

RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM

A RESPONSE

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I respond positively to “receptive ecumenism” as described by Denis Edwards and by the Durham University Department of Theology and Religion. I am particularly enthusiastic about the contention that the church universal exists in and from the communion of the Trinity – that we are called to be a living witness to difference well-lived, which is at the very heart of our Trinitarian God. If we can’t or won’t live congruently with the unity and diversity of the community of the Trinity, what is the point of our continuing existence or our claim to be “church”?

What would or does being “a living witness to difference well-lived” look like in practice? I belong to three groups in the church that I believe to some extent embody this living witness – the Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches in South Australia, the South Australian Council of Churches and the Uniting Church in South Australia. In these three bodies I experience the celebration of difference or diversity, growth in mutual understanding, and the process of working through the issues and conflicts that arise from our diversity. The Uniting Church Synod in SA changed its structure about four years ago to networks of congregations with theological values, ethics, and views of the church that vary across a wide spectrum, in order to remain in unity despite that diversity. And that has not been easy! The question remains for us of how much diversity and difference can we allow or tolerate within one denomination? And that is a common question for all denominations around the world, as we all know. What can we learn from each other about how to truly celebrate difference?

If we are to walk the way of conversion to receptive ecumenism, what ecumenical ethic and strategy will enable us to live between the “now” and the “not yet” of God’s will for the church and the world – our hope that the Realm of God will be a reality, sustaining us to see the signs that the Spirit is working now in our time towards that vision, and that we can and are part of that movement? One example is the way the RC UC Dialogue group has worked for about two years on developing a resource that might help congregations across the two denominations to discover and name the practical ways of working together in our current crisis of insufficient ordained leadership. We learned that we had in common our understanding that our baptism initiated us into ministry, and that our belief in our Trinitarian God gave us the model of being a living witness to difference, well-lived.

When we set a priority of learning with integrity from our Others, we can make amazing discoveries. Our discovery that we shared a common belief about baptism means we have a common understanding that we are all engaged in ministry, lay and ordained, in our congregations and in the world. So we

looked for places where these two denominations were already or could in future be sharing in leadership and leadership development.

Having studied how the Uniting Church in Australia has faced up to deep conflict around the issue of sexuality, and how our exercise of power relates to our understandings of God and of what it means to be church, I dared to conclude that our conflict will continue while the differing parties do not or refuse to engage in dialogue. We can more effectively learn from our Others if we dialogue together. Further more, that dialogue can only be effective if we exercise our power in ways that embody grace (as of Jesus Christ), a spirit of shalom, compassion for and non-victimisation of the Other, and work for restorative justice. These four characteristics of synergistic power, working between and among us as a community of faith, need to underpin our processes of receptive ecumenism, I believe.

What are the sticking points that might work against our engagement in receptive ecumenism?

- For some, one might be our differing emphases on our worship practices – for example the centrality of the Eucharist or of the proclamation of the Word. Can it be a “both/and” rather than an “either/or”?
- For some, the organisational structures that are so different across denominations might be the barrier.
- For yet others, our focus on ourselves as individuals, on our congregations to the exclusion of and in competition with others, might be the dilemma.
- For others our cultural view that we are right and others are wrong will be the hurdle.
- For all of us perhaps, our polity – the way we make decisions- will hamper us, because of its complexity within our differing structures.

In the Uniting Church we make decisions by consensus, and have found that this enables us to be more consistent in practice with our model of church as interrelated councils, as a pilgrim people of God on the way to the promised goal of the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation. Though, we still struggle to resist the temptation to take the win/lose approach of voting because we want a quick decision. You may know that the World Council of Churches at its last General Meeting in South America moved to use the consensus approach in their decision-making. The response of the Orthodox members was that this was the first time they had felt they fully participated in the WCC decisions. Consensus procedures brought about more effective ecumenism.

I believe we all, all branches of the church catholic and universal, need to intentionally analyse our structures and decision-making processes to see how these compare with that difference and unity that is at the communal heart of God, and see what changes we can make towards living in the image of God. What difference would this then make to the way we embody this image in our communications of the Gospel in action, separately and together?

Finally, I want to say that I have great hope and optimism about the churches engaging in receptive ecumenism, because I experience the seeds of this process in the ecumenical groups, both formal and informal, in this state. The way the SACC and HCCC have examined their own lives over the past few years, and made changes to their ways of working together are good examples of the flourishing of these seeds of hope and the work of the Spirit in our midst. I trust we will continue on this journey together, open to God's future for us, towards the time when we will be one, and also celebrating our difference as a model for God's world.

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