

On being a Covenanting and Multicultural Church: how do people see church in our current context?

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In July 2009 I was a member of the 12th national Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). At this Assembly a proposal was brought by a committee made up of members of both the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and the Assembly Standing Committee to change the Preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution. This new Preamble, as well as narrating the events which led to union, included a) an acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples as the First peoples of Australia and all others as Second Peoples, b) a recognition of God's activity with Indigenous Australians before 1788, and c) a recital of the history of the church's interaction with Indigenous peoples.. At the same meeting there was discussion of regulations for property sharing with migrant-ethnic congregations - an example of the frustration people felt in making the 1985 Assembly statement "The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church" a concrete reality.

The juxtaposition between a document describing First and Second peoples and the evident frustration of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) members of the church raised a number of questions for me. What does acknowledging first and second peoples mean for our understanding of what it means to be church? And how does our understanding of what it means to be church get critiqued by the actual existence of first peoples and second peoples? But the question that took up most of my time was how do people in congregations actually develop their own understandings of what it means to be part of a church which says it is a church of First peoples and second peoples? a church that is committed to covenant relationship with First peoples and claims itself to be a Multicultural church?

It is this question "how do people in the congregation develop their own understandings of what it means to be part of a church which says it is a church of First peoples and Second peoples? a church that is committed to covenanting and being a multicultural church?" that is the focus of my Phd research which is in its infancy.

What I hope to be able to do with you today is explore

- 1) broad academic literature that this question connects with
- 2) have a discussion about the fields of practical theology and 'ordinary theology': a field of practical theology that focuses on the articulation of theology of people who don't consider themselves to be 'expert' theologians.

Question for reflection:

What have been your experiences of being a covenanting and multicultural church?

The main premise of my Phd draws on the historical, social and theological context the Australian church has been shaped in and shaped by during the last 40 years. Since the 1970s the Australian Church has been grappling with both its complicity in colonisation and the consequent displacement of First Peoples and successive waves of migration. This context has led to a proliferation of theological work that a) explores the reality of living in a colonised and multicultural context and b) champions the theological insights of those marginal in mainstream western society. These works have provided challenge and critique to how the Western church, including the Australian church, understands what it means to be church.

Yet, while these concerns have been influential particularly within the academy, there has been little exploration of how people in congregations who are not specially trained in theology, articulate their own interpretations of being church in a context which is both postcolonial (that is in a place that was colonised by an empire and displaced First peoples) and multicultural (that is made up of many different cultural groups).

Given this lack of information on 'ordinary' theologians' views on being church in a postcolonial and multicultural context, the purpose of the thesis is to explore the question "How do 'ordinary' theologians articulate what it means to be church in a postcolonial and multicultural context?". This question will be addressed through a methodology constructed from the insights of practical theology, hermeneutic phenomenology and cross-cultural research. The particular population of 'ordinary' theologians, young adults leaders in the UCA, will participate in a series of semi-structured interviews. These interviews will then be brought into dialogue with official Uniting Church statements and the wider practical theology context.

This work will contribute to the field of practical and ordinary theology by

- Exploring faith connection made between context and theological reflection
- Examining the influence of official statements
- Developing potential models/language for the continuing conversation

Academic Context

The field of practical theology has been able to engage with what it means to be church and how to be church in particular contexts because of certain shifts in understanding and interpretation that have happened over the last century and a half. The rejection of the possibility of being an objective observer and the consequential emphasis on the subject/interpreter in conjunction with the globalisation of Christianity has challenged the Western theological academy to pay heed to voices outside of the Western mainstream. Gideon Goosen summarises it in this way:

An important aspect of the general shift across the disciplines relates to epistemology. Since the Enlightenment, we have moved through the era of logical positivism and critical rationalism to a period when uncertainty is

more welcome, objectivity is not an absolute and different ways of seeing the truth, other than through the western, rational, logical perspective, are explored eagerly. It is a period in which theology is dialoguing with the social sciences and humanities in searching for truth. ... The content of theology has moved from being concerned mainly with the big and obvious theological themes like God, Christ, Revelation etc to covering all aspects of life. The authors have changed from being First World, European and North American to coming from all parts of the world... and from being exclusively male to increasingly inclusive of women.¹

The theological work of interpreting the faith from an 'outsider' or marginal perspective has acted as a validation of previously rejected experience and culture. This has been especially liberating for the First Peoples of colonised countries whose culture had been dismissed as 'primitive' and had been expected to die out in the face of Western 'civilisation'.²

Understandings of the church and how to be church have been particularly challenged by these insights. The complicity of the church in dispossession of First peoples and the opportunity and challenge of moving from an anglo dominated church to a church of many cultures have raised questions around whose understanding of church is being practiced.

Important Australian texts include:

- ❖ edited collection *The Cultured Pearl: Australian Readings in Cross-cultural Theology and Mission* ed Jim Houston (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986)
- ❖ *From Here to Where? Australian Christians Owning the Past - Embracing the Future*, ed. Andrew Dutney (Sydney: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1988) which includes Rev Dr Djinyini Gondarra's "Father you gave us the dreaming"
- ❖ *Religion and Multiculturalism in Australia: Essays in Honour of Victor C Hayes*, ed. Norman Habel (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1992).
- ❖ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards An Australian Aboriginal Theology*. (SA: ATF Theology, 1997)
- ❖ Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and Methodologies Into the Third Millennium*. (Strathford, NSW: St Pauls 2000)
- ❖ *Faith in a Hyphen: Cross-cultural Theologies Down Under*, ed. Clive Pearson (Adelaide: Open Book Publishers, 2004).
- ❖ Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land*. (Princeton Theological Monograph, 2009)

¹ Goosen, *Australian Theologies* (2000: 20)

² as suggested by M. Steele Ireland, "Postcolonial Theology" in *Global dictionary of Theology* ed William A Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, Illinois. Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, Intervarsity Press, 2008).

All of these works grapple with the distinct nature of Australian history, including the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples and culture, the white Australia policy and entrenched racism. This history is qualitatively and quantitatively different from other ex-British colonies. For example, the treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand has shaped a distinctly different relationship between Maori and Pakeha than that in Australia. Canada was settled by both French and English colonisers and the USA, along with the Frontier Wars is also a product of African slavery and more recent Hispanic immigration.

In practical theology the attempts to address this question of how to understand the church in a multicultural and postcolonial context can be placed along a continuum from deductive (an applied theology or 'biblical' approach)³ to inductive (experience as starting point) approaches. For example, authors with an evangelical background such as DeYmaz,⁴ first emphasise the biblical mandate to become a multicultural church and apply biblical codes of behaviour, particularly from the Epistles, as models of right actions. Others, such as González,⁵ explicitly engage in a dialogue with the Scriptures from their current multicultural context and experience. Significantly, all approaches tend to emphasise the bible as a multicultural document in form, and/or, in content. For example, the multilingual nature of the bible, the stories from different tribal groups evident in the Hebrew Scriptures, the existence of four gospels and the translation of the bible into different languages are seen to be examples of God's endorsement of a multicultural church. Various stories in the Scriptures such as the Tower of Babel,⁶ the story of Pentecost and other stories in Acts,⁷ as well as Galatians 3:26-29⁸ are interpreted as, or used as justification for, a vision of the

³ See Steven B Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992) for one system of categorisation of approaches to contextual theology. Bevans would name the deductive approach as "translation". Practical theologians would call it an "applied" model. See also Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 2006), 59.

⁴ Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley, 2007).

⁵ Justo González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*, (Nashville:Abingdon, 1992), 38, 41-53.

⁶ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Steve S Kang and Gary A Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), Chapter 2

⁷ DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation*, 17.

⁸ Conde-Frazier, Kang and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, 60. See also Clive Pearson, "Criss-crossing Cultures," in *Faith in a Hyphen: Cross-cultural Theologies Down Under*, p19, for a discussion on how this passage has been used not to celebrate difference, but to smooth over

church that is not complete without the inclusion of many different cultural groups. Indeed, the struggle of the early church to deal with different cultural groupings is looked to as examples to inform current praxis. This multicultural ministry is also seen to be evident in the person and ministry of Jesus. For example, Jesus is described as having ministry with those outside his cultural group, deliberately going to non-Jewish areas, and was bilingual.⁹

However the concepts and images used to provide frameworks for being church have changed over the last 30 years. A popular concept has been Hospitality using the images of host and guest. This raised the question of who is host and who is guest especially in contexts where the First Peoples have been displaced from their role as hosts in the land and are treated instead as guests. The concept of *Shalom* tries to displace this guest/host dichotomy by placing all people as brothers and sisters with none holding the power of refusal and instead centred around Christ.

An example of how these approaches have been used can be seen in this example of how to be a multicultural church which builds on Black 1999.¹⁰

At first being a multicultural church included bringing people to the centre of church life through a representative notion of inclusion. This inevitably meant ensuring that people from different cultures were on decision-making bodies. This 'inclusive' practice was founded on notions of hospitality that assumed that the host (those with power) were inviting the guests (those with less power) to enter the powerful group's domain. This approach is now being displaced somewhat by the idea of 'decentring' everyone to the margins. The focus has become on how different world-views interact and transform each other so that all are at the margins looking to the centre, which is Christ - more of a shalom model. This has been accompanied by a shift in terminology. For example, the term 'multicultural', with its connotation of monocultural silos sharing the same space, has been displaced somewhat by the terms 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural'. These terms are taken to imply boundary crossing, mutual enrichment, transformation and creation of new ways of being church.

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⁹ Aeryun Lee, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today? In Search of a Christ of the Heart," in *Faith in a Hyphen: Cross-cultural Theology Down Under*, p 90.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Black, "Decision Making and the Multiracial, Multicultural Church: A Case for Discernment," *Prism: A theological forum for the UCC* 14, no. 2 (1999). Black writes that "becoming multiracial and multicultural is not simply a numbers game. It also has to do with becoming a transformed people of diverse racial and cultural heritage, who share an authentic identity of being one in Christ" p49. In the UCA context the National MultiCultural committee was changed to Multicultural and Cross Cultural committee to emphasise the need for "active interaction". Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson, *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press), 630.

Less well explored has been the idea of how to be church in a context where the church has been and still is complicit in the dispossession of First Peoples. It is obvious in the literature that investigations into the church as a multicultural body have been more focused on inclusion and making room. When Indigenous concerns have been raised the focus has been more on the need for repentance, justice and partnership.

The Uniting Church Context

The UCA could be understood as a case study of these different approaches, making room, inclusion, repentance, justice and partnership. Our key document is *The Basis of Union*; an elegant piece of systematic theology aiming to restate the universal faith of the church. Yet, after the Uniting Church was inaugurated in 1977, contextual and practical theological concerns took centre stage. In particular, there was an emphasis on how to be the church in *Australia*. Think of the statement to the nation and other such pieces. This necessarily meant reflecting on what it meant to be church which had been and still was complicit in the displacement of first peoples and is located in a nation of migrants.

This is a timeline of the statements the UCA has made nationally regarding its relationship with First peoples and its understanding of itself as a multicultural church.

Date	Covenanting	Multicultural
1982	Establishment of Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress	
1985	Recognition by National Assembly of UAICC	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
1988	Invitation from UAICC for UCA to enter a Covenant	
1994	The Covenant	
2006		A Church for all God’s People
2009	The Preamble to the UCA Constitution	The Preamble to the UCA Constitution
2012		One Body, Many Members

On the left hand side are the events of significance in regards to UCA and First peoples, in the right column are statements made about how to be a multicultural church. You will note in the left column that the term "covenant" is used. This term in the UCA refers to the particular relationship between the

Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, which has responsibility for ministry with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the UCA as a whole. It is a term that builds on reconciliation between two estranged parties. In the book *Committed to Change* the difference is explained as below

Covenanting can only proceed on the basis of reconciliation. It is a solemn commitment between two parties entered into in the presence of God and before witnesses. In covenanting, the two parties undertake mutual responsibilities. It is about making commitments for a more just and caring future. It is based in grace and trust. It is orientated towards living together in justice in the future.¹¹

The right hand column lists the statements the UCA has made on being a multicultural church emphasising, among other things, the importance of language, culturally and linguistically diverse world views and ways of being church and equitable distribution of resources. The Preamble, passed in 2009 by the Assembly and in 2010 by a majority of other councils of the church, speaks of a church of First and Second peoples..

Having the Conversation

From the field of practical theology the pastoral cycle, or action/reflection cycle, as Heitink¹² and other suggest, take human experience of God as a valid starting point for theological reflection and as Ballard and Pritchard state includes the process of dialogue between "discovering more about the world and the gospel in the light of new knowledge and better practice; while also bringing to bear on all situations the wisdom of the tradition and the insights of faith."¹³ p34 the open ended and eschatological nature of theology and living a faithful life¹⁴ and the fusion of horizons which which we grapple with as we reflect on, explore and practice our faith.

Ordinary theology, a subset of practical theology, focuses on how non university theologically trained, people of faith articulate their theology. Ordinary theology builds on the framework of practical theology by applying it to the process of theological reflection itself. Ordinary theology recognises the speech act of articulating theology as a practice - a way that people make sense of their faith

¹¹ Delphine Delphin-Stanford and John Brown, *Committed to Change: Covenanting in the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1994), 10.

¹² Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History/theory/action domains* (Cambridge, Mass: WB Eerdmans, 1999)

¹³ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 34

¹⁴ Charles R Foster and Theodore Brelsford, *We are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life*, (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity International, 1996), 19.

and even come to decisions about other ways they live out their faith. Jeff Astley in *Ordinary Theology* states "the nature of our religious faith is partly, but significantly, determined by the way in which it came and comes (and indeed goes)"¹⁵

It is this process, the coming and going, which is the focus of ordinary theology and the focus of this thesis. I am particularly interested in the space between theory and practice — the articulation space — or as Astley puts it, "theology-in-construction." It is this in-between space, where young leaders in the UCA have the room to explore their understandings of church, covenanting and multiculturalism, which is largely neglected by the literature, and by the church. It is a place of potentially new insight, it is a place of messiness, it is a place of contradiction and paradox.

Some critique ordinary theology as being essentially a sociology of religion. However Astley's emphasis on the "work" of theology can enrich the field of practical theology at a number of points

- 1) interest in the theological expression itself as a practice of faith and how that may inform and enrich the wider church is important.
- 2) recognises the role of the interview in stimulating construction of theology
- 3) explores and understands faith from the perspective of faith and
- 4) provides important information for the church so that it can properly exercise its ministry by focussing on what the people in the pews understand to be their faith.

Within this context I will be taking ordinary theologians through this event, reflection and action circle as we discuss how they understand being a multicultural and covenanting church. The event becomes the interview, the reflection is both the interview and the reflections of the participants between interviews and at the interviews, what happens with those reflections will be an important part of honouring the participant in the research.

Hermeneutic phenomenology and interpretive phenomenological analysis enhances the insights of practical and ordinary theology and provides tools for analysis. IPA provides tools with which to analyse the interviews themselves focussing on exemplars, paradigms and themes that can be looked at across and within interviews. Hermeneutic phenomenology contributes particularly the understanding of an interview being a phenomenological event - of theology under construction and the research act being a collaboration between the researcher and the participant. In addition, the field of Cross cultural research also emphasises the collaboration between researcher and participant and that special care should be taken to make sure the participants are informed and have opportunities to shape and see the outcome of the research.

Constructing methodology

¹⁵ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002), 56.

Drawing together the discussion above points to a particular shape for the methodology. The methodology, takes human experience as a valid starting point for theological reflection. Indeed the methodology understands theological reflection itself to be an experience on which to further reflect. The event/reflection/action model of practical theology, will be used as an organising frame both for the whole research project as well as for the interview process itself. In this way the event/reflection/action model is a tool for the researcher and a process for the interview participants.

The interviews themselves are viewed as a phenomenological event - an experience of theology under construction. The interviews are viewed as a collaboration between participants' and researcher. The second phase of the research the analysis of official statements and then the third phase of the research - critical dialogue between statements and interviews within wider academic discourse points to a fusion of horizons between the researcher, the participants, the official text and the wider discourse.

