

A Swiss episode.

In October I enjoyed a nostalgic weekend returning to old haunts and seeing old friends on the shores of Lac Léman in Switzerland.

Just after WWII the American philanthropist Rockefeller gifted the Swiss Château de Bossey, just outside Geneva, to the embryonic World Council of Churches (WCC) to set up an "Ecumenical Institute". In those hard, divided times W.A. Visser't Hooft, the first general secretary of the WCC, said in 1946 at its inauguration: "The Institute's programme has three main subjects: the Bible, the world, the church universal."

So we gathered – alumni, staff, supporters and church leaders literally from all over the world - to thank God for 70 years of Gospel witness through worship, study and community. A principal programme has been an annual five months' graduate school for 30-40 mostly young pastors, priests & ordinands, who live together at Bossey undertaking intensive study on a biblical theme. Recently this has come under the auspices of the University of Geneva and students can move on to masters or doctorate study in theology. Alongside these longer term students there are hosts of short conferences and courses for ministers & laity and Bossey is also well used for WCC meetings, local gatherings and church groups coming to enjoy the beautiful setting, the château's excellent facilities and the skills of the faculty staff.

Bossey is an incredible meeting place for Christians of every sort from every country. Nowadays UK churches are sometimes sceptical about things "ecumenical" – but the very basis of the WCC and its Ecumenical Institute is Jesus's own prayer "that they all may be one, that the world may believe". Suspicion evaporates when believers come to study and worship together (in a myriad of different ways) and really to experience their oneness in Christ – Methodists from US, Pentecostals from Brazil, Orthodox from Russia, Presbyterians from Cuba, Roman Catholics from Poland, Baptists from Zambia and even the odd Anglican and URC from UK.

When I worked for the WCC in the 1990s I was responsible for overseeing the finances and buildings at Bossey. The château was a bit tired and inadequate for the numbers using it, so we began a "makeover" process and it was wonderful to see it now, extended and fully upgraded for its role in the 21st century.

There was much to celebrate and a lot has been achieved. Thousands have passed through and many Christians, ordained and lay, have experienced a great

spiritual awaking and deepening there enriching their and their church's faith. But times and emphases change. In my younger years and the earlier experience of the WCC the thrust of the ecumenical movement was for "organic union" – the coming together of different churches & traditions (in which our URC was something of a trailblazer in 1972). But I think there is a realisation dawning that the unity Christ desires for his church is not necessarily a dull, structural uniformity, but a realisation and acceptance that we are all different and complementary in the skills and experiences we bring to the mission to which we are called.

So I sense theologians and Bossey students are not spending so much time arguing whether we need bishops or should practise infant or believers baptism (I am sure Jesus is not in the slightest concerned about that), but rather how we work together to bring healing and salvation to a divided, hurting world.

An interesting development recently has been the inclusion of an interfaith perspective. For example last year there was a six week course "Building an Interfaith Community" bringing together equal numbers of students from the three great Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism to forge links of understanding and co-operation in a world often broken by the clash of religions and cultures.

So I was intrigued, at our celebration weekend, to hear Hans Küng, the eminent Christian theologian being quoted, along with references to both Old & New Testaments as well as the Qur'an, by one of the keynote speakers Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the senior Islamic religious leader in Egypt. He reminded us that God/Allah/Jehovah has "sent all the messengers and prophets with a message of peace, love and fraternity". A bit of a contrast from the perceived message of ISIS!

One can get somewhat restricted and parochial in one's faith at times and I was glad of the opportunity to be reminded of the rich variety of Christ's church, its worship, witness and service and even to be faced with the fact that all the genuine theocratic religions recognise the call of the Almighty to live together in peace for the sake of His creation.

Rev Michael J. Davies

Treasurer UK Bossey Network and former Assistant General Secretary, World Council of Churches, Moderator of URC Thames North Synod and first URC Youth Secretary.