Thank you for the invitation to speak.

In my role as County Ecumenical Officer for Norfolk and Waveney, I spend a fair amount of time in ecumenical services, meetings and conversations. Tonight, I'd like to talk about a few insights I've gained and opinions I've developed during the past three years.

The main thing that has become increasingly clear to me is that Christian unity is not primarily an institutional concern or a theological problem to be solved. At its deepest level, it is a spiritual calling. For me, it is about learning to see one another properly in Christ.

By this, I mean that division is often sustained by distance. It is easier to distrust Christians we never meet, and easier to caricature traditions we only know through history, media narratives, or inherited denominational assumptions. We end up talking about 'them' rather than encountering fellow Christians whose lives are rooted in prayer, discipleship, and love for Christ.

Something changes, however, when Christians pray together. When they encounter holiness, kindness and faithfulness in traditions other than their own. It becomes harder to reduce one another to labels and to believe that the Holy Spirit is absent from communities where grace is clearly present.

This matters because Christian unity belongs close to the heart of the Gospel itself. In John 17:21, Jesus lifts His eyes to the Father and prays one of the most moving prayers in all of Scripture: *"that they may all be one… so that the world may believe".*

This wonderful prayer still stands before the Church - not as a pious aspiration or as a side project for especially ecumenically minded Christians like yourselves - but as part of Christian faithfulness itself.

And yet Christianity remains visibly divided through centuries of separation, theological conflict, and mistrust. Some divisions arose from sincere convictions and genuine matters of conscience, and we should not dismiss that history lightly. Even so, I find myself increasingly struck by the spiritual danger of growing accustomed to division itself - accepting it as inevitable rather than experiencing it, as I believe we should, as something that continues to grieve us.

I'm not talking about disagreement here that, at least up to a point, is inevitable and even healthy for dialogue. Rather, what I mean is the quiet assumption that division is simply seen as a normal and permanent state of the Church. This is a problem because, once separation becomes spiritually familiar, we slowly begin expecting less from the prayer of Christ.

As a Doctor of Philosophy, my perspective on Christian unity often differs from that of other ecumenical officers. Whereas they, understandably, tend to focus on theology and Scripture, I also try to draw upon a range of diverse philosophical sources, including both religious and secular thinkers, to provide additional insights that contribute to advancing and enriching the pursuit of unity.

One such thinker who has helped me understand the spiritual danger of division is Iris Murdoch - the Irish and British philosopher - best known for her novels about good and evil, sexual relationships, morality, and the power of the unconscious. Influenced by the French philosopher, mystic and political activist Simone Weil, Murdoch spoke about what she called *unselfing*.

By *unselfing,* she means the difficult moral and spiritual task of moving beyond the ego in order to truly see reality and, especially, to truly see other people. I think there is something profoundly relevant here for Christian unity.

Christian division can leave us trapped within our own denominational worlds, shaped by inherited assumptions, defensive instincts, and long-standing narratives about other traditions. We begin to define one another more by difference than by our shared belonging in Christ.

Ecumenism at its best resists this tendency through what might be called a form of spiritual *unselfing*. It calls us to look at one another truthfully, charitably, and with humility - not by ignoring real disagreements, but by learning to ask a different question.

So, instead of asking first: *How are they different from us?* Ecumenism invites us to ask: *What is the Holy Spirit doing among them?* That, for me, marks the beginning of authentic encounter.

Each year, I make a point of attending the Churches Together in Norfolk and Waveney ecumenical service on the Feast of Christ the King. What remains with me afterwards is the simple joy of Christians from many traditions gathering in prayer, worship, and fellowship. No doubt you have experienced this locally. I always leave with the same conviction: beneath our different traditions and practices, the love and presence of Christ are deeply evident among us, despite our differences.

Over time, experiences like this begin to reshape how division itself feels. It starts to seem spiritually stranger than unity. That does not erase theological disagreement or diminish the importance of doctrine. But it does transform the way in which we relate to one another, making suspicion harder to sustain and charity easier to practise.

One of the things I have discovered is that division often begins to weaken through friendship long before it weakens through formal agreement. It becomes much harder to dismiss another tradition once you have stood beside its people in prayer; harder to assume bad faith once you have served the community together; harder to sustain inherited suspicion once you have witnessed genuine discipleship at close hand.

It is for these reasons that I have increasingly become interested in the themes of trust and testimony in relation to Christian unity. The 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid and the Australian philosopher C. A. J. Coady, both argued that human beings depend profoundly upon testimony. Most of what we know comes through trusting others as reliable witnesses, and the Church is no different.

Christian division is, I believe, not only a scandal but also a crisis of testimony and trustworthiness.

In my own experience, both through ecumenical work and ordinary parish life, Christians do carry unspoken assumptions about one another. We often easily slip into believing that other traditions are somehow less faithful, less serious, or less reliable custodians of Christian truth than our own.

Clearly, such assumptions can erode trust long before genuine encounter has even begun.

The British philosopher Onora O'Neill offers an important corrective here. Her work argues repeatedly that trust by itself is not enough. The real moral challenge is trustworthiness: whether individuals and institutions actually conduct themselves in ways that deserve trust.

I should stress that O'Neill does not reject trust itself. Her concern is with trust that is naïve, unquestioning, or detached from evidence of trustworthiness. Trust, in her view, must be intelligently placed and responsibly earned.

Applied ecumenically, this means that genuine unity cannot be built through goodwill alone, nor can centuries of division be overcome by warm words or sentimental appeals. Trustworthiness must be demonstrated patiently over time through truthful dialogue, consistent action, humility, and mutual accountability.

Seen in this light, the pursuit of unity is demanding work. Michael Ramsey, the hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury, understood this when he wrote: *"If the problems about schism and reunion mean dying and rising with Christ, they will not be solved through easy humanistic ideas of fellowship and brotherhood, but by the hard road of the Cross".*

I have always found those words illuminating. Ramsey grasped that Christian reconciliation cannot be separated from the pattern of the Cross itself. Unity carries a cost. It asks us to relinquish pride, place truth above tribal loyalty, and resist defining ourselves primarily in opposition to other Christians.

Critically, the significance of this extends beyond the Church. I think you would agree that we live in a society marked by growing fragmentation, loneliness, and distrust. Public discourse is often polarised and communities can feel fragile. In this climate, the Christian pursuit of reconciliation is not merely an internal ecclesial concern. It becomes part of the Church's witness to the wider world.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor helps explain why. In his book *A Secular Age*, he argues that modern Western societies inhabit what he calls the *immanent frame*; namely, a social world in which belief in God is no longer the default way we find meaning, but one possibility among many.

In secular society, questions of identity, purpose, and fulfilment are increasingly addressed without reference to transcendence. Yet, beneath this confidence in purely human solutions and systems of belief, there often remains a sense of loss and restlessness - a feeling that something is missing.

If Taylor is right, then the challenge facing Christianity is not simply to make its voice heard among competing beliefs. It is to embody a way of life that points beyond the limitations of the *immanent frame* itself. When Christians from different traditions pray together, work together, and genuinely love one another, despite their differences, they offer the world something increasingly rare: a visible form of reconciliation (of shared life) that does not require the abandonment of conviction. It demonstrates that deep disagreement need not lead to hostility, and that truth and charity belong together.

The question, of course, is what that shared life should look like. Too often unity is imagined as a form of uniformity, as though Christians could only be one by becoming the same. The New Testament presents a very different vision. This is why I repeatedly return to Pentecost as perhaps the great ecumenical image of Scripture. The miracle of Pentecost was not sameness. The different languages, people and cultures remained. Yet through the Holy Spirit they were drawn into communion. Pentecost did not abolish difference. It prevented difference from becoming division.

That distinction matters enormously. Christian unity is not the destruction of Christian traditions but their reconciliation in Christ. It is not achieved by eradicating legitimate diversity into a single expression of Christian life. Rather, it allows different traditions to offer their particular gifts while remaining bound together in a deeper communion. This is why ecumenism must always seek unity rather than uniformity, what Pope Francis frequently described as *"reconciled diversity."*

I was privileged to meet Francis shortly before his death while on pilgrimage to Rome with the senior church leaders of Churches Together in Norfolk and Waveney. What struck me about him was his conviction that Christian unity must never be confused with uniformity. Indeed, he believed that attempts to impose sameness can suppress the gifts God has bestowed on different cultures and Christian traditions, even describing forced uniformity as a form of *cultural colonisation*.

And yet, Francis was equally clear that unity is not achieved by setting truth aside. Christian unity must remain rooted in Christ and the continual conversion of heart. His vision was of reconciled diversity: a unity that takes doctrine seriously while encouraging us to receive the gifts of the Spirit present in one another. In my view, this moves ecumenism beyond mere tolerance and towards a richer understanding of communion itself.

And so, despite its frustrations and slow progress, I continue to find hope in the ecumenical movement. I believe the Holy Spirit is still at work within the Church. John V. Taylor, a former Bishop of Winchester and writer, once described the Spirit as the Go-Between God. To me, this beautifully captures the Spirit's role in Christian unity: drawing us towards Christ and towards one another, often in ways we recognise only with hindsight.

That is why I remain optimistic. The future of Christian unity will certainly require theological dialogue, but it will also depend upon something much simpler and much harder: our willingness to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. This means praying together, listening carefully to each other, being trustworthy, and receiving with gratitude the gifts God has placed within traditions other than our own.

Every friendship formed across old divisions, every shared act of witness, and every moment of prayer offered together, bears testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. None of these things is insignificant. Each points to the unity for which Christ prayed and which God continues to bring about.

So, keep doing what you are doing. Keep building friendships across old divisions, and trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in ways you will only fully see with hindsight. Have courage and hope in knowing that Christ has not abandoned His Church. The final chapter of the story of Christian unity has not yet been written.

Thank you. May the blessings and love of God be with you always.