



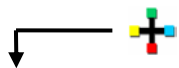
Living Together

1982

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The life offered to the world in Jesus Christ is a paradoxical affair. At first sight, it is apt to look more like death. Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' Resurrection comes first, because death comes before that. The life we are talking about is what Paul described when he said that we are always carrying about in our corporate life the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made manifest. It is something which we receive in proportion as we are willing to throw life away. It is not just a pepping up of natural liveliness.

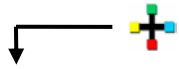
When we come to apply the theme of the Vancouver Assembly to the matter of 'Life in Unity', it is especially important to remember this. Unity among believers is not a question of ecclesiastical joinery – of adding together small bits to make something bigger. It is a matter of dying in our small selves to become sharers in a new life. It is a matter of surrendering the identities in which we have grown up in order to have a new identity which is a gift of Christ.

I have never been able to forget the feelings I had on 27 September 1947, when we gathered in Madras for the birth of the Church of South India. There had been plenty of travail-God knows. But at that moment, as we faced each other in that vast congregation, we all knew that we were – in a sense – facing death. There would never again be Anglicans or Methodists or Presbyterians or Congregationalists in South India. You could never unscramble those eggs. The names which had given us our identity would soon be forgotten. And, of course, it was just that surrender, that irrevocable commitment, which made the whole thing so full of new life. You can't have new life except at the cost of dying.

To be more specific: living together the new life of Christ will mean at least the following things:

That we share worship, work and fellowship with Christians whose ways of understanding the Gospel and of celebrating it are totally strange to us. Think of a thoroughly 'spiky' Anglo-Catholic parish, or a rowdy Pentecostal revival meeting, or a heavy Presbyterian sermon lasting forty minutes! Of course it is easy to be completely switched off by these things. And yet they have been the outward forms in which a true and costly and fruitful devotion to Christ has been formed and sustained. We have to be patient enough to penetrate behind the forms to the spiritual treasures they conceal-and protect! When we are willing to do that, we find that our own

discipleship is challenged, questioned, changed. But it is not an easy change. It is a kind of dying in order to find new life. And of course it is reciprocal: we can be the ministers of that kind of challenging, questioning and changing for others. It is not by getting together with people as near as possible to ourselves that we are challenged and changed. It is the costly and difficult encounters that are the fruitful ones. As always, the new life in Christ is on the other side of a kind of death and resurrection.



But we are not concerned merely with the togetherness of Christians. The Church only exists as a sign and foretaste of God's Kingdom. It is only true to its calling when it is a growing point for God's new creation, a place where the promise, 'Behold I make all things new', is beginning to be fulfilled. And "all things" means the whole life of the world. Our coming together from separate traditions to be challenged and changed is in order that we may – together – become such a place, such a sign. This means that we have to develop styles of living, working, worshipping and celebrating which are recognisable to others as signs of a new creation. The Church has to be recognisable as a possible home for the whole human family. And the Church in each place has to be recognisable as the true home for all God's children in that place and a sign of the victory of God over all the evils of that place. In spite of the overwhelming desire that we all have to make the Church a cosy place where we – its members – can feel at home, we have to be willing again and again to take down walls, to open up our home and let it be changed so that it is a home for all. That too is costly. It is a kind of dying. Very soon after the brothers of Taize had completed the building of their glorious church, they were faced with crowds of pilgrims too great for it to hold. Promptly they took down the great west wall and extended the Church by means of a temporary canvas roof. Life in Christ means dying to our own securities.

Of course we are sinful human beings, not spiritual supermen. We cannot live forever in a state of challenge and change. We do need securities, even if we also need to leave them behind. I think this means that the Church must have a variety of forms. There must still be places where people with the same kind of temperament, the same kind of 'style', the same kind of culture can celebrate the faith together and help one another towards maturity. But these must always be held within a wider community of different kinds of groups, so that our smaller fellowships are not allowed to become self-sufficient. This suggests a great pluriformity in the life of the Church – small intimate groups for spiritual growth, big public celebrations, tough and costly exercises in tackling situations where God's will is denied – all held together in loyalty to the whole family of the Church. We need that kind of pluriformity if our living together in Christ is to be the opportunity for receiving the gift of life and for giving it away in order to receive more abundant life.

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