

Theological sustenance for an engaged presence

The Ven. Michael Ipgrave is Archdeacon of Southwark. He was previously Adviser for Inter faith issues for both the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. This significant article is the slightly edited text of a talk he gave at a conference held in June 2006, which was exploring the future of the 'Presence and Engagement'¹ process.

When the 'Presence and Engagement' process was first conceived, we identified three themes as critical for local churches to address in their life amidst other faith communities, namely: *identity* – 'Who are we in this situation?'; *confidence* – 'What gives us the assurance to live by and proclaim the Gospel in our context?'; and *sustainability* – 'How can we maintain our presence and engagement into the long-term future?' I believe that these three points remain absolutely essential markers for churches to monitor themselves by, yet they are quite minimalist in their scope.

The reality that we are experiencing in many places is that it is in the 'Presence and Engagement' type of context that churches are experiencing real growth, whether that be in terms of deepened faith and strengthened commitment or in terms of numerical increase. So I want to ask what makes this growth possible, and what theological underpinnings we can identify for it. My question is: 'How are our churches to respond to the diversity around them and within them, in ways that lead us into new life?' Or, since we believe that the Gospel is that which gives us new life, we could also put the question in this way: 'What will allow us to hear the Gospel afresh in and through our encounters with others?' Three intertwining motifs seem to me crucial, each raising challenges, and each with a compelling theological logic underlying – I shall try to capture this logic by associating a biblical text with each motif.

I should also say that 'Presence and Engagement' for me means not only engaging with other faith communities, but also recognizing that we are set in a wider context of diversity – cultural and ethnic as well as religious. In particular, we need to take seriously the twin facts that our own churches are often massively diverse within themselves, and that we are also often relating to a diversity of new churches in a context which could be described as multi-Christian as well as multi-faith – and our relations with those churches will in some ways be quite like our relations with other faith communities, and in other ways quite different from them.

Honouring our presence

In the first place, the presence we have is to be honoured, in a double sense – honoured by ourselves keeping to the commitment we have made to local communities, but also honoured by others through the respect which they show for that presence. On the one hand, then, our churches are called to keep a presence in every place, to sustain there a sense of sacred place, sacred time and consecrated lives, through which a rhythm of prayer and witness can be generated in the local community. This is a serious challenge

at a time of acute pressure on our human and financial resources, with pressure to withdraw or scale down commitment to multi-faith parishes, but to maintain a worshipping, witnessing presence in every community is our vocation as Christians with a concern for the whole of society. A biblical motif of this commitment is for me the Psalmist's prayer for the city he loved:

'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; may they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers ... For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.' (*Psalm 122.6-7, 9*).

On the other hand, anybody who has been part of a worshipping, praying and serving community in a religiously diverse community will know how deeply the buildings, rituals, and even personnel of our tradition are respected, even honoured, by others. In Leicester, it is not uncommon for Hindus to come into our churches during the liturgy and join in prayer, or venerate the images of the Christian faith. Patients of all faiths will often seek out Christian chaplains in hospitals to request a prayer or a blessing, in the belief that the prayer of a holy man or woman will be efficacious for them. In London, very many African churches meet for worship in a parish church rather than their own premises, not only for practical reasons of availability but because the church building is seen as a sanctuary of prayer and holiness.

Through these experiences we are awakened to a fresh sense of the treasures that have been entrusted to us. The tradition in which we are nurtured, the buildings in which we meet, the sacraments we celebrate, even the clergy who lead us – these are gifts we often take for granted, and at the same time regard as our own possession. It is profoundly humbling, and life-giving, to be reminded by others both of their life-giving value for us, and of their availability to all. Of course, relations are not always easy: the sanctification of time and place is a project for other faiths as well as our own, and buildings or public spaces can become arenas of contest, as much prayed-for Jerusalem reminds us sharply. It is then that we have to put into practice our prayer for the peace of the cities we share, as our encounter with the other challenges us to display open and gracious attitudes to those who would share our space.

Our commitment to stay put in one place, to sanctify the life of a local community through prayer and witness, and in so doing to learn to value more deeply and share more widely the treasure entrusted to us – all this is a response to the incarnational logic that lies at the heart of the Christian story. The presence which we are honouring, and which others are honouring too, is that of the body of Christ: the presence of the God who expresses himself in our midst in body language, in the living of a life and the dying of a death, and then in the shaping of a community marked by the signs of that life and death. Believing that the divine has come among us as a human living among humans, and as one whose humanity crossed the boundaries of otherness which separated people of different groups from one another, we are impelled to maintain our presence

as people who walk Jesus' way in every neighbourhood; and we will find many others who honour that way alongside us.

And we need in turn to honour the open-endedness of the responses through which that honour from others is expressed – the many ways in which people of different faiths respond to Jesus from within the vocabulary, the horizons of their own faiths. This too is evocative of the logic of the Incarnation – before Jesus asked his disciples who they said he was, he tested their discipleship by asking them how carefully they had listened to others' responses to the question – 'Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?' One of the most stimulating books I have read in recent years to explore this incarnational logic informing our Christian presence is Michael Barnes' *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*², in which he reminds how we need the difference of our neighbour to show us again who God is. Barnes also, incidentally, points to the

importance of the first negotiation of difference in the Church's history – that arising from the parting of ways between Jews and Christians – as a reminder for all subsequent inter faith engagement.

Connecting our energies

Just maintaining our presence, however much honoured, is an insufficient response to the contexts of diversity in which our churches are located; we need also to be engaged, both contributing to and drawing from the sources of energy in our societies. In some cases, those energetic forces will be channelled through the structures of religious communities; in others, they will be found in more flexible networks and groupings, which may yet draw inspiration and motivation from the values and beliefs of the world faiths. Churches and Christian groups which are showing new life are those which are open and flexible enough to work in partnership with others for the common good. My biblical text here is 2 Kings 10.15, where Jehu meets Jehonadab son of Rechab: 'He greeted him, and said to him, "Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?" Jehonadab answered, "It is." Jehu said, "If it is give me your hand."' This might seem obscure, but John Wesley uses it as the basis for his wonderful sermon 'On the Catholic Spirit' (No. 34), in which he asks, and answers himself: 'Although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.'

Wesley is talking in the context of differences among Christians, and we are still in need of hearing his message in that context today, but it is not hard to see how the force of his argument can extend beyond that to people of other faiths too. The conviction that we may 'love alike', even if we do not 'think alike' is forcible for anybody who has worked with people of differing beliefs on practical projects. Muslims and Christians go out on the streets of a northern city to raise funds together for people suffering as a result of the bombing of Afghanistan and at the same time of the attack on the Twin Towers; African Pentecostal and English Anglican Christians work together in a housing association to

provide affordable homes for newly arrived asylum seekers; people of all faiths campaign together to *Make Poverty History*; a white middle-aged male archdeacon is invited to launch a new young Black Business people's magazine in Peckham, holding aloft the stunning cover picture of Miss Sierra Leone UK; and so on. Some of the combinations are certainly unusual, but in every case they lead us to reflect again on the values that guide us, to renew our commitment to the transformation of society, and to evoke afresh our energy in the service of others. That is to say, they open us up again to the life-giving Spirit into whose power we are given over as the people of Jesus – that, at least, is my understanding of mission in relation to pneumatology: not that the Spirit is given to the Church, but rather that the Church is surrendered to the power of the Spirit, to be caught up in the Spirit's mission of striving to bring in the Kingdom.

Here too there are dangers to be encountered. Not all energy is creative, and not every powerful spirit is to be aligned with the Spirit of Jesus. Religion of every variety can have a dark, a repressive, a divisive, even a violent side. However inadequate the word 'fundamentalism' is as a term applied to different phenomena in different faith traditions, there is abroad in all communities a spirit of defamation of the other, of the hardening of differences into divisions, of the suppression of variety, and of the disempowerment of those perceived to be weaker. There is abuse of religion for self-advancement, the promotion of sectional interests, the justification of agreeable lifestyles. All these dangers point to the need for a careful discernment when we engage with others, an engagement which must test our own motives as well. But discernment has always been part of any serious pneumatology, and it is in pneumatology that the theological motivation lies for our engaged connectivity. One of the most persuasive and detailed pieces of theological work in this area that I have read recently is Amos Yong's *Discerning the Spirit(s)*³, which from a Pentecostal background seeks to develop and apply a methodology for engaging with other faiths as sites of the Spirit.: we experience new life when we are opened up to these opportunities of communicating and cooperating with the other within the mission of the Pentecost God.

Hospitality

Kenneth Cragg proposes that Christian mission in general, encounter with people of other faiths in particular, has two poles: embassy and hospitality, 'going out' and 'welcoming in'. Both are important, and mutually complementary, but in terms of our missiology there has been a primary emphasis on embassy. What about hospitality? And by that I mean both the experience of being a host and the experience of being a guest. The Bible is full of images which point to the theological depth of the host-guest relationship. One of the most memorable of such texts is that of the 'Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah' (as it should be called) in Genesis 18.1-5, where God is the guest.

The childless couple entertain divine visitors unawares in the scene captured by Rublev's icon as a theophany of the Trinity modelling the generous welcome of God to all. Abraham and Sarah meet the test of hospitality through offering the best provisions they have, despite the entirely unannounced nature of the visit, and still more through

the time and care they give to addressing their guests' weariness and thirst. Nobody who has engaged at all with the realities of diversity in our cities can fail to be humbled by the exuberant hospitality they will so often receive. I have been repeatedly showered with gifts, relentlessly fed with huge meals, taken into the very hearts of people's homes, exalted to positions of extravagant honour, and am regularly given dangerous-looking bottle of 70% overproof Jamaican rum by one of my priests whenever she thinks I look as if I might be getting a cold.

Many of you will have taken a Christian group to a gurdwara, and been invited to share in the common meal of the *langar*. One of the party rises at the end to say thank you to our hosts, and they reply: 'But this is the *guru-dwara*, the house of God; all who come here are guests of the divine hospitality'. On the way home, the Christians will discuss what would happen if a group of Sikhs were to turn up at their church one dark, cold evening, and they are led to think more deeply about the imperative to show hospitality which lies at the heart of our faith. In the same way, the expansion of many of our churches by Christians from different cultures likewise challenges us to think more deeply about our ministry of hospitality as Christian communities. What is happening here is that we are being pointed again to a central theme of the Gospel through encountering the other: we are being re-evangelised through the other.

The challenges to the practice of hospitality are many and serious. Indeed, it seems no longer right to use the dichotomy of 'host' and 'guest' in the public sphere – we cannot speak of some parts of our diverse society as depending on the hospitality of other parts. But what about the more immediate and intimate contexts of our own Christian churches? Inviting others into our own space makes us vulnerable, and can make us defensive. For example: many Church of England schools have large numbers of Muslim pupils, a few are nearly 100% Muslim in their intake. What provision should we make for meeting the religious and spiritual needs of the students in Christian foundations like this? Our guests may themselves be suspicious, fearful, hostile (remember the ambiguity of the *host*- root in Western languages, both stranger and enemy), as we may be when we are guests; and there may always be failures to reciprocate on either side. It is, more over, entirely possible to use the practice of hospitality, not truly to accept and to recognise the other, but rather to suppress the otherness of the other by requiring him or her to abide by 'our own' rules in 'our own' places – an example of what Jacques Derrida has labelled 'hostipitality', the instrumentalisation of hospitality to function as a concealed form of hostility.

Such problems can only be overcome through the costly, sometimes painful, building of trust. As that trust is built, the distinction of host and guest gradually disappears, as it should do at any convivial meal. Most of all, we come to learn that the space into which the other comes in our churches or church halls is not actually 'our' space at all – it belongs to God. We urgently need to release our tight grip on 'our space', 'our community', 'our truth', and recognise that these are things entrusted to us by God, not as our possession but as blessings to be participated by God's other children too. Then we can realise the liberating truth that we belong with one another as humans, as

friends, as guests together of one divine host, the Father who is waiting for all his children to come home to the joy of the banquet he has prepared.

Some reflections on theological method

And so a couple of reflections on the theological method which underlies the ways I have identified our churches as accessing new life in their engaged presence amidst the religious and cultural diversity of our communities. In the first place, I have tried to see what kind of a theology it is that motivates and energises those churches which are finding new life in the encounter with diversity. In some sense that means an approach which emerges from, and is shaped by, the engagement with the other, while always keeping in touch also with the givenness of the Christian tradition. I have not tried, and I do not think it is particularly helpful to try, to begin from or to arrive at an overall appraisal of 'the other' in theological or terms – for example, around the question of 'salvific efficacy' which underlies the familiar categorisation of Christians into 'exclusivists', 'inclusivists' and 'pluralists'. What seems to me to be needed is not so much a theology of 'the other', as a theology of our relationship with the other, for that can have about it a dynamism and an interactivity which we are in danger of losing if we objectify those who are different from us as over against us. Indeed, even 'theology of relationship with the other' is an unduly rigid expression, for both terms in that relationship will change in a genuine encounter which leads into new life. The 'other' is no longer over against us, but the one who is present to us and us to them, the one whose energy connects with ours and ours with theirs, the one who is a fellow guest of the Father's house with us. And, in turn, what we mean by 'us' has changed too: the sense of 'usness' has been expanded to include those who once were other. We need theologies that can chart these transformations in our relationships.

Secondly, you may have noticed that I mapped out an implied Trinitarian contour for our motivations: it is faithfulness to the particularity of the Son's incarnation that commits us to maintaining our presence; it is openness to the energy of the Spirit's work that leads us into connectivity with others; it is mirroring the Father's gracious invitation that challenges us to sincere hospitality. What I have said you may or may not find convincing, but I do want to say that it was not contrived to turn out this way – I did not intend a Trinitarian shape, that just happened. So, for me any way, reflecting on the reality of diversity leads me back to the central organising pattern of Christian faith: through the other we hear the Gospel again in a new context. Whether it happens like that for you or in some other way, I do think it is crucially important that the motivations for our engagement with contemporary diversity should be rooted in the heartlands of our faith, the key credal affirmations, the central scriptural texts, and that the experiences of our encounter should again be triangulated against the landmarks of those heartlands. If we do not do that, we run the double risk of detaching our engagement from any real interaction with mainstream Christianity, so that it becomes just another fashionable enthusiasm, and of withholding from those whom we encounter the fullness of the faith that makes us who we are. On the other hand, if we do succeed in bringing together our contemporary engagement with the core of our tradition, then we

uncover new truths in the tradition itself, we read the scriptures in new ways as we realise that they are texts emerging from contexts of religious diversity, and we find our theology and spirituality renewed as we grapple with questions and possibilities which would never have occurred to us otherwise.

So the questions I want us to reflect on in the particular situations to which God has called us are these: How is our presence as the body of Christ honoured in our local context, by ourselves, by the wider Church, and by others? Where do we find energy for our share in the Kingdom mission through our partnerships with people and communities of other faiths? How does the experience of giving and receiving hospitality deepen and transform our relationship with God? Are we hearing the Gospel in new ways, being led into new life, through our engaged presence?

¹ The 'Presence and Engagement' process is an Anglican initiative (though with strong ecumenical links) which is seeking to explore and support the role of the Christian church in England in geographical situations where there are substantial numbers of people living of other faith traditions.

² Michael Barnes *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine), CUP, 2002.

³ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirits*, Continuum, 2000