

WHY CHRISTIAN UNITY MATTERS

by Bishop Gordon Mursell

The latest speaker in the “Church and the Academy” series, which takes place a few times per year at St Peter’s, Dalbeattie, was the Rev’d Dr John McPake, who is the Church of Scotland’s Ecumenical Officer. He gave an excellent talk in February about the recent Columba Declaration between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. This declaration, though modest in scope and ambition, seeks to draw the two established churches closer together in mission as well as in ministry and service. For me as an Episcopalian (and I am speaking in a personal capacity) it was a bit depressing to hear that the Scottish Episcopal Church withdrew at an earlier stage from the talks that preceded the declaration, in which they had been full participants – and then complained, once the declaration was published, that they hadn’t been consulted. Surely progress towards unity between *any* Christian churches should be a cause for celebration from all of us? John McPake spoke sombrely of the fact that Scotland had experienced what he called “late onset secularization”, which however was proving more virulent in its effects than the slower process taking place in England; and he went on to say that, if we don’t or won’t find ways to share our core priorities and identities, atrophy will do it for us.

He also stressed that the best progress towards unity had always happened at local level; and our own rector, who was present, shared something of his experience in Northern Ireland, which underlined that fact – and also reminded us of how sectarianism remains alive and well here as well as there. John McPake also encouraged us to learn from what has been happening in Cumbria, where different denominations are making real progress at local level towards sharing buildings, worship and service to the community in all kinds of innovative ways. We hope to learn from our neighbours across the border. In an age of increasing xenophobia and insularity, Christian unity matters – because human unity matters even more.