

**A Tale of Mountain-climbing and an Elephant in the Living Room:
The third phase of the ecumenical movement.
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by Trish Madigan op

The ecumenical movement took shape from the early years of the twentieth century as a movement to restore visible church unity for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

May they become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:23).

Renewal of the structures and practices of church life is an integral part of the ecumenical agenda. As churches which have been estranged, often for centuries, reconnect they rediscover forgotten elements of their Christian tradition. Like family members who have returned with their acquisitions after a long trip away, they now reassess the value of much of the cultural baggage which they accumulated over that time, in order to shed what is no longer necessary or helpful and to begin to establish fresh relationships in a new situation. As the Vatican II *Decree on Ecumenism* reminds us:

All are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ's will for the church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigour the task of renewal and reform.....(Our) primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and more faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles (4).

Although some have questioned what has seemed to them a slowing momentum in ecumenical matters David Carter, a participant in the English Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue, has drawn attention to the fact that we are now in 'an advanced stage of ecumenism' (Carter 1997, 125). Martin VanElderin, WCC official and editor, also contributed to what seemed like the sluggishness of the ecumenical movement in latter years a more hopeful interpretation when he said he thought that, like mountain climbing, progress became slower as one neared the top (VanElderin 1990, 162).

THREE STAGES

Be this as it may a prominent ecumenist, Rev John Hotchkin (Hotchkin 1995, 355ff) from the US Bishops Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, has identified three stages within the ecumenical movement so far and suggests that, as we enter a new millennium of Christianity, we are in the third and most developed phase of our ecumenical journey.

He describes the years from 1910 until the early 60s as an organisational and pioneering stage during which the ecumenical movement fomed a coherent structure within itself, breaking down barriers and inspiring people. This period saw the Edinbrough world missionary conference in

1910, the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and the establishment of the Annual Prayer for Christian Unity (later known as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) as a major event on the ecumenical calendar. The methodology used during this time was predominantly that of comparative ecclesiology.

A second phase of the ecumenical movement began to take shape as the churches entered into a new dialogical situation from the 1960s onwards, a shift that was given new impetus with the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into formal participation in the ecumenical movement as a result of the Second Vatican Council. There was a change from the 'horizontal' form of dialogue focused around comparative theology to a 'vertical' dimension in dialogue in which churches involved turned towards each other in an act of mutual self-giving before God in Christ (Raiser 2000, 288). Dialogue now became more deeply understood as not only an exchange of ideas in order to reach agreement and understanding, but as having a spiritual (vertical) dimension in which dialogue itself is understood as an expression and manifestation of the real, though limited, communion that exists between the churches by virtue of a common baptism. Personal conversion and purification of heart is an essential aspect accompanying the acknowledgment of the social and structural sins against unity. It is this understanding of ecumenical encounter which is found in the Second Vatican Council *Decree on Ecumenism* (UR 4) and which has been further restated in John Paul II's 1995 Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*:

This vertical act of dialogue lies in our acknowledgement, jointly and to each other, that we are men and women who have sinned. It is precisely this acknowledgment which creates in brothers and sisters living in communities, not in full communion with one another, that interior space where Christ, the source of the church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete (35).

It could be said that this second stage of the ecumenical movement has been fruitful beyond expectations. Among the major international agreements were *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry (BEM)*, (Faith and Order 1982) and the churches' responses to BEM in the 1990 *Report*, the fruits of the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission dialogue - *The Final Report* (ARCIC 1982) and more recently *The Gift of Authority* (ARCIC 1999) - and the Lutheran-Catholic *Joint Declaration on Justification* (1999). In Australia we produced our own Lutheran-Catholic Common Statement, *Justification*, and a Uniting Church/Roman Catholic Report entitled *Interchurch Marriages*.

From the 1980s onwards churches found themselves already moving into a third phase of the ecumenical movement which Hotchkin describes as one of 'phased reconciliation'. In this stage, he says, churches have to do more than create ecumenical agencies, convoke assemblies, conduct dialogues and respond to their findings. They will look to themselves to discover what changes they need to make for the renewal of their own church community and they will consider proposals for structural changes which will enable them to redefine their relationships with other churches, without necessarily merging. As churches delve into their historical and doctrinal basements they bring out treasures 'old and new' (Matt 13: 52) to form the ecclesiological underpinnings of a re-united Christianity.

TREASURES OLD AND NEW

One such example is the Common Christological Declaration by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV of the Assyrian church of the East in Nov 1994 which brought to an end 1,500 years of division between their churches, separated since 431 AD because of their different expressions of teaching concerning the divine and human personhood of Jesus Christ. The two leaders were able to say together: 'We experience ourselves united today in the same confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became human so that we might become children of God by his grace'. By avoiding the terminology that had been the cause of the original theological misunderstanding between their churches, the Declaration has prepared the way to the return to union of the two churches though they will continue to retain separate structures. In this way these churches have confirmed at the highest level the ecumenical principle, enunciated by Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the second Vatican Council, that differing doctrinal formulations need not be a barrier to full communion. (c.f. Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, 62). They are also witnesses to the possibility that churches may enter into a relationship of full communion without loss of identity.

We have discovered much also through progress made in Anglican-Roman Catholic relationships. After a delayed response to the *Final Report* of ARCIC (1982), in January 1997 Rome clarified its position by confirming that the two communities have now reached 'fundamental agreement' on eucharist, ministry and the doctrine of justification by faith. In a Common Declaration Anglican Archbishop Dr George Carey and John Paul II reaffirmed the commitment of both Anglican and Roman Catholic churches to work together for full visible unity, including a further study of the issues of authority and the role of the primacy. In 1999 *The Gift of Authority* outlined a common understanding of authority and a universal primacy to serve the unity of all the local churches. The publication of this document completed, at the dialogical stage, the resolution of all issues between Catholics and Anglicans which could be considered to be 'church-dividing'. All that remains now is for these agreements to be 'received' – that is, given life within the structures of the two church communities.

To begin giving this process appropriate structural form a historic world meeting of Anglican and Catholic bishops took place in Mississauga, Canada in May 2000 and in January 2001 the membership of an Anglican-Roman Catholic Working Group, jointly established by the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church, was announced with Archbishop Bathurst of Brisbane as co-Chair.

At the present time a most significant ecumenical rapprochement is also taking place at the international level between the Anglican and Lutheran churches. In September 1996 Anglican and Lutheran church leaders from the British Isles and northern Europe gathered for the historic signing of the Porvoo Agreement (which takes its name from the Finnish city in which the signers celebrated eucharist together on the previous Sunday). It affirms the acceptance of each other's ministries and allows for full eucharistic communion between these churches. The fact that this agreement is between one church with an episcopal tradition and one without it makes it particularly important. It locates the apostolicity of the community in its faithfulness to Christian life and witness as a whole, of which the historic episcopate may act as a sign (Tjorhom 2000,

199 – 201 and Lodberg 2000, 150 – 152).

The significance of this agreement will become more apparent as it generates unions at local level. On 6 January 2001 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (5.2 million strong) and the Anglican (Episcopalian – 2.5 million) Church after a lengthy process known as ‘Common Call to Mission (CCM)’ entered into full ‘altar and pulpit fellowship’ with each other. In Australia Lutherans and Anglicans are also in the process of moving closer towards unity on the basis of the Porvoo Agreement.

COVENANTING IN AUSTRALIA

However, impressive as these achievements may be, the movement from dialogue to conversion of life and structures is not an easy one. In Australia the formation of the National Council of Churches in 1994 was a concrete expression of the churches’ growing movement towards unity. Some have described ecumenism in Australia as a ‘natural’ ecumenism given that Australians are generally a pragmatic lot and not overly given to speculative thinking. As a people without a long and adversarial religious history much ecumenical activity occurs in everyday life among Australians at a communal level without people thinking about it too deeply. Over 30% marriages in the Catholic Church are now interchurch marriages.

In 2001 the churches of the NCCA (1) are engaged in a process intended to lead to a ‘multidimensional’ covenant at a national level. This covenant is intended as an act of commitment to one another as a further stage on the way to unity. It allows each church to enter into covenantal relationship with others in the way that their present stage of ecumenical development allows e.g. they may agree to engage in mutual prayer, to consult each other when making decisions, to share buildings or to engage in a particular project together. It is hoped that a covenant at the national level will open possibilities, provide guidelines and give encouragement to churches at the local level to covenant together and give a more visible expression to Christian unity locally. To this end the NCCA has produced a video *Portraits of Unity* which highlights places in Australia where covenantal relationships between the churches are already working. In another initiative the Victorian Council of Churches and the NSW Ecumenical Council have jointly produced a study guide called *Life after Drowning* to encourage reflection among Christians on the ecclesial implications of baptism as a sacrament shared by the Christian churches.

THE 'ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM'

Yet with all this undeniable progress in ecumenical dialogue and relationships at this moment there is undeniably a sense of stagnation in the ecumenical movement around the issue of authority in the church. Intrinsicly connected with this issue is the proverbial ‘elephant in the living room’ - questions about the ministry of women. While authority and primacy questions have been clearly put on the ecumenical agenda by Pope John Paul's request for dialogue (*UUS* 88 – 89) and *The Gift of Authority*, in contrast, when women have expressed their longing for the realisation of a more authentic and more faithful community of women and men in the church, it has all too often met with silence from the churches (Gnanadason 2001, 2).

As Janet Crawford points out, it is 50 years since women in the WCC began insisting that women's place in the church is an ecclesiological question, having to do with the very nature of the church (Crawford 2001, 14). A report by Sarah Chakko from the Syrian Orthodox Church on 'The Life and Work of Women in the Church' first raised the question at the first assembly of the WCC in 1948, with women insisting that the subject of women in the church should be the concern of the whole church and not seen as a problem of women alone. Yet despite the Faith and Order study *The Community of Women and Men in the Church (CWMC)* being carried out through the 1970s, neither the WCC *BEM* document nor the 1990 *Report*, showed much engagement with this study. They were unwilling to grapple seriously with the issues raised about women's ministry (Crawford 2001, 17 - 19).

From the time of *BEM* onwards the two specific issues in relation to the mutual recognition of ministries, namely episcopal succession and the ordination of women, have received very different treatment in ecumenical dialogues. Episcopal succession has been addressed directly. Both episcopal and non-episcopal churches have been counselled to change their perspective for the sake of mutual recognition. But on the issue of women's ministry neither the churches that do nor the churches that do not ordain women are counselled concretely, neither are challenged to change their perspective. (Crawford 2001, 18).

In 10 years following the *BEM Report* the challenge that the question of women's ministry issued to the churches has become further marginalised and swallowed up in other concerns. When a WCC study on the theme of *koinonia* began in 1989 which was to lead to the Canberra Statement (1991) there was no mention of women's issues and no hint that women's participation had anything to do with the visible unity of the church. The understanding of the term *koinonia* was restricted to referring to unity between the churches and not to community within the church. By 1998 the language of the Faith and Order document *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* had reduced the church to a community of neutered human beings with the diversity of male and female rendered invisible. Crawford concludes that although the debate on women's participation and ministry in the church is related to the three major issues identified in *BEM* as demanding further work (scripture and tradition, sacraments and sacramentality, and the search for common perspectives on ecclesiology) and is vital for the future visible unity of the church, in contrast to the issues of episcopacy and primacy it has not received the attention it needs.

ORTHODOX DIALOGUE

Perhaps unknown to most Western Christians, the subject of women's ministry and participation in the church has been a significant topic on the agenda of the Orthodox churches for 25 years (Fitzgerald 1999). In 1976 an Orthodox churches consultation in Agapia, Romania brought together Orthodox clergy, lay women and men to discuss the topic 'Orthodox Women: their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church'. In this consultation and in subsequent consultations in Rhodes (1988) and Crete (1990) recommendations included a plea for greater involvement of women in decision-making bodies of the church and a recommendation that the female diaconate, which had continued in the Orthodox church up to the 20th century, be studied and 'reactivated' (FitzGerald 1999, 8,13; Behr-Sigel and Ware 2000, 9). These issues were raised again by Orthodox women in two consultations held in Damascus (1996) and Istanbul (1997)

held as part of the mid-Decade assessment of the progress of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988 – 1998). Although these recommendations have been accepted in principle by some Orthodox churches any concrete change has been slow coming.

Orthodox theologian Kyriaki FitzGerald notes that the expansion of the scope of ministries of women ‘still awaits the application of the recommendations from Rhodes’. Inertia threatens the application of orthopraxis and the longer inertia dominates the more the integrity of the church’s mission is compromised. She asserts that inconsistencies, shortcomings, sins and abuses, need to be overcome for ‘the church to be the church’ and warns that we must avoid the temptation to look the other way instead of at Christ, which was the temptation to which the Pharisees and Scribes succumbed (Matt 16:3).

CONCLUSION

For the churches to move forward in this third and most challenging stage of the ecumenical movement Aruna Gnanadason (Gnanadason 2001, 2) confirms that the renewal required is both spiritual (vertical) and ecclesiological (horizontal). There is an urgent need to:

Discover: what it means to be called by God to live in, and for the world; what forms of spirituality would nurture the life of the church as community; how the ministry of the whole church can be renewed to include the gifts God gives to both men and women for service, what structures would better equip the church for faithfulness in its task of witness and service in the world.

In *Ut Unum Sint* Pope John Paul has also recognised that there will be no further ecumenical progress without deep spiritual conversion (Raiser 2000, 289). He calls for dialogue to be permeated by a spirit of conversion, the change of mind and heart that is required for any progress towards unity. It requires an examination of conscience i.e. a purification of heart, and mutual acknowledgement of the personal as well as the social and structural sins against unity. Reception must move beyond the official affirmation of common statements to the mutual reception of ecumenical partners in dialogue and a transformation of one's life and relationships with others.

Herein lies the challenge of the third stage of the ecumenical movement.

NOTE (1): NCCA member churches are the Anglican Church of Australia, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, Churches of Christ, Coptic Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church of Australia, Religious Society of Friends, Roman Catholic Church, Romanian Orthodox Church, Salvation Army, Syrian Orthodox Church and the Uniting Church in Australia]

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