

FRIENDSHIP IN THE PRESENCE OF DIFFERENCE: CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN MULTIFAITH AUSTRALIA

Executive Summary

This paper, is a follow up to a paper received and commended to the church by the Ninth Assembly (2000) prepared by the Doctrine Work Group, "Living with the Neighbour who is Different: Christian Vocation in Multi-faith Australia." This paper mindful of the changed global context after the events of September 9/11 is written to encourage UCA members and congregations to continue in the work of developing neighbourly relations with people within our multi-cultural society who are shaped by other faiths. It finds its natural home within the consistent desire of the UCA "to be a pilgrim people serving the reconciling and renewing purposes of God" (BU par 3).

Friendship is described as human relationship marked by respect, empathy and care, a cluster of qualities that approximate to Christian love. Engagement in respectful and thoughtful inter-faith exploration and growing friendship is welcomed as part of the church's desire to participate in the healing and renewal of a human family created and loved by God, but sadly bearing the marks of human violence, injustice and misunderstanding. Engagement in such dialogue and developing friendship is built upon a fresh appreciation of the servant way of Jesus and the significance of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. This is the theological heart of the paper.

Friendship in the presence of difference is regarded as being a central Christian attitude and value. Engagement with those of other faiths is welcomed as a pathway on which we may rediscover the heart of the Christian way while also being enriched by wisdom others have to share. Distortions that have crept into Christian living and believing often become apparent in informed conversation with those who believe differently. Friendship in the presence of difference can be a significant doorway into the renewal of Christian discipleship and theology.

The paper makes reference to important issues of evangelism and pastoral care in a multi-faith society and affirms that if our society is to be built on firm and humane foundations the wisdom of the different faiths needs to be welcomed and engaged with at all levels of society. Every part of the church and every theological and spiritual stream within the UCA, together trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit, have a positive and thoughtful role to play in the promotion of friendship in the presence of difference.

At its inception in 1977 the UCA expressed its intention to be a **Pilgrim people serving the reconciling and renewing purposes of God.**¹ The 1977 "Statement to the Nation" declared that the union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia was to be understood as "a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race."² In the years since, through statements and actions across the Uniting Church, it has sought to work out the implications of this Gospel vision. In 1985 the reality of the UCA as a multi-cultural church was acknowledged and welcomed. In 1988 the Assembly rejoiced in the vision of a multi-cultural society "based on commitment to the ideals of equality of opportunity, tolerance, justice and compassion." In 1994 the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Uniting Church in Australia entered into a Covenant committing them "to discover what it means to be bound to one another in a covenant," and "to work for the advancement of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness in this land."³ In 2010 the Uniting Church in a new Preamble to its Constitution recognised the church's complicity in injustices done to Aboriginal people and acknowledged that "the First Peoples had already encountered the creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways."

¹ See *Basis of Union*, par 3

² Statement to the Nation 1977, p.617, *Theology for Pilgrims*

³ The Covenant 1994, p.636 *Theology for Pilgrims*

The Assembly Task Group on Relations with other Faiths was formed as part of the church's commitment to reconciling and renewing mission in 1988. The 2000 statement made key theological and missional statements that have stood the test of time and provide guidance for the church as it asks what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in the presence of people of other faiths.

- **“God is calling us to engage in conversation with people of other faiths.”** “The development of hospitable and respectful relationships with those of other faiths is a proper response to Christ” who “calls us to live in harmony with all other people and so contribute to a world of peace, justice and hospitality.”
- **“Christians are called to love the neighbour who is different.”** The movement from exclusion to the embrace of neighbours who are different is of the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians discover the will and power to enact this gracious embrace of the neighbour as they become more deeply immersed in the indiscriminate love of God.
- **“God has placed the contemporary church in an ideal situation to engage in genuine dialogue with those of other faiths.”** We no longer relate to those of other faiths from a position of assumed political and social superiority. From nearer to the margin of society we are free to relate to other people as servants of the unifying, reconciling purposes of God revealed and embodied in Jesus.
- **“God delights in diversity and seeks unity.”** Diversity, woven into the heart of creation, is a gift of God. The unity God intends for humanity does not destroy difference but weaves difference into a single human mat.
- **“The Spirit is present in all of life.”** “No part of life, no person is without the influence of the Holy Spirit...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.”⁴
- **“The Centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian believing is not to be compromised”** when we engage in interfaith dialogue. Christ is the foundation of Christian believing and living. We live “in Christ” and our way of being with others should be consistent with the way pioneered by Jesus.

The 2000 statement invited the church to repent of forms of evangelism that reflected imperialistic ways of living and believing. It suggested that as we move outside “our safe envelopes” to encounter God in the one from whom we differ, we may discover “the frontier of our own renewal.” In commending the statement to the church, Assembly requested that **the “Uniting Church recognise as part of (its) mission in Australia at this time, the importance of fostering neighbourly relations with people of other faiths.”** In a post 9/11 world with its polarising tendencies this has become an even more urgent task.

The 2009 Assembly adopted a significant statement on **“Jews and Judaism.”** The unique and binding relationship between Judaism and Christianity was recognised along with an acknowledgement and repentance for the many ways through which Christians over the centuries have contributed to the suffering of Jewish people. Reference is made to anti-Semitic attitudes promoted by Christian scholarship, embedded in Christian theology and cemented into Western life. This statement contributes to the Church’s ministry of reconciliation and renewal. It makes it clear that facing our own complicity in evil is a painful but necessary step within a ministry of reconciliation. Changes in the church’s liturgical life, interpretation of Scripture and theological formulations are all required.

In 2010 The Relations with other Faiths Working Group commissioned Keith Rowe to write an updated statement. The title of this statement, **“Friendship in the presence of difference”**, is carefully chosen. Real differences do exist in humanity. The gospel imperative calls us to live in friendship. Individual and corporate friendship robs difference of its power to divide, to foster distrust or to sanction violence. Friendship in the presence of difference is a gift greatly needed both in the Christian community and within the human family as a whole. The word ‘friendship’ is chosen because

⁴ The 1985 Assembly resolved that the original form of the Nicene Creed, confessing the Holy Spirit “who proceeds from the father” without adding the phrase “and the son (Latin, Filioque) be the form for use in the UCA. This theologically significant decision encourages the church to recognise that though active in the ministry of Jesus the work of the Spirit need not be confined to the work of Christ and the life of the church.

it includes a sense of growing relationship, empathy, warmth and care for others. While we may rejoice in similarities among the affirmations and wisdom of the various religions we do not want to deny the existence of very real and important differences. World religions differ in their understanding of the Divine dimension within life, the purpose of our living, the nature of human fulfilment and what it means to live together in a world of many faiths. Our Christian uneasiness in the presence of difference is something we need to recognise and address. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it well: "In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference".⁵ The possibility of the religions and people of religion being able to contribute to peace rather than conflict in our world depends on the capacity to relinquish the desire for uniformity based on what serves our comfort or power.

In spite of the pain we may feel at religion-based divisions in our world and nation we live within a gentle confidence that God uses human efforts in the fulfilment of God's purposes. While all the great religions may be in need of renewal, re-establishing contact with life affirming, peace-loving, justice seeking and unifying impulses that brought them into being our concern is to identify and remove the log in our own eye in the spirit of the words of Jesus: "why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matt.7:3). We are particularly saddened when persons and groups claiming to speak in the name of Christ vilify those of other faiths, deny them the rights others enjoy or use them as scapegoats when addressing society's problems.

Interfaith friendship is both an important contribution to communal peacemaking and an important doorway into the renewal of Christian discipleship. In friendship with those who believe differently we are faced by sharp questions that drive us to a re-examination of our own faith and rediscovery of treasures in our own tradition that have been lost or become misshapen. It is a common experience that in the act of "crossing over" into the ritual or thought world of those who believe and live differently, and then returning again into the Christian community with new questions and insights, our faith is enriched and deepened. Often we are made aware of how through unthinking adherence to inherited or popularly held beliefs or attitudes we have effectively denied the way of Christ.

Our most important task in the presence of other faiths is to rediscover Christian discipleship, as a reconciling, prophetic, hospitable way of life, as a witness and sign of God's loving purposes for all humanity. Christianity has often been captive to perspectives which regard other religious traditions as inferior. These perspectives are not compatible with the servant way of Jesus and the peaceable kingdom to which the church bears witness.

The Christian confession that Jesus is the revelation of God has a central place in Christian theology and impacts directly on our behaviour towards others and in particular those who follow other paths. The central convictions of the church hammered out in a series of councils in the fourth and fifth centuries remain as primary markers in the church's theological understandings regarding Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Trinitarian nature of God. The tragedy is that the Imperial auspices under which these councils were held tended to determine how the results would be interpreted. Titles applied to Jesus in the context of worship and that function as vehicles or symbols of commitment and devotion became used to suppress and /or deny the presence of God in other religious traditions and to imply the worthlessness of alternative wisdom. The servant way of Jesus, amply demonstrated in the Gospels and witnessed to by Paul, (Phil 2:5-11) was obscured as the church became a servant of Roman imperial power and Jesus came to be regarded as a reflection of an all-powerful and deified Emperor. The essentially counter-cultural emphases of the Gospels and of the Apostle Paul were lost as the church became infected by imperialist aspirations. In the early church Jesus' status as Lord, Saviour and Son of God was a counter-cultural affirmation of the servant way of Jesus in comparison with the imperial power of Emperors who were described in the same terms. However, by the 5th century Jesus had been co-opted to serve the Empire's search for power. The servant way through which Christians are to serve the purposes of God was largely repressed and instead the church sought numerical, financial and imperial success. Those of other faiths came to be regarded as enemies of Christ and in many cases were deemed to deserve death. Jesus, the servant of God's loving purposes, became the judge before whom the faithful cringed or sought support through the prayers of his mother. The linkage between Christian doctrine and imperialistic behaviour needs to be broken if the Christian community is to be renewed in the faith of Jesus and enabled to contribute to the human adventure in a reconciling, healing, Christ-like manner. On the way to Jerusalem the disciples argued who would have the places of honour in the Kingdom of God only to be reminded that the way they were on was the path of the servant (Mark 10:35-45). In interfaith encounter we are

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, 2003, p. vii,

called to be midwives of reconciliation rather than imperial judges of those whose way differs from ours. It is patient and demanding work.

Christian openness to truth within other religious perspectives arises from our understanding of God as Trinity. The Trinitarian understanding of God is frequently misunderstood in interfaith conversation but it is our way of affirming God to be present within life as creative energy, present in Jesus and within the human adventure and as the spirit of unity drawing individuals and communities toward their fulfilment in love, justice and peace. God is present within the human struggle for fuller life and wherever love is served and life in community maintained. Understanding God in Trinitarian terms enables us to recognise there is plurality and relationship within the very life of God. To understand God as an emperor-like judge and ruler is to deny the essential revelation of God as love expressed in and through Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The life giving, healing and unifying God witnessed to in the symbol of the Trinity invites us to build trusting and life enhancing relations between the religions and to work together for the healing of the world we share, each contributing the wisdom and strength bequeathed to us through the same Spirit. A consensus is emerging among Christian theologians that the doctrine of the Trinity provides the church with the larger theological framework we need when considering other faiths and the positive role they play within the purposes of God. God, it seems, paints on a larger canvas than the one we have designed or inherited.

What of Christian evangelism? An important element in genuine friendship is the sharing of gifts. In genuine multi-faith friendship we share what matters most to us as people nurtured within a particular faith. The gift we bring as Christians is the good news of God's love for humanity and for every individual as embodied and proclaimed in the ministry and continuing presence of Jesus Christ. This is our ministry of evangelism, our sharing, living and witnessing to the good news that has claimed us and within which we live. We share what matters most to us while also learning to appreciate what matters most to our friends. Both partners open themselves to greater truth and the broadening of the horizons within which they live. While learning from others we who follow the way of Jesus also have a gift to share for the revelation of God in Christ is distinct and has universal importance. While desiring the conversion of others to the way of Christ and his way of salvation we recognize that our words and deeds are not sufficient. When conversion occurs it comes when people led by the Holy Spirit respond to the grace of God. The way of living proclaimed and embodied in the ministry of Jesus needs to be woven into human living if the human family is to survive. The manner of our sharing the good news will always be consistent with the graciousness of the news we share. Hospitable friendship is the appropriate context within which we might share Christ and expand our understanding of the one who for us is life giver and embodiment of fulfilled humanity.

There are important **pastoral dimensions to life in a multi-faith society.** The movement of peoples between religions is likely to increase through inter-marriage and as people discover the riches within other perspectives or become disenchanted with what they inherited. The welcoming and farewelling of those who come into the life of the church or who move to another faith is an issue that needs to be explored with sensitivity.

The Uniting Church in its understanding of itself as a servant of the renewing and reconciling purposes of God and committed to the well-being of Australian society, is well placed to make a strong contribution to the development of friendship in the presence of difference among the many faiths and cultures in our society. Each congregation in its own area and each church member in their work and in their neighbourhood have a role to play in this vital task. Our doing needs to be associated with an ongoing reflection on what unnecessary roadblocks we place in the way of interfaith friendship. Synods, Presbyteries and Congregations need to be discussing these matters and sharing discoveries and hopes. Throughout the world Christians are engaged in an important and respectful discussion about what it means to live and believe as a follower of Christ in a divided world of many faiths, cultures and diverging hopes. It is less important that we arrive at a single view on these important matters than that we explore the issues together assisting one another to act in ways that are consistent with the servant way of Jesus.

A democratic society requires that diverse religious groups be invited to speak their deepest and most thoughtful truth into the public arena. In our judgement society needs the mature and thoughtful wisdom of the religions. For this to happen religious groups need opportunity and encouragement to live from and contribute to society from their deepest wisdom nourished in worship and reinforced in their own faith communities. The UCA supports the formation of religion based schools and community/worship centres that contribute to the maintenance of specific religious identity and the flourishing of the common good. We encourage UCA schools to develop neighbourly and supportive relations with schools of other religions.

The formation of interfaith councils, the provision of educational opportunities and the mixing of religions in the workplace suggest positive signs that Australians are learning to accept the reality of a multicultural and multi-faith nation. For many though it is not an easy journey. Prejudice, scapegoating and misunderstanding often prompted by isolation from people of other faiths or lack of knowledge of these other ways are still too common. Negative attitudes often feed on events and perspectives generated in other lands and brought to our shores via the media or within the scarred lives of those who have lived in places shaped by religion-fuelled conflict. UCA congregations and agencies have a role to play in encouraging informed discussion and reconciling action and challenging racist behaviours masquerading as law-abiding patriotism. We have a particular pastoral ministry to those who have come from lands where Christians are persecuted and not surprisingly find it difficult to move from distrust to friendship in the presence of difference.

CONCLUSION

As a church we are grateful for our developing friendship with those of other faiths. Christians have deepened their understanding of God and of the tasks we face together in our divided world in friendship and conversation with people of other faiths. We look forward to developing deeper friendships and discovering ways we can live together generously and work together for the common good.

We encourage politicians, decision makers and opinion shapers in commerce, industry and the media to grow in sensitive and accurate knowledge of the faiths within our society. Where religious beliefs contribute to conflict and division, we ask our national leaders to strive for understanding and reconciliation among those whose beliefs differ. We believe that lasting peace in our world is not possible unless the religious dimension of life is recognised.

Each part of the Uniting Church is invited to make the building of friendship in the presence of religious and cultural difference a priority missional objective. Whatever theological or spiritual stream of the church's life we belong to we all have a positive role to play. Trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Uniting Church commits itself to cultivating friendship in the presence of difference.