

A History of Church Twinning – a Personal View: Robin Blount

If I were speaking about Civic Twinning, this task would be easier. There is a discernible history of city, town and village twinning from the beginning of the 20th century. Following the second world war, civic twinning became popular and widespread during those years of relationship-rebuilding, and in 1972 was incorporated into the activities and under the umbrella of the British Council on the basis of international cultural and social development. Times changed, however, and from 1984 civic twinning became absorbed into the Local Government Association, with an emphasis increasingly focused on economic and business partnerships between Local Authorities and increasingly directed towards eastern Europe.

But in the case of Church Twinning, there is no such organisational base, nor any discernible authoritative code of practice. Of course there are many examples of good practice, but each twinning relationship is autonomous and self-regulating. Various guides to church twinning have been published, and European Links Officers by whatever name have been appointed by denominations, but Church Twinning has never become a movement.

However, there is one feature that is common to both civic and local church twinning – the current decline in interest and energy. In civic twinning, following the sudden and dramatic shift in emphasis from cultural and social to business and economic, local authorities began to focus their attention and their funds towards their own civic links, and the (basically voluntary) twinning committees began to feel the pinch. Add to this the generalisation that twinning committees were made up mainly of retired people who had the time for such activities, with increasing years and decreasing energy the gradual decline in twinning is understandable.

For the Churches, other factors play a part in this. Firstly, financial constraints are forcing Churches to make uncomfortable choices. In recent years the costs incurred for keeping local churches staffed with clergy and ministers has fallen more and more on local congregations, and the burden of raising money is falling on fewer and fewer people year on year. Activities which are often seen as peripheral to the “real business of the church” tend to fall victim to the struggle to make ends meet. And this is not a feature of this country alone: we are noticing the same pressure facing our partner churches across Europe.

Secondly, church twinning is *ipso facto* an ecumenical activity. Indeed, much of the value of creating and developing such partnerships is in exploring the

culture and beliefs of a different branch of the Church and in learning to celebrate the differences and rejoice in the similarities. But here again we see the slow decline in interest at the local level in things ecumenical. Partly because of those financial constraints, people are finding their energy directed towards maintaining their own church, and less willing to take the risk of developing ecumenical links. Ecumenism for many has become peripheral. It is almost ironic that the one factor that might provide the energy to fuel a partnership link abroad is cooperation between churches – to engage in twinning ecumenically.

If it is agreed that the Churches benefit from creating and developing partnerships abroad at a level which will encourage local participation, it is at regional level that the support and organisation can best be supplied. A strategy for the future, notwithstanding the many successful partnerships already in existence, might include the development of local partnerships under the regional umbrella. In my own diocese of Canterbury, where there are two long-established links in France and Germany as well as in Madagascar, the number of parishes which have links in any one of these three places number 31 out of 275. But 89 parishes have links elsewhere.

Church Twinning is diffuse and unorganised. At whatever level it takes place, those involved will benefit greatly, but the cost in terms of time and effort will be considerable. Following the Second European Ecumenical Assembly at Graz in 1997 came the Charta Ecumenica, guidelines for ecumenical engagement between the Churches. In the light of the third Assembly last year, it is tantalising to imagine what might be achieved if Church Twinning were to become a national movement rather than just a peripheral activity.