

Being ecumenical: being partial, being practical

The first Annual Oration in honour of former General Secretaries of
the *Victorian Council of Churches*

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It is indeed an honour to be invited to give the first Annual Oration in honour of former General Secretaries of the *Victorian Council of Churches*. I have worked in various capacities with Maureen Postma, Robert Gribben, Sr Mary Moorhead, Hamish Christie-Johnston and Doug Dargaville, each having different charisms and enthusiasms. I am delighted to have this opportunity to thank God for the evidences of the Spirit's work in their lives, and in those of many others associated with this Council.

June 2010 is a century on from the Edinburgh *World Missionary Conference*, generally seen as the public beginning of the modern ecumenical movement.¹ That year also saw the founding of Ridley College, and the Melbourne College of Divinity Act passed by the Victorian Parliament – the first Principal of Ridley was also the first secretary of the MCD. These events are being marked throughout this year, but it is less well known that the Edinburgh Conference was also the catalyst for formal ecumenical relations beginning to develop in Victoria. Doug Dargaville, an industrious member of the illustrious band of VCC secretaries, notes in a recent article that

Edinburgh 1910 became alive to the people of Melbourne later in that year, when a young Anglican priest visited Australia as Mott's deputy to convey the Edinburgh message. His name was William Temple. He organised an ecumenical service at St Paul's Cathedral. The procession included among the church dignitaries a Greek Orthodox priest. The music was, to quote this future Archbishop of Canterbury, "as good as the Abbey", and the service concluded with the "Halleluiahs Chorus".

Being ecumenical

What does an 'ecumenical service' look like, however? This question – to which I will return – serves to open up the wider one: what does 'being ecumenical' look like?

Quite a few Christians regard being ecumenical as qualifying core Christian doctrines out of existence, working towards a one-world totalitarian government, paying terrorists and substituting organic, living faith in Christ with boring, institutional, compromised bureaucracy. Before dismissing such views out of hand, it is important to listen to the challenges they bring to those who are partial towards being ecumenical, not least that we are seen to be Christ's through and through.

At the other extreme are those who, viewing the grass in their own Christian tradition as looking pretty brown, are tempted to make ecumenism into a quasi-denomination where the grass is emerald green. (NB: I am wary of words ending in -ism, -ship, -hood and the like: such abstract terms usually hide an agenda and avoid specifics.) But no tangible expression of an ecumenism denomination can be found – even at events such as the VCC Summer Schools – and so such well-meaning Christians can be keen on ecumenism while having little actual participation in a living congregation.

Being ecumenical is not the same as being involved in ecumenism. As former *World Council of Churches* General Secretary Konrad Raiser often pointed out, the WCC is part of a *movement*, one that calls us to a deeper commitment to the realities of Christ's church militant here on earth than ecumenism or anti-ecumenism. As Christians who confess 'one holy, catholic, apostolic Church', we are called to see its tangible expressions in church life with both the hopeful eyes of faith, and also with the realistic eyes of sight. Idealism without practicality refuses to face the realities of human frailty and harsh institutional life. Yet practicality without vision quickly leads to factionalism, and turns a congregation into a club – real temptations for every Christian group in Australian society.

¹ An excellent and highly readable review of the sources, progress and Reports of this gathering can be found in Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009)

Two words often used about being church have shifted in meaning over the past century – member, and company. What does it mean to be a member of Christ’s church, of the company of heaven? In Australia today, being a member is about joining a club or society that interests us, while a company is the structural form of a business. These are good things, but some way from how the apostle Paul, and a succession of ecclesial catechisms employs the terms. In classical Christian usage, a church member is not someone who chooses to enroll in a society of the like-minded, but a limb, eye, ear, toe, hand, even a private part of the living body of Christ. This body is indeed a corporation, yet not grounded in clear mission statements and focused on the bottom line, so much as living out of its wounds, operating for the sake of those not yet been drawn into the embrace of Christ its head. This company is not a business seeking to wield influence and increase its market share, but a living body of members who eat bread together with their living Lord, who laid down his life for these sheep.

Being ecumenical is thus not about persuading rival ecclesial corporations to co-operate rather than compete, to engage in outcome-free zones of diplomatic niceties, to organize branch mergers or even run ecumenism as a successful enterprise. It is about sustaining the prophetic vision of all God’s people called to live as citizens of the new creation, in a new world order marked by the example and teaching of Christ as revealed in the holy scriptures, and depending on the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. This vision is certainly idealistic, yet it cannot be divorced from the everyday struggles and joys of day-to-day life as Christian disciples, bonded in Christ and called to live out Christ’s reign *together*. And the role of a body such as the *Victorian Council of Churches* in living out of this vision, and the specific vocation of its Secretaries, is to be a catalyst for God’s Spirit in drawing all God’s people into the life of the new creation in Christ.

Being partial

Which lead into my second header – being partial. In former times, to say ‘I’m partial to a good dinner’ was a polite, oh-so-Anglo-Celtic understated way of saying ‘Hungry Jacks is awesome’. And I want to encourage this sense – I trust that all here are partial to being ecumenical!

But being partial has a sense which is both more humble and more rich – acknowledging that none of sees the whole picture, none of us knows the whole story, none of us lives the full bottle. Living out an ecumenical hope for the people of God cannot be separated from the actual life of an ordinary congregation (though is any such just ‘ordinary’?), and this is necessarily partial. The local congregation is where we are drowned in baptism, fed by the Word audible, personal and sacramental, join in common prayer, and experience (for good and ill) our common life in Christ. Further, the communion between these congregations shows out and inspires what it means to be Christ’s body across wider space and longer time, the ‘company of heaven’.

a) In hope – and through sin

But ... this land has never known a time when such a communion has been undivided. From its earliest beginnings, the Christian communities of *terra australis* have been divided, and not politely but often in sectarian bitterness and harsh rivalry. In this context, it is essential that each Christian tradition acknowledge that none knows the fullness of what it means to be church – each has but a partial grasp of God’s truth, though each believes it embraces all that Christ intends his body to have and to hold. To confess ‘one holy catholic and apostolic church’ is to bear witness, by faith and in hope, not by sight, to the ultimate destiny of all in Christ. In this church, for which Christ “gave himself up to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word” it is impossible to see any “spot or wrinkle or any other such thing”, as Paul put it in Ephesians.

But beyond this theological truth, every church as we know it falls short of the glory of God, and knows the frailty and bondage of sin. Acknowledging this is something we find very hard to do – witness the painful public agonizing of Pope Benedict XVI over the possibility that the church in the Roman Catholic tradition is tainted by sin in its structures as well as its members. Further, to acknowledge that we need others in order to be fully Christ’s Church is not easy. It is especially difficult for those traditions with a strong sense of unbroken tradition to acknowledge their partial

reality. And every tradition resorts quickly to a ‘we are right’ position when under threat – the default position of every Christian tradition in Australia for many decades.

b) *Post-denominational partiality*

The sectarian relationships which characterised Australian life have eased considerably in the past half-century, influenced by movements as diverse as the Billy Graham Crusades, the Second Vatican Council, the arrival of colour television, the end of the White Australia policy, the acceptance of women being as human as men, and movements towards reconciliation between indigenous and immigrant Australians. So successive *National Church Life Surveys* have been used to argue that ‘denominational loyalty’ is now a thing of the past. Put like that, one not only has to agree, but wants to: loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the body of Christ, and to the Christian faith which stems from these commitments, is far more important than loyalty to a particular Christian tradition. That is what being ecumenical is all about – but it does not that we cease being partial.

How, where and through whom is my – our – allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord called forth and passed on (‘traditioned’)? Until fairly recently, it was accepted that the Tradition [capital T] of the gospel was received and passed on through particular church structures - ‘denominations’ for short, better described as Christian traditions.² ‘Denomination’ is not a nice word in theological terms – first known in 1716, as the value of a bank-note: the Oxford Dictionary lists ‘religious sect’ as the fifth usage of the term. It enters ecclesial vocabulary in the nineteenth century, though church divisions have been a sad reality in the English-speaking world since the seventeenth.

The term ‘denomination’ has generally been used in a *descriptive* sense, to denote the diverse Christian traditions through which the Tradition of the gospel is received, lived out and passed on. I might not like this reality, but we need some word to describe it. More recently, however, denomination has been employed as a positive concept, to *define* a particular Christian brand – theologically rather a worry. Terms such as ‘inter-denominational’ or ‘multi-denominational’ are useful in giving precision to the relationships in which some Christian institutions have their being. But ‘non-denominational’ is indefensible and self-defeating – indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, fear that any church co-operation in Britain might trend this way raised acute problems for those planning the 1910 Edinburgh *World Missionary Conference*.

Do denominations matter? The whole ethos of a person’s Christian walk is shaped and affected by the particular tradition, the ‘denomination’, through which they encounter the gospel Tradition. Thus in my own case, it was through the particular instrument of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Anglican tradition within it which was used, that faith was first handed – ‘traditioned’ – to me. And the core of the gospel Tradition transmitted is held by the various denominational traditions – certainly of those who subscribe to the theological basis of the *Victorian Council of Churches*.

What then of being ‘post-denominational’? Any call for our allegiance to Christ to supersede other loyalties is welcome – but ‘post-denominational’ carries the idea of being ‘post-tradition’, setting aside the need to think and live the faith as it has been received and handed on – i.e. ‘traditioned’ – in a particular Christian community. So the boring, frustrating, debilitating, manipulating structures that we know as ‘church’ are rejected in favour of a seemingly free, but potentially formless, communal life focused on the present. We become impatient with any and all liturgical patterns of worship, for example: not just refusal to use a prayer-book, but rejection of any tradition of prayer that has ‘shape’, including its language, music, setting, heroes and behaviour patterns. And if you ever try to choose hymns for a synod service or ecumenical rally, you will quickly experience the loss of a ‘canon’ of hymns known across the Christian traditions. Here being partial has so dominated being ecumenical that ordinary Christians find singing together a major practical challenge.

c) *Traditioning together*

² The Montreal (1963) *Faith & Order Conference* helpfully denoted ‘Tradition’ as handing on the gospel of Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen as Lord (cf 1 Cor 15:3ff); ‘tradition’ as the whole corpus of ways by which this Tradition is passed on and received (‘traditioned’) in and through the (hi)story of a particular community of faith; ‘traditions’ as the particular features of a community of faith which embody its responses (for good and ill) to its traditioning of Tradition.

Being partial acknowledges that the way the gospel Tradition is held and experienced by each Christian tradition reflects its unique heritage and changing contexts. It admits that each tradition embodies deep-rooted distinctives as to what a Christian stance involves and implies. Yet being ecumenical means encouraging the traditioning of faith in a *maximalist* way, so that we learn to receive the apostolic Tradition *together*, remaining open to embrace the fullness of the faith held severally in the diverse Christian traditions. Full realization of this hope is most unlikely to happen in our lifetimes, and possibly not this side of the new creation: living in this hope, however, already reflects the light of Christ, through whom and for whom all things created have their being.

Being ecumenical does not mean despising the patterns and forms by which God has continued to tradition the Gospel – though it does mean seeing each in the light of God’s future. Being ecumenical means being both part of a particular Christian tradition, and also part of a movement towards transcending it in a wider and deeper form of the apostolic Tradition. Post-denominational approaches can be so impatient with existing structures as to run the risk of having no obvious means by which faith in Christ is traditioned. The outcome can be the disappearance of Christian faith in a fog of religiosity, and/or the re-invention of the ecclesial wheel in a new denomination ...

Being practical

What do such reflections mean for Christ’s Church today? Let me turn to my third header – being practical – by considering media advertising. ‘Freedom of choice’ is the mantra repeated again and again to encourage us to want more, more variety, more brands: like the Athenians of old, we must ever seek things that are new. It is difficult for Christians to reject this slogan, given the emphasis in the Christian tradition on freedom as God’s great gift.³ But the ‘freedom of choice’ mantra presupposes that life is about making (seemingly value-free) selections from a set of (seemingly value-free) goods. Yes, it is mostly of little moral consequence whether one decides to buy Brand P or Brand Y of breakfast cereal, for example, though factors such as its nutrient value, how, by whom and where it is grown, processed and advertised and who ends up with the profits cannot be ignored. (Sanitarium products, produced by Seventh Day Adventist businesses, form an interesting example of a Christian tradition seeking to live out a new creation vision in today’s world.)

Yet much deeper claims are made in this our consumerist society: choice *for its own sake* is the order of the day, and contesting it makes one a cultural ‘heretic’. In Christian terms, however, ‘freedom of choice’ is framed quite differently:

- a) In the first place, there is the mystery of sin and grace: we have wills, but of themselves they need to be set free by the Spirit in order that we may choose God.
- b) Secondly, the freed will is not given to us by God so we can exercise ‘freedom of choice’ about our preferred brand of denomination or congregation. The gospel message through which the Spirit frees the will comes through –not apart from – a particular congregation. And the new commitment of the will is made visible when sealed in baptism, which requires water, minister and the ongoing life of a particular people of God.
- c) Thirdly, the notion that our ‘free choice’ of congregation is a matter of one’s Myers-Briggs score, personal lifestyle preferences, cultural ethos, doctrinal emphasis, worship-style, moral orientation etc. – apart from being nigh impossible in rural areas or for the poor – makes a mockery of the prayer of Christ ‘that they may be one’. It is one thing to recognise that some people may change their Christian tradition when moving home, or when there are principled questions of faith at stake. It is quite another to suggest that this is of no moment.

Yet ‘freedom of choice’ is pervasive, even among ecumenically-oriented Christians and churches. It

³ To confess Jesus as Lord may appear servile, but (as Augustine emphasized) in reality it brings us under the One ‘whose service is perfect freedom’ as a classic collect puts it. The New Testament affirms the importance of each Christian being able to offer his or her contribution to the common good, and emphasises that barriers to this are not to be tolerated. Further, there is a long heritage of Christian faith undergirding ‘capitalist’ economic theory (provided it never forgets who is the real Owner), and the significance of enterprise. The critical point here concerns contemporary understandings of these concepts.

is hard to escape the modern and post-modern assumption that I am first and foremost an individual, who then *chooses* to relate to others (as a task), rather than *being* in relationship with other persons (as a gift). Turning up the theological volume to high, to suggest that we might confess the Holy Trinity as ‘three individuals in one Being’ utterly distorts the Christian understanding of God. Likewise, as those made in the image of God, to view human beings as in the first place separate individuals, rather than as persons made for relationship, undercuts the very basis of human and Christian life. And the same applies to the body of Christ: a congregation is much more than a collection of individuals who have exercised ‘freedom of choice’ in the religious marketplace, and a Christian tradition is far more than a mere aggregation of congregations who have taken their franchise’s brand-name (the literal meaning of ‘denomination’).

How is alerting us to these realities is being practical? The most practical thing one can do, in my view, is to shift the imagination. It re-orientes the heart and will, and action will inevitably follow. But I offer you three more some specific examples of what being practical might involve.

a) *Ecumenical services*

At the beginning of this address the question was asked, what does an ‘ecumenical service’ look like?⁴ Sometimes planners see it the opportunity for a new invention, unlike any ‘usual’ rite of a particular Christian tradition. Apart from the outcome probably leaving everyone except the leaders lost, the deeper problem is that it sees being ecumenical as side-stepping the traditions in order to receive the Tradition. And that simply cannot be done. There is no access to the apostolic Christian community apart from the historical heritage of the particular Christian traditions! An authentic ecumenical service will thus start from the practice of one tradition, keep in mind what is in common to all (notably the scriptures and hymnody), season it with elements from other traditions, and look for an outcome that is open to all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In this way being ecumenical recognizes our being partial, but evolves into something practical.

b) *Pentecostal and evangelical traditions*

Secondly, I note that the *Victorian Council of Churches* does not embrace every Christian tradition in this state: the major gap is those churches from the Pentecostal tradition. My assault on some aspects of ‘post-denominationalism’ is not directed at them, but at all of us. Yet the Pentecostal tradition is easily be tarred with this or a similar brush by ‘mainstream’ Christians and churches.

My main encounter with this tradition is through theological education, initially through students from Pentecostal congregations in class at Ridley, and now in relating the theological colleges and Christian tertiary institutions having Pentecostal origins. They are as concerned with the substance of being ecumenical as we who identify with that term. Colleges such as Tabor, Harvest and Alphacrucis are well advanced in the key areas of theological education, and probably ahead of many in their adaptation to the learning cultures and mission contexts of an electronic age. They are as concerned as anyone about the acidic effects of post-denominational, post-tradition attitudes – indeed, in many ways they have them pushed in their face! And their graduates are making their way not only into congregations associated with the Australian Christian Churches, but into Christian traditions who are members of this *Victorian Council of Churches*.

Since being ecumenical involves being partial, can I suggest that this Council acknowledges its own partiality, and takes practical steps to embrace all the Christian traditions of this state. This may already be happening – I do not know. It might involve some costly dying. But since our loyalty to Christ lies within yet beyond any particular tradition or ecumenical body, for the sake of God’s kingdom I look forward to it coming about. The magnum opus of the late and dearly-beloved Sr Mary Lou Moorhead, another former Secretary of this *Victorian Council of Churches*, was entitled *Journey Begun, Destination Unsighted*. She was writing about the ecumenical movement in the Roman Catholic Church Archdiocese of Melbourne 1960-1990, but her title might well be adopted

⁴ An article which teases out the perspective here, written by myself in conjunction with Robert Gribben, a VCC General Secretary, is ‘Anglican — Uniting Church covenant: liturgical aspects’, published in the *Australian Journal of Liturgy*.

as this Council places its future in the hands of God.

c) *Rural congregations*

My third example is even less easy to work through – how rural congregations may work across the Christian traditions in which they participate. For most of my life I have live in Melbourne’s inner suburbs, where Christian presence is so thin on the ground that ecumenical contact is either obvious or irrelevant. But I have long been involved with students preparing for ministry in regional Australia, and am now based in Bendigo. The Anglican diocese extends from Woodend to Mildura, as does the Uniting Church presbytery, overlapping with the Catholic dioceses of Sandhurst and Ballarat. Across this region are hundreds of communities, ranging from Bendigo’s 100,000 to hamlets of a dozen or so plus their surrounding farms – and towns in decline, as population shifts and aging whittle them away.

In taking few services in small rural churches, I often find myself leading a small group of godly people in a building across the road from another church (or three). Perusing their notice-boards (these churches are usually left open) I note that few have a service each week, and many have no resident minister of any Christian tradition in town – which soon starts to raise my theological hackles. In Victoria there are in place several careful, theologically-sound agreements covering co-operative ministries, designed to put into practice what it means to be both ecumenical and partial, but somehow we don’t seem able to go beyond this.

Thus the *Trinity Declaration* between Victorian Anglican and Uniting churches has been in place since 1999, reinforced later by *For the Sake of the Gospel* at national level. In the same year, a *Declaration of Mutual Recognition* was made between the Uniting and Lutheran churches, while *Common Ground* is a national Covenant between the Lutheran and Anglican churches. The Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses of Ballarat have had a Covenant in place for some years, and good relations exist between them across Victoria. All these traditions, and others, have signed up to various levels of the Covenanting Process inaugurated by the Faith & Unity Commission of the *National Council of Churches of Australia*.

These official statements offer evidence that being ecumenical is on the agenda – but is it getting beyond that, into the practical level of congregations’ life? There is both great opportunity to learn from the experience of rural ministries working together, and also a desperate need. *Being Churches Together in Rural Queensland* has put runs on the board for more than a dozen years, including ecumenical co-operation between congregations, hospital care and sharing public events, and shared buildings. In Victoria, a few ‘co-operating parishes’ exist, for example in Central Mallee and Churchill, but there seems to be reluctance to move further. As rebuilding gets under way after the Black Saturday fires, are the churches willing to consider doing so together? Could we plan towards having a resident Christian minister in every Victorian town of more than (say) a thousand people?

Conclusion

Being ecumenical is about living in the light-filled shadow cast in this age by the new creation – seeing things from the viewpoint of the kingdom of God, as witnessed in the apostolic Tradition. It cannot avoid being partial. We experience God’s rule now only in part, shaped by the gift of our particular tradition, but also as in a glass darkly, tainted by sin, confused by error and dimmed through sectarian rivalry. Such partiality must not be trapped by the blinkers of our tradition, but nor can it be pushed aside in favour of some post-denominational, post-tradition vagueness. Above all, being ecumenical means living in the hope and light of God’s future in Christ, acknowledging our partial vision, and taking the risk, in and through the Spirit, of being practical about what it means.

So - rather than analyzing Christian life in terms of being post-Christendom, post-denominational, post-tradition, post-modern, post-whatever – why not live in terms of what we are pre-?