

Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach

The argument

The United Reformed Church has decided that it wants to make a difference. The argument of these pieces is that one good way to make a difference, perhaps the best way, would be to take up Dr Williams's proposal about how to deal with disunity. For twenty years the churches in England have been trying to discover a way forward after the failure of the proposals for covenant in 1982. The URC has hitherto seen its destiny as dying by process of institutional merger in the cause of Christian unity. Dr Williams is today offering all the English churches an alternative way forward out of disunity. This piece introduces the proposal. The second piece sets out Dr Williams's insights in more detail. The remaining pieces three enquire whether the URC might be able to bring some unique insight to the witness of the great church, and explore something of what would be involved in doing so.

1. Dr Williams's proposal - an introduction

In three tremendous addresses delivered in 2003 on the 27th February, the 17th May and the 13th July, Dr Rowan Williams offered us an entirely new vision of the way forward to Christian unity. Recognising that many leaders of the Anglican communion are bored and sceptical about 'unity' as it has been pursued by way of ecclesiastical negotiations in recent years, Dr Williams has identified one root cause: he writes of "a depth in our search for unity that has not always been there when our talk about unity has been preoccupied with negotiation" and of "An increasing sense that we're not simply negotiating our way towards a formula that we can just about live with". John's gospel has made it clear to him that "Unity is therefore never simply the appearance of unanimity, it is never simply a matter of human agreement".

Dr Williams proposes a new way forward. He has a vision in which church communities start by recognising the gift given to other churches and take deliberate steps to deepen their common understanding at every level. Dr Williams proposes a 'way of recognition' built on these four pillars (extracted from his address to the ecumenical conference on unity at St Alban's held on 17th May 2003): Making more occasions on which we can pray together; making more occasions on which we can make pilgrimage together both spiritually and quite literally on foot; making festival on more occasions when we meet simply to celebrate together the joy of being Christians, as the German Churches do on their

Kirchentag; and making more occasions for celebration in service to the world together, as Roman Catholics and Protestants work side by side together for peace in the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland.

Dr Williams is saying that the success or failure of Christian unity is up to us, thinking, meditating, talking, singing, arguing together with Christians from other churches. I suggest that, if we went down that road, it might be both a release from the nagging anxiety that we shall one day be swallowed up in some large, rather unsympathetic, church institution and a release from our ministers' fear that their ministry will never be 'recognised'. We should be free to rejoice in all that our fellow Christians are doing to make Jesus plain to the world in their different ways while contributing what we can.

This practical programme is founded on Dr Williams's profound sense that we need each other just as we are. Preaching at his enthronement on the 27th February 2003 Dr Williams said: "Once we recognise God's great secret, that we are all made to be God's sons and daughters, we can't avoid the call to see one another differently. No-one can be written off; no group, no nation, no minority can just be a scapegoat to resolve our fears and uncertainties. We can't assume that any human face we see has no divine secret to disclose....."

And a little later on, "Living in Jesus's company, I have to live in a community that is more than just the gathering of those who happen to agree with me, because I need also to be surprised and challenged by the Jesus each of you will have experienced. As long as we can still identify the same Jesus in each other's life, we have something to share and to learn."

And again, (this from Dr Williams's address to the ecumenical conference at St Alban's on 17th May 2003): "No one person can say everything about Christ, so it is a community that talks of Christ, not an individual or a set of individuals, but a group of people continuously engaging with one another and yes, sometimes arguing with one other. But, if they know their business, returning to the fundamental insight, I can't say it all and there are things which you must say, and your tradition must say and do because I can't exhaust it in what I say." (my emphases throughout)

I urge you to read the full text of the Archbishop's addresses in the Archive section on his website (www.archbishopofcanterbury.org), but, in case you have not time for this, I quote rather more extensively from all three in Part 2.