

LIVING WITH THE NEIGHBOUR WHO IS DIFFERENT

CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN MULTI-FAITH AUSTRALIA

Introduction

The Eighth Assembly in 1997 requested the then Doctrine Commission to prepare a theological statement to guide the Uniting Church as it entered an increasingly diverse society where many faiths are practiced. This statement is our response to that request, and is a summary of a longer resource document available in hard copy.

Australia is emerging as a multi religious society. This new reality raises theological, spiritual and missional questions for the Christian Church. Within the Uniting Church we must ask what it means for us to be followers of Christ in this setting, and in what sense our identity needs to be reshaped and our praxis re-examined as we encounter the diversity of faiths. Already some of us have experience in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, which became a necessity following the painful experiences of the Second World War. Dialogue with Aboriginal spirituality is developing in our time, especially among our younger people. With what theological self understanding and motivation do we enter into the wider engagement with other faiths, which our society today demands of us?

1. Theological Affirmations

The Doctrine Working Group has worked on this issue over the last three years. A series of affirmations has become quite central for us. These affirmations form the heart and substance of our conviction and we commend them to your prayerful and thoughtful consideration.

1a. God is calling us to engage in conversation with people of other faiths.

In a world of human division, in which conflict is often fuelled by religious difference, it is imperative that Christians grow in their appreciation of other faiths and find ways in which we can work together with people of other faiths for the common good. Our sharing of the riches of Christ includes working patiently, prayerfully and lovingly for a nation and a world shaped in peace. The view of the Doctrine Working Group is that the development of hospitable and respectful relationships with those of other faiths is a proper response to Christ in our day. Christ calls us to live in harmony with all other people and so contribute to a world of peace, justice and hospitality. The proper response to Christ in this new setting is to ask afresh how we should, as followers of Christ, respond to people of other faiths.

1b. Christians are called to love the neighbour who is different.

The question of how we are to relate to persons of other faiths is a specific expression of the larger question: how can we live with the neighbour who is different? Love is central to Christianity and must continually be brought to bear in this situation. We have to face the hard fact that the Christian Church does not have a consistently good record in respecting and valuing those who we see as 'different'. How are we to move from a history of exclusion of the other to one that embraces the neighbour? Only through a deeper immersion in the love of God made known in Christ. Our personhood need not be threatened by otherness. One scholar, Miroslav Volf, has suggested that what is needed is the formation of a "catholic personality" (small "c"!), defined as one who is enriched by otherness. Such a personality reflects the character of Jesus.

1c. God has placed the contemporary Church in an ideal situation to engage in genuine dialogue with those of other faiths.

When the Church was at the centre of Western life it tended to relate to those of other faiths from a position of assumed political and social superiority. Much damage has been done to the human community from the outworking of this false assumption. Today Christians are aware that they share this planet with other faith communities who also believe deeply and are shaped by values and styles of living which have integrity. Of course, questions abound. What is the purpose of God in permitting a variety of religions to exist side by side? Do other religions have a role to play in God's offer of salvation? How do we speak of Jesus in a world of many religions? Does dialogue lead to a lack of evangelical passion? These are questions that the Christian Church cannot avoid. Our conviction is that both the situation in which we find ourselves and the call to dialogue are God given opportunities to our generation.

Theological Reflection

Three broad possibilities for Christian theological engagement with the faiths of the world are now commonly recognised.

The exclusivist option denies the presence of saving truth in other faiths and understands Christian mission to involve the denial of worth of these faiths. Therefore, the goal of Christian mission is the replacement of these faiths with Christianity. The strength of this mainstream and inherited position is the uncompromising affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The weakness is the limitation it imposes on the love and generosity of God in Christ.

The pluralist option denies that humans can ever fully grasp the mystery of God and should accept that all faiths, including Christianity, have only partial knowledge of God. In dialogue with other faiths, Christians are asked to set aside christological and trinitarian convictions lest the truth in other traditions be denied. The goal appears to be the 'least common denominator' kind of expression with which all the religions can agree. The weakness of this position is that it denies the claims to uniqueness within any faith and, as a result, the passion that belongs to authentic faith can be lost.

The inclusivist option recognises the saving presence of God in non-Christian faiths, while maintaining that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God. Christ is understood to be present, though not named, within other faiths. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have worked officially with a position closely akin to the inclusivist view.

While finding arguments in support of each of the theological options outlined above, this Working Group believes that an Uniting Church position on the issue would best be served by drawing on some core theological affirmations. Three such affirmations are central.

1d. God delights in diversity and seeks unity.

The Creator has set in being an order of incredible diversity and richness. God's repeated affirmation of the goodness of this creation in the Genesis narrative, tells us that the diversity of this creation is God's delight. The story of Babel (Genesis 11) described the human attempt to deny diversity and instead to build a single tower, a single culture. It is doomed to failure and attempts at a monoculture will continue to fail. Panikkar suggests, "the Lord appears not to favour such human enterprises... The cosmos is a pluriverse and not a universe." This perception must be balanced by the perspective of the post Pauline epistles. The purpose of God as expressed in Ephesians 1:9-10 is "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth." The cosmic Christ is seen as the principle of unity, by which God draws creation into an inclusive wholeness. Unity in Christ does not destroy difference, but robs difference of its power to divide. This is witnessed in passages such as Colossians 1:19-20, Galatians 3:28, and Acts 2:1-13.

1e. The Spirit is present in all of life.

No part of life, no person is without the influence of the Holy Spirit. In the inclusivist understanding, the Holy Spirit is present through the whole fabric of the world, yet is uniquely present in Christ and in the fellowship of Jesus' disciples. It does not follow, however, that the life and work of Jesus exhaust the work of the Spirit or exclude the presence of the Spirit in other faiths.

1f. The centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian believing is not to be compromised.

Christ is the foundation of Christian conviction, believing and living, and cannot be compromised without denying our essential identity. It follows that our way of being with others should be consistent with the way of Jesus and the revelation of God in Christ. It is sometimes feared that Christians might lose their faith in inter-faith dialogue. A more common experience is that it moves participants to enter more deeply into the heart of Christian faith.

Biblical Reflection

A common approach to biblical reflection has been to make reference to a few texts, such as Acts 4:12 ("There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved") or John 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"). Taking these texts out of their original context is to mis-read their significance for the Church today. A better approach is to view the Scriptures in their entirety and to note the continuing tension within the biblical testimony between particularity and universality. A Christian view of our issue is more likely to emerge from the holding together of these two apparently conflicting attitudes than in seeking for isolated texts that appear to supply a simple answer. The love of God finds a particular and defining focus in Jesus Christ, yet that same love is present in the act of creation. Every person and every nation is embraced by that same love.

God calls people to serve God. No nation is separated from God's presence. The particular covenant with Moses and the Israelite people is preceded by the cosmic covenant with Noah. At a time when Israelites assumed they alone were the bearers of Yahweh's favour, the word of God to Amos is that just as Israel was saved from the land of Egypt, so the Philistines and the Arameans were similarly rescued from their captors (Amos 9:7). Israel's identity is found in the particular calling of God and the assurance of God's continuing interest in them but this does not preclude various acknowledgments that God is also present in the lives of non-Israelite peoples. There is continuity as well as discontinuity between the Israelite revelation of God and other pictures, stories and experiences of God. The lives of so called 'pagan saints' are celebrated as though to remind Israelites that God is at work in healing and sanctifying ways beyond their boundaries.

The central affirmation of the New Testament is that in Jesus Christ, God touches human history in a decisive and particular expression of grace. The life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus are a unique and decisive expression of God's love for humanity, but, at the same time, Christ is the focus of an expansive and universal love. Jesus was a loyal Jew, seeking the renewal of faith among His own people but He is also portrayed as being active to break down barriers that divide. He welcomes outsiders, forgives error, accepts Samaritans as faithful, heals a Canaanite woman. Jesus Christ is the light of all people, present in creation, and His truth will never be destroyed. (John 1:1-5). Paul describes Christian faith as a wild olive shoot grafted onto the olive tree of Israel. He uses words and ideas borrowed from Hellenistic religions and philosophies to express the cosmic significance of Jesus crucified and risen. Jesus is the beginning of a new humanity, a future in which boundaries of race, economic status and gender will be dismantled (Gal. 3:28, and see also Eph. 1: 7-11 and Col. 1:15-20).

2. What of Christian mission and evangelism in a multi-faith community?

2a. The evangelical imperative of Christian faith is central to Christian identity.

To move in the direction we propose does not suggest a renunciation of mission. Christian mission is our participation in the Mission of God, who acts in Christ "to gather up all things in him" (Ephesians 1:9-10). The proclamation of the Gospel so as to invite faith in others is an integral part of our mission. Such activity is not true to Christ when it is coercive or manipulative. The missionary impulse of Christian faith can be purified, strengthened and deepened when it is enacted in an atmosphere of respect, listening and appreciation.

2b. The proper methodology for evangelism is dialogue.

We see this in the example of Jesus in his relationship with people of other faith traditions. We must reject the popular tendency to pose evangelism and dialogue as mutually exclusive, just as we must reject the notion that evangelism is a targeted 'monologue'. Dialogue is not the easy option, which avoids the sharing of one's faith; rather it is the difficult option, which calls us to share our faith in a conversation of true mutuality.

2c. The motivation for our evangelism is to grow Christ-like persons living in Christ-like communities, and not to add to the numbers in the Church.

Much of the disdain now surrounding evangelism in some quarters stems from the ways in which the evangelical imperative of Christianity became mixed with the imperial aspirations of colonial powers. The outcome has been a type of 'monological evangelism' which fails to respect the other and is contrary to the Spirit of Christ. We must repent of that series of errors, and purge from our motivation for evangelism any sense of a revival of imperialism, even *Christian* imperialism. We must face the uncomfortable truth that in some ways it is the Christian Church, which stands most in need of conversion to the 'more excellent way of Christ'.

2d. Practical outworkings.

Many of our congregations are gaining invaluable experience in inter-faith encounter. Some have conducted seminars with visiting persons of non-Christian faiths exploring the nature of spirituality or the main tenets of each other's beliefs. There are municipalities where inter-faith forums or councils have been formed to enable meeting and shared action. The Assembly Relations with Other Faiths Reference Committee has issued a leaflet on shared worship at community gatherings. The Working Group believes that the Uniting Church has an important role to play in creating the conditions within which peoples of many faiths can live and work together in appreciative harmony. Congregations are the primary focus for this important missionary work but Assembly, Synod and Presbytery encouragement is required.

As inter-faith dialogue becomes part of the everyday life of our Church, we will find some persons who move into the Christian Church from other faiths and who find in Christ the one who provides life with the purpose they seek. When this happens we should give thanks for the work of the Spirit in our midst. We will also see Christians who find in Buddhism or Islam or Indigenous Aboriginal spirituality a way of life that attracts them. In this way, they may deepen their knowledge of God. In this too we must rejoice and give thanks for the bounty of God.

3. Let God be God

Our capacity to enter into this kind of inter-faith dialogue will be measured by our willingness to let God be God. Are we willing to move outside our own safe envelope to encounter God in the one from whom we differ? If we hold to the universality of our particular God, this could be the frontier of our own renewal. Our view of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, needs to be wide enough that we are open to our own ongoing conversion and the growth of divine grace among all persons.