as it was 1700 years ago that 250-300 Bishops of different denominations met to agree on a collective “statement of faith”. Dr Susan Durber, who is URC’s President within the World Council of Churches spoke on the Nicene Creed saying that it contains “wonderfully compact phrases [about] what needs to be said about creation and redemption and about who Jesus is and who we might become.” The first section “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” Susan reiterated that this was a clear break away to Roman society that Christianity was separate from the Roman religion. She went on to say that this statement of faith reiterates that “God loves all” regardless of gender and social class. She also stated that the Creed says that “Jesus is who God is” through the next section: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” Dr Susan Durber said that “the Creed is like a poem telling the story that is the beginning of all our stories.” This is why it is so important to remember the foundational significance of this anniversary. When logistics seek to overcrowd our thinking when working together ecumenically, it is important to come back to the simplicity of the Nicene Creed in pushing us forwards to unity.

One of the other moving central elements was praying for the forty young ecumenists that turned up to Forum. We asked them all to stand at the front and all the Church leaders and other representatives in attendance, prayed for them and that their passion for ecumenism would continue to be cultivated throughout their ecumenical journeys. It was incredibly encouraging to see so many in attendance. Asking the young ecumenists

to stand at the front highlighted the fact that the next generation continues to need prayer and guidance as they navigate their own ecumenical journeys.

The young ecumenist workshop was well attended, and we covered the questions: “How does ecumenism contribute to our spiritual life as Christians? How are we engaging with the climate change in different ecumenical contexts? How can we best strive for unity whilst stewarding the earth?” We had twelve people attend each session.

During the first workshop, people discussed the importance of the work being carried out by the Woodland Trust and Eco Church in response with the climate change question. Networking and linking green spaces with other churches, getting bronze and silver eco church medals and arranging workshops to help young people with public speaking was supported. We also discussed how stewarding the earth can emphasise unity among denominations and one attendee reiterated that the cry of the earth links with the cry of the poor. They are both as important as one another and when we care for the earth, we consequently help the poor whether that be in physical means or spiritual means. Therefore, climate change is as essential as helping the poor as the effect of climate change directly impacts those who are struggling financially.

Asish Varghese from Churches Together in Merseyside and a member of the Mar Thoma Church spoke on the question: how does social media impact your ecumenical context? Social media is affecting the mindset of the next generation and is consequently having an impact on their core values and their perspective on the world. Asish spoke about how social media can be used as a “platform of unity” within the right context. Within the context of ecumenism he mentioned that “the Church needs to meet the next generation so they might walk into Church,” and we need to be ready to receive them. It is important that we advocate and support one another in our use of social media to be “a Christian witness.” We can’t shy away or ignore the negative impacts of social media where we see fractures and division more often than unity. It is this acknowledgment that exacerbates the need to see ecumenical unity across all social media platforms. We discussed the importance of understanding the head space of young people and helping them to support Church leaders.

When we reflected on “How does ecumenism contribute to our spiritual life as Christians?”, one person mentioned that having grown up in a Church of Wales school, that interdenominational support enriches the Church and helps it to flourish. There was also discussion that many ecumenical spaces are in the process of a continuous image change. I believe that we constantly have to review what it means to exist in an ecumenical space and the impact that it can have on our communities. The goal is to as I have said before, to emulate the body of Christ, and we need to consistently reflect on the impact of this. Embracing different traditions enriches our scope of worship and our experience of the presence of God. It enhances the spiritual life through waiting for the presence of God through different lenses. The theme “One But Not the Same:

Celebrating Diversity – Living with Difference” encapsulates that ecumenism is not just people uniting. It is a celebration of unity! We are fulfilling what the Lord has called us to do and in turn helps our own Christian lives to flourish.

One of the speakers spoke about how there are different ways in which the spirit is expressed, and we should learn to engage with a different tradition even if that means adapting to a style that is not like your own, urging us to continue to be creative with the ecumenical space that we are in. She went on to quote Toshihiro Takami, founder of the Asian Rural Institute who says “What happens is that people have to go through the pain of creating for themselves a community of learning. In the process, each person has to find a new image - quite different from the one they came with...In this painful process of having our conventional images shattered, we find ourselves emerging with new images - of ourselves, of leadership, life and culture.” It is not easy. However, it is a process that we can trust that God is guiding us through. Elliot Vanstone, my co-facilitator, spoke about the next young ecumenist webinar and the wider social media groups that are being organised so young ecumenists can continue to network together.

All of the topics we discussed such as stewarding the earth emphasises how we can further honour the Lord within working together collectively. We can honour God’s creation through stewarding the earth together. This is something we should nurture as a County and through the ecumenical activities that we organise. The discussion on social media reinforces the importance of engagement across all demographics and it is possible to utilise this by continuing to send promotion of events to myself so I can continue to upload these events to social media. It is always useful to be creative and adaptive within ecumenical spaces and create “a community of learning” within our ecumenical context and continue to be open to listening, learning and discerning together

My ecumenical take away was rejoicing in the fellowship that we shared but also challenged by the many talks given to us. Uniting and celebrating that unity is crucial in refreshing our souls and moving forward in the direction God has called us to go. I hope others felt inspired by the conference and understood that celebrating difference in worship and different traditions emphasises our different spaces within the body of Christ and allows us to play our part in being God’s witnesses and then coming together to reflect as the body of Christ. We can learn from the different parts of the body in these ecumenical spaces, and all of this can further enrich and deepen our understanding of Christ. It is important to remain teachable in every single moment of our Christian walk. Attending conferences like Forum help us to be malleable and learn something new from a different denomination whilst remaining united in Christ. It is essential to walk in humility together and be willing to learn from one another. Helen Cameron, one of the CTE Presidents and at the time Moderator of the Free Churches Group (Dr Rev Tessa-Henry Robinson has since taken over the Moderator role) that unity

is “god-given” and that there is a “mutual indwelling of the father and the son of the obedience of the son and the self-giving of the Father and we learn to be one...to share in the unity that God has given us.” She went on to say that “unity is God’s will and intention for us” and that “diversity is the strength of the Church.” “The way we relate to one another is fundamental.” We need relationship between Churches, we need it. It is important we walk in grace and compassion, regardless of doctrine or theology.

Watching other members of different denominations become involved in worship of different traditions, sitting alongside one another shows that regardless of theology or doctrine that we are part of the body of Christ. By continuing to focus on unity, we are dwelling in this golden opportunity to rejoice in the Lord alongside one another. Jesus said “they may be one as we are one.” This is a plea from Jesus to the Father that we may experience the same wholeness that Jesus and the Father had. My hope is that we will continue to cultivate the work that is taking place, focusing on the essence of unity when planning events and solidifying the formation of each Churches/Christians Together group. When continuing to plan activities, let’s go forward enriching each other and constantly focusing on Jesus as we continue to navigate the journey of unity as we all have a part to play in the body of Christ.