

Synodality Symposium

United Reformed Church conclusion

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I want to start with another memory from my South African years. This is about a trip to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. While I was there I was introduced to a village outside the city. What I was really struck by was being told that when young people got married, the village automatically built them a house to live in. I thought of white young people in different cultures and contexts, struggling to find accommodation. I felt amazed that amongst this black community, which could just be seen as so much poorer than any white community, there was a level of care and attention that might not be heard of in a white area. It brought home to me the need for listening and learning from people who might otherwise be seen as different and distant.

In the United Reformed Church, we began with a hope-filled emphasis on unity, praying that our unity would be a sign of what might yet happen more widely amongst the UK churches. But this was not to be. Ecumenism over the past decades has sometimes been seen as having a strong focus on shared working for the sake of the world and for God's creation, but not as having the deep theological roots which are needed to draw us close together, and closer to God.

In this Symposium I have re-discovered the significance of unity. This is not just something that one tradition imposes on another, but something that we receive together from the one God in whom we each place our trust.

I want to draw out three points as I reflect back – memory, difficulty and promise.

Firstly, the significance of memory, as we trace our journeys back over the centuries and reflect on where God has led each one of us. Memory points to the importance of sharing of experience and understanding from different contexts, and being able to listen openly to one another, especially when we have seen each other as too different for us to be able to work with.

Secondly, difficulty. It's been good to take time to reflect on the way in which listening is not always easy and needs perseverance. It can be easier to talk of where we each come from and our different understandings of structure, organisation and faith, and not take the next step of hearing the seriousness of the 'other' way of thinking. In order to listen to difference we need perseverance. It has been really helpful to spend time together, in plenary and in small groups, so that we can hear from each other and reflect on our differences, and the struggles that might lie ahead to bring us closer to being the fullness of God's people.

Thirdly, there's the sense of promise. This promise lies in what we've heard about the Holy Spirit leading us forward, possibly in new ways, into the next millennium, as the Spirit has led God's people forward over the centuries. We cannot always see where we might be being led, but we can have confidence and trust that when we walk in God's way, we will be led forward. This promise is about God's gift of hope – not just for our different traditions in separation, but for our shared work and life, for the sake of all of God's world.

It's been a real joy and encouragement to be here and to share in this Symposium. I have felt really encouraged by the words from Pope Francis and from the Vatican, about the link between Synodality and Ecumenism. This time together has been a good learning and sharing experience. I believe it needs to be taken up more fully and that what we are seeing at the end of this gathering is not an ending but a new beginning. My prayers are for us to be open together to where the Spirit might lead us.