

Divided Loyalties: Ecumenism or the environment?

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*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed*

In the realm of ideology, I have two loves: ecumenism, and the environment. I show my love for ecumenism by being part of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). My love for the environment manifests itself in my lifestyle. I prefer public transport to driving. I eat only vegetarian food. Until recently, I boycotted aeroplanes.

My passion for WSCF was ignited in Manchester. In an ugly 1960s chaplaincy, in the basement which always stank of sweat because it was used in the daytime for yoga and aerobics, a few of us would meet, sometimes five, sometimes ten – a small number for the biggest university city in western Europe – to discuss issues we felt were important. We talked about fair trade, child soldiers, university tuition fees. We examined our faith, taking it to pieces in the same way medical students cut up human bodies, so we could learn how to keep it alive in a world where religious belief is constantly challenged. We chanted songs written by monks, sitting in a circle around a small table of candles. We were from different towns, different countries. We spoke with different accents, and at the pub after our meetings we had different tastes in alcohol. But we were united by our faith.

This meeting of the Manchester Student Christian Movement happened every Thursday night. Each of us would walk, or take the bus, from his or her home, and come to this special meeting, where God's hand worked among us. These special nights inspired me to dream, and taught me of a Christianity directly engaged with the issues of the world.

Getting involved with WSCF Europe, I have heard stories from many people who have had similarly special experiences at WSCF conferences. Young Christians gather together from across the continent to discuss issues that matter to them: climate justice, new technologies, gender identities, the theology of empire. They share food, dances and songs from their home culture. They stay up all night in deep conversation. They make lifelong friends.

My passion for the environment began as a child, in my experience of nature. I loved playing outside on the moorland opposite my parents' house, climbing the trees, and catching small fish in the river. Mum worked on a farm, and as she earned our daily bread, my brother and I were left to make friends with the goats. At primary school I learned about global warming. A teacher left a notice in the toilets, asking us turn off the taps to preserve water. Intuitively, I understood this was a good thing.

At Manchester University I got involved with environmental groups. I was a member of People and Planet, a group of eco-friendly students. I wrote articles for the university newspaper on environmental issues. I rode a bike rather than catching the bus. In our student house we installed low-energy light bulbs. I had close friends who were part of Plane Stupid, a campaign group focusing on the environmental destruction caused by air travel.

I find myself torn inside by these two loyalties: a loyalty to WSCF, a place where Christians from across the world can come together to fight for justice, yet which requires extensive air travel, and has a huge carbon footprint; and a loyalty to my environmental roots, where every tiny step towards a sustainable lifestyle mattered, and where stepping on board an aeroplane was unthinkable.

When I lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland, I refused to fly home to England to visit my family. The

flight time was one hour. Travelling by boat and train took twelve hours, a full day of travel. My question is: can WSCF, which professes a concern for climate justice, embrace similar commitments? Can we, as young Christians, the future leaders of the church, envision and forge an environmental ecumenism? Can we remove the huge black stain on ecumenism: that at the moment our beautiful conversations have a vast, unsustainable environmental cost?

Ecumenism stands on a threshold, a place of challenge and opportunity. The challenge is environmental: as we head towards – and beyond – peak oil, and the price of air, rail and bus travel doubles, triples, and even quadruples, international conferences will become increasingly unaffordable. Furthermore, it seems ironic, if not hypocritical, to jet around the world to discuss how we are concerned about the environment.

The environmental challenge is linked to other challenges. Ecumenical groups are currently finding it difficult to raise funds. Like all those working for justice, the ecumenical movement has found itself wounded by the global economic crisis. Further, ecumenism has become unsure of its own identity and place within the church. Ecumenical Christians have struggled to communicate their message to the wider church community. A recent survey in Ireland found that a significant number of Christians don't know what the word ecumenism means.¹ Many of those polled were engaged in ecumenical practice - such as dialogue with people from other denominations – but didn't want to call it ecumenism. When I started my university degree in theology, born and raised a Christian, I had never heard the word. It sounded like a special cult.

Yet these challenges are also a threshold of opportunity. The financial challenge pushes us to question the value of our work. What is most valuable in what we do? How we can demonstrate what we do is valuable, both to ourselves, and to those who offer us financial support? Are we spending money in the best way possible – after all, international conferences cost tens of thousands of Euros – or, if we profess to believe in justice and peace, would the money be better spent feeding the hungry and giving shelter to the homeless?

The challenge of identity encourages us to communicate ourselves to the church. As we learn to re-articulate ourselves in meaningful ways to funders, we can also learn to engage with Christians from across the spectrum: conservative, liberal, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Catholic, mainline Protestant, and the emerging church.

This re-articulation of ecumenism will, by necessity, involve recognising the unsustainable nature of our current practice. It will mean discovering environmentally and financially sustainable ways of engaging with those different from ourselves. Environmental ecumenism will mean re-localising our work, bringing it back down into the local communities where we are rooted.

As the ecumenical movement re-examines its practice in this way, we can begin again to ask questions of what ecumenical practice might look like in our local context. And local ecumenism – as with my local SCM in Manchester – can be as beautiful, as meaningful and as transformative as its international sibling.

We cannot save the ecumenical movement as it currently stands. It is environmentally and financially unsustainable. But perhaps this is a good thing.

*I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,*

¹ Gladys Ganiel, *21st Century Faith: Results of the Survey of Laypeople in the Republic of Ireland & Northern Ireland*, (Belfast: Irish School of Ecumenics, 2010).

*with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.*

Poetry from "Natural Resources" by Adrienne Rich