

A table for All

[The keynote address given at the Multicultural Celebration of the United Reformed Church (Saturday December 5th 2009), Carrs Lane United Reformed Church, Birmingham, by the Revd Roberta Rominger]

The church is like a table,
a table that is round.
It has no dies or corners,
no first or last, no honours;
here people are in one-ness
and love together bound.

Those words of URC hymn writer Fred Kaan capture perfectly what I want to say today. We are here to celebrate the table that God has set before us, and God's invitation to sit down together; the bounty on the table, gifts from God; the fellowship of equals around the table by the command of God's justice, and stomachs full and content by the generosity of God's provision. The world should be like that. It is the kingdom vision that some of the churches here today have already spoken about very powerfully. The church of Jesus Christ as a mini-expression of God's kingdom should certainly be like that.

It is very significant that the table is round. One of the parables of Jesus talks about God's invitation to a long rectangular table that has a head where the host sits and places of honour up at that end, with decreasing levels of status as you go down, till at the far end of the table there are seats for people who are in disgrace. In Jesus' story somebody tries to take the seat right beside the host at the very top of the table and he is politely but firmly told to move down. That isn't his place. Don't put yourself in that position, Jesus warned his audience. Choose yourself a seat down towards the bottom of the table and then maybe you will have the pleasure of hearing the host say, Oh no, come up higher, here is your seat nearer to me.

There is no denying that the church in the United Kingdom has sometimes been like that great long table with all of the privilege and the honour at one end, the power held in the hands of a few like-minded people who had no intention of sharing it with anybody else. Globally it has been like that too. The colonial powers each had its family of churches founded by its missionaries and it was the colonial mother churches that got to set the rules for life in the family.

I am proud that the United Reformed Church was one of the first to recognise what a scandal that long table was with the good seats and the second class seats, what an offense against the gospel. In our world church family, the Council for World Mission, the table is round. Everybody recognises that there is still work to be done. But when there are decisions to be made, we all make them together. There is money for God's mission in the world and we all decide together how it should be spent. There is no head of the table, only the circle that represents our belonging together in Christ. Where is Christ himself when the table is round? Fred Kaan helps us again.

The church is like a table,
a table for a feast,
to celebrate the healing
of all excluded-feeling,
(while Christ is serving, kneeling,
a towel round his waist).

What a powerful vision! My dearest dream is for the United Reformed Church to be a true home to people who have felt excluded. There is no greater joy than when voices long silenced begin to

join in the conversation and people who didn't believe they would ever be invited to the party realise that the food and the drink and the friendship and welcome is really and truly for them, that it is OK for them to be themselves.

For some reason, some people in our church find the welcoming of the excluded ones controversial. I have heard it said that there are some whose presence should not be encouraged. If they turn up they are allowed in but with the clear understanding that they need to be changed in order to be acceptable. I don't deny that we need to be changed. Who among us is really as beautiful in our living as Christ would have us be? But it is God's business to challenge us to change, and God's first word always is come in, you are welcome, just as you are. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome at the table. That is the gospel, pure and simple. Compromise on that and you are back to a long table where some people are loved and others are merely tolerated. Christ is much more gracious than that. We must be too.

Fred Kaan again:

The church is like a table
set in an open house;
no protocol for seating,
a symbol of inviting,
of sharing, drinking, eating;
an end to 'them' and 'us'.

I have a challenge for you today, for us joined together in this multicultural celebration. The challenge is about our language. When you talk about the United Reformed Church, do you say 'us' or do you say 'them'?

It has been over four years now since the United Reformed Church declared itself to be a multicultural church. The declaration named a reality that many of us had already experienced over many years. Many of you will have heard me tell the story of how I fell in love with the local church where I am a member at Golders Green. On my first Sunday the pastoral leader got up to do a talk for the children. She had a big map on a stand at the front of the church and a boxful of colourful stickers. She invited everybody in the congregation to come up and take a sticker and put it on the map to show where they were born. It was the middle of August and church attendance was a bit low that day, but even so, we had 22 nationalities represented among us that day. There was one family from Jamaica but they and I were the only people who could put stickers on the whole of the American continent, so I knew that I was needed there. And later in the service when we shared communion together I felt like I had arrived in the kingdom of God.

That's a microcosm of who we are as a church. This is not a white Anglo Saxon church to which a few other people belong. In my experience it is the Scots who are most impassioned about our multicultural reality. Hardly a week goes by but that we have a meeting where somebody reminds us, "It's different in Scotland!" How many cultures sit around our URC table? Too many to count. That's who we are. That's "us".

I can understand that if you belong to a Korean congregation or a Ghanaian congregation or a Pakistani congregation it is natural when you say "us" to mean us Koreans, us Ghanaians, us from Pakistan, and "them", the rest of the URC out there who are predominantly something else. I understand talking about the way we do things vs. the way they operate, particularly when they come around telling us that we have to start doing things their way. I'm asking you to trust me for a truth that is much easier to see from where I sit than from any individual church – there is so much variety in the URC that you genuinely are real URC even when you're feeling very different.

There are things we believe in in the URC, like elders and church meeting, and there are ways of doing things that everybody is strongly urged to follow. But you don't have to go far in any direction in the URC before you bump into the word "normally". Here is how we believe a thing should be done normally, but if you've got a good reason for doing it some other way, providing you're not breaking the law, you're probably OK. The way we make the round table of our multicultural church real is by saying, "The URC – we!" "The URC – us!" My challenge to you is to catch yourself whenever you say, "The URC – them" or "The URC – they", and correct yourself, and do the same with other members of your congregation. Claim your place. Insist on it. Without that, the multicultural vision will never be anything more than a pretty dream.

I realise that this challenge needs to be heard by the rest of the church too. At the last General Assembly when we were debating a resolution that would require every synod to include BME representation in the group it sent to Assembly, there was a lot of talk about them. They don't like going to meetings. Or, it isn't fair that they should get more chances to go than everybody else. We've got work to do on our language because language reveals our attitudes. We've got work to do on our attitudes. We have work to do. Hear it? Together we'll get there. Separately we won't.

The church is like a table
where every head is crowned.
As guests of God created,
all are to each related;
The whole world is awaited
to make the circle round.

In the last verse of his hymn, Fred Kaan gives us a vision that is bigger than the church. And rightfully so. I'm very conscious that while we are sitting here today, Christians by the tens of thousands are gathered in London and Glasgow and other cities to send a message to the world's leaders about climate change. The UN Conference begins in Copenhagen on Monday with the biggest challenge before them that the human race has ever faced. When I got up this morning I wished I knew how to be two places at once. Actually, I wish the UN had consulted us, because we had this date in the diary long before they set the date for Copenhagen.

But we should all be standing alongside those protesters in spirit, because God's purpose in creating a multicultural church is not just for us to feel good being together. As others have already reminded us today, we've got work to do. We are meant to be a light to the world, a living example of how human beings can create a community where every person is valued as a brother or sister made in the image of God. From that place of unity we know that we have to save this planet for our children and grandchildren and for all the peoples of the world, especially the poor who are already paying the costs of rising sea levels and crazy weather.

In 2005 when the URC declared itself to be a multicultural church, the committee reminded us that this was not something new but something very, very old. The first church was born on the day of Pentecost and it was a multilingual family made up of Jews from a whole long list of nations. That's how the Holy Spirit made us from the beginning. The reason then was the same as the reason now – in Christ, all the barriers that keep us apart are overcome, and we are invited to a table where we all belong. Not a long table with a top and a bottom and some people privileged way over others. But a round table at which everybody is honoured. We pray that Copenhagen will be such a round table, The future of life on our planet depends on it.

Here we live the possibility. Here we show what God can do. It's challenging, needless to say, and sometimes we hurt each other and have to ask each other's forgiveness and try again. Because this is our vocation from God. God needs us to show the world that it can be done. So join me

today in a promise. From now on it's not them and us, it's we. The table is round and there's a place for everybody. It's full – there is plenty for everyone to eat. Christ is serving us. He is rejoicing with us. And expecting great things of us.

Roberta Rominger