

**The Unity of Christians:
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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XVI

**Spiritual Ecumenism in practice: the view from churches in
East London**

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To be very practical about this, let us look at *why* we work together ecumenically in my part of the Hackney and Haringey borders, *how* we go about things, and quite a long list of *what* we actually do.

Close to the day of Paul Couturier's anniversary, I am pleased that the overall title uses the idea he coined - Spiritual Ecumenism - as it is perhaps a better description than one I might have chosen to portray where I believe there is an immense amount of ecumenical energy - namely in what *could* be called the *relational* rather than the institutional dimension. Relational Ecumenism, personal friendship and networks of friends were fundamental to the way Couturier spread his vision and, of course, they have been a crucial component of our faith from the earliest days - Our Lord says, 'I call you FRIENDS'. I must confess that Covenants and Councils of Churches hardly turn me on at the main switch, though I respect immensely those who in previous generations made wonderful breakthroughs and progress by working in this way and those who still do. Our primary efforts in today's vineyard should surely be focussed upon responding jointly and collaboratively as Christians to the needs of where we find ourselves. For this I believe we require the most minimal structures we can function with, and maximum flexibility.

In fact new and flexible approaches are also required in other areas. For example, in my work as a parish priest from Stamford Hill (Spurs and Arsenal are equidistant!), I find it impossible to persuade people nowadays to volunteer to be the ones responsible for the church garden, as in former years. These days (for better or for worse) we shrink from volunteering to commitments which stretch out seemingly to an endless horizon. Much more successful has been to have a rally of greater numbers of people for an occasional garden working party on about four mornings in a year. People seem much happier to be part of a series of ‘one off’ communal efforts. And so with our ecumenical work - instead of casting round desperately to find one or two designated ‘ecumaniacs’ to service local institutional structures - surely it is better to have larger numbers (in our case about a third, or roughly 25, of the people) of the congregation actively involved in the various projects and initiatives we do on an ecumenical basis. Shared tasks, shared commitment, new and enduringly fertile relationships, and, crucially I believe, not flogging the goodwill of those most generous with their time and effort.

Why do we work and think ecumenically? I wouldn’t call myself particularly ecumenically minded, because it seems such a natural common sense and normal way in which to think and operate. Other ‘go it alone’ mindsets seem to me outmoded outdated and somewhat pointless. How much more can be achieved when Christians from seven local churches from four denominations pool their person-power for the benefit of the community? The context, in which we live and work, would make it crazy to think or work in any other way. I come from an area with a predominantly mixed Jewish community (though mostly Hasidic), with large numbers of Muslim asylum seekers moving in during the last 10 years. My own church has a mostly black congregation and leadership. The biggest church in the area by far is the massive Jesuit edifice of S. Ignatius, Stamford Hill, and being located in a small side street as my church of S. Bartholomew, Stamford Hill, is it feels very much like being the third or maybe only even the fourth largest religious community in the area. That is a rather unusual experience for most Church of England vicars, I guess. As in many other areas of London, there is a tremendously fluid population in the East End and North East London. Traditionally, the Stepney Area of the Diocese of London has attracted talented Bishops with a strong commitment to the Social Gospel - and with a radical bent (Huddleston and Sentamu, to name just two).

I rather enjoy the experience of being literally on the edge of the Diocese and of two boroughs - Hackney and Haringey - in a back street too, with Christians as a minority community. In this context I believe it would be ridiculous not to search for partners with whom to work together. My own description of the area, and of our relation to the wider Church, is to call it a sort of *Nazareth* place. On the edges, and at the boundaries, a poor area - out of the way. Anyone who has been to the Holy Land will know what I mean when comparing a place like Nazareth (dusty and unremarkable in the middle of nowhere) to the stunning lakeside setting of Capernaum. That is where all the wealthy Roman officials would have had their cooler weekend houses, as it were. Perhaps it is easier for ecumenical endeavour to flourish in our needy Nazareth type area, than in the more swept up heart of things. I think it sad that many central London clergy have to spend so much time merely chaplaining the inherited traditions and leading edges of their beacon status shrines. And this applies across the denominations - putting on a good show for the firm. Clearly of course there are many wonderful ecumenical services, and prayer groups, and joint acts of witness; but my impression is that so much *more* working together could be achieved, and yet for many places ecumenical co-operation is an ‘add-on’ rather than the basic default mind-set.

How things got going in our part of north east London has very much to do with the Social Gospel, in both senses of the word. Clergy from the four Anglican churches, S. Ignatius Stamford Hill Catholic Church, the United Reformed Church and the Methodist Church came together in the early 1990s for what used to be called Clergy fraternals, and now are called fellowships. The scope of our activity at the time was typical of most similar meetings throughout the country - organising Week of Prayer for Christian Unity events, Forums during elections, representation at Police Liaison meetings, Holy Week ecumenical services, and the like. Of immense help for the cohesion of the group were the pre-existing links and co-operation between the Anglican churches involved. But, as I said at the beginning, it was quite a blessing not to be encumbered with structures inherited from the past, and I believe all moribund local ecumenical structures should be allowed a quiet and dignified death. The meetings in North East Hackney are a free association of the open and willing, and always have been. But it is also a group with churches of very different sizes, and it

has been a blessing to be able to offer many of the programmes offered by the large resources of S. Ignatius to all local Christian people whose churches have much smaller facilities and capacities, and to do so in concert.

Most important, though, when thinking about how the scope of what we now do quickly expanded way beyond the norm, are the personal links between the clergy, and also between the lay people. This will be no surprise. Having been where I am for nearly 12 years, I have seen a complete change of personnel, but when new clergy arrive it soon becomes clear that what we do together is ‘where it is at’ (as they say) in the area, and relations today are as good and enduring as ever they have been. We like, and I believe, respect each other immensely.

At one meeting in my vicarage I was embarrassed to see rather a fine and large collection of alcohol on display on the sideboard in the dining room where the meeting was taking place. It was swollen well beyond its normal capacity, as a friend of mine (a former Anglican but now a Catholic parish priest) had only recently left to test a monastic vocation and the poor love had to relinquish all manner of exotic goodies. Half way through the meeting I thought I had better offer some of the drink around; and I asked (as might be done in any vicarage) whether anybody would like a sherry before lunch. Within seconds, and this was her first meeting, the Methodist minister asked if I had a G&T (again, hardly the last secret of Fatima that Catholic Anglican vicarages are likely repositories). After this encounter through genuine, relational ecumenism, you will hardly be surprised that she is now one of my best friends.

What actually goes on, thanks to our relational ecumenism? I begin with the sorts of things, which would be typical of many local ecumenical churches throughout the country

- *Police Liaison* meetings with clergy - these are now Interfaith as well
- *Lent Groups* : people go to the most convenient in terms of when and where, regardless of which denomination is hosting. We arrange a network of times and places and advertise them throughout our churches. For example Wednesday mornings (Methodist) might suit better than Thursday evenings (Anglican)

- *Palm Sunday* : joint procession of palms from a central point (and some churches also have a joint Good Friday open air service or march of witness)
- *Individually Guided Retreats* are run from S. Ignatius but with ecumenical input and are available by people in all congregations
- *Prayers for Peace* : all seven churches have been open at noon on Saturdays in recent weeks, and will be for the foreseeable future

Less typical activities, and yet most important for us, include

- *'Children First' Child Contact/Access Centre* - we have over 30 volunteers, a funded organiser, with clergy and people from all seven churches on the management committee which meets every Saturday. It has never lacked energy and is our core project meeting a real need. It was initiated about nine years ago, after we decided to do something major together yet after we had waited to discern the right thing. It has attracted major funding the inner London Probation Service, the Church Urban Fund, and Jesuit Charities as well.
- *Hackney Winter Nightshelter* This used to be based in Methodist Church Hall and is now in the URC. But most volunteers come from my own church and S. Ignatius
- *Two-week mission Faith Through Life'* : a few years ago, seven events revolving around the churches looked at issues such as poverty, race, generation issues (especially with regard to the value of older people), sexuality, and other faiths, with expert speakers, such as Paul Boateng, Robert Beckford, or John Sentamu, alongside somebody local. There were smaller mission events on *Money Matters* and *Debt Issues* more recently.
- *Adult Education* : each church chooses two or three key lay people to go on a six month course, called 'New Step'. Local clergy provide a large proportion of the teaching input. It is run ecumenically and is suitable for building confidence in the newly confirmed, or renewal for those more mature in the faith who might be taking on more responsibility in the parish.

Sharing a basic ecumenical mindset has proved so valuable too in our relations with other faith communities. Three of us are on the executive committee of the Council of Christians and Jews for East London and our clergy meetings have expanded so that

every other gathering is now an Interfaith meeting with Moslem, Jewish and Hindu representation - and a real breakthrough late last year of an Interfaith open air service of prayers peace on Stoke Newington Common. A significant moment bringing many dozens of key leaders and those actively involved in their own faith communities together. Next week we host a special meeting of local Christian and Muslim leaders to be visited by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Working Group on Christian-Muslim relations.

The ecumenical initiative we are most proud of, I think, is the 'Children First' project, and I thank God that we pour in our resources jointly and do so in what might be described as a disinterested way. That is to say that the benefits are reaped by others, no *one* of us owns the project individually (with all the attendant danger of proprietorial pride), yet it is something we can be proud of together. Shared ownership, shared effort, shared endeavour making so many more things so much more possible than going it alone.

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