

# Make Straight His Way

## Stages on the Road to Unity

1985

### Introduction

In 1977 the Episcopal Committee for Ecumenism (Roman Catholic Church) and the Commission for Ecumenical Affairs (Uniting Church) appointed members to a joint Working Group. We have explored some areas of understanding that exist between the two churches and we are grateful for the opportunities given to us *as* members of that group to grow together in faith and hope and love.

In 1979 the Working Group presented a statement entitled "A Common Understanding of Baptism" which was subsequently endorsed by the Australian Episcopal Conference and by the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. Where attention has been given to this statement members of our churches have had preconceptions modified and some misunderstandings removed.

We believe that the time has now come for us to draw the attention of those who appointed us to a number of developments which have led us further along the path of understanding. Should the authorities of our churches see fit to give this report wide circulation in the two churches concerned, our experience could be shared by others. Many in the parishes of our churches have already some awareness of their common faith. We would expect that wide dissemination of a list of gains in recent years will increase that awareness and give to many a greater appreciation of that unity which is both Christ's gift and task for his Church.

### Some Misconceptions

There is no doubt that in the past popular stereotypes have distorted mutual understanding. It is a human failing to compare the best of one's own thought and practice with a poorer representation of other points of view. Long after responsible persons have cleared their minds of crude misrepresentations, time-worn prejudices may linger.

That is not to say that when misunderstandings have been removed we shall necessarily agree. We hold no such expectations, but we believe that it may then be possible to state the areas of disagreement in such a way as to indicate a creative way forward.

Meanwhile it may be helpful to give some examples of areas of misunderstanding and to indicate how further studies have helped to correct misrepresentations.

- a) **In Doctrine** we have frequently misconstrued each other's intentions or purposes. Roman Catholics generally saw Protestants as rejecting essential aspects of the Christian faith and themselves as defending it in all its divinely-inspired traditional patterns. Protestants generally saw Roman Catholics *as* maintaining a distorted version of the true biblical faith and themselves as reforming it to its original proclamation. In fact, at its best, each was concerned with the same ultimate goal — the preservation of the central doctrine of God's saving work in the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord.

In the discussion of justification a dichotomy arose — faith against good works, one element stressed against the other. The reality was that both traditions were concerned to preserve the divine initiative in human salvation, but neither could find a commonly acceptable way to reconcile the moral responsibility of human beings with the freedom and sovereignty of God. On this issue there are in fact differences of approach within each tradition as well as between them.

There were differing approaches to the sacraments, to the Eucharist in particular. These differences were commonly misrepresented as a contrast between overemphasis by Roman Catholics on the realistic aspects of Christ's presence and overemphasis by Protestants of the symbolic or sign dimension. In fact, both traditions recognise that any adequate understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist must hold the two aspects in the tension that attends all the mysteries of the faith. Therefore, while it is still the case that Roman Catholics often stress the presence *of* Christ in the elements and Protestants insist upon the presence of Christ *to* the congregation, these are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Likewise, in calling the Mass a sacrifice Roman Catholics did not have in mind any multiplication of the once-offered sacrifice of Christ. Nor did Protestants deny that the remembrance of his sacrificial self-offering was a key element in the Eucharist memorial.

- b) **In Practice** for many, sectarian antipathy often arose from devotional and cultural practices which they perceived *as* alien. The different traditions of architecture, conduct of worship and devotional aids such as rosaries, statues, incense — or their absence — were identified as expressions of substantial difference.

In recent years, sharing in the study of the scriptures, in worship and in prayer has overcome much of the alienation and misunderstanding. This has engendered a growing appreciation and acceptance of one another's practice.

## **The Call to Grow Together Ecumenically**

- (a) Now that past controversies are more distant and a spirit of mutual trust is growing in our churches, we wish to respond to the movement of the Spirit calling to Christian unity by striving to grow further in mutual understanding. Thus we must open our minds to a fuller grasp of divine truth, appreciating that this one truth can be experienced in a diversity of ways, which help to bring out its inexhaustible richness.
- (b) As we each look more deeply into our own heritage we do so not in a spirit of partisanship or with a desire simply to reiterate the expressions and forms of the past, but rather to discover more clearly the shared heritage of faith handed on by both our traditions. In this process we need the assistance of each other in order to see events and formulations in proper historical perspective. Such clarification of the issues can lead to that renewal of mind which is essential to our unity in Christ.
- (c) Local study and sensitive discussion of material from conversations such as ours could enrich parish life and our ability to proclaim the Gospel in Australia. We are encouraged greatly by the agreement and convergences that have been achieved internationally as the result of Roman Catholic — Methodist and Roman Catholic — Reformed dialogues. Our dialogue has its own contribution to make to Australian ecumenism, to worship, doctrine and witness.
- (d) Along with our earnest hope for mutual growth into unity we must realistically recognise that members and clergy of churches grow at varying pace. Ecumenical changes have often appeared to threaten long held identity. Much needs to be done in parishes to show that such change can lead to deeper appropriation of universal Christian conviction. As part of that search, disagreements responsibly held and clearly stated, can often bring deeper insight into the richness of that faith. That has been our experience. Local ecumenism must include frank recognition of differences without permitting them to have the last word. Exploration of common worship, mutual service, prayer, local co-operative projects and witness to our vision of social justice here and overseas can all contribute to awareness of how much we have in common in Jesus Christ.

## Stages on the Road to Unity

The process to full union takes place by stages some of which have already been passed. We recognise this to be the work of the Holy Spirit who moves our hearts and minds towards unity. We feel impelled by the same Spirit to ask the members of our churches to examine their experience and ask whether they too have been led to a greater awareness of unity by the following factors:-

1. **Our recognition of each other's baptism** was a major step towards unity. It means that we recognise each other as members of the Body of Christ and acknowledge in each other the reality of the sacramental source of our common life in Christ.
2. We hold that the **Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments** bear decisive witness to the faith we hold in common. We have not found that our differences concerning the extent of the canon of the Old Testament substantially diminish the understanding of the Christian faith which we share.
3. We each receive the ancient Christian Creeds —the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed — as authoritative statements of the faith we share, and we acknowledge the value of the Ecumenical Councils of the early Church, in which the genuine Christian faith was defended and handed on.
4. In the scholarly **enterprise of studying the** scriptures and the events and documents of Christian history we have benefited greatly from the work done in both our traditions, and a community of scholarship bridging denominational differences has emerged. This common search for truth helps to bind our churches together.
5. The problem of the place of tradition in Christian life and thought is now seen to be less divisive than it was thought to be by Catholics and Protestants in the 16th century. On the Protestant side there is now a clearer understanding of the fact that the Scriptures are read from within the historical Christian community, while on the Catholic side the need for the Church to be continually challenged by the Scriptures is more fully recognised.
6. In liturgical worship we use at times the same translations of the Scripture (e.g. the Revised Standard Version), and just as we follow the same basic structure of the liturgical year, so we follow in large measure the same cycle of Sunday readings. The unifying power of the same Word of God being proclaimed in our respective churches Sunday by Sunday should not be underestimated.

7. In our orders of Eucharistic service we draw from ancient Christian traditions, and seek also to adapt our liturgies to the needs of today. In attending each other's Eucharistic liturgies and in studying each other's liturgical books we recognise many common features; these help us to feel at home, despite the differences between our churches

We look forward to the day when participation together at the one Eucharistic table will manifest the fullness of our communion in Christ.

8. The experience of **praying together** over the years has brought us to respect and value the spirit of faith and prayer that we find in each other, and has taught us to appreciate the diversity of spiritual traditions that has developed in our churches, manifesting the richness of the Christian life.
9. Our common witness to Christ and his Gospel in what are often very secular surroundings has helped to bind us together. In the Social Justice Statements of 1983 ("Changing Australia") and 1984 ("It's a Rocky Road") we have examples of how the appropriate agencies of several churches in Australia can take a joint stand on **issues of importance in Australian Society**.
10. Common action for **justice in the world** and appreciation of the practical concern for the poor manifested in both our traditions have shown us more of what we have in common in our life in Christ.

## **Further Stages**

Having been brought thus far by the Spirit, we trust in his guidance as we look ahead to further stages on the road to unity. We see the following tasks as important:—

- (a) **The furthering of growth in mutual understanding and cooperation at the local parish level.**  
It is from this developing union of minds and hearts among Christian people themselves and the working of the Spirit of unity and charity in them that we hope for still greater impetus in the movement towards full communion.
- (b) **Further dialogues between our two traditions at all levels of the Church's life.**  
In this way the insights of each tradition can become better appreciated by all and entrenched positions which are not founded on the Gospel can be uncovered and challenged.
- (c) **Explanation of our respective understandings of fundamental issues of human existence.**

Considerations of such questions (e.g. marriage) become increasingly critical at a time when there is a growing gap between the Church's teaching and widely accepted community practices. It is expected that this would lead to further discoveries of points of convergence and difference, not only in relation to the subject but also to our understanding of the nature of Authority.

**(d) Use of the rich Christian sources of Faith and culture which we share.**

In our conversations there has been frank recognition of the effect of cultural and political factors as potent causes of disunity in our past. We have been encouraged by the many examples, especially since World War II, of old enemies making genuine peace and becoming partners and even friends. They have done that with honourable, but merely secular, motives. We are confident that the rich Christian sources of faith and culture which we share will continue to bind our two churches together in true Christian esteem and affection. We are particularly interested in exploring the great resources of liturgy, devotion and personal prayer in each other's tradition and in encouraging the culturally creative among our faithful to enliven and renew those resources where they have tended to become hackneyed or dated or threadbare.

We have no hesitation in standing together under the authority of the Trinity and thus we confess: "God comes to us in Jesus Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit". God has revealed himself in his Word: in the covenant promise inaugurated with Israel, continued in Jesus Christ, made presently effective in the power of the Spirit. To Him we belong.