

A RADICALLY CHANGED CONTEXT FOR 'MAKING MEISSEN WORK' IN TODAY'S WORLD

Bishop Nick Baines is Anglican Co-Chairman of the Meissen Commission. His challenging address to the Annual Meeting on the theme "Making Meissen Work" is reported here by Bishop Rupert Hoare.

Having heard John Arnold's introduction and Bishop Johannesdotter's address, Bishop Baines had decided to take a rather different tack. He recorded how he had originally declined the invitation to become the Anglican Chair of the Meissen Commission "because he was totally bored by ecumenical activity". He had asked himself, "Who read the ecumenical reports anyway?" However he was eventually persuaded to accept the post.

He said that Meissen was "a child of its time". As Bishop Johannesdotter had reminded us, it grew from a desire to create convergence after all the bloodshed of 1939-45. Ecumenism was characterised by this desire for convergence. But since the Meissen Declaration so much has changed. "Has the ecumenical movement understood this?" he wondered. Nowadays young people move from one church to another; people do not see the need for convergence; we "pick'n choose" with whom we will get into partnership. He went on: "If we don't change, we'll be left behind with the ecumeniacs". Meissen is a means to an end, a tool to help the people of God be the people of God for the sake of the world.

Bishop Baines reminded us that The Church of England is both Catholic and Reformed. It is not monochrome. So there are some in the C of E who say the Historic Episcopate does not matter a great deal; others say it does. So sometimes it is hard for our partners to know who they are talking to. Again, whilst in parts of continental Europe Confirmation may still be a rite of passage, it is no longer that in England. In south London it is something people choose to do. So often when members of the C of E and the German Churches talk about Confirmation, very often they are not talking about the same thing.

He then gave another example to demonstrate how our differing contexts matter. A little while ago the Archbishop of Canterbury made a speech - preceded by a radio interview - advocating Shariah law in certain circumstances. In response, said Bishop Baines, Bishop Huber "went for the Archbishop's throat". In Germany Islam is made up largely of 'Gastarbeiter' from Turkey; in Great Britain Islam has arisen out of our colonial past. "We're in different worlds," he concluded. We need to become better interpreters of each other's context.

He then referred to the Reform Process for the Church, initiated by Bishop Huber, due to culminate in 2017 (the quincentenary of Luther's 95 Theses) in which Bishop Baines has become involved. The Church Tax in Germany now produces an income of 4.3 billion Euros; in 2015 it is estimated it will be just 2.9 billion. His point was that, whilst we always change when, and because, the money is running out, what we need to do is to take seriously our vocation. That is the key to "making Meissen work".

In Bishop Baines experience, Local Ecumenical Projects have largely ceased to function. People are just not interested. You have to "go where the energy is". He believes that "we need to find less legalistic and more relational ways" of working and living as Christians together.

Bishop Baines then turned to the Meissen Commission's present work, in the service of churches which share a common mission in Europe. In the Europe of today we have to engage with four major areas of European life: (1) Islam (with differing contexts), (2) the secularisation agenda (he referred to Dawkins versus Huber), mediated to us through (3) the Media (he described his own engagement with modern media, involving him in "blogging and tweeting"), and (4) Bio-ethics. He referred to the Commission's exploration of how to relate to schools, and observed that "religious illiteracy is a serious business". He added that we will unite over bishops when we do things together.

He ended with a question. "Is Meissen a means to an end, or is it for those who like this ecumenical activity?" He said there was little interest in pursuing the questions of episcopacy in the Faith and Order agenda, until the wider issues to do with Women Bishops (and on the Church of England side the Pope's recent invitation to Anglicans opposed to the ordination of women to join the Roman Catholic Church) have been dealt with. From the Anglican Communion Office there was now a stress on diaconal life and work.