

From a prayer of Jesus: *'That they may be one'* (John 17. 21)

Dear Friends

I once heard the former Liberal Party Leader, then David Steel, now Lord Steel of Aikwood, address an ecumenical conference by telling the story of a discussion between ministers of two different denominations. "*Why don't you come and join us, we have the proper and right way of worshipping God*", to which the reply came, "*you worship your way, but we'll worship God's way.*"

Scotland is not alone in having amidst its Christian community attitudes that span the spectrum from distrust to sectarianism, yet it was in Scotland at World Mission Conference in Edinburgh 100 years ago that the modern ecumenical movement began. And 20 years ago this year a new spirit of ecumenism was launched through the development of the 'Churches Together' movement, which had itself sprung out of a conference in which Christians from many denominations pledged that they were 'no longer strangers, but pilgrims together'.

A century on from the Edinburgh Conference and much has changed. Fewer churches regard other denominations with suspicion and increasing numbers recognise other denominations as brother and sister Christians seeking to worship and serve God in diverse but equally valid ways. Our own denomination, the United Reformed Church was born out of the union of two separate denominations, the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Church of England and Wales. Locally St Andrew's is now part of a Churches Together grouping including Roman Catholic, Society of Friends, Church of All Nations, Anglican and Methodist Churches and we enjoy a covenanting relationship with Lidgett Park and St Edmund's through which we have committed to worshipping and undertaking mission together.

But the 1970s hopes of the URC to be a catalyst in bringing about visibility unity between churches seem to have dissipated as Christianity itself has diminished in the nation. So with no likely national union of churches in sight, we might ask, what next to bring about the prayer of Jesus 'that they may be one'?

For some within denominations there is a natural desire to fall back on what is precious and distinctive in their heritage. By contrast, for many seeking faith from outside the church, the label on the church notice board, whether URC, Anglican, Methodist or Baptist is irrelevant, but what attracts (or repels!) is their perception of that individual fellowship, whether they find something of the love of God or sense of God's spirit and purpose speaking to their lives. It is more than a hint to churches today that we are entering a post-denominational world.

St Andrew's is a cosmopolitan church, whilst some have grown up within it, the majority have come from other districts, many from other denominations and have chosen to stay because there is something about our church that they feel drawn to. Some do find their way to us because of our URC label, but greater and increasing numbers of newcomers are attracted not by our label but by the worship and fellowship.

So what may ecumenism mean in an increasingly post-Christian and post-denominational world? Perhaps an answer is found in some other words of Jesus: *love one another as I have loved you*. By embracing these words we may find that our church 'label' whether URC or Methodist or Anglican becomes increasingly irrelevant but what really matters is the faithfulness of our discipleship. In this sense, we can naturally draw closer to our sister churches around us, seeking to support one another and work increasingly closely together. What matters more is the faith we follow than the denomination to which we belong.

We have come a long way in the last 100 years. I don't know how we may be judged by Christians in the next 100 years, but these words of the late US preacher William Sloan Coffin spoke to me something that resonates:

Church is where all hearts are one so that nothing else has to be one. Church is where there's such a climate of acceptance that each of us can be his or her unique self. Church is where we learn to be free, strong and mature by sharing with one another our continued bondage, weakness and immaturity. Church is where we so love one another that it becomes bearable to live as solitaries.

And perhaps it is in such a church we may find an answer to the prayer of Jesus, *that they be one*.

Yours in Christ

David