

Listening to the Voices of the World Church

5th John Coventry Memorial Lecture for the Association of Interchurch Families, given by Rev David Coffey

Thank you for the invitation to deliver the 5th John Coventry memorial lecture which is a great honour, not only to myself, but to the many Free Churches I represent as Moderator.

When I began preparing I thought a prudent place to begin was to do some research on the loved and revered person whose name is honoured in these lectures. The notes of Ruth Reardon's talk to the Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) in March 2002 were most helpful in providing information on the life and ministry of Father John Coventry. Even the briefest headlines of his biography are immensely captivating:

- A man whose life was hid with Christ in God.
- A student who wrote his first three books during dull lectures. Very innovative!
- His knowledge of Eucharistic doctrines enabled him to detect that AIF couples were misunderstanding one another rather than disagreeing with one another.
- He was always loyal to the Roman Catholic Church, but he always opted for 'a wider and more generous interpretation' on points of difference.
- He emphasised the importance of taking other Christian Communion with full seriousness and had a passionate desire for the healing of Christian divisions.
- Faith, he said, is not about propositions but about persons responding to God in Christ. I sense that John Coventry would affirm the great principle enunciated by one of the founding fathers of the Free Church movement: John Wesley would say, 'If your heart is right with my heart then give me your hand'

The Lambeth Conference 1968 was a turning point in his ecumenical journey, when he had a sudden conviction that what the Anglican bishops were doing at the Eucharist was the same thing that he had been doing when he said his daily mass before he set out that morning. As Ruth Reardon comments, 'It did not mean all the big ecumenical questions were answered, but it meant he saw them in a new light'.

My hope is that many of the values I observe in the life of John Coventry will be reflected in the lecture today and whilst not all the big questions will be answered, I trust we will see them in a new light.

'Listening to the voices of the world church' is a modest attempt to reflect with you on selected aspects of the global Christian community and seek to find what resonances there are internationally with the national life of AIF. The theme of the lecture coincides with a renewed emphasis in AIF on the importance of international relations. Paul Docherty's report to your AGM suggested that AIF efforts in 2006 had been directed to an international focus. It was encouraging to read that in your 40th anniversary year, the 2008 conference theme is 'Interchurch families making a difference in the world'. It was also inspiring to sense the enthusiasm of the Kenyan family who attended your conference last year. Joyce and David Makumi spoke of 'the strength of a common resolve to live the reality of an interchurch family life to the fullest, in spite of hesitant support from our churches'.

I have attempted to draw on my experience from travelling and meeting global Christians and then reflected on the values and vision of AIF as I understand them. It will be your judgement whether I succeed in drawing these connections. This is the adventure that awaits us!

I am choosing four areas for exploration which I hope will be fruitful for our discussion. The first is the pain of exclusion and the power of embrace; the second is the spiritual nurture of the individual in the context of community; the third is bringing our deepest differences into the burdensome joy of dialogue; the fourth is the perseverance of faith and the call to courageous pioneering.

1 The pain of exclusion and the power of embrace

A dominant experience which I encounter everywhere in the world is the capacity of Christians to exclude one another from full fellowship in the Body of Christ. The pain of exclusion is present whenever

ethnic origins, ancient animosities or doctrinal convictions, become a more powerful force than the blood line of life together in Christ in the believing community of the Church.

In Latin America it is sometimes enmity between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals; in parts of Eastern Europe it can be the superior relationship of the Orthodox Church to every other Christian tradition; in the Balkans region it is the ethnic tensions between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats; in North America it is the ideological power of evangelical fundamentalism that excludes others; in Africa it is tribal loyalties that can murderously divide. What is common to all is the failure to cope with otherness – the simple fact of others being strangely different leads to damaging alienation.

Let me personalise with some illustrations:

Last October I was in Nairobi, Kenya for a pan African Christian gathering. I have been visiting Africa for the past 20 years and this conference was another reminder of the rich blessing of fellowship and inspiration you always enjoy with dynamic African Christians. But here in this vibrant continent I encountered stories reflecting the pain of exclusion. One pastor shared with me during the conference the deep distress he felt because in his denomination, tribal loyalties took prior place over loyalty to Jesus Christ and the church family.

There are around forty indigenous tribes or ethnic groups in Kenya. The largest of these would be Kikuyu who comprise 22% of the population, followed by Luhya, Kalenjin, Kamba, Swahili, Kissi and the small percentage of Maasai who are about 1% of the population. The pastor said, 'we have nine tribal groups in our denomination but only two are ever represented in the leadership. Even when it comes to nominations for elections the same two tribal groups appear on the ballot paper. All other tribes are excluded.' He said 'it's a subject which is never raised but is always painfully present.

The pain of exclusion was evident when the four Presidents of CTE visited the Holy Land prior to Christmas last year. There is a small Baptist Community in Israel and it was my hope that in meeting the Church leaders of Israel I would renew the valued friendships with these Baptist Christians. I had not realised that Baptists did not qualify for membership of the Church Leaders' gathering in Jerusalem, and were not invited to the opening welcome dinner for the Presidents.

Baptists are labelled by some as a sect and a cult, along with Jehovah Witnesses and others, and therefore not considered part of the traditional Church. Thanks to the intervention of staff from Lambeth Palace and the generosity of our host, Greek Patriarch Theophilus, two Baptist leaders were invited to the opening dinner and the pain of exclusion was overcome, albeit temporarily.

My third example is the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to meet Pope Benedict last November. Robert Mickens reported on the visit and suggested that Anglicans and Roman Catholics displayed many visible signs of goodwill and expressions of hope. He also described it as a 'bitter-sweet occasion'. Praying, thinking enjoying each other's company was a splendid witness to all the progress that has been made towards achieving full visible communion. But with the uncertain future that currently surrounds the Anglican part of the church and the knowledge of how that could damage relations with the Roman part, there were feelings of apprehension and sadness among many. He said that it was a moment of high significance and deep poignancy when the Archbishop offered the Eucharist on the very stone altar at which the Bishop of Rome celebrates mass each Ash Wednesday. 'As the Archbishop of Canterbury celebrated the Eucharist at the 5th Century church of Santa Sabina – a rite that was so very Roman, and yet one that Roman Catholics could not fully participate in – the ache of disunity brought some of the congregation to tears. As one Anglican bishop said sadly at the end of the liturgy, "we know this feeling well".'

AIF carries in its genetic code this pain of exclusion and I am suggesting this underlines the urgent importance of your expanding participation in the fellowship of the global Christian family. Your experience needs to be shared and your life needs to be enriched by the stories of how others cope with the pain of exclusion.

A significant contribution to understanding the pain of exclusion has been made by the Croatian Pentecostal theologian, Miroslav Volf. He lectures at Yale University Divinity School and has written extensively on a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation, notably in his book

Exclusion and Embrace. As a Croat he draws on his personal and painful experience of living with the ethnic hatreds in former Yugoslavia and describes ethnic otherness as a filth that must be washed away from the ethnic body.

Those who encounter the pain of exclusion within the Body of Christ need some firm theological foundations in order to survive and Volf lays these foundations with a wonderful precision.

He introduces the notion of a 'catholic personality'.

Drawing on the biblical teaching, that those who are in Christ are a new creation, he suggests this implies that the Holy Spirit creates in us a catholic personality which is personality enriched by otherness. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying 'you are not only you; others belong to you too'. But catholic personalities require a catholic community. Each church must therefore say 'I am not only I; all other churches, rooted in diverse cultures, belong to me too.' And this catholic personality must also be an evangelical personality – a person brought to repentance in Christ, shaped by the Gospel and engaged in the transformation of the world.

Finally, evangelical personalities need ecumenical community. 'We need to see ourselves with the eyes of Christians from other cultures, listen to voices of Christians from other cultures so as to make sure that the voices of our cultures have not drowned out the voice of Jesus Christ "the one word of God".' He then provides this wonderful extended word picture which he terms the drama of embrace. Do you recall the ending of the film 'Love Actually', with the steady building of a montage of photographic images of people meeting, greeting and embracing one another? Volf describes the four structural elements in the movement of embrace. The opening of the arms; the waiting for the other; the closing of the arms around the other; the releasing and opening of the arms.

The open arms are a gesture of invitation saying there is space for you. The waiting arms are a sign that although embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin – it can never reach its goal without reciprocity. Closing the arms reminds us it takes two pairs of arms for one embrace. Each is holding and being held. Opening the arms leaves only one outcome. A genuine embrace cannot leave either party completely unchanged. This is why Volf calls this 'the risk of embrace'. 'I open my arms and make a movement toward the other and don't know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported and reciprocated.'

This vivid picture of the drama of embrace captures the spirit of AIF, with your commitment to take the risk of embrace, whatever the outcomes.

2 The challenge of spiritual nurture in the context of community

A second issue I would identify is the challenge of spiritual nurture in the context of community. This concern addresses how we nurture people in the Christian faith; how we pass on the faith to the next generation; it poses the question: will our children find faith? And asks: how do we perform this task of discipleship and nurture in community?

I suspect this is a major issue for AIF families with the tradition of 'double belonging' and questions around the nurture of the family. There is the debate around the strengths and weaknesses of church schools and the concern that when spiritual formation is delegated to the school classroom, and catechesis becomes an intellectual activity alone, what does this do to the spiritual development of the child?

It is an endless fascination to witness the diversity of approach to spiritual nurture in different parts of the world, but what is striking is observing the way the community works together to raise a child, and the inspired use of visual imagery in discipleship and spiritual nurture. This is very common in many parts of the world and serves as an educational support for what is taught from the pulpit and in the classroom.

A few years ago I attended a Russian wedding ceremony in the 1st Baptist Church Moscow. Those who know the history of Christian witness in the Soviet Union will know this city centre congregation was a citadel of freedom through the years of Soviet rule. Before the young couple were married, the presiding minister called both sets of parents to the front, and when they were standing alongside the bride and

groom he physically pushed both sets of parents away from their respective child. He wanted to illustrate that marriage was about 'leaving and cleaving' and he was visually enacting the bride and groom 'leaving' the family home before 'cleaving' together in a new beginning of married life.

African Christians use the imagery of nature. There is a tree that grows near to swamps which they call the fever tree. The tree draws toxic poisons from the water of the swamp which could kill the tree root and branch. But the tree has developed in such a way that it channels the toxic water into one branch of the tree, and it is this branch that hangs dead and lifeless while the rest of the tree is allowed to blossom and flourish. The African evangelist will use this to teach the truth that Jesus Christ was the one Saviour who died on the tree of Calvary that all the branches in the vine might live.

Another form of spiritual nurture through community is the hospitality of the meal table. Open Door Atlanta is a community where the members build their lives around the hospitality of the meal table. On the wall of the dining room, members have posted an ancient Celtic saying on hospitality which ends with the words: 'often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.' As part of their regular discipline of discipleship they ask whether they have treated difficult strangers in the same way they would treat Jesus. Have harsh words and hasty decisions undermined other expressions of welcome? The Open Door hospitality recognises the vulnerability of strangers and the dangers of exclusion, but above all, God's special presence in the guest host relationship. That's why they say at Open Door: 'If you miss the mealtime you miss everything'.

Common to these experiences is the importance of spiritual nurture in community.

Many years ago I was introduced to the Rule of Benedict and his concept of the school for God's service. To be pupils in the school of the Lord's service means we are to learn Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that Christ is the only pattern we must follow. And because Christ really lives his life in us, we too can walk even as he walked.

Brett P. Webb-Mitchell suggests we are called to perform or live out the Gospel with what he calls 'Christly Gestures'. These gestures, he says, are learned in communities where people give of themselves in vulnerable relationships so that they become Christians together. Spiritual nurture is concerned with the work of patterning the many members and the gestures they practise in to the pre-existing oneness of Christ's body.

The quality of nurture requires a deeper expression of community than most of us experience. The worst expression of community has been described as people coming together without knowing each other; living without loving each other and dying without grieving for each other. This kind of non-community life is alien to AIF where knowing and loving and grieving are so central to your life together.

I sensed something of the deep fellowship of AIF when I read in one of your AIF papers the story of Tim and Fiona. In a moving tribute to his late wife, Tim described himself as a penitent catholic, because when he first knew Fiona he assumed that being a Catholic he somehow had a superior relationship to God. He said how he and Fiona had tried to live unity rather than intellectualise it. They felt their lives mirrored what unity should be: two individuals accepting each other for better or worse. They wished that the church could take the risks that each married person takes. Tim concluded his tribute by mentioning the fruits of their marriage: their children Katie and Jonathan. On the day Fiona died, his daughter Katie asked him with real concern: 'will this mean that we won't be going to our interchurch weekends at Swanwick any more?' Tim replied that it was quite the opposite, that interchurch families would play an even more important part in their lives. Tim said 'we are after all part of God's family and Interchurch Families is its purest expression'. This is a great example of spiritual nurture in the context of a loving community.

3 Bringing our deepest differences into the burdensome joy of dialogue.

The third area is bringing our deepest differences into the burdensome joy of dialogue. Oz Guinness suggests that again and again the question is raised 'how do we live with our deepest differences, so that diversity becomes a matter of strength and richness, not of weakness and division?'

The current edition of Time magazine has on the front cover: *Getting along – a Europe of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds*. Ruth Robinson, in a lecture to European missiologists, addressed some of the trends that will cause cataclysmic changes in Europe in the coming years, and depicted some contrasting scenarios: ‘In reaction to each other, they can be either like vegetables in a soup whose greens, reds and yellows get mashed into a rich brown stew; or like multicoloured threads in a rug with interwoven pieces of rug wool dipped in varying dyes; or like beads on a necklace that complement each other; or like pigments in a Van Gogh self-portrait whose distinct colours blend in subtle shading as one moves away from the subject; or like an explosive chemical reaction, the violent consequence of acidic attitudes of racism and xenophobia.’

Christians are often called to live in the midst of deepest difference, and this calling includes the commitment to struggle towards creative dialogue. This stands in the historic tradition of responding to the invitation of Jesus to be peacemakers. Last September I was in Thailand for the Micah Network Consultation, a conference of representatives of 290 Christian NGOs working in the area of aid and development. The theme of the conference was *Integral Mission in a World of Conflict*. One of my co-speakers was Bishop Alexis Bilindabagabo who is currently serving as the Anglican Bishop of Gahini, Rwanda. He has been a refugee three times. In response to the 1994 genocide, Bishop Alexis established a foster care agency for war orphans called Barakabaho (‘let them live’) Foundation. Today, this agency is the largest non-government agency in the country and regarded by the government as the model family welfare agency.

He shared with the conference that after the genocide Rwandans had a choice to make between staying in the dust of self-destruction into which they had fallen or to rise over and above the clouds of problems into the sunshine of peace and reconciliation:

‘I had to make a choice myself and the choice was not an easy one. In fact, the first option offered to me was a bursary to go away and forget about it all. After much prayer, I did see that it would have been a big mistake to be protected in order for me to just go away and forget about it all. The other option was to let life go on as if nothing had happened, but again terrible things had happened as most of my family members had been killed by people I knew. In that case then, why not go and take revenge, but that was not the will of God. At the end I discovered that the will of God was for me to take care of the orphans, and that is the way I followed with all my strength. It was a choice and a good one, because these orphans needed the church to go to them, now that they were unable to go to the church. They needed to see men in different colours now that they could not trust any man because of what they had seen men doing. They needed to see Christ, not in white robes and golden crosses, but in servants’ clothes, and in my humble opinion this is peace building; it is reconciliation *par excellence*.’

Bishop Alexis had experienced the deepest suffering during the genocide in Rwanda with the loss of many close relatives. He told me there were days when he contemplated the multitude of grieving orphans and widows, the thousands of suffering people rendered homeless; the raging anger of retribution which was constantly sparking another forest fire of carnage and murder. Frequently he felt overwhelmed by what he saw and said to the Lord ‘I cannot serve you in this wretched place’. He heard God saying to him: ‘Alexis, I am not asking you to do everything, I am asking you to do something. Please do something significant for my Kingdom today.’ Alexis constantly renewed his call to work with the deepest differences and hatreds and move towards creative dialogue in a broken and wounded society.

Another friend of mine is João Matwawana. Like Bishop Alexis he has lived major portions of his life in the context of armed violence. He knows personally the hardships suffered by the victims of war and genocide. He was born in Angola but has been greatly used in peacemaking dialogue in Rwanda and the surrounding regions. He and his wife felt called to organise workshops and seminars for pastors and church leaders which would address the theme: ‘The role of the Rwandan Church before, during and after the genocide.’

Pastors and church leaders from seven denominations participated in the seminars. They were divided into groups of three; one would tell his story, the second was asked to repeat it, and the third to evaluate it and point out what was missing. Participants were told: ‘You may scream and cry while telling your story. You are allowed to do that, but others must listen.’ João said people were unwilling to dialogue. They would resist by saying ‘We did not do any wrong. All we did was avenge the suffering caused to

our families. The other side were the criminals. They were very bad people. What I did was my duty.’ To counter this resistance and encourage dialogue, João used effectively three components of the human anatomy: the head, the heart and the hands. The head represents the mind and encourages a reflection on the planning and thinking we sometimes go through before we do something. The straight question in the seminar was ‘Do you think genocide was an accident?’ One Hutu Pastor replied: ‘No, it was not an accident. Our people had been thinking and talking about killing for a long time. As a pastor I did not believe that it would ever happen.’ The second step is a reflection on the heart, which represents the motivation behind the genocide. The patient process was designed to convince people that the heart is capable of designing the most dreadful acts of evil. Only as we focus on God’s power to open the heart for cleansing can we begin to walk the road to being changed. Finally, the hands represent the concrete actions of performing evil actions. In the workshops they speak openly about the use of machetes, axes and hoes in the act of murder. They emphasise the importance of seeing our hands as a gift from God.

These are stark examples from the world church of the journey from difference to dialogue, but in principle they mirror your own journey. AIF was formed in a context of deepest difference. Central to your commitments is the acceptance of the need for on-going dialogue. As I reflected on your current publications, the number of occasions the word or the concept of dialogue came through was notable. Your meeting with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in October 2005; the dialogue around the phrase ‘double belonging’; the dialogue on *One Bread, One Body*; the on-going dialogue you have had with the Catholic Bishops’ Conference through the years, and the dialogue which is now being encouraged in local initiatives, and the enormous challenge this entails of facing the pain of rejection. Pope Benedict’s address in April 2006 to the representatives of the seven members of the Polish ecumenical Council included that landmark phrase of ‘forming a practical laboratory of unity’, calling for an urgent dialogue. I understand there is a commitment from the Polish Ecumenical Council to dialogue with the Polish Catholic Bishops’ Conference on guidelines for the pastoral care of interchurch families.

All this emphasis on dialogue underlines that your initiative in AIF to be more international in focus is timely. I encourage you to take your rich experience of deepest differences and journey with it ‘into the burdensome joy of dialogue’. The latter is not my phrase; I borrowed it from a Baptist theologian friend who has been engaged in conversations with theologians of all denominations for a number of years. He terms it ‘a burdensome joy in the service of the church, for the furtherance of the faith, to the glory of God alone, because it involves listening as well as speaking, receiving as well as giving.’

I suggest that AIF has built a reservoir of rich experience through the years of dialogue and you possess a deep understanding of the ground rules and principles for those involved in sensitive areas of dialogue. God may now be calling you to take this experience into a world of difference and I am confident that if you accept the burden of responsibility, God could use the members of AIF in ways beyond your knowing.

4 The perseverance of faith and the call to courageous pioneering

The final theme I address is the perseverance of faith and the call to courageous pioneering. Martin Luther King is best remembered for his ‘I have a dream’ speech. What is rarely recorded is what Luther King said a year after the dream speech. He said ‘My dream has become my nightmare. My dream has failed to take root in the heart of people. I must confess to you that since that sweltering afternoon in August 1963, my dream appears to have been shattered.’

Whenever people are provided with a God-given dream then a persistence of faith must accompany them on a long journey. The story of the Church everywhere you travel in the world is about perseverance of faith and courageous pioneering.

I read in a newspaper recently the story of a Mr Joachim, a Sri Lankan living in Canada. He has an odd passion for accumulating world records based on endurance. He has smashed the record for watching television non-stop (69 hours and 48 minutes); he has set the standard for the time balanced on one foot (76 hours 40 minutes); and for travelling up and down an escalator (7 days). When asked why he engages in frantic but seemingly futile activities, he replies that it is to raise awareness of suffering children. Tim Hames, who wrote the story, comments: ‘The suspicion remains that it has become an end in itself.’

This could be our danger – persevering without a purpose. AIF as an end in itself achieves nothing for the Kingdom of God. You cannot be intimately involved with AIF without experiencing the occasional bouts of fatigue, cynicism at the unfulfilled promises, and a chronic disappointment with the Church. There needs to be a source for spiritual perseverance and a constant renewal of the dream to bring us through the inevitable setbacks. I often use the term ‘the keep on keeping on’ principle which lies at the heart of every Christian grouping.

One of the most moving examples of ‘keep on keeping on’ I have ever encountered was in visiting the village of Namaroi in Northern Mozambique in the early 1990s soon after the end of ten years of drought and fifteen years of civil war. This was my first encounter with armed child soldiers. I have never been in a village where so many people were maimed and mutilated with missing fingers, toes and ears. We were shown round the war-ravaged village by the local pastor. We said to him, ‘What did you do during the long years of drought and war? How did you survive as a leader?’ He replied, ‘The first year we prayed. The second year we prayed and cried. The third year we prayed and cried and waited in hope.’ The secret ingredient to persevering with the dream is a patient hope, and this in turn inspires courageous pioneering.

I met an inspirational prophetic pioneer when I visited Mozambique. One of my heroes is Anglican Bishop Denis Sengulane. I have heard his first-hand accounts of how he travelled with other church leaders as peace-makers between the armies of the two warring sides in Mozambique’s civil war. As he stood outside each Headquarters with his heart beating faster than usual, he would recite the words ‘Blessed are the peacemakers – for they will be called children of God.’

At the end of the civil war in Mozambique, huge numbers of guns were still in circulation, a constant threat to the rebuilding of peaceful communities. With other Christian leaders, and in partnership with Christian Aid, Bishop Denis launched a programme to encourage decommissioning. ‘A tool in exchange for arms’ was their slogan. Those who handed in arms to be destroyed received in exchange tools which allowed them to work and to earn – they received a sewing machine, a hoe, or a plough. But Bishop Denis felt it was not enough that the weapons were out of commission. They had to be shown to be part of a new order – like the communities from where they had come. He invited a group of Mozambican artists to make the weapons speak, to tell the story of their past use and their present purpose. To tell the story that life can come from death if we allow it to do so. In 2005, in the Great Court of the British Museum in London, their work went on display for three months. The Tree of Life is the sculpture of a tree made of rusted metal; sheltering its branches are the birds and animals of Southern Africa. Neil MacGregor, who tells the story of the Tree of Life, says: ‘every element in the sculpture was designed to bring death. Hundreds of lives were ended or mutilated by these weapons. But the metal also speaks of a new beginning; of individuals and communities refashioned, like the weapons, to a higher purpose. The Tree of Life is a supreme image of hope.’

So these are my four global issues. I invite you to reflect on the pain of exclusion and the power of embrace; the spiritual nurture of the individual in the context of community; the deepest differences which can be moved into the burdensome joy of dialogue; the inspiration of the perseverance of faith and the call to courageous pioneering. I encourage you to hear these voices of the world church and incorporate them into the ongoing journey of AIF.

David Coffey
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