

RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM

What have I learnt from Other Churches?

GIDEON GOOSEN

IN THIS ARTICLE I wish to write about learning and ecumenism. However it is a learning *from* other churches rather than an academic learning *about* other churches. The things that I have learned and described below do not follow any structure as such. I simply asked myself: what are the things I have learnt from other churches? I have loosely gathered my spontaneous responses into topics which appear as the section headings.

I write as a Catholic who has been involved in ecumenism for fifty years—which on reflection seems quite a long time, but in the context of two thousand years of Christian history, not so long. I have learnt much about other churches and also my own, and well as *from* them. I have had the privilege of teaching courses on ecumenism at diocesan and university levels, of working on interchurch committees to settle refugees at the local parish level, of serving on diocesan commissions for ecumenism, of serving on ecumenical councils and I have had the privilege of listening to the wisdom of many speakers from other traditions. What follows are some of the main things I have learnt.

Problem solving and Authority

How do local churches decide practical things? I have been impressed with the local UCA who were confronted with the proposal to enlarge their church building. Some were against it, some were for it. Those against pointed out that the number of parish contributors was declining and therefore the money was not there. The debate in their parish council went on for some time (years) and proved to be a very contentious and divisive issue. However they continued to discuss it over a number of

years and then reached the decision that they should not proceed. A folding door was placed at the back of the church which, when opened, gave access to their hall and thus allowed for more people. So by extensive discussion and gathering much information, they were able to decide things. Not all churches proceed thus.

This way of proceeding has its disadvantages. One obvious one is that it takes too long. I recall one UCA person who was a minister in fact, lamenting that they were tired of many church Assemblies that couldn't decide anything and that she longed for a pope-like figure that could make decisions which would stick. This shows the other side of the coin. Catholics sometimes complain that the pope or local bishop is too authoritarian. The actual issue was on the ordination of homosexuals which is proving such a difficult issue worldwide in all churches. Each system has its pros and cons and no system is perfect. We sometimes look for a perfect system, a perfect minister, a perfect congregation. They do not exist.

Allied to the issue of authority is that of structures. The UCA near where I live has often had no minister while they undertake the task of finding another one. What I have learnt is that they get on with the job of being Christian and day-to-day running of the parish. They have the infrastructure and everyone does his/her job. Catholics sometimes collapse in a heap if 'Father' is not there to tell them what to do. This is disappointing but real. It seems to me that the laity are more pro-active in many Protestant churches whereas Catholic laity, in spite of many fine statements in the Vatican II documents, about being collaborators with the clergy and having co-responsibility for the mission of the church, are often passive and

unengaged in the mission of the church. This is seen by the small percentage of parishioners active in parish life.

Bible

My Baptist friends are forever talking about bible study groups and obviously take the bible group very seriously. One Baptist who became a Catholic asked the parish priest if the priest would set up a Bible Study group with him, thinking this suggestion would be met with great enthusiasm. But alas, there was a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the parish priest which scandalized the erstwhile Baptist.

In another situation there was an ecumenical bible study group that I used to attend which discussed and prayed about the readings for the coming Sunday. There was much in common and much to discuss but sooner or later I noticed that the issue of literal understanding of the text came to the fore among some who attended. This can be ignored for some of the time but not all of the time. Basic questions about the composition of the gospels and hermeneutics have got to be faced. These issues need a separate and sustained course in biblical studies and cannot be dealt in passing within a bible study group such as we had.

Another biblical event was one that proved most popular. It occurred during the Year of St Paul. Representatives from three different Christian traditions, Baptist, Catholic, and Lutheran took as their topic a theme from St Paul which was particularly dear to their tradition. They spoke on the theme and why it was significant for their tradition. This ecumenical evening was particularly well attended and has convinced me that focusing on the bible is a very fruitful way to promote ecumenism.

Commitment

What I have learnt from the Baptists is that you are either one hundred percent in or you



Gideon Goosen is a Sydney-based theologian, author of Hyphenated Christians, Peter Lang, 2011 and editor of The Gift of Each Other: Learning From Other Christians, NSWEC, 2013.

are out. You are either an ardent Christian or you are nothing. Like the author of the Apocalypse there is no room for lukewarm Christians.

However commitment comes in different ways. From observing some evangelical Anglicans I have learnt that it is not a good thing to be so narrowly focused on your own congregation, your own denomination, to the extent that you cannot look up and learn from someone else. An Anglican minister in fact warned his flock that they should not pay any attention to matters ecumenical and stay focused on Jesus. The 'stay focused on Jesus' part I support but surely all Christians are trying to focus on Jesus and may have something to teach us about how this can be done?

There is a disturbing presumption at work here and it is that there is only one way of doing things, MY way. This strikes me as not being adult thinking. On the other hand, in the context of ecumenical dialogues such as ARCIC, I know that the Vatican often demands that doctrine be expressed with their words and nothing else will do. Vatican thinking is however not necessarily the same as global Catholic thinking.

From a Presbyterian group I have learnt that it can be isolating and anti-growth to be so focused on one's own group that one is fearful of contact with other Christians. Sometimes the minister wishes to cut off all contact with other Christians but in spite of *his* efforts there are always some who intuit this is wrong. (Female ministers seem more open to networking).

Criticism of Catholicism.

I have learnt from other Christians that my church often comes across as arrogant and superior. Often the declarations and utterances from Rome use language which supports this perception. *Dominus Jesus* was one such recent utterance. I myself now feel the same way too about my church. There needs to be more of the humility so characteristic of the gospels. There has been an understatement of the mystery of life and the false impression given that the Catholic Church has an answer for everything. An over emphasis on 'correct' doctrine (as in the Catechism) has led to an imbalance of the priorities in being a Christians. Other Christian churches, through their members, have given me a far healthier perspective on the weaknesses of my own church.

Speaking about 'correct doctrine' makes me think of the Orthodox churches. The Greek Orthodox church and other Orthodox churches have stressed the importance of the Trinity as the centre of the Christian faith. Everything they do begins and ends with the Trinity. Often Catholics begin with Mary and end with Jesus. Are Orthodox and Catholics both Christians?

For those churches that have symbols, statues, paintings on the walls, how many refer to the Trinity and how many to saints, the Virgin, etc. The Christian faith is quintessentially Trinitarian but judging on what you see in some Christian churches you would not think that! I recall wandering in and out some Catholic churches in Dublin and how struck I was with the statues of Jesus and Mary. Likewise in Peru and Ecuador the emphasis was on Mary.

Because of their ecumenical history it is no surprise that UCA members seem more open to matters ecumenical than some members of other churches. I have learnt what a difference it makes when a church makes the restoration of Christian unity a main aim. It becomes part of the ethos or culture of the church.

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Prayer

From Pentecostals I have learnt that prayer can be used in the middle of a meeting to solve problems. However I think I personally would not do that.

From Protestants in general I have learnt how to pray and include everything in that prayer. While this means that prayers are very inclusive it also means they can go on and on! What I really appreciate about the evangelical and Pentecostal tradition is the ability to pray spontaneously. This is often done by relating all that one does in the day to prayer. In this way prayer can really flow from the heart. Catholics often have to dive into the missal for a written prayer.

One thing I did notice is that if one only uses spontaneous prayers one can slip into the danger of focusing only on one's immediate needs and concerns to the detriment of the global picture, of the global church, of humanity. Prayer can, and should be, local and universal.

Language can be a barrier.

In ecumenical circles I have noticed how people have changed their language. I personally have learnt to use language from other denominations and concepts. I have noticed that people have begun to swap language. Words like priest, presbytery, sacrament, went out, and minister, pastor, bible study, manse came in. Now a more balanced view of using the appropriate language for the occasion is used. There is a certain arrogance in using my terminology and presuming that everyone else should know what I mean.

Common Problems

Problems are often across the denominations, not denomination-specific. All churches tend to have scandals involving the minister/priest; all have congregations where unity is sometimes shattered. Unfortunately the struggle for

unity has been there from the time of St Paul, and seems to be a never-ending problem. Some ministers/priests do not have the necessary skills for conflict resolution. In fact I would say most do not.

Issues can often divide. Presently the burning issues are the ordination of women, the ordination of homosexuals, the understanding of homosexuality. The last of these issues is so explosive I note that ecumenically we keep off it so as not to start an almighty row. Married clergy is not a universal issue as the Orthodox have married clergy, as do many Protestant churches and so do some rites within the Catholic church such as the Maronite and Melkite rites. This latter is one of the best kept secrets in the western Latin (Catholic) rite although with more and more Anglican married priest becoming Catholic married priests, questions are being asked.

Speaking of conflict raises the issues of how churches handle conflict. I have learnt that some churches like the Anglicans are prepared to put it all out in the open as they have done with the ordination of women and the issue of practicing homosexuals. This enables the issue to be debated frankly and in full exposing all points of view. This can be messy and time-consuming, but it is honest. My church on the other hand has had the culture of banning some controversial issues, perhaps in the hope that they will go away. I am always amazed to think that Pope John Paul II try to ban the discussion of the ordination of women. Did he really think that educated western Catholics would accept that? Catholicism needs a theory of conflict and their leaders, global and local, need to learn the skills of handling differences.

Interchurch committees

It is always good to hear other opinions. By working together on interchurch committees many false assumptions are corrected and new friendships are made. Accurate information about other denominations is obtained. However one quickly realizes that not all Chris-

tians are passionate about the restoration of Christian unity. Unfortunately the non co-operation of ministers is still a big problem. On the other hand some Christians that one encounters are so impressive with their commitment, their dedication, their selflessness, their immersion in the bible, that one feels inferior in this respect.

Rubbing shoulders with other Christians it is clear that some churches have not considered interfaith issue like the salvation of other Hindus, Moslems, and Buddhists, for example. There is often a lack of a theology of other faiths. In this respect it helps to have departments or commissions that think about these things, like the decasteries (departments) in Rome which then present the ideas to all the faithful. churches which lack this kind of infra-structure miss out I feel.

As I have said, I have learnt much about my own church, the Catholic church. It did not take long to work out that not many priests were enthusiastic about ecumenism. Quite a few spoke about it in a supportive way but did nothing. I learnt that ministers of religion, and that includes priests, were the biggest obstacle to ecumenism. Observing what was happening around me it was clear that where the priest was very active in ecumenism, much could be achieved, like covenants among a number of churches.

In fairness to priests and ministers of religion, being involved in ecumenism often looks like yet another duty to address in an already heavy workload. In the same way as social justice could be seen, not as an extra thing to do, but instead as a dimension to all we do, so too, I believe, ecumenism should be a dimension to all we do, rather than an add-on. The paradox is that ministers have said that being involved ecumenically lightened their load rather than the opposite.

I also learnt that Catholic bishops often did all the correct things, like set up a commission for ecumenism but did not actually engage in ecumenical events much. Very few bishops actually attended meetings of ecu-

menical councils. I got the impression that as long as there was a commission and the bishop could include that in his report to Rome, that was all that needed to be done. On the other hand, where the bishops actively supported ecumenical events, the movement made great strides. There is an experiential side to ecumenism which is essential for its success. It involves meeting people from another church. church representatives on dialogues have spoken of friendships formed at these meetings over days. There is no substitute for this experience. Its absence explains a lot of indifference regarding ecumenism.

My analysis of the issue is that there is a power game occurring here. Any move towards equality with others churches might mean a diminution in the power of the local priest or bishop. There is an element of giving up something in pursuing the restoration of Christian unity, a requirement to be humble and willingness to change one's thinking. This I think is the challenge that many in authority instinctively avoid. The Oriental churches came to an agreement of Christology some years ago. This was the only thing separating them, but have they re-united? No. Why? I think it is the issue of what they may be asked to give up for this unity. Unless the seed falling to the ground die ... If two Oriental churches unite which one will provide the bishop? Not many bishops willingly step down. Not many popes retire!! To come back to the point: the power game is obvious and extremely deleterious to ministry. One bishop I know says: power is poison to ministry. How true that is if I look across the problems in the Catholic church today.

Have you noticed that dialogues between Christian churches often make some progress and then come to a halt because neither party is prepared to take a risk with the next step? Should we share ministers? Should we share the Eucharist? Should we recognize each other's ministry? Churches are inclined to favour their own safety house.

Likewise I have learnt that many of the laity in my church see no need to 'fraternize' with Protestants. There is a reluctance to go out and meet other Christians which is what practical ecumenism requires. They think they have all the truth available so why bother with meeting members of other churches? If the other churches want to join us, that is fine. This back-to-Rome attitude is still very prevalent and there is very little I have heard from the pulpit to make Catholic folk think otherwise. Most people in the pews see no convincing rationale for ecumenism.

Let me cite an incident which has remained vivid in my memory. It relates to going out and meeting Protestants. Many years ago I met the priest who was in charge of ecumenism for a diocese. On talking to him he said the important things about ecumenism is to pray for the restoration of unity. Prayer was essential. No mention of action. I thought this strange. I was aware of the mention of spiritual ecumenism in the Vatican II document, *Redintegratio unitatis*, but always felt that what I would stress with Catholics was: go out and meet a Protestant! That action would set many things in motion. I feel that many Catholic hierarchs think all they have to do is pray and the rest will follow. I see it differently.

Popes have had a huge impact as well. John XXIII and his enthusiasm for our separated brethren was a breath of fresh air. John Paul II had a great idea when he asked Protestants how the papacy could be changed in the way it operates. We have heard nothing about that project since. Benedict XVI, has made a big impact on the Orthodox churches we are told while disenchanting the Protestant churches with his *Dominus Jesus*. Pope Francis' actions, on the other hand, are most encouraging for both ecumenism and interfaith dialogue.

These are some of the thoughts that go through my mind when I reflect on what I have learnt from other churches. My prayer now is that we may continue to learn from others as we work together ecumenically.