

Visit to the Ecumenical Institute Bossey, Geneva by ordinands, 2015

As part of its commitment to introduce people to the experience of Bossey, the UK Bossey Network facilitates the opportunity for ordinands/trainee ministers to spend five days at Bossey. This is the third of our bi-annual visits. The visit coincides with the Graduate School semester at Bossey and offers a rich experience of engaging with people from many different nationalities and church traditions.

An ecumenical visit?

The desire to convene an ecumenical party, as on previous visits, proved impossible this time, largely due to the fact that Colleges and Courses now need longer notice of a proposed visit than previously, and certainly than the Church of England's timetable for bids for funding ecumenical visits currently permits. In the light of this, arrangements are already underway for contacting all ecumenical ministerial colleges and courses in order to convene a party for our 2017 visit. This itself presents the further difficulty of locating the persons responsible for determining ecumenical placements across the different ministerial training institutions. Help in steering us to the appropriate people and in drawing attention to the Bossey visit would be welcomed.

The 2015 Group

Although there was loss and disappointment that we were not a truly ecumenical group, the visit provided significant opportunities for sharing the Church of England tradition and practice at some depth with members of the Graduate School, only 2 of whom were Anglicans. The group itself bonded extremely well, and proved responsive, sensitive and appreciative and if it was comfortable this served as a base for perhaps more daring encounters with the Graduate School itself.

The programme

Our ordinands audited some of the lectures for the Graduate School as well as engaging in formal and informal discussions on our different cultural and church contexts and experiences and also participate in worship together. The Bossey faculty also provide seminars for our ordinands on key ecumenical, ecclesiological and missiological issues. The group hear about the work of the World Council of Churches on their visit to Geneva, and have an afternoon exploring the city before a celebratory meal in the old part of the city. The UK group meet regularly during the week to reflect on the applicability of what they have experienced for their own ministry in the UK. Prior to the visit, participants are given some introductory background reading on ecumenism and are asked to write a reflection on the impact and learning goals of their visit.

The Bossey Faculty

The Dean, Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller, is a Reformed priest from Germany; The vice dean, Rev. Fr Dr Lawrence Iwuamadi, is a Roman Catholic priest from Nigeria; The director, Rev. Dr Ioan Sauca, is a priest in the Romanian Orthodox Church; and Dr Marina Behera, Professor of Ecumenical Missiology, is from the Presbyterian Church of India.

Components of the visit with comments from participants

Graduate School

The graduate students we met at Bossey represented some 19 nationalities and 12 confessions. There were Orthodox from several Eastern European countries; Africans were representing the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Coptic, and Pentecostal church; Lutherans, Evangelicals, Reformed, and Anglicans came from several countries in East Asia. `

Worship

We experienced Chinese, Roman Catholic and Latin American worship and learned about the difference between "common confessional prayer" (according to one tradition to which all the others must conform) and "common inter-confessional prayer" (according to many traditions – a mixture). The first is preferred in Bossey.

WCC

This involved a fascinating tour of the building by Theodore Goll, WCC Senior Editor, a presentation on Inter-religious dialogue and co-operation by Clare Amos and a discussion with Dong Sung Kim on Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace. The banner listing 349 member churches of the WCC, representing some 550 million Christian around the world, was, as one of our party said: 'a powerful sign of the spiritual desire for unity on a global level'.

Other comments from ordinands included the following:

'I was amazed to find out what the WCC did. Their work doesn't seem to be very well advertised. I was interested to find that the WCC worked with the churches in West Africa during the Ebola outbreak to find a spiritual solution to enable the bereaved to say goodbye without touching the body. It also has an improving relationship with the UN. There are many bilateral conversations going on... Maybe as churches we should be holding the member churches of the WCC in our prayers and seeing ourselves as part of the world-wide church'.

'Aside from this very positive experience of the work of the WCC it was interesting to see how institutionalised it has become in Geneva.... The huge grandeur and optimism of the WCC's founding seemed a distant memory and there was a sadness about the place, not just in its financial struggles. It seemed that they'd turned something very spirit driven and responsive into a large bureaucratic organisation and it did seem to be dying'.

Audit of Graduate School lecture programme

The two that the group attended were enormously appreciated. Lawrence Iwuamadi, led a participative bible study on the first in a series of studies on the Lord's Prayer considering: 'Our Father'. We were enriched by the cross cultural interpretations of 'fatherhood' the Graduate School provided, and concluded by saying the prayer, each in our own language.

Dr Ioan Sauca gave a fascinating analysis of the history of the Orthodox Communion within the WCC and of his own experience in Romania of the influence of evangelicalism on the Orthodox communion.

Seminars for the UK party

The titles were: Worshipping Ecumenically, Ecumenism Today: New Paradigms, Faith and Order and Ecumenism and the Church's Mission. Our thanks go to Dr Dagmar Heller for co-ordinating this and for delivering the lion's share of the input in an entertaining and rigorous fashion.

Overall evaluation by participants included the following:

'The visit was extremely worthwhile especially as my current module is ecclesiology. I was able to learn more in five days through experience than in the previous five weeks through reading.

'I think the experience has left me being more open to others. It was especially interesting to meet Orthodox Christians and to see where the stumbling blocks are. I feel really drawn to some of the richness of their theology. It has also changed my view of ecumenism at home. Most Churches Together groups are protestant. It would be good to work more with Roman Catholics towards a united front.'

'As Britain becomes more diverse culturally the experience at Bossey will become more relevant. Many new migrants are either Roman Catholic or Orthodox. We need each other. We are the body of Christ in the world. If we don't relate to one another and be seen as united how will the world believe?'

'Overall the trip was encouraging and sad at the same time. The fallenness of human beings was so evident and the squabbling of Christian brothers and sisters was not at all easy to hear about. However at the same time I was encouraged that Bossey and the WCC have not given up on the enormously challenging work of bringing unity to the Church of Christ. As a Church leader and (nearly) Ordained minister I see working toward unity as a large part of my calling and the experience of just one week in Bossey will certainly fuel this passion for years to come.'

So I went to Bossey thinking I knew a little about difference and getting along with one another. I was quite wrong. Fairly soon into the trip I realised that Ecumenism in the UK is not the same thing as Ecumenism across the world churches.....'

'..... during my visit to Bossey, the Orthodox students there reminded me and reflected themselves on the special relationship which exists between the Orthodox Church and the Church of England, which is especially poignant as I

am currently living and studying in Oxford where many Orthodox students were welcomed after the Second World War. In turn, this has inspired me to look further into the influence of the Eastern Orthodox Church and I have recently submitted a long essay title to Oxford for approval.....'

'The lessons learned over the last 100 years from the WCC and its forerunners are very applicable and could possibly prevent us reinventing the wheel in this area of engagement between missiology and ecclesiology. There is much valuable and painfully worked out thinking regarding the nature of the Church and the realities of mission in our current context that it would be good to raise awareness of in the Church of England'.

'Have determined the need for action as a result of coming here. Keeping in touch with the WCC, using resources and prayers for the churches across the world, makes me bolder to work with other Christians across denominations and treat them with respect'

'An excellent way to learn about the church'.

'I have come away with a strong desire to think, act and be ecumenically engaged in my local setting as an expression of Jesus's prayer for unity. 'I think that this visit is really an exceptional opportunity for U.K. ordinands to engage with the many issues which ecumenism raises both for the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. Indeed, I would suggest that a placement like should be an essential part of training for mission in a rapidly-changing world and modern, multicultural UK context.'

'This was an excellently organised and fruitful trip. It has been the highlight of my theological training so far'.

(Revd. Canon) Roger Spiller

Chair, UK Bossey Network