

Why I Care About Relations with People of Other Faiths:

Commentary on the Occasion of a Dialogue with Muslim students with the UCA
Congregation at Colonel Light Gardens, South Australia.

Geoff Boyce May 2004

There is a famous quote by Rev. *Martin Niemoller*, writing at the end of the Second World War in 1945 :

First they came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.

When I first began tertiary chaplaincy over 6 years ago I would have said that the last thing I would be doing today is inviting Muslims to attend a Uniting Church to talk about their faith. What a turn around for me!

At that time I couldn't have cared less about what Muslims or any others believed, perhaps with the exception of Jews, unless it gave me information about how I might evangelise them. I would have said that Jesus was the one true and only way to God and that my brand of Christianity was the best. And I could quote plenty of Scriptures to prove it!

The UCA in South Australia requires me to be a chaplain to the University to which I am appointed.

Probably many members of the UCA would assume that I am chaplain to UCA students at the university – or maybe UCA staff and students. But I am directed to be chaplain to the *whole* university.

To the extent that there are some UCA members in the university, I may be involved in ministry among them. But can you see that, if I am appointed to be chaplain to the whole university I will minister to UCA members *because they are members of the university*, not because they are UCA members as such? The distinction is subtle but results in an altogether different set of priorities.

As I began to be immersed in the University I began to become aware of a wider consciousness around me. I began to meet people who were giving their working lives to all kinds of questions and problems, complex issues where there often didn't seem to be simple

solutions. I began to feel that God was saying to me “this is a place where ‘my will on earth, as it is in heaven’ is at stake”.

The university world is one where every opinion may be challenged. It is impatient with a single view – or rather one that has not at least entertained other, if not all, possibilities and found good reason to either eliminate or accept them. It is a place concerned with knowledge, a place of research and teaching concerned with the expansion of knowledge.

The obvious cosmopolitan nature of the university, engaged as it is in a global enterprise, invited me into an environment that is complex and multifaceted. If I was going to serve God in this place, if I was indeed to be “chaplain to the university” I needed to say ‘yes’ to an invitation to *their* world – as St Paul did with Athens and Rome and indeed, as Jesus did with the world.

So, now, how can I say ‘no’ to a Muslim, a Mormon or a Sikh when they are part of the world in which I am immersed?

Looking back, Niemoller offered an apologetic for caring about all, no matter what their religion. His was an apologetic offered in regret. “If only we had cared about the Communists and the Jews and the Homosexuals... if only we had cared it would not have come to this...” I wonder whether the tardiness of Christians to welcome the stranger will be a source of regret in ten years time. It shouldn’t be so. There is no greater injunction in Scripture.

The gift I believe we have to offer, the same gift I offer the university as a chaplain, is the love of God. It is as simple and as difficult as that. My job is simply to love people as God loved people. And I remind you in, the name of Christ, that you are called to the same ministry.

My job is both simple and impossible without God’s Spirit of grace– to care for the Soul of the University, to nurture the right spirit of the University. And the language of care and nurture is the language of God’s love. To love as God loves.

I remember how difficult love was when a person presented herself to me as a Pagan, wanting to become chaplain to the Pagans on campus. What did love require of me? At almost the same time, the Indonesian army were murdering East Timorese as East Timor struggled toward independence. What did love require of me toward the Indonesian students on the campus, nearly all of them Muslim, who began to become targets of Australian anger over the atrocities in East Timor, when they had no part in it?

When we reach out in love, we don’t dishonour our faith, we fulfil it!
Those who recoil from praying with a Muslim or eating with a Jew, or being best friends with a homosexual because they think they will become “unclean” - they think they will be denying Jesus - are paradoxically, the very persons Jesus condemns!

Who does the Gospel writer put at the centre as the objects of God’s love as shown to us through Jesus?

A Samaritan, despised and rejected; a Pagan widow; Naaman, the Syrian – a Pagan; lunatics expelled from society; sick people who were by definition excluded because of their sickness; an uninvited prostitute... it goes on and on!

Croatian theologian Mirislav Volf in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* puts it this way:

In the Palestine of Jesus' day, "sinners" were primarily social outcasts, people who practiced despised trades, failed to keep the Law as interpreted by the religious establishment, and Gentiles and Samaritans. A pious person had to separate herself from them; their presence defiled because they were defiled. Jesus' table fellowship with social outcasts, a fellowship that belonged to the central features of his ministry, turned this conception on its head: *The real sinner is not the outcast but the one who casts the other out* ... Sin is not so much a defilement but a certain form of purity: the exclusion of the other from one's heart and one's world. In the story of the prodigal son, the sinner was the elder brother – the one who withheld an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in her otherness and a desire to purge her from one's world, by ostracism or oppression, deportation or liquidation. The exclusion of the other is an exclusion of God¹.

If Jesus is the Way, He is not "the way" some Christians think – of separation from what they consider unclean or wrong.

If Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, then we only come to God by Him through love of neighbour.

I love my fellow Pagan chaplain! And I give her money to celebrate her wedding anniversary because she is poor.

I love Yusuf! And I pray with him at Friday Prayer because, for him, that is what brothers do.

Why should I embrace the other? The answer is simple: because the others *are* part of my own true identity. I cannot live authentically without welcoming the others – the other gender, other persons, or other cultures – into the very structure of my being. For I am created to reflect the personality of the triune God... In the presence of the divine Trinity, we need to strip down the drab gray of our own self-enclosed selves and cultures and embrace others so that their bright colors, painted on our very selves, will begin to shine².

Why do I care about relations with people of other faiths?

Because Jesus did.
And because without the other, I am diminished.

Would You Be My Friend?
(Paul Kelly ...*nothing but a dream*)

If I fell into confusion
Got scared and couldn't say
If I lost my rhyme and reason
And threw away the gift of grace
Would you be my friend?

If they said I don't deserve you
That my credit was no good
If they told you I'm not worthy of your love
You should cut me like dead wood
Would you be my friend?
Would you be my friend?

And if you heard that I was on the town
Pissing loudly on your name
Would you find me, would you face me down
Though your ears burned with shame
Would you be my friend?
Would you be my friend?
Would you be my friend?

And if I said I'd never been born
And my mouth could only curse
And if I'd passed the point of no return
Like a poor, puking child in church
Would you be my friend?
Would you be my friend?
Would you be my friend?
My only friend