

## **SIMPLE GIFTS: NEW POSSIBILITIES ON THE ECUMENICAL JOURNEY**

**Address by the Rev Lindsey Sanderson, Assistant General Secretary of Action of Churches Together in Scotland, at the annual general meeting of Glasgow Churches Together on October 28, 2009.**

Thank you for the opportunity of being with you this evening. Not only is it a chance to catch up with some folk and meet others for the first time, but it also pushes me out of administrative, managerial mode into what I hope is a more reflective and discerning frame of mind, something we all perhaps hanker after but only actually get round to when push comes to shove. When Mary (*Rev Mary Buchanan, Chair of Glasgow Churches Together*) invited me to be with you tonight she asked if I could share something which reflected my engagement with the ecumenical movement both in a global and local way. My global involvement is as the United Reformed Church's representative on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and the local is more of a national, reflecting on my five years with ACTS, so apologies to the good folk of Rutherglen, local is not getting that local tonight.

The title for my presentation is 'Simple Gifts' and I invite you to share with me some simple gifts, as we explore the increasingly important concept of receptive ecumenism from those global and national perspectives and we are going to do that by engaging in a piece of receptive ecumenism itself...but before we go further what do we mean by receptive ecumenism?

Within the UK, the focal point for receptive ecumenism to date has been the Centre for Catholic Studies located within Durham University. Dr Paul Murray, Director of the Centre defines receptive ecumenism as the concern

'to place at the forefront of the Christian ecumenical agenda the self-critical question, 'What, in any given situation, can one's own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?' and moreover, to ask this question without insisting, although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves the same question.'<sup>1</sup>

Receptive ecumenism is not a new idea, but it does seem to be an idea whose time has come as a new mechanism for enabling the churches in their ecumenical journey in what many describe as an ecumenical winter, or becalming.

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<sup>1</sup> P D Murray '*Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the agenda*' International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church vol 7 no 4

So with that very brief definition, of self-critical openness to learning from others, before us, let us set out on our exploration of receptive ecumenism by way of Simple Gifts.

One of the most important ways in which we have engaged, often unconsciously, in receptive ecumenism is through the sharing of our liturgical resources. Singing is one of my passions, so this is something I have particularly valued as part of my ecumenical experience, and tonight I would like to use a song as our way into learning from others.

'Simple Gifts' is a Shaker dancing song which would be used in worship. It was written by Elder Joseph Brackett in 1848 in the Shaker community in Alfred, Maine. Over time the melody has been adapted by a number of people including Aaron Copeland in the ballet, Appalachian Springs, Sydney Carter, in the well known, hymn, 'Lord of the Dance', the dance musical of the same name by Irish dancer Michael Flatley and most recently at the inauguration of Barak Obama. However time has not been kind to Simple Gifts, and there are many erroneous claims made for both the words and the music - so let's go back to the original for a moment – which sounds like this.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gain'd  
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.<sup>2</sup>

The references to turning are the ones which hold the clues to Simple Gifts being a dancing song as they are actually instructions to the dancers about the movements they should make, but it is the worlds a little earlier in the song I should like to spend some time thinking about,

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.'

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<sup>2</sup> [www.americanmusicpreservation.com/shakermusic4.htm](http://www.americanmusicpreservation.com/shakermusic4.htm)

Working in and with the ecumenical movement is a tremendous privilege and I feel that most when I meet others from God's global family and have the opportunity to talk with them about their understandings of faith, the ways in which they share in God's mission in their context and how these two things and many more shape the life of the church wherever they have come from. For me the diversity of the church is one of her greatest gifts and I am privileged to experience this at the World Council of Churches Central Committee, one of the Council's governing bodies of approximately one hundred and fifty people. At the Central Committee we are divided into working committees. I am on the Public Issues Committee. I don't regard myself as a public issues specialist at all, my interest is how you get people in the churches to engage with issues rather than having detailed knowledge on particular concerns and so the idea was born at the Committee meeting in late August to offer prayers to accompany the statements that the World Council would make about a wide range of global issues and I offered to draft some prayers. Doing this in a global ecumenical context suddenly made me aware of how trapped I can be in my own - northern European, liberal, reformed context, particularly when the subject matter for the prayers included ecological debt, genocide, sexual violence, and blasphemy laws, so it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I showed the first draft of my texts to Bishop Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church asking if he could look at them from his context which was very different to my own. Bishop Irinej was very gracious and offered me a number of suggestions for the drafts which drew on the great liturgical depths of Orthodox theology and liturgy and brought a fuller dimension to the texts. It was an opportunity to be self-critical and open to the insights of other traditions.

And that doesn't only happen when meeting people internationally. One of the parts of my work I enjoy most with ACTS is being present with our member churches at significant occasions in their lives. Being with the Roman Catholic community here in Glasgow at a mass to celebrate the election of Pope Benedict gave me further insight into the way the community supports the Pope and his personal authority through their prayers and devotion, a concept we often struggle with in my United Reformed tradition. Being with the Salvation Army, as they welcomed a new Chief Secretary into post on a cold wet night in Govan, revealed the ways the gifts and ministries of individuals can be affirmed by the whole community. Being with the United Free Church and Church of Scotland as they signed their Covenant statement in Dunblane Cathedral demonstrated how two communities had worked together through grace to overcome the hurts of the past. Being with the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church earlier this year as the Bishops' celebrated the Eucharist together gave me further insights into the centrality of the liturgy in the living tradition of the

Scottish Episcopal Church. Each one is a precious moment to share in, enjoy and reflect upon in the light of our own experience.

And I suppose that one of my reflections during these five years has been that although all of these experiences have been wonderful and I don't want them to stop, at the same time they haven't made me want to leave where I am and go somewhere else. Working in the ecumenical movement hasn't diluted my commitment to the United Reformed Church it has strengthened it. Not in an exclusive or point scoring way, but in the sense that each of us finds a place in God's global family where we will feel at home and that is not to say that home is better than anywhere else, or is closer to God, or is more authentic than anywhere else ...it is simply the place where we feel at home, where we choose to be.

Joseph Brackett put it this way,

*And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.'*

The simple gift of being at home, not decriing other places, nor accepting all 'home' is offering in an unquestioning manner, retaining that self-critical dimension, but feeling, perhaps more than knowing that you are in the place just right.

This idea of being at home seems to me to be an important one in thinking about receptive ecumenism. If the starting point for receptive ecumenism is the willingness to be self-critical then this would seem to imply the need for confidence, in one's own tradition, so as to be able to hear what the other might be saying to you and from which you can learn. And it might be helpful at this point just to revisit a dictionary definition of confidence which is 'firm belief, trust, reliance'. I would suggest that that confidence is born from a maturity of understanding of and engagement with the tradition you call 'home'. One of the pieces of work that ACTS has undertaken recently and which has been adopted by our member churches is a remit for church representatives to ACTS networks. The remit is there to enable people to know the level and nature of engagement expected of them as church representatives, the ways in which the ACTS staff will support them, the ways in which the member churches are expected to support their representatives and the ways in which representatives will be accountable to their churches and their ecumenical partners. At the heart of the remit concept is the idea of enabling people to speak with confidence from within their tradition and about the agenda of their member church, so that the churches together model can really be made operational – we engage in conversations with our partners on the ecumenical journey, sharing our individual agendas, joys and concerns, in order to seek a

shared response to the these as Churches Together on the way to the visible unity of the church.

Confidence is required as we engage in receptive ecumenism but so is certain degree of discipline, in our willingness to listen and a considerable amount of trust. In his address to the World Council Central Committee the present Moderator of the Committee, Rev Dr Walter Altmann, quoted the Swiss theologian, Rudolf von Sinner,

‘There can be no ecumenical movement other than the one built on trust, and firstly on trust in God, who in Christ became human and is present through the Holy Spirit. Based on this trust, we can risk trusting each other. This makes us vulnerable. But it is the only way to build meaningful relationships.’<sup>3</sup>

I had lunch the other week with my former colleague, Kevin Franz, whom I am sure is known to many of you. During our conversation he reflected upon his work in church contexts in both Scotland and England and offered the comment that in Scotland working relationally is something we take for granted, it is our *modus operandi*, but that had not been his experience in England. Without doubt as churches and church people we have worked hard and travelled far in building those meaningful relationships. We can point to many catalysts on the journey - the pioneering work of Scottish Churches House, the visit of Pope John Paul II, the Scottish Ecumenical Assembly but we all know that relationships, human or between organisations, take a long time to build up yet can be broken so easily. Trust is vital and so not taking our relationships for granted, but constantly working at them is essential in our journey together remembering that ultimately our trust and confidence is not to be found in our church traditions but in God in whom we find not only our home but also the very source of our life and being.

The simple gift of recognising that you are at home, having confidence in that place, and using that confidence in a constructive way to engage, learn and receive from others on the ecumenical journey.

There are two other verses of Simple Gifts, both are later additions and neither are from the Shaker community, but they offer us some further insights as we think about receptive ecumenism. I’m not going to sing these verses, I mentioned before that time had not been kind to Simple Gifts and you have to do some very odd things to the tune to get these words to fit. So I’ll simply read them.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Walter Altmann address to the WCC Central Committee August 2009  
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2009/reports-and-documents/moderators-address.html>

*'Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return  
'Tis the gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn,  
And when we expect of others what we try to live each day  
Then we'll all love together and we'll all learn to say  
When true simplicity is gain'd  
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

*'Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be,  
'Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of 'me'.  
And when we hear what others really think and really feel  
Then we'll all live together with a love that is real.  
When true simplicity is gain'd  
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

'Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return, 'Tis the gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn'. Learning is at the heart of receptive ecumenism. Learning about the other is the way through which we will make progress on the way to the visible unity of the church. This is not new. Learning has always been part of our faith experience, perhaps we think about it mostly with reference to children and the work that is carried out in Sunday school or various organisations, but we continue to learn through Bible Study, through listening to sermons, through our very life experience itself. Learning has been part of the ecumenical journey, often characterised by weighty and lengthy documents written by eminent theologians and church leaders. But perhaps there are other ways of learning which enable us on the journey. Two experiences.

It was the closing service of the World Council Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil February 2006. The preacher was the Rev Robina Winbush from the Presbyterian Church USA, an African American, who spoke from her context of the legacy of slavery and the preaching tradition of the Deep South. Her text was from Revelation, 'the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations' and she challenged us, did we want, did we have it in us, to be a healing leaf as we prayed, 'God in your grace, transform the world,' and before I knew it I was standing up, applauding in the middle of a sermon, and around me friends were doing the same thing and then we realised what had happened. We were Scots, most of us were

reformed – this is not what we do, how we behave, and so we quickly sat down, but in that moment we had received something of Robina’s tradition, and experience of faith which enriched our own and strengthened our commitment to the Gospel.

It must have been while I was a student that I spent an evening sitting on the stone floor of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh, squashed in with many others, in the semi-dark around a large cross slightly elevated from the floor at its head, and surrounded by candles. I sat, sometimes joining in with the gentle chants offered in multiple languages, sometimes being quiet in my own prayer and reflection. If you had told me that I was going to find sitting on a stone Cathedral floor, squashed together with others for the best part of three hours, one of the most memorable nights of my life, I might have been sceptical, but the opportunity to share in worship with the brothers from the Taize community was just that, and opened up a new dimension of spirituality to me, which I continue to value today.

I remember John Bell, saying at a college lecture once, that we all learn more theology from the hymns we sing than from the sermons we listen too. I know that’s 75% true in my case, and I know I am not alone. Many of us here tonight are privileged in that we have opportunities to meet people from other traditions or contexts and grow in faith from receiving from them, but for many people in our congregations that face to face encounter is not possible and often the way in which they do have the opportunity to engage with people from other contexts is in the sharing of liturgical resources. Many of our newer hymnbooks now include songs from the world church which share ideas about faith and witness from around the global community but think about some of your worship experiences - the times you have sung Taize chants, perhaps of a Christingle service, even old favourites from the pen of the founding fathers of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley. By sharing in these experiences in our everyday worship lives we open ourselves up to receiving ideas about faith from those whose experience has been different and from whom we can learn and in turn grow in our faith. Learning through sharing our liturgical resources is perhaps not the way of learning we most associate with the ecumenical movement but it is a way of enabling ideas about receptive ecumenism to move beyond the academic community and professional ecumenists to the grassroots congregations. Some very creative work could be done through a liturgy sharing project enabling local groups of Christians to learn more about each other’s faith and traditions through the ideas expressed both in authorised liturgical material and hymns and prayers. Interestingly, the statement issued by the representatives of Christian World Communions and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council meeting in Breklam, Germany in March 2008 to review recent bilateral dialogues between the churches and the vision of unity they express, includes the following paragraphs:

'Our dialogues usually draw upon doctrinal sources which are authoritative for our communities. We encourage dialogue teams also to make use of spiritual and liturgical sources which express the practice of faith.

The awareness that the ecumenical movement is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit means that we must continually be open to the possibility of the Holy Spirit directing us in new ways. The shape of our visible unity is beyond our capacity to put into words.<sup>4</sup>

Learning through worshipping together is another way of learning. These thoughts of Jean-Marie Tillard, included in the papers forming the eighth report of the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church remind us of why such learning is important and gives councils of churches and churches together groups a key role in this learning,

'A council of churches makes a loving dialogue possible. By breaking the isolation and bringing about the knowledge of each other, ecumenical encounter slowly erodes distrust, prejudices and traditional hatreds. While each church begins by hoping to impose its own views and confessional ambitions on the others, we find that among members something gradually comes into being which triumphs over the interests and claims of each group. In learning to love one another, in the knowledge that diversities exist and in respect for them, we gradually learn the unity that God wants'<sup>5</sup>

Learning to love one another, enables us to learn the unity that God wants.

One of the pieces of work we undertook at the World Council Central Committee was to elect a new General Secretary for the Council. The successful candidate is Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit who is currently the General Secretary of the Ecumenical and International Council of the Church of Norway. In his presentation to the Council he articulated for me where learning to love takes us – mutual accountability. He said,

*'Mutual accountability* is for me a vision for *the World* council as to *how* we work together, being one. You are exercising this when you are visiting one another and when you develop

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<sup>4</sup> *Ecumenical Chronicle: Bilateral Dialogue Statement and Recommendations* The Ecumenical Review 61. 3 October 2009. WCC publications.

<sup>5</sup> Fr Jean-Marie Tillard OP, quoted in *Inspired by the Same Vision* a paper from the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches 8<sup>th</sup> report 2005. WCC publications.

your methods of consensus building. It means reliability, a commitment to listen, and a willingness to criticize and to hear criticism constructively.<sup>6</sup>

Or as Simple Gifts expresses it:

*'Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be,  
'Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of 'me'.  
And when we hear what others really think and really feel  
Then we'll all live together with a love that is real.*

Mutual accountability is both a vision and challenge for the churches as we journey together towards the full visible unity of the church. I mentioned that some are calling this time an ecumenical winter, well if it is I am impatient for Spring but perhaps the hours of daylight are slowly lengthening a few minutes at a time and new shoots are beginning to struggle towards the earth's surface.

Earlier I talked about the remits that we have put in place for Network members to enable people to speak with confidence about their tradition and church's agenda as we seek a shared agenda together, and in time ACTS needs to encourage the churches to roll out those remits to their representatives in other places which come under the ACTS umbrella, but there is also the sense that whole denominations need to have a remit themselves, a mechanism through which they can be much more intentional about their commitment and responsibilities to each other as they seek to learn to love one another and practise mutual accountability and here I share a further gift I discovered on my last visit to Geneva – the National Covenanting process between the churches in Australia which is facilitated by the National Council of Churches in Australia.

The Covenanting process is a national initiative between denominations, and acts as permission giving to encourage other initiatives locally. It also acts as a sign that the churches are being called into the unity of the Church, sometimes something which is not visibly high on the agenda of churches or ecumenical instruments. It is multi-dimensional, recognising that, as the preamble states, 'the possibilities for co-operation and commitment between the churches are many and varied. In other words, the nature of the covenant/agreement into which a church will enter with each other of the churches will have

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<sup>6</sup> Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, Address to the World Council of Churches Central Committee August 2009  
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2009/reports-and-documents/speech-by-olav-fykse-tveit-to-the-wcc-central-committee.html>

different dimensions that express the extent of the co-operation and commitment that is possible at this stage of the ecumenical journey' <sup>7</sup>

What the Australian Churches have done is set out a Declaration of Intent reaffirming their commitment to one another which is signed by seventeen denominations from Orthodox, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed and Free traditions and then sets out a number of dimensions to which varying numbers of churches have committed themselves which range from a general commitment to pray for each other, through the shared use of physical resources, common mission and ministry, common sacraments and the sharing of ordained ministries which incorporates bilateral agreements between churches. There is also a future pledge to continue to discuss within each tradition the meaning and significance of unity and ecumenical partnerships and to explore further steps to make more visible the unity of all Christian people in Australia.

I am quite excited by this Covenanting Together document, for I think that in Scotland a similar document might enable us to do a number of things. Firstly it would allow us to review the journey since 1990 and the formation of ACTS and celebrate the current point on the journey. The multi-dimensional aspect of the agreement means that current denominational specific agreements in place in Scotland could be set in the context of our wider partnership in ACTS for example with regard to the National Covenant between the Church of Scotland and United Free Church of Scotland and the Statement of Partnership which will be signed by the Scottish Episcopal, Methodist and United Reformed Churches in January next year. And most significantly it may provide the means of entering into partnership with Christian Communities in Scotland who are not in membership of ACTS. I am thinking here primary of the Baptist Union of Scotland, with whom we have growing cooperation in a number of areas our work, with the growing but very small Orthodox communities who are part of the global ecumenical family but rarely have the capacity in Scotland to engage in ACTS work and with the growing number of migrant or ethnic minority churches in Scotland, many of whom are keen to work with the traditional churches and with whom we have begun to work through the Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group. We will see, the ACTS Members Meeting has asked the Faith Studies Network to consider the document and its applicability in Scotland and report back to the Members' Meeting in June next year.

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<sup>7</sup> A National Covenant [http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Faith\\_and\\_Unity/A\\_National\\_Covenant.pdf](http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Faith_and_Unity/A_National_Covenant.pdf)

Being at home, learning by worshipping together, learning to love one another and through that discovering the unity God wills for the church. My experience on my ecumenical journey, both globally and nationally, has been about finding where I feel at home but always, I hope, with the self-critical perspective of asking what do I need to learn from you to enrich my faith. It results in a quiet confidence that leads us into vulnerability and building relationships founded on trust and from there to a place of mutual accountability to each other and to God on our journey to seek the full visible unity of the church. Joseph Brackett and the unknown authors of the later verses offer us a Simple Gift - a dancing song for worship but one which can speak to us in a different era and different context of deep and timeless truths for us as individuals and as churches together.

I'm glad Simple Gifts is a dancing song for in dancing we are all invited to participate - contributing our own movements and working with others, to create the overall pattern and shape of the dance. The image of the church dancing its way towards unity, with dancers of all shapes, colours, traditions and experiences, is an image of life, of community, of hope and of fun. We are all invited to join the dance, so please accept my Simple Gifts and, 'Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you, won't you join the dance?'

*Lindsey Sanderson  
Glasgow Churches Together AGM  
28<sup>th</sup> October 2009*