

Unintentional Receptive Ecumenism: From Ecclesial Margins to Ecumenical Exemplar – A New Zealand Case Study

DOUGLAS PRATT*

The Community Church of St John the Evangelist, situated on a relatively remote island off the east coast of New Zealand, is a unique ecumenical venture supported by the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. This paper describes and situates this venture and discusses its development and modus vivendi in light of the paradigm of receptive ecumenism. This paradigm did not feature in the thinking of those who established this ecumenical community church; nevertheless it is argued that the paradigm aptly applies, so yielding the phenomenon of an unintentional receptive ecumenism at work.

Keywords: *Ecumenism, receptive ecumenism, community church, New Zealand, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Partnership Agreement*

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s four Churches in New Zealand – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian – have shared in the provision of Christian ministry to the Community Church of St John the Evangelist, Great Barrier Island, and in partnership with the Community Church, to the wider island community. All pledged to support as ‘Partner Churches’ to this unique venture with the supply of clergy or lay ministers who, between them, cover about half the Sundays of the year. The local fellowship serves itself for the remainder. However it was only as recently as 2011, after some 25 years of operation, that the Community Church was able to formulate its own Constitution and a Partnership Agreement formally endorsed and signed by the four supporting churches. Hitherto, practical co-operative arrangements had been guided by the terms of the standard Joint Use Agreement that applies to many co-operative ventures in New Zealand which involve Anglican, Methodist and/or Presbyterian Churches. But as the situation on Great Barrier Island is unique, in that these three were joined by the Catholics who are not party to the ecumenical arrangement whence arose

* Douglas Pratt, Professor, Studies in Religion, University of Waikato, New Zealand, Adjunct Professor, Theology and Interreligious Studies, University of Bern, Switzerland. Address: Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand; Email: dpratt@waikato.ac.nz

the Joint Use Agreement protocols, and that in any case none of them had a parish as such on the island, a full standard Joint Use Agreement could never apply. Something contextually specific was needed, and eventually produced. Letter finally caught up with spirit and faith.

In this article¹ the author, since 2008 the designated Anglican part-time minister to the St John's Community Church on Great Barrier Island, presents and probes the story – both letter and spirit – of this venture from the perspective of receptive ecumenism. Was – or is – this a case of what might be called unintentional receptive ecumenism? If so, what does it contribute to our understanding of this mode of ecumenism and, indeed, to the vision and future of ecumenical Christianity?

In order to tackle these questions I shall first set the scene by way of an outline of the context – geographic, historic, and social – of Great Barrier Island and also sketch a profile of New Zealand's religious demographics, for this is also part of the wider context of Church life on the Barrier. I will then review the origins and development of this Community Church, with special reference to its Constitution, the Partner Church agreement. A discussion of receptive ecumenism as such will then follow, and will lead into an examination of the Community Church as a putative example of receptive ecumenism. I end with some closing observations and reflections.

Context: Remote Island, Hardy People, Hidden Paradise

Off the East Coast of New Zealand, some 100 or so kilometres north-east of the North Island city of Auckland, there lies Great Barrier Island which, at times utterly inaccessible, is in fair weather only 25-30 minutes by plane, but still some four hours and more by vehicular ferry from the mainland. It is the fifth largest in the New Zealand cluster of six principal inhabited islands: North, South, Stewart (off the southern coast of the South Island), the Chatham Islands group (some 680 km southeast of the South Island), Great Barrier, and Waiheke (effectively, today, an off-shore

¹ This paper has been developed from a presentation entitled 'From Ecclesial Margins to Ecumenical Exemplar: An Unintentional Case of Receptive Ecumenism' given at the third international receptive ecumenism conference, *Receptive Ecumenism in International Perspective: Contextual Ecclesial Learning*, held at Fairfield University, Connecticut, USA, 9-12 June, 2014. I am grateful to the Anglican Church in New Zealand for financial assistance enabling me to attend the conference, and to Archbishop Sir David Moxon, Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome for appointing me for a brief period as a Scholar in Residence in October 2014 thus providing the necessary time and space to complete the task of writing up a full draft. I am grateful also to Margaret Stewart, resident of Great Barrier Island and stalwart member of the Community Church, for feedback on that draft so enabling this final version. Any errors or omissions remain entirely my own.

suburb of Auckland, easily accessible by ferry for daily commuters). Ever at the margins, often regarded as quaintly 'other', life on Great Barrier Island is sustained to a large extent by tourist income and local productive ventures, many of them in the field of arts and crafts – painting, photography, sculpting, wood-turning and so on – supplemented by welfare benefits. As well, there is a range of income sources and salaried jobs that contribute to the island's economy including farming, police, schools, Department of Conservation (a large area of the island is within the estate of this government department), Council, medical, retail, hospitality; and there are the builders, plumbers, electricians, property maintenance people and so forth, along with a good proportion of retired and a number of self-employed whose occupations are undertaken via the internet. The Barrier has ever been a mecca for recreational boating, fishing, camping and holidaying. The environment is spectacular with wide sweeping Pacific beaches on the east coast and deep coastal coves on the sheltered western side; thick bush-clad mountains and winding streams; even a thermal pool or two. It is a tramping and camping paradise which, ironically, too few of the country's population even register exists on their doorstep.

The island's fortunes and population have ebbed and flowed since early 19th century European settlement. The current population of around 800 is scattered across 285 square kilometres (110 square miles). In summer, the population can swell to several thousand. There are now many holiday residences and in the off-season some areas have a sense of ghost-town abandonment. Elsewhere residents hunker down for winter, occupied by a schedule of activities such as local Art Gallery workshops, for instance, unless they are able to get away for their own holiday break. For some, money not made in the summer months means a lean time in winter; for others, a respite from the privations of winter is warmly welcomed. Sufficiency of supply can become an issue at times, especially if planes cannot land and the supplying ferry is tied up at Auckland harbour, locked in by bad weather. Indeed, geographically Great Barrier Island protects Auckland city from the worst the Pacific Ocean can throw at it as, quite literally, it provides a barrier between the Pacific Ocean's swells and the Hauraki Gulf – the vast maritime entrance to the harbour of Auckland city, home to over a million of the country's total population.

Preceded by a long-standing Maori community, it was in the early decades of the nineteenth century that European settlers made Great Barrier their home. Felling and milling native kauri and other timbers to supply the wants and needs of sailing vessels, and for the provision of building material for a growing Auckland, were among the earlier economic opportunities to

attract settlers, together with digging for the gum of the kauri which was used in the production, for example, of varnish and linoleum. Then came farming, both to support local life and also, again, victuals to Auckland – including a brisk trade in locally produced honey, which continues to be something of a boutique industry, even if somewhat diminished from its heyday. Gold and silver mining were both also prominent for a while in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For a time, too, the milling of kanuka and manuka, also known as tea-tree – both being local, hard, slow-burning and good heat-producing woods to warm Auckland's colonial homes during winter – was a good earner, even into the early decades of the twentieth century. And, given the island's maritime location, whaling and commercial fishing were two productive industries that lasted well into the twentieth century.

However, in the past few decades rising costs of transportation, together with technological and political changes, have seen the demise of much the island's industrial activities. For many residents life on the Barrier is as tough and economically hard as it is delightfully isolated and a relatively pristine beautiful environment in which to live. Whilst for some a reasonable living can be had, especially if in full employment, for others subsistence is more the order of the day. Hard times juxtapose with good times. Pioneering values continue to shape the people even as they are also imprinted onto the landscape. Unless you have caught it yourself, or been given it by someone you know, the plentiful supply of fish from which one might expect to enjoy a meal – if you are eating at one of the island's few restaurants, for instance – will in fact have been brought – chilled, possibly even frozen – to the island from the mainland. Public health regulations means local food businesses cannot purchase locally caught fresh fish. The consumption of this form of local produce can only be by dint of private, non-commercial, fishing activity. In other words, in many respects, life on the island is heavily constrained by contemporary rule and regulation. The sense of freedom remains, but it is more and more curtailed by modern governance policy and bureaucratic machinery. Attitudes to institutional structures can be rather ambivalent.

It is into this context that, in the mid-1980s, a new development of Christian Church appeared and found a way of taking root. Previously, ever since European settlement in the 19th century, various forms and expressions of Church presence had come and gone, and in the mid-20th century a Christian settlement and camp-site, Orama, had developed in the north of the island and continues to flourish. But with respect to the main Church denominations which had a link to the island in some form, but for which none could reasonably view the island as the likely location for a parish as such, a way forward together had emerged. Not by reproducing on Great

Barrier Island the forms and structures of denominational institutional life found elsewhere in the country, but by experimenting – arguably quite successfully – with a form of ecumenical existence that, by any standards, is unique. But before getting to that story, we need to be acquainted with the broader religious scene that obtains today in 21st century New Zealand.

Religious Diversity in New Zealand: Demographics of Change

The recent (2013) census of the New Zealand population produced some surprising facts and figures. Compared to the 1906 census when almost 93% of the population of slightly less than one million was recorded as Christian, now only 45.1% of the population of some 4.2 million so identify themselves.² In one hundred years the raw number of Christians more than doubled, from approximately 881,000 to about 1,913,000. However, as a proportion of the total populace the Christian bloc in fact halved overall. But perhaps what is more significant in terms of comparison is that about halfway between these two reference points, in 1956, out of a population of 2,174,062 there were about 1,906,650 Christians (87.7%). Thus, in the past half century or so, total numbers have barely increased but the demographic proportion has declined dramatically. In fact, as indicated below, the absolute numbers peaked after 1956 and have since been in significant decline in recent times. What has contributed to these changes? Basically, two things – and these are found elsewhere in secular western societies – namely an increase in religiously diverse populations as a result of migration, and to a lesser extent, conversion; and an increase in the numbers who eschew any particular religious identity. More people are less religious.

With respect to diversity, in 1906 some 4,768 persons (c. 0.5%) in total in New Zealand were recorded as belonging to a religion other than Christianity; in 1956 it was 6,612 (c. 0.3% – a proportionate decline); and in 2013 the figure had risen to 245,223 (5.98%). Clearly, at almost 6%, religious diversity as such is not a major demographic factor, yet in terms of relative changes it does reflect significant demographic shifts and developments that have taken place over recent decades. A greater diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and also religions, have come to our shores. For example, whereas Zoroastrians went from only 4 persons in 1956 to 972 in 2013, Buddhists leapt from 111 to 58,404 in the same period and Sikhs more modestly, but no less dramatically, from 133 to 19,191. Even more dramatically, numeri-

² The census data has been comparatively analysed by Todd Nachowitz, PhD candidate in the Political Science and Public Policy programme of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Waikato. I am grateful to Todd for allowing me free access to, and use of, his material.

cally speaking, Hindus went from about 1600 to around 90,000. Muslims increased from 200 to some 46,000 or so, and the number of Jews nearly doubled – from some 3800 to about 6860. But in 2013 two new categories were included: Spiritualism/New Age (18,285) and Maori religion (2,595). Maori Christianity as such was included in the general Christian figures. It is evident that religion is diversifying. But arguably such diversity was not the main factor contributing to the decline of the proportional share of Christianity. That is more directly attributed to the dramatic rise in the population of persons recording as having no religion which, in half a century, has moved from less than 1% of the population to over 38% (1906 = 1,709; 1956 = 12,651; 2013 = 1,635,345). Add to that the two long-standing census categories on religion, ‘Object to answering’ and ‘Not stated’ (combined figures: 1906 = 2.8%; 1956 = 8.8%; 2013 = 12.3%) and the proportion of the population abjuring any religious identity is today sitting on 50%. So, in broad terms, we might say roughly half the population is religious, and half not. But if the half that is religious in terms of the census were fully active and engaged in the life of faith, religious leaders would be rejoicing.

In point of fact census religious identity is not reflected in the lived reality of life-of-faith behaviours, and that has been a sociological fact for a long time. Nevertheless, the chief conclusion drawn from this cursory examination of demographic changes vis-à-vis religion is that New Zealand can be said to lead the world in terms of secularism – here understood *qua* its popular usage as denoting non- or irreligion, and not in its strict sociological sense of referencing social acceptance and political accommodation of religious diversity, and an accompanying socio-political polity of equal allowance and treatment before the law. New Zealand is officially secular in this latter sense, but popular discourse belies a tendency to regard a secular society as one where religion is at least absent from the public domain, if not from society absolutely. Pundits of this form of ideological secularism trumpet the decline of Christianity as a triumph for rational humanism; often hopefully assuming the end of religion is nigh. They can be puzzled by, or blind to – or in some cases fearful of – the rise of other religions. But that is another matter.

For our purposes it is sufficient to outline the religious profile of New Zealand society so as to provide a wider context and backdrop for understanding and appreciating the particular ecumenical development that took place on Great Barrier Island, and so also the prospect for receptive ecumenism not only there but within the wider New Zealand context. But before proceeding further, we need to look a little closer at the recent shifts in the demographics of the four churches involved in the Barrier’s ecumenical venture.

As noted above, measured by recent census results, it is clear the total number of Christians has been in decline in recent years. Census 2006 recorded nearly 2.1 million Christians; the 2013 census showed there were 1.9 million. But there are even more dramatic shifts with respect to denominational results. Anglicans, for many years the undisputed leader in the Christian stakes, recorded a 17.1% decline (c.555,000 in 2006; c.460,000 in 2013) which also means it is now in second place behind the also declining Catholic population (c.508,000 in 2006; c.492,000 in 2013). Historic Christian denominations are all declining numerically. Presbyterians have dropped some 17.5% (from around 401,000 in 2006 down to some 330,000 in 2013) and Methodists by 15.5% (from c.122,000 to c.103,000). In such a context the historic churches are faced with considerable practical challenges, not the least of which is the maintenance of institutional life and the provision of ordained ministry. As a microcosm of wider New Zealand society, and reflecting a penchant for 'doing things differently' the Christian folk of Great Barrier island, who over the years had tried to provide denominational coverage of one sort or another, came to the point of recognition that they could do better together than which is at best a struggle to do apart, and they could do it creatively and differently.

The Community Church: Background and History

Like any small rural community, but with some distinctive differences, a community such as exists on Great Barrier Island has its fair share of stress, crises and needs, both personal and communal. And there are many occasions of cooperative togetherness, shared celebration, and sheer community good fun. The Church has a presence and a diaconal ministry to offer into all such situations. And in the context of the Barrier, the role of the ecumenical church is significant both in what it does – supporting social service by involvement in the food bank, for example – and in what it does not do: by not repeating the divisive denominational structures of the mainland communities. As the preamble to the Partnership Agreement states:

The Community Church of St John the Evangelist, Great Barrier Island (hereinafter, St John's Community Church) is a unique ecumenical venture that holds together Christians of diverse denominational backgrounds and memberships within a fellowship that formally represents four mainline Christian traditions supported by the appropriate regional Courts and Authorities of these four Partner Churches.³

³ Clause 1.1, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*. The Community Church of St John the Evangelist, Great Barrier Island 2011.

So, who are these church partners and how did this venture come about? When the four churches – the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian – came together in support of a community church on the Island during the 1980s there had been a legacy of varying attempts to provide for Christian worship; indeed, in one form or another, Christian worship had taken place on the Island for over one hundred years. But no one church could sustain a ministry presence let alone any Church building and allied infrastructure. However, a Methodist family, the Medlands, in the early 1960s donated some coastal land at Medlands Beach, named after their pioneering forebear. The land has ever since been held in trust by the Pitt Street Methodist Church Trustees, Auckland. Two decades later an upper-North Island Anglican congregation donated its redundant wooden church building which was duly shipped by barge and dragged ashore to the Medlands Beach site on 20th June, 1986. By this time, clergy from Churches that were to become partners had been in the habit of making occasional visits to Great Barrier Island to service the worship needs of their denominational adherents, and a variety of locations, private homes and public spaces, had been used for such purposes. Now, however, there was a delightful dedicated Church that all could use, and the challenge was to formulate an arrangement to make this an appropriately ecumenical new venture. A key individual in facilitating this was the Rev Peter Stead, a recently retired Methodist minister who nevertheless continued a part-time ministry on Waiheke Island and was used to making regular visits from there to the Medlands and other Methodist families. Furthermore, the mid-eighties were the time of immediate aftermath of the demise of national Church Union negotiations, involving Anglicans, Methodist and Presbyterians, principally. Of all the Churches, the Methodists had evinced the highest level of commitment to Church Union. An ecumenical intention for greater visible unity was still around, together with energy in some quarters to see if, despite the national failure, there could yet be a local success. Thus was born the unique ecumenical venture that became the Community Church on Great Barrier Island.

The four partner Churches, as well as the local Community Church committee, raised and contributed funds for the transportation and restoration of the donated Church building. The initial cash contribution – totalling \$17,000 – of each of the five partners to the venture is recorded in the Partnership Agreement.⁴ So it was that on 30 November 1986 the wooden former-Anglican church was re-dedicated under the name and title of ‘The Community Church of St. John the Evangelist, Great Barrier Island’, for

⁴ Clause 2.4, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

the free use for public worship and teaching by those Churches which had agreed, in conjunction with the St John's Community Church Council, to the formation and on-going support of this Church. An interesting, and at times not easy, ecumenical journey was enjoined.

Formally, the partner Churches are the Anglican Diocese of Auckland, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Auckland, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Methodist Church of New Zealand.⁵ However, in respect to the latter two churches, specific pastoral and related responsibility is vested in the local authorities, namely The Northern Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church and the Auckland Methodist Synod.⁶ At the outset all pledged to support this ecumenical venture "by way of provision of appropriate pastoral, material, spiritual and other practical support as from time to time may be negotiated between the Community Church and the Partner Churches, either together or singly".⁷ These churches have since been responsible for the supply of clergy on regular visits to the island who, between them, cover half or more Sundays of the year. The local Community Church fellowship takes care of the remainder. This means that alongside the visiting ministers there is a lively engagement of lay worship leadership. Ministry is mutual and shared.

The Constitution, which sets out the terms and references of governance, makes clear that the governing body, the Church Council, comprises three to seven elected members together with the ex officio members, namely the appointed ministers.⁸ Elections are annual, with all posts vacated at the AGM – held usually in September. Thus each Council serves for one year, even though a good proportion of its members are regularly re-elected. Co-option is allowable if the AGM does not produce seven elected members. Given that the regular core active constituency of the Church is less than 20 persons, there is a high level of continuity of those who serve multiple roles. The Partnership Agreement affirms the authority and identity of the Partner Churches whilst at the same time binding these partners to support ministry specific to the Great Barrier context. The key motifs of mutual hospitality, gracious forbearance, and pastoral sympathy are stressed. They set the context for both commitment to the Community Church as well as the exercise of ministry and engagement in the life of this Church. The Agreement thus states:

⁵ Clause 2.3, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

⁶ Clause 1.2, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

⁷ Clause 1.3, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

⁸ Clause 2.1, *Constitution*. The Community Church of St John the Evangelist, Great Barrier Island, 2011.

The purpose of the partnership is (a) to enable the exercise of the unique Christian liturgical and pastoral ministry that each Partner Church deems proper to do within the context of the co-operative partnership ... and which can be more effectively and efficiently discharged by virtue of this partnership than is practical or prudent to undertake independently of it; and (b) to support the local fellowship of St John's Community Church in its endeavours to bear an ecumenical Christian witness, and provide appropriate ministry to the Island community.⁹

The Agreement goes on to state:

While it is of the nature of St John's Community Church to function ecumenically, relying upon mutual hospitality and exercising a high measure of gracious forbearance and pastoral sympathy ... [the intention is not] ... to delimit or dilute the constitutional rights, obligations and expectations of any of the Partner Churches in respect to the exercise of ministry with and to their own members and adherents.¹⁰

Subsequent to the production of the Constitution and Partnership Agreement, the Church has produced its own Vision and Mission statement, as follows:

Our Vision

To be an ecumenical Christian community which is committed to being accepting and inclusive in its worship of God, its love for all people, and its service to the Great Barrier Island community.

Our Mission

- To provide venues and opportunities for Christian worship, teaching and fellowship
- To use our time, talents and efforts to serve others
- To be involved in the island-wide life of the community of Great Barrier
- To provide a location for spiritual contemplation
- To maintain a place of historical and cultural significance

This statement is a succinct summary of the self-identity and focus of the Great Barrier Island Community Church. The Constitution spells out some of the structural ways the mission and life of the Church is to be discharged by way of the overarching responsibility exercised by the Church Council – in particular its Life and Work, including worship, pastoral matters and social

⁹ Clause 1.4, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

¹⁰ Clause 1.5, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

service,¹¹ and matters of property and finance,¹² with recourse required to the partner Churches, especially the Anglicans and Methodists in whose trust the Church land and buildings are vested. Beyond these, the usual organisational matters are duly covered and a clause concerning disagreement, disputes and discipline is also included,¹³ as well as the mechanism for dissolution.¹⁴

The question of mutual responsibility between ministers, their respective churches and the St John's Community Church, is spelled out in the Partnership Agreement, thus:

Each of the ministers duly appointed by the Partner Churches is primarily accountable to, and is subject to the discipline and authority of, their own Church, through whatever channel of authority is applicable; and each minister is also accountable to St John's Community Church, through the Church Council and the Annual General Meeting, in respect of matters relating to the life and work of St John's Community Church and properly falling within the area of responsibility of the Church Council under the Constitution.¹⁵

And provision is made for an even wider range of worship engagement, especially given that the ministry team of the Partner Churches cannot cover all Sundays.

The Church Building may also be used for worship and teaching by other approved Christian groups which may from time to time request and be granted permission by the St John's Community Church Council, provided that nothing contrary to the Word of God is proclaimed or taught therein. St John's Community Church Council may approve use of the Church Building by other groups provided that their activities carried out are not contrary to Christian teaching and ethics.¹⁶

As with the Constitution, the Partnership Agreement spells out a number of key practical areas of the relationship, providing structure and processes, including also the dissolution of the Partnership as such, or the withdrawal of any one of the Partner Churches from it.¹⁷ Whilst such docu-

¹¹ Clause 4.1.1, *Constitution*.

¹² Clause 4.1.2, *Constitution*.

¹³ Clause 5, *Constitution*.

¹⁴ Clause 7, *Constitution*.

¹⁵ Clause 3.3, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

¹⁶ Clause 3.5.2, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

¹⁷ Clause 6, *Partnership and Joint Use (of Worship Buildings) Agreement*.

ments as these give a base-line reference, it is the on-going life of the Community Church – its evolving *lex orandi* – which gives a fuller picture than can be painted here. Suffice to say there are many instances where Church life, including liturgical practice, is modified to reflect both the fact of the ecumenical nature of the Community Church and that, at best, there have been mutual and interactive learnings at play. For example, irrespective of the denomination of the president of the Eucharist, an open table is kept, and in all cases the wine is offered in three simultaneous formats, reflecting the diverse practices with respect to whether or not fermented wine should be used, and whether or not a common cup, or individual glasses, is the method of distribution.

Rather than attempting a uniform practice, which would be an intractable if not impossible goal to achieve, the capacity to offer something like a ‘smorgasbord’ when it comes to receiving the element of wine, the blood of Christ, enables all to participate equally yet diversely in the liturgical act. All come forward and receive the one host (wafer); all take consecrated wine – irrespective of which liquid (fermented wine or wine substitute such as blackcurrant juice) and which vessel; all have been included in the ritual act. And for those for whom only the Common Cup and the consecrated bread is ontologically valid for conveying the mysterious presence of Christ, well, it is there, and they receive it. Nothing is lost in the diversity, and in the process people of different traditions learn, and come to a new appreciation of, something of another. Other examples could be adduced. The underlying point is that an interactive process of ecumenical learning and forbearance has taken place which has arguably enhanced the body of Christ in this situation. Is this not what receptive ecumenism is about? Has the Great Barrier experience been, unknowingly an exemplar of this form of ecumenism? In order to reflect on this we first need to gain some clarity as to the meaning of Receptive Ecumenism.

Marks of Receptive Ecumenism

Professor Paul Murray¹⁸, who devised the concept and coined the phrase ‘Receptive Ecumenism’, has stated that it

...represents a way of ecumenical ecclesial conversation and growth that is both remarkably simple in vision and remarkably far-reaching in potential ... receptive ecclesial learning is envisaged as operating not only in relation to such things as hymnody,

¹⁸ Paul D Murray is a Catholic lay theologian and professor in the Centre for Catholic Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, at Durham University, UK.

spirituality, and devotional practices but as extending to doctrinal self-understanding and, even more so, respective structural and organisational-cultural realities.¹⁹

South Australian ecumenist, Geraldine Hawkes, notes that receptive ecumenism is a church-life process whereby individuals involved are engaged in becoming more Christ-like through learning from each other: “The key focus for Receptive Ecumenism is what do we need to learn about being Christ-like from one another, rather than what do we have to tell the other – or even, how can the other become more like us!”²⁰ This process is marked by dispositions of love and humility. “It requires us to know – and accept – that we are each different, that we each have our own gift, our own charisma”.²¹

For Murray, the “integrity of traditions consists not merely in doing the same things in different ways and different locations but in doing, as required, genuinely fresh things in familiar or recognisably coherent ways”.²² Thus, regardless of whether a personal or a communal (or ecclesial) matter, the ecumenical challenge “requires to be lived through attentive hospitality to the truth of the other in specific circumstances”.²³ Murray urges, rather evocatively, the need “to ‘lean-into’ the promise of God’s purpose and the presence of God’s Spirit and to ask what it means in practice for us to enter into this more fully in the here and now”.²⁴ And, as Gerard Kelly points out, “ecclesial learning is a creative process. Like any good learning it will only be effective if each church takes an active part in it”.²⁵

From the foregoing we may discern marks of receptive ecumenism as follows.²⁶ It combines engagement in the concrete acts and practices that

¹⁹ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism: The Basic Idea”, unpublished paper given at the ‘Exploring the Promise and Potential of Receptive Ecumenism’ July workshop, St Spyridon Greek Orthodox Church, South Australia, 2012, p. 1.

²⁰ Geraldine Hawkes, “Receptive Ecumenism: Encounter with Beauty, Truth and Love”, unpublished annual lecture to the South Australian Council of Churches, Adelaide College of Divinity, 20 June, 2013, p. 1.

²¹ G. Hawkes, “Receptive Ecumenism: Encounter”, p. 1.

²² P. D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism: The Basic Idea”, p. 2.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²⁵ Gerard Kelly, *Recognition: Advancing Ecumenical Thinking*, New York 1996, p. 7.

²⁶ See also: David Carter, “Receptive Ecumenism – An Overview”, unpublished paper for the Society for Ecumenical Studies conference, ‘Receptive Ecumenism: The Call to Ecumenical Learning’, 2007; Gabriel Flynn, “Vatican II and the World Council of Churches: A Vision for Receptive Ecumenism or a Clash of Paradigms?”, in: *Louvain Studies* 33(1-2

constitute church life together with exercising self-understanding in relation thereto; attending appropriately to the structures of church life that will facilitate an ecumenical reality; and taking contextual cognisance of organisational-cultural realities. Thus genuinely fresh things happen; the life of the Christian community is not a matter of repetition *ad infinitum* of things past. Liturgical flexibility, adaptability and creativity are key watchwords. The receptive ecumenical context is one of attentive hospitality toward each other across denominational lines; honouring, respecting, and receiving from the truth of the other. To the extent this is a mutual reality so, in humility, there is great enrichment of both personal discipleship and community identity: those involved 'lean-into' the promise of God's purpose. There is a genuine enthusiasm for this way of being Christian and being Church which is underpinned by a lively awareness that, indeed, ecclesial learning is a creative process.

Receptive ecumenism is about Churches – or people from different Church traditions and identities – engaging in and celebrating Christian life together: “all we have already done and will continue to do together”; and re-imagining what it means to be Church in the context of unity in genuine and lived diversity; that is rethinking the “vision and disposition for our journey together in new ways”.²⁷ It is about both sharing with, and learning from, one another and, in the process, “becoming more fully who we are called to be – institutionally as well as individually”.²⁸ Hawkes' overview of Receptive Ecumenism provides us with reference points for understanding that complement both the work of Paul Murray,²⁹ and of fellow Catholic ecumenist Gerald Kelly (1996, 2010),³⁰ among others.

In essence receptive ecumenism, I suggest, is a process of ecclesial openness and willingness to be critically self-reflective so that, in humility, one can learn from the other. The focus is on what can be mutually and complementarily received as helpful, enriching, and contributive to a wider vi-

/2008), pp. 6-29; Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London 2009; Kallistos Ware, “Receptive Ecumenism – an Orthodox Perspective”, in: *Louvain Studies* 33 (1-2/2008), pp. 46-53.

²⁷ G. Hawkes, “Receptive Ecumenism: Encounter”, p. 10.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

²⁹ See: Paul D. Murray (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, Oxford 2008); idem, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning Receiving Gifts for Our Needs”, in: *Louvain Studies* 33 (1-2/2008), pp. 30-45; idem, “Receptive Ecumenism: The Basic Idea”.

³⁰ See: G. Kelly, “A New Ecumenical Wave”, unpublished Lecture, National Council of Churches Forum, Canberra 12 July, 2010; idem, *Recognition: Advancing Ecumenical Thinking*, New York 1996.

sion of what it means to be 'Church' ecumenically; as opposed to the context of ecumenism being regarded as a process of negotiating an organic/institutional unity of structure. For this predisposes participants towards sensitivity to what might be 'lost' vis-à-vis the outcome, and so therefore what needs to be preserved. This is the ecumenism of unification, the assumption that the driving motive – "that we may all be one" – necessitated a singular result: a singular Church Institution. The result is that ecumenical venturing reduces to the art of subtle ecclesial seduction: enticing the 'other' to join with or 'return to' me such that the ecumenical goal is, in effect, equated with 'my' ecclesial identity. Thus ecumenical engagement has tended to reduce to being an often fraught process of ecclesial posturing and negotiation in order that, in the end, achieving the goal requires little, if any, real change in either doctrinal self-definition or practical ecclesial identity on the part of those engaged. As a consequence, church union, the organic goal of the ecumenical movement, has seen very little real success.

Receptive Ecumenism, however, offers a more dynamic approach: 'oneness' is the gracious gift of encompassing fellowship; a genuine 'unity in diversity' and 'diversity held together in unity' that allows for both continuing plurality of ecclesial identity and structure as well as a necessary on-going dialogical engagement as the vehicle for this dynamic unity. When ecumenical dialogue and relationship ceases, there is no more dynamic, so no more dynamic unity: *ergo*, no ecumenism. The greater purpose of ecumenical dialogue, I contend, is not to negotiate a compromise position vis-à-vis an institutional outcome and so achieve an imagined goal of static singularity (One Church); it is rather to be engaged in the perennial task of ever seeking to fulfil, together, the call of *Missio Dei*; to be Christ to, and servant of, one another; and together, in dynamic interrelationship, be Christ to, and servant of, a world in need. Thus, in consequence of mutual reception – wherein the Spirit guides and inspires in and through the variety of gift (charism) that is found richly in and through the very diversity of Christian identity and ecclesial arrangement – are the churches able, in the togetherness and tension of dynamic unity, to be truly the Church in the world?

Unintentional Receptive Ecumenism: Great Barrier Island Community Church

In light of the foregoing, I turn now to consider the Great Barrier Island Community Church venture as a case of receptive ecumenism, albeit perhaps unintentionally so. What does it contribute to our understanding of this mode of ecumenism and, indeed, to the vision and future of ecumenical Christianity? The structure whereby the practical and administrative dimen-

sions of the Church's life have been discharged is by way of small work-group teams. These allow for the diversity of gift, capacity and interest to be utilised complementarily, and in turn this has both enabled the small core group to manage its affairs reasonably efficiently. Indeed, there is most usually a measure of overlap of personnel; people are often on more than one team, but no-one usually exercises more than one team leadership role. However, and perhaps more significantly, especially from an ecumenical perspective, individuals of different denominational orientation and background have been enabled to work together: Catholic and Presbyterian collude closely without any sense of ecclesial distinction, for example. The local venture – the Church in this place – overrides difference and at the same time necessitates a climate of mutual interaction. The local ecclesial culture is one of contributing from one's own ethos, yet hearing and taking on board the viewpoint of another so as, together, to discern what is right and proper to the local context and task. In reality, this community church has been, in the words of Hawke cited above: "becoming more fully who we are called to be – institutionally as well as individually" by virtue of an exercise, albeit implicitly, of receptive ecumenism.

I have already touched on the matter of liturgical adaptation with respect to sacramental administration. Other aspects of church life and practice have also benefitted from the give-and-take of ecclesial mutuality. For example, when conducting an Anglican Eucharist, one needs to be aware not only of the formal ecumenical context of the four denominations present, but also that, in the nature of a community church, there are those who have come from other Christian contexts, most often of the protestant variety, for whom a formal liturgical structure is quite alien. Whereas in a denominational parochial context the expectation would be that such a person who so joins in worship regularly would, in time, be socialised into the liturgical forms of worship, in the context of a community church where there is a climate of both receiving from another tradition, but also accommodating the other as appropriate, then concessions and modifications to the manner in which a liturgy is performed are inevitably and properly made. To be sure, with respect to Anglican Eucharistic worship, the result is cast in in a low-Church mode rather than in a high Church, or Anglo-Catholic, mode. But in this context not even the Catholic Mass would ever include incense, let alone bells. Yet all accept candles at the altar. Compromise occurs, but at the same time the regular congregants are deeply appreciative of the fact they are exposed to, and receive from, such a variety of Christian liturgical traditions and input. The feeling they have expressed is that they enjoy the richest of worship life because of the diversity of worship leadership and preaching; yet all is held

together in a climate of mutual receptivity and respect. The outcome is to clearly register the mark of being both familiar yet fresh, together with that of 'attentive hospitality'. In a very real sense, the experience of the Community Church is one of 'leaning into' an ecumenical way of being; denominational identities are present, but not in the mode of an institutional balancing exercise but rather as guiding resource and contributing element from which all learn and are enriched. Thus, being the Community Church on Great Barrier Island is very much a matter of being within a creative ecclesial process.

This process involves an uptake of ecumenical learning-from-partner (reception) in openness to an ecclesial outcome (the Community Church in its own being and becoming). This contrasts with any denominational hegemonic posturing that would imply an attempt at pre-determining the ecclesial outcome. There is no end-goal as such; being the church in the mode of receptive ecumenism is the point. It is the way of being Church in which openness to the gift of the Spirit is mediated in and through that which each receives from the otherness of the other. And a further mark of receptive ecumenism may be discerned in terms of context, that is, in responding to and taking deep cognisance of the concrete situation of the Church in our time: the *Sitz-im-Leben* of mission; in this case the context of Great Barrier Island itself. But, whatever the context, the Church's authentic life is nothing if not mission oriented. It is not a club of the pious. It is the gathering of seekers and disciples concerned for the mission of God in the world of today. The inclusive life of the Church Catholic is that oikumenal/ecumenical fullness which is based on the receptive interweaving of ecclesial gift in order to advance the *Missio Dei*; it is for the sake of a world ever in urgent need of justice and redemption, not for the satisfaction of administrative arrangement premised on lowest common denominator. And the mark of catholicity is important. A Community Church risks being so locally focussed that it could easily drift from connectedness to the Church Catholic. By being in an ecclesial context of partnership in ministry, and with that, in reality, a context of receptive ecumenism vis-à-vis the outworking of the partnership, the Church is seen to manifest, and experiences its own life, not in terms of a static ecclesial category but as an inclusive dynamic: the body of Christ is a living body, not a mummified corpse.

Conclusion

Receptive Ecumenism is itself a dynamic. It is not some 'thing'. It names a process, an orientation. It is not a route to a monistic goal of organic union, but an expression of interactive interplay of diverse ecclesial identities and intentions, where no one party predetermines the shape of the final

goal. It is an example of ‘realising’, rather than a realised, eschaton: ultimate destiny is in the way of being, not in a final resting point. Receptive ecumenism is relational and existential. Thus the focus is not on static finality but a living relational reality for co-operation, partnership, creativity and gracious forbearance in a climate of mutual hospitality which enables a dynamic ecclesial interrelationship to be manifest: Unity in God the Father is the horizon for diverse encounter with God the Spirit and manifold inspirational apprehension of God the Son. Mutual learning and acceptance is the *modus vivendi*: being minister, priest and servant to each other. Identity affirmation and deepening is the existential outcome: both personal (we are all equally Christian, and differently so) and corporate (the strength of unity in Christ found and manifest through the mutual reception of our diversities).

Furthermore, I suggest, Receptive Ecumenism is narrative-extending. That is to say, the multi-layered Christian narrative that shapes ecclesial identity of both faith communities and their individual members is enhanced within the context of concrete ecumenical engagement, so enhancing identity and deepening the sense Christian belonging: ‘whose we are and whom we serve’. It is grounded and innovative, reflecting the best of the concept of a ‘living tradition’. And it is marked clearly by reciprocal authority: no one partner can dominate, but where practical or other circumstance calls for a lead from one, this is offset by a reciprocating action of leadership by the other, complementing and extending the leadership of both.

Despite its distinctiveness and veritable ‘otherness’, the experience of the Christian community of Great Barrier Island is that of a microcosm of the wider history of the Church, including a schism when, in the early years, a group broke away and formed a separate Sunday evening fellowship. This has only recently (in 2014) folded, with some remaining members re-joining the regular morning congregation. But there is also a measure of symbolic, as well as material, significance in that the financial asset of the schismatic group (a modest cash sum) was bequeathed to the Community Church in support of its ministry and mission. And I suspect this is in no small measure due to the fact that, despite dissension born of a combination of ideology (some thought the Community Church too much beholden to the denominational partners) and inter-personal clash (an island is rather like a village, with benefits of community cohesion on the one hand, and draw-backs of personality clashes on the other), a link between the two had always been maintained. Gracious forbearance was exercised in the face of dogmatic dissent, and grace, in the end, triumphs.

In summary, the Great Barrier Island Community Church comprises, and at times feels the tension of, a wider denominational diversity beyond

even that of the four constitutive partner churches. Yet the experience of this Church offers both conceptual insight and concrete exemplar of the dynamic reality of receptive ecumenism, especially with respect to the very practical realities of decision making and accountability processes, the relation of the local to the universal Church, the mutual exercise and acceptance of various styles of ministry – ordained and lay, including that of women – as together constitutive of the serving and supporting ministry team. In many respects, the receptive ecumenical experience of the Great Barrier Island Community Church may be regarded as contributing a model informing the ecumenical quest in the tasks of resolving pragmatic issues and transcending dogmatic divides.