

Ordinands Trip to Bossey
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Thank you for inviting me to come and speak to you today. My 15 year old son was very impressed that I was coming up to Mayfair - we live near Bristol. 'Hey, Mum. You're going to be in the rich part of the board. That will cost you £400.' I fear he was just a few zeros out! I think Roger has given you a good introduction so what I hope to do is to give that introduction some personal flavour. This talk will mainly be me sharing my reflections on my time in Bossey and its impact. And forgive me if what you get is a somewhat Monet version of our time there. It's five months since our visit and the edges of my memory aren't as sharp as they were - especially in the midst of the final year of my training - and looking back now the impression left is just as strong but maybe less precise. I could, of course, just be getting old...

I first heard about the trip to Bossey in early March of last year. A notice appeared on our college's online bulletin board and I was immediately intrigued. I think there's something about training for ministry that makes you, or at least I think it should make you, alive to new possibilities.

Exploring ideas you haven't before, doing things you haven't done before and at its most basic, meeting new people. In each of those three important respects, the trip to Bossey seemed to tick the boxes. And so I applied to Roger to be included on the trip. As part of that application I had to make the case for - or so it seemed - my ecumenical credentials.

I am not from a Christian family and although as a child I went to an Anglican church, my early formative experiences of church came in an Assemblies of God Pentecostal church in Hounslow, and Baptist churches whilst I was at University in Leeds. My experiences as an adult in the Anglican Church range from a conservative evangelical church in a commuter village in Surrey, a Fresh Expression in a school hall in Somerset to working at Southwark Cathedral, where I set up and ran the Education

Centre. Quite a range both in terms of theology and tradition! But I cannot say that these experiences were at the time considered choices, that I was reflecting on the nature of the difference as opposed to simply the differences themselves.

So my first 'conscious' working in an ecumenical sense was as a Christian schools worker in the Cheddar Valley. At first my relationships with the churches in the villages were slightly at arm's length as my actual employer was the school,

but after a cut in funding for post-16 education, I was made redundant and became an employee of the churches in the area. Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, community church, independent chapel - all funded my work. And as a condition of my employment I spent a Sunday a month with one of the churches. It was a fascinating situation, because not only did I experience ecumenical working but I was also the object of it. I was the 'thing' which allowed a focus for these churches to come together as they sought to serve the communities of the Valley. All the ministers in the Valley consistently saw the bigger picture beyond their own self-interest - as you have to with all youth work. As an example of what is needed for ecumenism to work 'on the ground', it was a powerful experience of what ecumenism might mean in reality.

And bringing my story up to date, I am currently employed by and training in a semi-rural benefice in North Somerset, which is working in ever-closer partnership with the Methodist churches in both the villages it serves. Joint services, joint prayer diaries, sharing heating when our boiler packed up - important things like that. But the truth is that there is little that divides us theologically, little real cause for struggle in the forming of that relationship, other than our identities. And there's the rub.

When it comes to being allowed to continue to be who we have always been, to not move or compromise, church congregations are experts. Because identity matters.

It seems to me we live in an era in which barriers and divisions are being sought to be emphasised rather than diminished. The Brexit debate, for example, has at its heart, at least in part, it seems to me a deep sense of longing for an English national identity

that we seem only to be able to create through identifying and demonising the other. It's an interesting tension that in our global community the changes in technology and communications appear to lead to a greater desire for separation and individual identity, rather than to increasing unity.

I suppose the truth is that despite this background in practical ecumenism, before arriving in Bossey I hadn't wondered enough about how this might all be played out on a bigger, more global stage. I expected to meet fellow Christians from around the world and in some naïve way, in my mind, it was all going to be rather like a Coca-Cola advert with everyone singing one song together, smiling brightly.

And so the time for our trip arrived.

Of course, as I'm sure you know, it's hard not to fall in love with Bossey. Despite the fact that - horrors - it was raining when we arrived (Roger promised us this was a temporary aberration - and indeed it turned out to be), it was very clear that Bossey was a rather magical place. We had a full programme planned and we were soon finding a new rhythm. It was, in part, a rhythm that revolved around eating large quantities of very good food, very regularly. Some things, at least, about the Church do seem to be universal! The graduate students with whom we were mostly interacting had not themselves been long in Bossey. As with any group it was fascinating watching at a distance emerging friendships and seeing how different groups had allied themselves - along national, regional or theological lines.

I think that it is hard to exaggerate the impact of social media on the ways in which people's relationships are changed by the ability to stay in contact across continents, or even just the classroom with great ease. Watching the graduate students messaging one another across the lecture halls, the ping of notifications and the silent smiles at jokes shared was a fascinating insight into the changed world in which we are living.

I am not a seasoned traveller. I have no experience of foreign mission. I tick the commonest boxes on equal opportunities monitoring forms. In Bossey, realising that my life experience has been very narrow, I felt on one level very out of my depth. But I also felt cross at my ignorance; my ignorance of the worldwide church. For example, that I don't understand subtleties of Orthodox theology; that I don't know more about what is happening in the Chinese church.

It was a reminder to me that we all have our blind sides and sometimes we need to be forced to look around them. Bossey did that for me.

Every day, we shared in morning worship led by different students from the graduate programme. One day a Mexican Methodist minister from Mexico led the service, playing beautiful music on his guitar, getting us to sing lots of hymns with lots of verses - often sharing in Methodist worship in my benefice, it was home from home for me! Then on another day, a female pastor from the Chinese church took a pretty lengthy Morning Prayer. If like me you come from a fairly traditional C of E background, you would have been wondering, as I was, just how long Morning Prayer can possibly go on for. 45 minutes was the answer. Later in the day, when I got a chance to thank the Chinese pastor for her service, she apologised profusely that it had been such a *short* one.

Bossey's policy of encouraging people to share their tradition in an unadulterated way was a surprise to me. I think I had been expecting some kind of homogenisation. Blending. *Blanding?* A worship smoothie, where you put in a lot of ingredients, mixed them up and that at the end something that was good to eat would have been made, but with no nasty lumps, pips or peel to get in the way...

Instead Bossey encourages learning through sharing the best of your own tradition and experiencing the best of someone else's. Perhaps the clearest example of this

was the way in which we said the Lord's Prayer at these services - each in our own mother tongue. I was so overwhelmed by the sheer variety of language, the multitudinous ways of saying the same thing, that in the end I was unable to pray myself and had to simply stop and listen. Everyone speaking something so central, so shared, in their own words. The same but different.

This '*same but different*' was something I also became aware of when we took part in a joint Bible study into the first four words of the Lord's Prayer. We were asked, each of us in turn, to explain what we heard when we spoke each of those words. The word 'Father' took my group a long time to pick apart, from the cultural perspective of a Nigerian man to whom 'Father' meant unquestionably an authority figure, to another priest in whose culture fathers were often absentees.

But the truth is, you don't need to travel all around the world to experience these differences of nuance and interpretation. My experience of what 'Father' means will - although we might share some underlying cultural assumptions - be uniquely my own, different from anyone else's in this room, even in our own small country. The gap between the intention of the word, and its interpretation, can be huge. But it is only through talking that we can, together, discover what is being both said and heard, and so find a way in which to speak of God in a language we can all begin to understand.

Of course, it wasn't all talking. We were taken to the World Council of Churches and spent the afternoon and evening in Geneva. Sights were seen, tea was taken, Reformation giants regarded. Some wine may have been drunk.

On a more serious note, it seemed after a morning spent at the WCC that there was so much that was important going on there, but that few of us on the trip even heard about it - let alone the members of our congregations.

The Church of England sometimes seems to have become so paralysed with its own divisions and so preoccupied with its '*imminent demise*' that we lack the energy to look outwards, which might, ironically, of course be the answer to both those problems...

In terms of the impact of the visit on me, I hope you can appreciate that it kick-started my thinking in important areas and awakened my eyes to a bigger perspective. Three years focusing on your own formation can be not entirely helpful. I am looking forward to thinking about myself rather less over the next three years!

But I think it is fair to say that it was in the area of the ministry of women - one which does affect me in a very personal and direct way - that I found myself most challenged.

In one of our lectures we sat and listened to an Archdeacon from Nigeria sharing the story of how one of Bishops from his country had come back from one of the Lambeth conferences, having made up his mind to start ordaining women and so began to at once. All went well until the Bishop in question retired. At which point, the Diocese reverted to the care of a Bishop for whom women's ministry was not legitimate. The women's orders were declared null and void. Their ministries ended. It was a deeply shocking and painful thing to hear.

And yet when I am ordained, God willing, in July, I myself will become a further embodiment of this division within the church. Another barrier to reunification. These differences between our churches are no small thing. They are not solely about abstract ideas, or high-flown theology; though, of course, they are often both those things too. But they touch on the real lives of real people. People who can be hurt. People who can be made to feel that somehow they bear God's image rather less fully than their male, or their straight, or their white counterparts. When we speak of these divisions, inevitably they touch both heart and head - as I experienced again in Bossey. And sometimes, there will be deep pain in the speaking. On a couple of occasions in Bossey, there was as a strong sense of things unsaid for the sake of peace. Deep

currents of pain. As an Anglican Communion facing the future, I cannot believe that silence is an answer to some of these deep currents.

So for such a wonderful, happy place and time, I still bear with me a very palpable sense of the pain of these divisions.

But it is, strangely, I think a good pain. A necessary one. I believe the time to worry with hypothermia is when you stop feeling cold. It's then that you're really in trouble. When we stop noticing the pain, stop experiencing the rawness of these crunch points, we will have stopped speaking, stopped listening, stopped caring and stopped hoping. What does it say that at Bossey, a place that symbolises our worldwide Christian family, students are unable to celebrate the Eucharist as a community? That this symbol of all that unites us - a belief in a Saviour who diminishes himself so much for love, and is broken that we might be one - cannot be shared together as a family should be a deep sadness to us all. It certainly was - *is* - for me. What have we done to our Church - God's Church - that we cannot eat and drink together in remembrance of him?

Big issues.

And how did we all respond as a group of ordinands to this opportunity to live with these issues? We have kept in touch since and several of the group have said that this has been the most central experience of their training. I would endorse that view fully and encourage Ministry Division and, I presume, yourselves to continue to make this trip possible for future ministry trainees.

Because the point is that division and difference aren't just things we can choose to speak of remotely - as though they didn't touch us here and now. Because they do.

Take for example my fellow Bossey visitors. We are all being ordained into the Church of England. We will all make the same vows before God. And yet we were all very different people believing subtly different things and expressing that belief through divergent traditions. As a microcosm of what is going on in the Church of England more widely, our group provided a very clear illustration of the strength in numbers of ordinands being trained from an evangelical background - a part of the Church of England that has in the past seemed to me less open to Ecumenical partnerships.

But my sense from this week was of an increased openness from all of us to other traditions and a desire to seek the wisdom of other denominations that can only be good news for the Church of England and, more widely, for the whole church in this country.

We were, then, a group of very different people. I may be alone in this but I often make snap judgements based on labels. 'Anglo-Catholic' 'ABC' 'St Mellitus' 'Middle of the Road'. We name, label and classify each other all the time. I have to remind myself to see beyond the label because it's the content that really counts.

There were certainly tensions of belief and interpretation even amongst our own group. But no-one and nothing is served by pretending that these tensions do not exist. Just like Bossey's decision for students to lead worship in an authentic style, so we too need to hold dearly to our traditions; express them authentically, embrace them wholeheartedly. But over and above that, we need to hold even more dearly to our love for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ - image-bearers, truth-speakers and peacemakers.

Bossey has changed me. Changed my perspective. Thank-you for giving me, and all those who went with me, that precious opportunity.

God of Tiny Beginnings - Jan Berry

God of tiny beginnings
We thank you
For the sparks of imagination
That blaze into new visions;
For the fragments of shared understanding
That grow into friendship;
For the seeds of hope
That blossom into a new creation.

God of tiny beginnings
We thank you
For your love which calls our faint longings
Into dreams of justice;
For your guidance which leads our faltering footsteps
In paths of peace;
For our power which transforms our good intention
Into committed action.

God of tiny beginnings
We bring you
Our stumbling prayer,
Our faint praise
Our half-hearted attention to your Word,
Offering it to you
For it to become the living sacrifice
Of whole-hearted worship.

Taken from: 'Naming God' by Jan Berry
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