

Ecumenism As I See It
Victorian Council of Churches Oration 2011
Merrill Kitchen

Ecumenism, as I see it, is an active human process of negotiating the essential differences between our religious identities and at the same time celebrating those differences. Our common label as 'Christian' demonstrates the unity we have in our common response to the faith of Christ. We are able to look back on our historical stories and understand that some of the divisions and separations amongst us are reflections of our valued ethnic origins, in some cases, but they also can reflect very real responses to past and present social and political manipulations that take advantage of human vulnerability while being hidden under the coverings of a fundamental self-righteousness. Charles Sherlock's concluding remarks at the 2010 VCC Oration challenged us with the assertion that '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.'¹ This evening, as someone who was not brought up in any one particular religious tradition, I want to share some of my own practical, experiential (and at times risky) life-giving journey into ecumenism as I encountered religious difference and diversity while living over the past six decades in Australia, in the United Kingdom and in the Middle-East. It has been a profoundly spiritual journey stimulated by a growing God-consciousness, but on reflection, it is a journey that has been inspired spiritually more through rich human relationships than by any particular ecclesial organisation.

1.Ecumenical Formation in Childhood and adolescence

I was born into a family with diverse religious associations at a time when the age profile of church attenders exactly matched the wider community demographic.² I remember my paternal grandmother, an avowed atheist, telling me to 'never trust anyone who says "amen".' Apparently she also told her children that she didn't mind if they married into religious families as long as they were not Jewish or Catholic. Consequently, they all married Jews or Catholics. My mother had a Jewish father and a Methodist mother; my cousins were associated with many different religious communities, and while the children in my family were all baptised in the Christian church tradition we were not formally attached to any particular church in our early lives as my father was a league footballer and football training on Sunday mornings always superseded religious allegiance. It had been because of football that my father and many of his fellow players at the Melbourne and later St Kilda football clubs signed up to serve in the police force or the fire brigade during the second world war so as to avoid disrupting the football fixtures as much as possible.

As a small child we lived at the Eastern Hill Fire Station in East Melbourne and the children with whom I played (mostly the sons and daughters of footballers) in the lanes and alleyways around our home often talked about our different religious affiliations. Everyday we would be aware of St Patricks Cathedral and St Peter's Anglican Church across the road, the Baptist Church down Albert Street just next to the Jewish synagogue and close to the Salvation Army properties that spread across to Victoria Parade. Most of us went to schools or kindergartens run by churches. I remember attending a Josephite kindergarten in Fitzroy before moving on to the Rathdowne Street State School in Carlton. I loved going to the Catholic Ladies College with its beautiful grotto and its chapel where my friend taught me how to cross myself with holy water. We joined together every St Patrick's day each year waving from our balconies as the procession took place outside our homes. Once, we dared to enter St Patrick's Cathedral where one of my friends wanted to show us where God lived in the altar. I still remember the ferocity with which we were

¹ Charles Sherlock 'Being ecumenical: being partial, being practical.' *The first Annual Oration in honour of former General Secretaries of the Victorian Council of Churches*. 2011.

² Hans Mol, *Religion in Australia: A sociological investigation*. Melbourne VIC: Nelson, 1971.

quickly ejected. But to counteract that memory, Brother Murphy would often be our baby-sitter while our parents went to football or cricket matches. My father coached the athletics team at Parade College in East Melbourne and this lovely Christian Brother, who we 'adopted' as an uncle, gave his time to us in payment for his services

On Sunday mornings several of us would go to Sunday School at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Victoria Parade with the fire chief's daughter who would collect us and walk us all the way down Victoria Parade. Many of us gathered together regularly on the steps of the Salvation Army printing press where a kind man in a leather apron would read to us the latest children's stories from newly printed issues of the War Cry. But the most engaging religious place for me was the crucifix outside St Peter's Anglican Church at the corner of Albert and Gisborne Streets. Together we would watch in wonder as an older woman placed fresh flowers at the feet of the suffering Christ every day. This was a very different image to the smiling Jesus in white robes who was depicted on the Sunday School wall gathering children around him amongst green grass and pretty flowers. There was no real sense of separation or otherness between us, rather there was an innate respect for our differences, and an unconditional acceptance of each other. It was an invisible ecumenism that would be confronted in time as we grew older and were separated from each other, but for the moment it allowed us to journey together in faith.

My family moved many times over the years. I attended seven different schools during the eleven years of primary and secondary education and our family valued increasingly the important continuity found in the ready welcome of Methodist and Presbyterian local church communities as we moved around Victoria and interstate. After marrying a Baptist, my husband Paul and I, both students at the time, decided to solve the family denominational questions being raised by attending the Swanston Street Church of Christ, a religious space that fostered, from our perspective at the time, a vigorous theological conversation and introduced us to a tradition that believed it was 'human limitation' that had forced separation in a church that, on Divine terms, was 'essentially one.'³

Our life experiences at the time became captive to the realities of life and death in the major hospital system where Paul was a trainee surgeon and I spent some time every day, as a Medical Scientist, in the post-mortem room. The church offered little in terms of spiritual direction for those of us were encountering human trauma on a daily basis. Rather formal and informal ecumenical support group developed amongst us allowing us to talk about the issues we faced, listening to each other empathically and reflecting together about where we saw God in the experiences that were challenging us. As far as I remember all of us were Protestants or agnostics (the Catholics were all at St Vincent's) and for some of us it was the Student Christian Movement that offered a relevant formal space of reflection and for others it was the Evangelical Union.

2. Experiencing Ecumenism as an adult Overseas

Any ecumenical imagination we might have had at the time, however, became seriously challenged as we moved from Melbourne to Scotland and then Israel. Riot police were on Scottish streets on Saturdays if the football match was between Rangers and Celtic. Strong division between Catholic and Protestant meant separation in a way that we had not seen before in Australia, but may well have been experienced by our parents at the same age. It was an interesting and valuable transitional experience for our next move to work in the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society hospital in Nazareth, Israel.

A hospital, as we had already experienced, is one place where ethnic and religious diversity can be usually accommodated and assuaged. The medical staff at the Nazareth Hospital consisted of Jewish, Christian and Muslim doctors and nurses caring for people of all these three Abrahamic traditions. If any real angst emerged, it was nearly always amongst those of different Christian

³ E. Lyall Williams, *A biblical approach to unity*. Melbourne VIC: Austral, 1957, 9-12.

leanings than amongst people of different faiths. Ecumenical initiatives in the region, largely supported by the colonising overseers, had begun in 1902 when the Ecumenical Patriarch, Yoachim III, Patriarch of Constantinople, issued an encyclical that raised the issue of Christian unity and Orthodox relations with Roman Catholics and Protestants. But it was not until 1990 that the Middle East Council of churches formed itself as a ‘family of families’ –consisting of the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant/Evangelical communities.⁴

Three examples of positive ecumenical co-operation amongst the Christian churches that I have experienced in recent years include the development of the Nazareth Village project in Nazareth, two notable inter-faith prayer gathering in response to human disasters in 2007 and 2009 and the visit of Pope Benedict to Nazareth in 2009.

The Nazareth Village

In 1997 land had been expropriated by the municipality from the Nazareth Hospital in order to build a road. In the preliminary stages of excavation an ancient wine press was discovered and the Jewish Antiquities Department quickly called a halt to the project. Further ancient sites were uncovered including 2000 year old terracing and a watch tower. Consultants and advisors drawn from all three Abrahamic traditions came together to explore the possibility of developing this newly identified archaeological area and an offer of funding the reconstruction of a First Century Village came from the Mennonite Central Committee in the United States on the proviso that all of the Christian communities in Nazareth would come together and support the project. The result has been a carefully researched reconstruction that has not only provided employment for a relatively disadvantaged community, but brought previously disparate sections of the community together in innovative ways.⁵

Inter-faith prayer gatherings

Our first experience of an inter-faith prayer gathering was in January 2005 soon after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami. Christians from many traditions, most of whom would have had little contact with anyone from South-East Asia, gathered together at the Dominican church in Jerusalem in a sign of solidarity with the devastated people of the Aceh province in Indonesia. Widespread access to electronic global communications and the influence of the Middle-East Council of Churches were opening windows so that not only could neighbours touch base with each other, but a wider world view was beginning to develop in ways we had not seen before.

A second ecumenical experience occurred in Nazareth in early 2009 when an exacerbation of the conflict in Gaza occurred. ‘Israeli troops commandeered high-rise buildings in three eastern districts of Gaza City expelling residents and shooting militants in the streets in an effort to break Hamas’ fighting ability.’⁶ A Catholic parish priest in Gaza wrote a passionate letter to the Middle-East Council of Churches pleading for the prayerful support of his compatriots and as a result a rare inter-faith prayer meeting was organised in Nazareth. The Maronite Church overflowed with participants with the Patriarchs of most traditions seated together alongside each other in front of the altar. Representatives of all of the traditions present offered formal prayers in Hebrew, Arabic, English, French, German and Vietnamese. I had the privilege of offering a prayer in English. Such gatherings would have been almost unimaginable twenty years ago.

Pope Benedict’s visit to Nazareth

Five months later, in May 2009, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated in Nazareth the final Mass of an eight-day trip to the Middle East. Local workers from all the Christian traditions, as well as many Muslims, carved an amphitheatre into the ancient Hill of Precipitation and an estimated 50,000

⁴ See <http://www.mec-churches.org/> accessed 26 July 2011.

⁵ For further information see the *Nazareth Village* website www.nazarethvillage.com/ and *The Centre for the Study of Early Christianity* < www.uhl.ac/nazareth.htm >

⁶ *New York Times* <www.nytimes.com/2009/01/06/world/middleeast/06mideast.html>

gathered for the Mass.⁷ We were in Nazareth two months after the event and friends we encountered from a range of different faith backgrounds excitedly told us how much it meant to them. One of our friends, a young woman who had grown up in Australia but had returned to Israel with her family, had been given the privilege of reading the Scripture during the Mass. The ecumenism that has been present at the grass roots of Israeli / Palestinian society for a long time is now being seen at the highest organisational levels of the Christian churches, but there is still a long way to go!

3. The future of ecumenism as I see it today

Over the past decade, the Australian church has been experiencing 'a period of generational transition' and as Ruth Powell points out, this transition will have a very particular and unique character because of the dramatic differences between current generations.⁸ The collectivist identities of our past have been completely replaced by widespread individualism. We belong where we choose to belong not where we are told to belong.

Ecumenism and youth today

Overall, there is a different demographic in our mainstream churches now. The younger generations are largely absent. Social studies show that there is not a loss of youth spirituality but is it being nurtured or even influenced at all by the Christian tradition? As the Professor of Sociology at Monash University, the Reverend Professor Gary Bouma, has warned us, the challenging questions for our traditional faith communities is not 'Will our children have faith?' but 'Will our faith have children?'⁹ The feedback from the Gen Y cohort in the 2006 NCLS survey measuring church health showed that they were providing 'increasingly more positive assessments in every area of church life than did the same age group five years' previously.' This outcome contrasts with the feedback from the older cohorts whose assessments of church life were increasingly negative. The Gen Y youth across all denominations are affirming that they have been inspired by their experiences of worship as well as feeling a strong sense of belonging, being valued and having confidence in a shared common vision with their faith communities.¹⁰ This depicts the relational components that contribute to healthy faith communities, mirrors the Kingdom of God values articulated in the teachings of Jesus and offers hope for healthy future faith communities.

While affirming these positive responses to Bouma's question, just because the younger demographics are not as visibly present in traditional local church Sunday worship services doesn't mean that they are absent from engaging with the wider church of God. While they may not be attending Sunday School, children *are* participating in Christian education programs in church based schools as well as in state primary schools. While they may not know the name of local priests or ministers, many are connecting with chaplains at their secondary schools. University students are just as likely to prefer regular smaller group gatherings at their homes, in cafés or pubs rather than attending scheduled services at churches. Their spirituality is increasingly evident by the way that they advocate for social justice issues, and reach out compassionately to those who are struggling in their midst.¹¹ Interestingly, the Generation Y's

⁷ Reports of the occasion in the *Washington Post* <www.washingtonpost.com › [World](#) › [Middle East](#)>, <www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/05/14/Pope-Benedict-celebrates-mass-in-Nazareth/UPI-23771242305178/>

⁸ Ruth Powell, 'Australian Church health and generational differences,' *NCLS Occasional Paper 12*. NCLS Research: April, 2008, 18.

⁹ Gary Bouma *Australian Soul*, 2006, 67.

¹⁰ Ruth Powell and Kathy Jaka, 'Generations Approach Church Differently,' *NCLS Occasional Paper 11*, January 2008, 5. See also, Powell, 'Australian church health & generational differences.'

¹¹ Sam Sterland, Ruth Powell and Michael Pippett, 'Faith-sharing activities by Australian churches,' *NCLS Occasional Paper 13*. South Sydney NSW: NCLS Research, 2009, 4.

constitute an increasing percentage of both undergraduate and graduate theological students who are not preparing for formally accredited ministry but who are searching the Scriptures and examining church traditions in contexts that, hopefully, will give them the freedom to explore issues, ask questions and encourage deeper spiritual pathways not only for their own benefit but also for the common good.

Ecumenism in a flexible mobile church

Not only are there changes in the youth demographics of our church profiles but many denominational churches in Australia are dynamic entities with ‘a lot of movement both in and out.’ For most of society today, change is the only constant. Fifty years ago births and deaths, along with European immigration, constituted the changing membership of churches. In this decade, most of the 26% outflow of members that occurred in churches resulted in individual decisions to drift ‘out of church life altogether’ with the net loss being felt mostly by Protestant denominations.¹² The capacity of church communities to cope with such unprecedented change varies. As Philip Hughes has noted, ‘some churches change whatever they are able to change to relate to the surrounding cultural changes, to the different demographics of their situation, and to adopt those practices which are said to be most characteristic of vital churches in today’s world. Other churches emphasise faithfulness. Their focus is on maintaining the traditions of their faith. They mark themselves by being resilient to change.’¹³

Overall, only 53% of people in most congregations surveyed had been in their community for more than five years, with social mobility a major factor in the reason for movement and change. On the positive side, it means that:

One in five attenders are effectively new to their congregation in the past five years. This represents a group of people with potentially fresh perspectives and energy. . . [but]. . . it has been estimated that only a quarter of all church growth is comprised of people fresh from the community moving into church life.¹⁴

Ecumenism as a virtual anticipated church

Just because people do not regularly attend church on Sundays it doesn’t mean that there is no active engagement with faith in the life of Australian communities. As mentioned previously the story of Jesus is being remembered formally in both secular and religious schools and universities, as well informally in sporting venues and pubs. In addition, most hospitals have chaplains and pastoral care workers ministering actively in the name of Christ to people in crisis and the role of chaplains in the military services, police force, emergency services and amongst communities devastated by bush fires has been applauded.¹⁵ There is a virtual church in our midst supported by traditional sources but creating an osmotic parish of its own that is beyond the traditional frameworks of control but evidencing a spiritual Presence that meets us wherever we are. A consultation in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory reviewing the future of Churches Together NSW.ACT, the ecumenical organization equivalent to VCC, concluded that ‘[E]cumenism has moved beyond a simple meeting of denominational structures’ suggesting that innovative ways forward will be necessary to shape a ‘receptive ecumenism’ that uses ‘social network media’ and facilitated ‘leader to leader and/or group to group relationships’ in an

¹² Sam Sterland, Ruth Powell and Keith Castle ‘Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations: 1991 to 2001. *NCLS Occasional Paper 8*. South Sydney NSW: NCLS Research, 2006, 10, 12. The study showed that 8% of the outflow was because of the decease of the attenders, another 8% was the result of changing denominational loyalty but 10% of former attenders go nowhere else.

¹³ Philip Hughes, *Shaping Australia’s spirituality. A review of Christian ministry in context*. Preston VIC: Mosaic Press, 2010, 126.

¹⁴ Sterland, Powell and Castle ‘Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations,’ 5-6.

¹⁵ For example <www.cam.org.au/recovery>, <www.salvationarmy.org.au/salvwr/_assets/main/.../bushfire-response>, <www.emergencyministry.com.au/recommendations.html>

‘ecumenical journey’ that can ‘move on from co-operation to commitment and communion, and from dialogue to phased reconciliation.’¹⁶

Conclusion

In our search to be ‘one holy, catholic apostolic church’ that is relevant to, and cares for, all of God’s created diocese, let us remember that the gospel story already carves a pathway for us to follow. In our anxiety about accommodating to difference let us remember the anxiety of the disciples of ‘little faith’ as they encountered Jesus blessing a Canaanite woman who had ‘great faith’ (Matt.15: 21-28). In our need to justify God’s preference for us let us reflect on Nicodemus who assumed he had the birthright for eternal life but was challenged by Jesus to be ‘born again’ (John 3:1-10). If we have concerns about handing over responsibility to those who are younger than us, let us remember Jesus’ affirmation of the wisdom and insight of children at a time when elders were blinded by irrelevant tradition (Matt.18:3; 21:15-16). At the same time let us listen to the wisdom of one of our oldest elders, Pope Benedict, who ‘ended the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by saying the path to unity is a moral imperative’ going on to point out the temptation of resignation and pessimism . . . is a lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷

¹⁶ Major Paul Kinder and Rev'd Paul Swadling, letter to Head of Churches *Re: Review & Transition Process Churches Together NSW.ACT*, 15 April 2011.

¹⁷ Papal homily “We are still far from that unity for which Christ prayed” at the close of the Prayer for Christian Unity Week on 25 January 2011 <www.zenit.org/article-31567?l=english> accessed 28 July 2011.