

## Faith and Society Files: Baptists and Ecumenism

A paper looking at the distinctive contributions Baptists have to make to the ecumenical movement, and the future hopes and challenges of the journey.



## BAPTISTS AND ECUMENISM

'A united church is no optional extra,' said Desmond Tutu at the World Council Churches (WCC) Assembly at Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006. Rather it is 'indispensable for the salvation of God's world.' He went on to link unity firmly with our mission calling to make a difference in the world, arguing that the work of the WCC – of Christians together – was vital in the struggle against apartheid. 'You, the WCC, demonstrated God's concern for unity, for harmony, for togetherness,' he declared.

### A History of Ecumenical Commitment

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) was there at the WCC Assembly, alongside 350 other member churches including the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, as one sign of our active involvement in, and commitment to, the ecumenical journey. Of course, when Baptists first came on the scene back in the 1600s, we were a persecuted minority – dissenters who rejected the established church. We were part of the divisions that tore apart the church in this country, as we rejected the enforced use of the Book of Common Prayer, for example, and claimed freedom in matters of faith and practice that others would not allow. But as during the last century, the Christian church has begun to seek to heal its divisions and come together, Baptists have been fully involved; ecumenically committed.

When the World Missionary Conference took place in Edinburgh in 1910 from which the Ecumenical Movement received much of its early inspiration, Baptists were present. And early in 1914 the Baptist Union Council agreed to take part in a proposed World Faith and Order Conference that finally met in 1927, and led in time to the formation of the WCC in 1948 with full Baptist participation.

The inaugural meeting of the British Council of Churches was held in 1942 in Baptist Church House in London. And when in 1987 the Swanwick Declaration sought to move the churches to a deeper commitment to one another, drawing in the Catholics for the first time by forming the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (together with Churches Together in England and the other national instruments), BUGB voted decisively in favour of being part of the new ecumenical landscape at its annual Assembly.

Individual Baptists have made a significant contribution to the modern ecumenical movement. The Revd J H Shakespeare, General Secretary of BUGB during the early years of the twentieth century, had a strong ecumenical vision. 'I passionately desire the goal of Church unity,' he wrote in *The Churches at the Cross Roads*, and he worked hard to develop plans for unity between the Church of England and the Free Churches, including Baptists. In the end, of course, the talks came to nothing. The Revd Ernest Payne, who also served as General Secretary of BUGB during the mid twentieth century, played a very significant role within the WCC, serving on its Central Committee as well as in many other ways. More recently, the General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and of the Conference of European Churches have both been Baptists.

The local picture also witnesses to significant Baptist ecumenical commitment. The majority of congregations within BUGB have some kind of link with groups of churches together, with over 200 involved in formal Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs). Some participate in single congregation LEPs, while others share buildings, or are in close covenant partnership with other traditions as they serve and witness to the local community together. More than 30 Baptists are present in a variety of chaplaincy situations, often working alongside those from other Christian traditions and other faiths, and there are a significant number who serve as County Ecumenical Officers. Thus, in all

kinds of ways, both formal and informal, locally and nationally and internationally, BUGB has expressed its commitment to the ecumenical journey.

### Issues and Challenges

This might surprise some! Despite such a clear commitment expressed in formal votes and active participation, experience of Baptist ecumenical participation – particularly at a local church level – can be very mixed. Whether this is very different from churches of other traditions is open to debate, but there is no doubt that Baptists have the potential to be awkward companions on this shared journey of faith. There are a number of reasons for this.

- a) There is the issue of baptism. While the majority of Christendom practices infant baptism, Baptists have a commitment to believer's baptism, and this presents clear difficulties in trying to reach agreement about the meaning and practice of this central sacrament within the life of the church. There continue to be those who hope and seek to build deeper ecumenism on the basis of a common baptism, but this is always likely to be problematic for Baptists. That is not to say ways forward cannot be found. The recent conversations between BUGB and the Church of England, published as *'Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity'*, offers fruitful paths of exploration involving the recognition of a shared journey of initiation. But nevertheless this issue continues to be a source of some tension due to our varying practices and understandings.
- b) There is the Baptist emphasis on mission. The evangelical nature of many Baptist churches is often expressed in a deep commitment to live out the mission of God, and this will often determine the nature of the ecumenism to which they are committed. Issues of faith and order – what might be termed the traditional ecumenical agenda – are often regarded as of little importance and so will receive little time or energy. There may well be a lack of sensitivity to Church traditions that, for example, value highly the recognition of particular orders of ministry, and with it an impatience at how this might appear to impede a coming together in unity. Opportunities for collaborating in employing a school's worker, on the other hand, may well receive strong support.
- c) There is the issue of ecclesiology. BUGB is a union of churches, associations and colleges, who covenant together, and so each Baptist church has freedom to order its own life and ministry. Whatever the commitment of BUGB to the ecumenical journey, local congregations will remain free to work this out in their own way – or not as the case may be! Such a devolved ecclesiology certainly means that theological commitment to ecumenism will vary; and it also affects the practical outworking of ecumenical ventures. On the one hand, the way in which we manage our finances will for the most part be local, with very few resources held or distributed centrally, and this can give the impression that there is a lack of ecumenical will when significant funding is needed. On the other hand, light structures mean that Baptists can easily be frustrated by other traditions that seem unable to respond quickly and creatively to new ecumenical opportunities.

Such issues can be a source of difficulty, and it would be easy to see them as nothing more than obstacles to be overcome. However, they might also offer the framework for developing a distinctive Baptist contribution to ecumenism, enabling alternative ways of doing ecumenism to be identified and affirmed.

## Developing a Baptist Ecumenical Methodology

What might a distinctive Baptist methodology for doing ecumenism look like and what could be its distinctive features?

A Baptist approach to ecumenism will undoubtedly be rooted in the recognition that it is insufficient for us to be alone. The language of covenant is central to Baptist life and thought. It is the conviction that we are bound together in covenant relationship with God and with one another, and this conviction is one that must be extended to include the wider Christian family. The commitment to seeking unity is an affirmation that all Christians already exist in covenant relationship, whether we like it or not, and so our ecumenical methodology calls us to engage in shared worship, learning and serving. We are incomplete when left on our own. With the humble trust and openness that marks true covenant relationships, Baptists must recognize that they can only ever see themselves as part of the Church, and that they are in need of the other parts in order to continue the journey towards fullness.

This emphasis on covenant means that Baptists will tend only to look for minimum agreement in order to recognize, talk and work with others. Covenant is about walking together and watching over one another, offering a dynamic basis on which a relationship can grow and develop, and so there will not be the demand for unity on key issues prior to such a relationship being formed. It will be a unity of reconciled diversity, despite the inevitable pain that arises from such shared brokenness.

Whereas the methodology followed by other traditions (such as the Church of England) would tend to give very careful attention to faith and order issues in order to seek and attain maximum agreement and commitment as a basis for formal talking and working together, Baptists will look for only minimum agreement in order to recognize, talk and work with others. Whereas such other traditions would be looking to establish and affirm the marks of the true church in others in order to make the journey towards structural unity, Baptists will be more concerned with seeing and affirming the true marks of Christ in the lives of individuals in ways that enable resources to be shared and the mission of God fulfilled.

Baptist imperatives will be about conversion, the development of faith, and mission and spirituality. Ecumenical discussions will be a means of recognizing and affirming the journey of individual Christians and groups of Christians, almost irrespective of the structures in which they are placed. The concern is more for inward reality than outward form, and is linked with the conviction that in the end God does not take much notice of ecumenical differences.

This lack of concern for structural unity leads to a further feature that reflects a distinctively Baptist ecumenical methodology. Ecumenism usually operates in an environment that assumes hierarchies, and so takes place within the different hierarchical levels. In many traditions there are councils and synods with the power to direct policy, and there are those who are appointed to offices that give them the authority to speak and act on behalf of their church. They in some sense hold within themselves the unity of their church.

Baptists, however, don't tend to see things this way! Our egalitarian principles allow for other ways of working and associating that are not bound by the need to concentrate authority on the shoulders of certain individuals or even assemblies, and this means that we can potentially bring into the ecumenical arena those who might otherwise be on the margins, creating space for energy from the edges. So we may well want to ask questions, such as: who is talking, who is part of the conversations, and how can we involve different kinds of people? The truth is that creative ecumenism often happens outside the formal structures that are too often dominated by older white men, and at our best Baptists should be able to model a methodology that challenges and breaks apart the dominating ways of working.

Again, the Baptist lack of concern for systems and structures will mean that the way we do ecumenism rarely seeks to be comprehensive. It will not try to talk about everything all at once with everyone represented in some way! Such an approach can work, bringing about significant progress towards deep and lasting unity, but it also has dangers. It can be painstaking and frustrating for those involved, and easily bypass those who simply want to work together. It is likely that Baptists will do ecumenism by being responsive to particular issues, look for creative ways of allowing groups of people to meet and act. And such initiatives will be encouraged to happen without any direction or involvement from a hierarchy!

It might be said that each denomination has a distinctive calling, or vocation, within the life of the wider church. We need, for example, the calling of the Orthodox to draw us back into the universal song of unending praise to God, or the Church of England to help us express a vocation to serve the life of the nation. For Baptists the commitment to the local will, perhaps, always be an important contribution, both to ecumenical life and to the way in which ecumenism is done.

### **The Future of Ecumenism**

It has been suggested that the ecumenical movement, both in this country and internationally, is middle aged and slowing down! Certainly it feels as if there is a lack of energy, and the general decline experienced by the major denominations does appear to have led to a degree of retrenchment, with less willingness to do invest resources in ecumenism despite the fact that this might be the very time such moves are most needed! But there are possible ways forward as well, and Baptists might well want to draw attention to a number of key pointers.

- a) There needs to be a constant reaffirmation and recognition of what ecumenism is all about. It is not just about reorganising the church, or even about enabling the churches to witness to their own unity. It is about the unity and oneness of all creation that finds its life in God. This big vision needs to be at the core of what we seek as churches together and anything less will be a denial of the gospel.
- b) It is important to affirm the signs of hope – the places where energy is allowing new ecumenical ventures to flourish. The creation of the Joint Public Issues Team with the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church is an immensely creative step forward in shared work and witness in one particular area – that of social and political affairs.
- c) Greater attention needs to be given to naming and exploring the different ecumenical visions that exist, in order that we can better understand the attitudes and approaches of our varying traditions. One vision is to seek to identify the marks of the true church that then enable moves towards full visible unity, including common structural forms. An alternative vision is to recognise a unity of spiritual life amidst a diversity of organisations, allowing shared commitment to mission to be the source of ecumenical life. Perhaps misunderstanding too often arises because these alternative – but not necessarily competing visions – are not properly identified.
- d) Unity needs to be bottom up! There is energy to be found on the ground, where new forms of church are emerging and initiatives in mission are happening. While often fragile and uncertain, these signs of life need to be given space and encouragement, and they point to the need to re-examine LEPs in the search for more varied patterns of partnership. The future will be messy, reflecting a unity in diversity rather than a coming together into one world church. Ecumenism has to be a movement that is inherently flexible, rooted in deep and meaningful relationships at all levels.

- e) Spirituality has become one of the main drivers for ecumenism. The evidence is that many outside formal church structures are nevertheless engaged in a spiritual search, and to fail to respond to this will be to desert our primary calling. The challenge – particularly for Baptists – is to pay renewed attention to the mystical, offering with others the kind of hospitable space that can nurture life in the spirit in all its many dimensions.

Ecumenism is an inescapable reality for all of us! Our churches are made up of Christians from varying traditions. So while not many Baptists would hold to a vision of structural or organic unity, we need to accept the challenge of offering our own contribution to shaping what it means to live together and serve together in the future.

*(This paper was originally written for an Ecumenical Officers' Consultation in November 2007)*