

OUTLINE OF PAPER FOR REIV CONFERENCE

TITLE: Receptive Ecumenism in practice: South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches.

In this paper, The South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (SADRCUC) reports on their activities 2014-7, studying documents about Receptive Ecumenism as our major focus, so that we could discover ways we could encourage congregations to engage in receptive learning. We developed a statement and a diagram and encouraged two pairs of local congregations (RC AND UCA) to work together as action research on RE. We report on the outcomes of this work. We also studied the World Council of Churches (WCC) document "The Church: Towards a Common Vision", in order to discern where an understanding of RE could enrich this resource for member churches and sent our response to WCC Faith and Order Commission. The workshop reports on the contrasts between the work of RE in a rural and central capital city, together with a resource leaflet describing our theoretical and practical ideas for use in congregations seeking to discern the gifts brought by each other.

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Introduction

The South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches (SADRCUC) has existed for more than 25 years. It is the only bi-lateral dialogue at a state level in this nation, and has produced documents in the past on our common approach to the Bible, prayer, and lay leadership in the two denominations.

When Professor Paul Murray visited South Australia at the invitation of the South Australian Council of Churches (SACC) in 2004 (?), this Dialogue joined with South Australian members of National bi-lateral Dialogues in conversation with Paul Murray focused on Receptive Ecumenism (RE), and its implications for the work of dialogue groups. Members of this particular Dialogue, participated in several of the workshops conducted during his visit, and one member has been involved on the planning group for this visit.

Challenged by these experiences, the Dialogue decided to investigate RE in depth, with a view to discerning how we could resource our Congregations to understand RE and to engage in Receptive Learning (RL). We believed we could add to the many resources on RE made available through the SACC web site dedicated to this topic, rather than overlapping with their work.

The work of the Dialogue

(a) Study of Receptive Ecumenism

In order to focus on this theme, we first spent a one-day meeting engaging in the RL process. Members prepared for the meeting by reading three Roman Catholic documents describing the ecclesiology of that denomination and two documents dealing with the ecclesiology of the denominations that gave rise to and joined together in the Uniting Church in Australia (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational). The whole group divided into denominational groups to study the documents from the other denomination's background, in order to discern the gifts each tradition brought to our relationship. The whole group then convened, and listened to the others' identification of their gifts. This was quite an emotional experience! All of the "gifts" were recorded in the minutes of the day.

Following this meeting, we spent several meetings analysing the points we had made, grouping them into themes, and asked a small task group to develop a brief statement about Receptive Ecumenism

that we could share with Congregations. At the full day meeting the next year, we evaluated this proposed statement, revised it, and then worked to identify the processes and strategies that would enable a congregation to have an ecumenical approach in its congregation. The resulting statement, diagram, and explanation are attached to this paper.

Along with this practical action, the Dialogue focused on the World Council of Churches document, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision", to identify where RE fitted or not in this important statement. The group spent 1 ½ years studying the paper, chapter by chapter, discussing the statements and noting where RE was pre-figured or could contribute. Individual members drafted summary responses to these chapters, and these were again discussed by the whole group. Revisions were then made and a final edit undertaken by the two co-chairpersons. At the end of 2016, we submitted our response paper to the World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission as a response to their document.

(b) Case studies of Ecumenical Learning

At the same time as we were doing this more theoretical work, we decided to engage in some action research to help us identify what would help a bi-lateral dialogue to occur between pairs of congregations of our two denominations. One of our members was the representative of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Port Pirie, a rural industrial/agricultural city 250 kilometres from Adelaide. She undertook to talk with the Uniting Church Minister in that city about how they might engage in receptive ecumenism. Our two co-convenors offered to work with the two City churches (Pilgrim Uniting Church, and St Xavier's Cathedral) around possible engagement in RE. One co-convenor is a member of the UCA congregation and on its Church Council. We aimed to produce the stories of these two case studies for sharing as a resource for congregations.

In the meantime, the Port Pirie partnership gathered momentum, fully supported by the Bishop. The two congregations established a planning team to organise a "Dinner of Light" at the Lighthouse Uniting Church, for 50 members of each congregation, with outside caterers, so that people could fully participate in the event. They invited Ms Geraldine Hawkes, Facilitator of SACC, to address them on the theme of Receptive Ecumenism. The reports of this event were wildly enthusiastic, including how the two groups of people were engaging in conversation as they met going about their affairs around the city. Relationships had been enhanced. At the request of the congregations, the following year another dinner was organised in the same venue for 75 from each congregation, catered for by the Uniting Church, and served/waited by the Roman Catholic younger members. The two co-chairpersons of the SADRCUC were invited to be the speakers for the occasion. One of these participants was overcome by the emotional responses of people of a number of denominations (some had come with partners of the members of the congregations) who told stories of how their whole lives they had waited for this moment of knowing we are one body in Christ! Rumour has it that there will be another dinner this year, and that these two denominations and others in the city have joined together in their work with youth. So the relationship building activities, along with ecumenical learning, have brought about ecumenical action. (This case study is reported in more detail in the report from the Ecumenical Relationships Committee of the Synod of South Australia).

At the city end the story has been different, as it will be in any combination of congregations. The Uniting Church Congregation worships in three services on Sundays and two during the week, while the Cathedral worships in seven services on a Sunday with more than one of a different culture and language. We began with a meeting between key leaders in each church, over afternoon tea, to discuss how we might get to know one another better. The two already worked together in Palm Sunday outdoor service and march, and shared choirs singing mass in both churches over the years. After two such meetings, the group decided that we should endeavour to bring together the Congregation Council of each, by organising a meal in the Cathedral facilities. Then events began to

intervene. The Cathedral decided to restructure its council so that it more clearly focused on the work of the whole Congregation, so personnel began to change; the Cathedral church had to be restored to its original state, and services were transferred elsewhere while it was covered in scaffolding; the Archbishop had to take leave of absence for personal reasons; the Uniting Church suddenly found itself with a Chinese (SA) Christian Congregation needing space to worship when they had been “turfed out” of their home of 12 years, due to a redevelopment of that site, with all the negotiations that entailed so that the two could work in partnership, not just as landlord and tenant. So RE negotiations lapsed due to these other demands. To date, we have not been able to resume this case study. However, it teaches us a thing or two. Both congregations were locations for the 70th Birthday Pilgrimage of the SACC earlier this year, a moving experience. The UCA people who catered for the morning tea and served the 70 participants were enthused by this experience, and what they learned by walking from church to church and learning a little more about the people of those places as well as of the work of the SACC.

Reflections

The Dialogue Group has benefited greatly from the study of RE and engaging in RL. We deepened our already deep relationships and trust of each other. We have been inspired to learn more about each other’s ecclesiology and practices. We are yet to produce the resources we planned, though with a new Web page and web master this is in the program for the following months.

The Case Studies demonstrate the different difficulty levels of engaging in relationships building events across central city and rural city congregations. In the rural city, people live, work and socialise together around community events, so they are on “nodding terms” with each other, as it were. Distance-wise it is easier to get people together after hours to have a meal together. Even though central city congregations are closely located, in this case one block apart, both facing the same central city square, their congregations come from widely disbursed suburban homes in the main, and don’t meet apart from at church and organised meetings of committees. The governance structure of each is different, for example the Catholic Cathedral worshipping groups are part of a parish of nine congregations scattered across the city of Adelaide, while the Uniting Church Congregation operates independently of other Uniting Churches in the city area. There is no parish structure. The Appropriate groups to call together as key people who can organise an ecumenical event differ in each location.

Both case studies demonstrate the individuality of the task of endeavouring to work together across denominations. These difficulties are also exacerbated by the increasing tendency of all urban/city congregations of all denominations to be inward looking, because the threats they perceive to their lives e.g ageing congregations, a society that regards them as irrelevant, difficulties in communicating with their local communities, and the negative images of the Church generally in the media, especially in the context of national investigations into child abuse in the Christian Churches and reports of the prevalence of domestic violence in some denominations. There is a feeling of being ‘be-leaguered’ as it were, so groups move into caring for themselves and resisting sharing their successes with their “rivals” in the competition for attendance at services.

This broader context means that we as a Dialogue desiring to see congregations fully appreciate that we are all part of the Church universal, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, and not isolated islands with no connection, are feeling at the same time depressed and yet with hope, given the cameos of ecumenical learning and action in this state, reported in other papers.

We remain committed to the RE process, and with a largely changed membership of the committee, we embark on a new process of learning of the gifts we can share, as we study documents from each denomination, focused on foundational statements about ecumenism.

REFERENCE:

World Council of churches 2014 *The Church Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Commission, Geneva.

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ATTACHMENTS

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ROMAN CATHOLIC UNITING CHURCH DIALOGUE

DRAFT STATEMENT SUMMARISING ONE DAY MEETING DISCUSSION

RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM depends on and arises from the following **conditions**:

- collegiality and communion
- inclusive dialogue
- receptive learning
- ongoing conversion to a redefined "family" of God

between congregations and traditions, enabled, enhanced, facilitated and accompanied by the **skills** of

- open listening
- respectful recognition
- pastoral respect, and
- shared transparency.

These processes, skills and attitudes, together with a comprehensive *sensus fidelium*, (sense of people's faith), lead to new directions for the Church Universal and Ecumenical.

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DIAGRAM: ECUMENICAL LEARNING



New Directions for the Church Universal and Ecumenical

