

**Revd Canon Roger Spiller, Chair, UK Bossey Network**

A high level of energy, enthusiasm and engagement was evident at a recent conference on ecumenism at Lambeth Palace. The meeting brought together church leaders, theological educators, those engaged in ordained and lay ministries, from a wide spectrum of church traditions including Orthodox, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Presbyterian, and New Generation Church. The catalyst for the gathering was what the initiator and chair of the conference, Bishop Brian Castle, characterised as 'one of the best kept secrets', the influence of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. We gathered to celebrate the contribution of Bossey and to discern how it might be more widely known and used to renew Christ's call for unity among Christ's fractured body.

'Life changing' are the words most often used by former Bossey graduates to summarise five months living in the diverse, risky yet ultimately safe and deeply formative 'ecumenical laboratory' that is Bossey. Testimonies from four past Bossey students, from 1954 to the present, affirmed that the 'Bossey magic' had meant for them a transformation that years of theological study and residential training had not quite achieved, and that its impact goes on energising them in their ministry. The Bossey community compels its participants to discover that 'the world is my neighbour' and that previously unimagined difference has to be engaged with and can even be embraced. That difference has, in fact, been widened further in recent years by more students coming to Bossey from churches outside the membership of the WCC, from the southern hemisphere and by a multi-faith dimension. One recent Bossey graduate expressed it thus: 'That some 50 people make a community inside of 5 months when all they have in common is that they are baptised Christians, is a huge testimony to the power of the gospel'. A booklet *A Place to Remember* contains some 50 short testimonies to the diverse and far-reaching influences of Bossey.

Dr Ioan Sauca, Director of the Bossey Institute gave the opening lecture. He recounted how his own participation in the Graduate School was a life changing experience even though he had already completed extensive theological studies and had lectured on ecumenical theology. He too faced the shock and disorientation that was the usual precondition of transformation. He characterised the direction of travel usually taken by Bossey students from 'smiling ecumenism', through 'shock therapy' to an 'embodied ecumenism'. He illustrated this by telling the story of a Bossey student new to the community. Preparing to lead worship in the chapel, he felt disturbed by the icon and candles on the Communion table, unfamiliar in his own tradition, so he hid them under the table. By the end of the semester that same person was to be seen leading the chapel procession bearing the icon in his hands, an outward sign of a lengthy inner journey that he had undertaken in the safe space of

this ecumenical laboratory, an example of what has been called receptive ecumenism. The Bossey Institute is itself a movement in transition and its inventive Director reported on bold developments that reinforce its own capacity to respond to new ecumenical insights, embrace change and to promote ecumenical formation.

We were fortunate to have the group of brothers and sisters of Chemin Neuf, the international ecumenical community, who are resident at Lambeth, to lead our worship. The empty plate and the over-turned chalice on the altar symbolised the pain of disunity, which Dr Sauca addressed in the second section of his lecture. Institutional ecumenism is in crisis, he acknowledged. A resurgent concern for identity, whether theological, denominational or national, challenges traditional ecumenism and erodes enthusiasm for it. What was once a movement for visible unity has become a sectional interest for a few enthusiasts while churches turn in on themselves. Against this Dr Sauca reiterated that the call to unity is a command of the Gospel and not an option. It requires a fresh paradigm to re-engage our ecclesial landscape – a paradigm that reasserts the Trinitarian emphasis on a communion of diversity in which Christology is the ground for, not the obstacle to, a widening dialogue and which recognises that the Spirit permeates the whole world. Such a paradigm will involve the valuing of diversity, a ‘pilgrimage’ of justice and peace together now’ that is a way to unity, rather than conditional upon prior agreement, and thus a unity that is properly ‘embodied’.

Dr Susan Durber in a fascinating lecture on ‘Ecumenical Spirituality’ noted the development in English history from deep and comprehensive division to an unconscious ‘beginning to share each other’s life and faith traditions in ways that enrich us all’. Dr Durber narrated her own experiences, while on holiday, of attending worship in a number of different liturgical traditions including cathedral and chapel. What she actually encountered, and enabled us to imagine for ourselves, was a surprising, and sometimes faintly amusing, interchange of styles that belied the sources and traditions from which they had originated. If participants had been tempted to derive quiet satisfaction from this unadvertised ecumenism, hoping that our journey toward unity was well underway, we were sharply challenged to consider that this approach might mean a retreat into worship, and a bricolage of styles that avoids more dangerous and deeper engagement. ‘Were we all being honoured and heard or were we guests in someone else’s, albeit very hospitable, house?’ Dr Durber argued that spirituality is not a thing by itself, but is rooted in practices of life, in habits of action, in social locations and ways of living’ and that, therefore, ‘a deeper kind of ecumenism is needed, one that combines doctrine, spirituality and action’ and is grounded in the realities of our lives. Crucial words, not only for Christian churches but perhaps too for those working with the often self-indulgent, ‘secular’ spiritualities that occupy the space vacated by the churches.

Dame Mary Tanner and two other ‘listeners’ reflected back and summarised the results of invigorating conversations by participants around the tables.

What emerged was the conviction that we needed to recapture a younger generation of church leaders with a passion to work for the healing of our ecclesial divisions as a sign that reconciliation is possible in a hurting and fragmented world. As Dame Mary expressed it: 'We need leaders whose understanding of Christian unity in today's world has been formed in the most inclusive ecumenical context of ecclesial traditions and cultures, out of which renewed vision, conviction and energy come...'

'Ecumenical formation' was recognised by the Assembly of the WCC meeting in Busan in 2013 to be so vital that it has become a programme in itself, and this is spearheaded by the Bossey Institute with its academic team of seven professors and its accreditation from the University of Geneva. This offers a resource to those responsible for training women and men for ministry, some of whom were present at the conference. The number of people able to participate in the Graduate School are, inevitably limited, but the Ministry Division of the Church of England is funding shorter 4-6 week courses that offer scope for more people. The UK Bossey (friends) network, responsible for organising the conference, also arranges a week-long visit of ordinands and trainee ministers from different church traditions, to overlap with the Graduate School, so that still more people can have the opportunity to get a sense of what ecumenical formation might mean within the compass of a tight theological training programme. We have been gratified by the benefits that even this brief visit to Bossey can bring. Comments from ordinands include: 'Immensely enriched my understanding of the ecumenical scene'; 'The visit has...given me access to tools to enthuse the local church to have a global vision'; 'A great trip of huge benefit to my formational training'. The UK Network will also hope to arrange a visit specifically for Theological College/Course Principals and staff, which some of their number have requested, so that they can assess its potential contribution for their ordinands.

The conference was hopeful that it would reinvigorate passion for ecumenical formation even more than for celebrating the way this is being realised through Bossey. However, it also seemed evident that even the hard won success of Bossey in creating community out of incredible diversity can inspire hope that we can both subvert the church's preoccupation with its own survival and mobilise our resources to engage with our fragmented world. The prospect of a refreshed ecumenism that is prophetic, relational and inclusive is surely both urgent and realistic, and an indispensable perspective in enlisting in God's mission to his fractured world.