

Uniting in Worship?

Proposals towards a Liturgical Ecumenics

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I take it for granted that the Uniting Church is called by God to seek and bear witness to the unity of all Christian people, a unity that is, at once, ‘Christ’s gift and will for the Church’.¹ I also take it as given that ecumenists in good standing not only understand the biblical, historical and theological manifestations of this calling, but are also thereby motivated to work for its realization—to seek, in faith, the coming fullness of Christ’s church, which is his body, the region of the Spirit. For while the unity of Christ’s body is indeed an unmerited gift—the putting to death of old enmities with Christ on the cross (Eph 2.13-22)—it is a gift that the church has found little discipline to receive. In the five hundred or so years since the Reformation, the churches have found plenty of good ‘reasons’ for putting aside the disciplined practise of visible unity in Christ. In this paper, however, I should like to discuss two apparently *new* threats to ecumenical endeavour: ecclesial post-denominationalism and cultural post-modernity. I should like to outline how it is that these phenomena seem able to upset the ecumenical project; but then go on to suggest ways in which a specifically *liturgical* theology might provide resources by which those difficulties may be overcome.

Post-modernity

It has become common-place to refer to contemporary western culture as ‘post-modern’. The reader will be aware, however, that there are several different schools of thought on the subject. The most incredible account says that postmodernity is so named because it comes ‘after’ modernity in some historical sense, modernity being that period of unrivalled expansion in human knowledge and self-confidence known as the European Enlightenment. Here postmodernity is understood as the end of the age of Enlightenment, the end of our peculiar Western certainty that everything is getting better and better. The obvious difficulty with this account is in its over-schematic historicisation. It is simply not the case that the Enlightenment dream has died, and the

¹ *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church in Australia, paragraph 1. All quotations are from the 1992 ‘inclusive language’ edition.

best evidence for that is the ABC. There are still plenty of programmes on the public broadcaster about how scientists, in particular, are improving our lives through clever research into medicine, agriculture, environment and communications technology. There is also the evidence of the recent election campaign, which successfully tapped into a communal belief that the good life was still possible as long as one has sufficient economic resources to buy a house, a couple of cars, a home entertainment system, a gym-membership and shares in Telstra. If we did not believe in the power of technologised capital to deliver the good life, I suggest, we would not have voted as we did.

Yet this suggests a socio-economic way of understanding the culture of postmodernity. While we may not have lost the belief that we can buy or create the good life, we have certainly curtailed the spatiality of that good life. It is no longer a common good or a common-wealth, as in modernity, but rather the private bubble of home and nuclear family. What the politicians and the advertisers both appeal to is the supremely privatized dream of mum, dad, and the kids in a house-sized bubble of wealth and security, where there is no longer *any* obligation to share one's wealth, fortune or knowledge with a wider community or tribe. Here people no longer dream of emancipation or liberation for the poor or ignorant or marginalised, as in modernity. They dream of protecting themselves from such ills through the accumulation of private wealth.

Another account of postmodernity is epistemological. Human knowledge, it is claimed, must now be understood as necessarily perspectival and partial, even fragmentary. In the romantic phase of modernity, it was often said that we see what we need to see and know what we need to know. We create universes for ourselves, universes that are habitable, but these do not in any way represent objective reality, reality beyond perception. Extra-perceptual reality, it was said, is essentially inaccessible, because our senses as well as our minds are simply not wired to receive such information with accuracy. We are all, rather, like artists or poets, always acting upon the environment in which we live in such a way that it conforms to our mythological or psychological desires. Now, while this Romantic account continues to inspire dreamers and artists to greater feats of personal self-expression, it has hardly proved adequate beyond their circles of monied patronage. For there are clearly many things that interrupt the private mythological reverie: sickness, disaster, poverty, the weather, a denouement in love, the death of a friend—indeed,

anything which is capable of creating an embodied experience of pain. Personal pain is unlikely to form part of any personally chosen universe; it must therefore represent events that come from beyond us somehow, from a world outside perception, a world of body and materiality. This account of post-modernity therefore emphasises the severe limits on human self-realization and power. We are free to make and express ourselves, but only up to a point. There is much that we can neither know nor control, and a great deal of that which we cannot control appears to be located in our own selves, our own minds and bodies. Who has not experienced the madness of love, for example, when the idea of the other so possesses us that we are hardly able to master our own desire?

Finally, then, let me suggest that at the heart of the post-modern condition is a deep uncertainty or scepticism about either the capacity or the desirability of making promises or binding covenants with other people. How can you make a promise if you can't completely know or master the environment in which that promise is made? How can you make a promise if you cannot entirely know or master even your own self, your desire or your body? How can you make a promise if you cannot entirely know or master the future? And what of the other with which a covenant might be sealed? If they, too, are unable to master these things, then how can I trust him or her to follow through what they intend? How can I even know that what they intend is what I think they intend? These questions are deeply imbedded, I suggest, in all the accounts of post-modernity we have considered. With the severe circumscription of knowledge, sociality and self-mastery, we have become deeply ambivalent about the successful performance of promises. Post-modern culture is therefore that milieu in which it seems absurd to make covenants, especially those covenants which stretch beyond the boundaries of the front fence.

At the heart of ecumenical endeavour is the call to covenantal *koinonia* or community. Theologically, it has now become commonplace to define the church as that community which, precisely as the body of Christ, participates in the radically hospitable communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.² The church is that community which has died with Christ, thus putting aside every form of human division, in order to find itself anew within the *kenotic* mutuality of trinitarian self-realization. Here, as Bonhoeffer said, the baptised Christian is called to enter into a vowed communion with others by first entering

² See for example Miroslav Wolf, *After Our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997.

into a vowed communion with Christ.³ By joining with Christ in his baptism into death, a death which renders null and void every power or principality that makes for division, the Christian also puts to death every sin that would divide him or her from the neighbour. Galatians says:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ (3.27, 28).

In the new spatiality of being ‘in Christ’ we therefore share in the covenanting mission of God, which is nothing less than the Trinitarian expansion of divine *perichoresis* to include the faithful and eventually, we believe, the whole creation. Thus the Johannine prayer which, in many ways, has provided the charter for ecumenism since the second century:

[I ask] that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me (17.20, 21).

Invisible unity with God is not enough. It is important that the divine community finds its likeness in a visible—that is, ritual and ethical—communion between Christians. That this communion is to be understood within the Jewish tradition of covenant is made clear by the institution narratives in the synoptic gospels: ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.’ (Mk 14.24). For Israel, the facing of God in covenant was always enacted and mediated through a facing of neighbour in both ritual and ethical sacrifice. Here selfhood could never be realised apart from the permanent and enduring injunction from God to *care* for the neighbour.

In light of this appallingly brief account of *koinonia* it is clear, is it not, that the ecumenical impulse towards the renewal of the church in trinitarian unity clashes rather badly with the post-modern anxiety about making promises, vows or covenants of any kind. Certain kinds of theologians would then, perhaps, argue that what we are faced with in this situation is exactly that kind of difficulty which gives the lie to any neo-Tillichian theology of correlation between the question inherent in human anxiety and its gospel answer. For here post-modern anxiety regarding covenantal relations would appear to render the gospel impulse toward community rather irrelevant: put simply, the gospel can deliver only the very opposite of that which people are longing for. This unfortunate consequence would appear to be all the more unfortunate in that

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein, London: SCM Press, 1954, pp. 10-12.

circumstance which apparently faces the Uniting Church right now, namely, radical post-denominationalism.

Post-denominationalism

What I mean by the formulation ‘post-denominationalism’ is this: not the passing away of organised Christian denominations, for there is ample evidence that the larger ones (at least) shall survive, but rather the passing away of denominational loyalties, such that people will stay with a particular denomination for life. I am a case in point. Nurtured and converted within the life of the Baptist Union of Tasmania, I am now a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. Still, while on study-leave between 2001 and early 2004, I became the honorary pastor of a little Baptist church in South Yarra. Some would call that a lack of denominational loyalty! If that is the case, then there is a great deal of disloyalty around today, especially amongst the young. My current congregation, for example, includes former Anglicans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox, Pentecostals, and Salvationists. I discovered, the other day, that one of my elders is not even technically a Christian, because he has never been baptised.

In addition, it is today quite difficult to convince people to become what I like to call ‘ministering members’ of our churches. There are many who attend from time to time, some of them regularly. There are some who were baptised as children, or even confirmed as teenagers, but these same people will steadfastly refuse to accept any position of real responsibility within the life of our congregations. I know very well that I shall soon lose some of my people to the local Baptist church, because they have a rock band and lots of pop music. I know, also, that I shall gain some disillusioned attendees from other churches, though they may not join with us in anything other than the occasional worship service.

These stories, which are repeated over and over in practically every church in the country, would seem to confirm the triumph of that post-modern anxiety towards covenant I wrote about earlier. People, even apparently Christian people, seem more and more impervious to becoming ‘joiners,’ throwing their lot in with others for better or for worse, simply because that is what Christian people are called to do. Many folk are apparently choosing the contrary, reducing their sense of covenantal responsibility to the barest minimum: to provide a place of safety and (relative) economic ease for their

nuclear families. Ironically, most of these people seem content to work very, very long hours at the office in order to finance this private bubble. It is tempting to conclude that many people are not prepared to redirect some of those working hours toward the ministry of the church because the church cannot reward them (for either theological or financial reasons) with the goods they most desire. But the situation is almost certainly more complex than that. People work long hours at the office for other reasons as well. Home life may be difficult or lonely. Work may provide a ready society of peers who share one's essential culture and outlook, while the church does not. Work may provide a way to be in casual relationship without there being any expectation toward commitment (except, perhaps, to the completion of tasks).

But there is another kind of post-denominationalism at work in the Uniting Church. We are now well beyond the time when the phrase 'Uniting Church' could be said to represent a single kind of ecclesiology or ecclesial practise, to say nothing of other dimensions of Christian life. Our *Basis of Union* states that the Assembly has responsibility for determining matters of faith and order, that is, of 'doctrine, worship, government and discipline' and the like.⁴ And so it does. The Assembly indeed deliberates on such matters, and makes decisions which are binding on the whole church. Yet, it is increasingly clear that a great many Presbyteries and congregations are either openly hostile to the decisions promulgated by the Assembly, or deliberately disengaged with anything that the wider Uniting Church says or does. New groupings and lobbying factions have arisen, often rallying (still) to tired old categories such as 'liberal', 'reformed' or 'evangelical'. Many congregations pursue an essentially independent ecclesial practise, except where they must engage with the presbytery in order to find a new minister. Furthermore, it is my observation that Presbyteries and Synods usually behave as if there is nothing they can do to influence or discipline congregations that are apparently out of step with Assembly standards of doctrine, worship or ministry practise. All of this speaks of an endemic lack of responsible loyalty or covenant in the Uniting Church as a national body, and this is manifested, I would argue, in unresolved arguments about the faith and order of the church which have been around since well before union. What is our ecclesiology? In what do we find our unity? What are the limits of our diversity?

⁴ Paragraph 15(e)

My own reading of Andrew Dutney's history of union suggests that questions of faith and order were given a fresh and thorough theological treatment in the early stages of the discussions toward union; yet, by the time the second *Basis* was drafted in the late sixties, this theology had been largely marginalised and flattened by the pressures of denominational pragmatism.⁵ If this perception is true, then the roots of our post-denominational problems lie in theological as well as cultural directions. The *Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* laments that the wider ecumenical movement has recently taken its eyes off the central questions of faith and order as well. The authors argue that the World Council of Churches has, since 1989, all but reduced ecumenism to a pragmatic focus on Life and Work, that is, on our *doing* a very limited number of things together.⁶ But doing some things together, argue the authors, is not enough. It is a scandal that we still cannot break bread together, or recognise each other's ministries. Only by taking up where *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* left off, only by continually asking 'What is the faith, and how shall we practise our common faith together?' shall the church continue to make genuine progress towards the *koinonia* which is Christ's gift and calling.⁷ Clearly it is difficult for denominational authorities to pursue questions of faith and order on a church-to-church basis if these issues are being neglected internally. Even if, for example, the Uniting and Lutheran churches were to recognise one another's presbyters, would there be any guarantee that all Lutheran congregations would accept the Eucharistic presidency of a woman or a gay man?

It would seem, therefore, that inter-denominational dialogue, indispensable as it is, can no longer be the only game in town. Efforts should also be made to get the leading protagonists of various trans-denominational groupings to talk with one another. Who these groups might be, and how we might engage them in conversation together, will form the remaining substance of this article.

Conversations about worship: ecumenism for a post-denominational age

It is my contention that amongst the more fruitful ways of engaging trans-denominational groups in substantial ecumenical dialogue with one another is through a discussion about worship practices. The recently arrived discipline of *liturgical theology* has been

⁵ Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986.

⁶ Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *In One Body Through the Cross*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003, p. 24.

⁷ *In One Body Through the Cross*, pp. 44-46

particularly concerned to take Christian *worship practices* as the key source for its reflections.⁸ The movement has taken a saying of Prosper of Aquitaine at the Council of Carthage (418 CE) as its motto: *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, ‘the law of worship constitutes the law of belief’. (The maxim is often presented in its shorter form: *lex orandi, lex credendi*, ‘worship shapes belief’). In some parts of the movement, the saying is invoked to elevate the worship practices of the church to a place of pre-eminent importance for theological reflection in general. Aidan Kavanaugh, for example, argues that worship is not just one source of theology amongst others, but the ‘ontological condition’ of theology, the context in which the originating Word is best heard and performed in the faith of the church. ‘The liturgy’ says Kavanaugh, ‘does not merely reflect but actualises concretely and in a sustained manner that basic repertoire of faith which is irreducible; it does this to a degree of regular comprehensiveness no other mode or level of faith-activity can equal.’⁹

At first glance, Protestants may wonder at Kavanaugh’s apparent lack of regard for the normativity of Scripture. Is not the Bible the norm of norms in that it presents unique and apostolic testimony to the Word of God who is Christ? Should not worship therefore conform to the patterns and practices hallowed in Scripture? Others, Orthodox and many Catholics, may argue that while worship is indeed normative, it is itself normed by the traditional teaching of the episcopal orders of the church or, occasionally, by the experience of the Spirit in a saintly life of mission, performed in imitation of Christ. For is it not the bishops or other episcopal authorities who approve any changes to the liturgy; and isn’t it the ever-new call of the Spirit of love in missionary situations of poverty and need that (eventually) forces the church to adapt its rites, thereby acknowledging a certain normativity from mission?

In view of these questions, some have argued for a three-fold interplay of *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi* (‘the law of living’) in the norming of the Christian life, where none of these dimensions is allowed to ‘norm’ apart from the co-inherent authority of the others.¹⁰ Don Saliers, for example, argues that

⁸ Some trace the beginning of the liturgical theology movement to the publication of Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966). See, for example, Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 13.

⁹ Aidan Kavanaugh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1978), p. xii.

¹⁰ E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 27.

The mutually critical correlation of liturgy and ethics is part of the critical reciprocity between *lex orandi* (pattern of prayer) and the *lex credendi* (pattern of belief). But these issue in the *lex agendi* (pattern of intention-action) of the church. Hence we may say that true doxology issues in fitting orthodoxy as reflective faith, and both in orthopraxy of the church's servanthood in the social order in which it is placed.¹¹

Louis-Marie Chauvet, who poses the problem in terms of a hermeneutics of ecclesial identity, offers a more nuanced account. *The church is most itself*, he says, *in worship*. That affirmation should not be taken to imply that Christians do not belong to or do the work of Christ in their scattering during the week, but only that the church 'manifests its identity best as a concrete liturgical assembly'.¹² Why? Because the sacramental character of worship provides the primary site for a 'symbolic' or hermeneutical 'exchange' between the address of God in Christ and the existential world of ethical and missional decision. By this he means nothing other than what we have been talking about under the rubric of 'covenant' in this paper: that Christian worship effects a unique and real exchange of identity and vocation between God and human beings, albeit in a way which acknowledges God's priority in the process.¹³

Now, if worship is anything, it is the performance of grace in the shape of thanksgiving or blessing. Worship communicates the radically *new* blessing of God in and as the human act of repeating God's former blessings, performatively, in a non-identical *anamnesis*.¹⁴ Jean-Luc Marion says that it is a 'fundamental rule of revelation' that 'There is no presence of God among men, if men do not bless him and the one he has sent'. It is not that God is unable to present Godself anyway, whether we recognise it or not. Rather, because this God gives Godself as grace or blessing, only the person who also blesses is able to *recognise* the gift without disfiguring its meaning.¹⁵ Since worship is exactly the blessing which Marion describes, it is worship that is able to *reveal* the grace which would otherwise remain hidden or implicit within the Christian life as a whole. It is therefore unique, in Christian existence, as the place of graced experience which also enables participants to both *recognise* and *perform* that experience in all the business of life. All of which is to say that Kavanaugh may well be right. Perhaps

¹¹ Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, p. 187. cf. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 4-11 and Kevin Irwin, *Liturgical Theology: A Primer* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 68-72.

¹² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 34.

¹³ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, p. 123.

¹⁴ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 154, 155.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 129.

worship *is* unique in what it makes possible ontologically. Worship, I submit, is a transformative encounter by which God takes on a body- or existential-self and human beings take on a spirit- or eschatological-self. In worship, identities are ex/changed—changed as from a different ‘here’ and a different ‘now’—in such a way that both the realm of God and the world of human beings are ontologically, that is *really*, altered.

Liturgical theology, then, represents an explicit attempt to interpret the whole of Christian existence in and through the language and symbols of worship. Worship is neither the expression of an overwhelmingly *human* life, understood as that realm somehow beyond the reach of God, nor the expression of an overwhelmingly *divine* life, understood as somehow beyond the reach of the human. Worship is, rather, the privileged site of negotiation or exchange whereby each of these realities comes to accomplish themselves as truly divine or truly human in and through the interlocutory agency of the other. In this worship simply repeats, ritually but not identically, that *paradigm* of worship I call the Pasch or passage of Jesus of Nazareth. For the Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, is precisely that confluence-in-difference of the divine offering of love and the human offering of faith that ecumenists call ‘covenant’.

A taxonomy of worship-based theologies

From this point of view, to engage different groups in a discussion of their worship practices would already be a discussion of their most fundamental sense of faith and order. It suggests, also, that groups may best be identified and engaged, for the purposes of ecumenical dialogue, by their approach to worship. The following taxonomy may prove useful as a starting point in this new, post-denominational, endeavour.¹⁶ I have identified six groups of churches, groups which transcend formally denominational boundaries. In each case, I begin by describing its corporate worship practise; I then engage in some speculation about the kind of theology that practise might imply, giving particular attention to the attitude that group is likely to have toward the kind of post-modern culture I outlined earlier.

1. **Traditional sacramental churches.** Congregations use a familiar text which is drawn from traditional sources. Some or all of it is sung. The order follows the

¹⁶ In what follows, I have adapted and nuanced a taxonomy first proposed in Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden (eds), *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 views*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004.

classical fourfold pattern of gathering rites/ liturgy of the word/ Eucharist/ and missional rites. The Sunday lectionary and the church year are adhered to faithfully. Although led by a principle minister, the people participate in worship by singing, antiphonal responses, changes in posture, and by receiving the bread and the wine from a server. The ordained minister invariably preaches a relatively brief homily which reflects upon the Scriptures for the day in a fairly general way. Incense and icons may be used. The preferred musical instrument.

Traditional liturgical churches are likely to view God as essentially hidden in mystery, and yet present to the community of faith through word and sacrament. Authoritative teaching comes primarily by a faithful re-presentation of ancient tradition. The church's mission is primarily to repeat these traditions by faithful Sunday gathering and the upright moral behaviour of individuals in all the business of life. These churches tend to be very hospitable to 'higher' forms of liberal western culture, but quite disparaging towards 'popular' culture.

2. **Traditional Hymn and Preaching churches.** Here congregations sing at least four familiar hymns which are interspersed with prayers of thanksgiving and petition, in varying orders. The zenith of the service is the sermon, which may come from an ordained minister or a lay preacher. The preacher usually utters the majority of the prayers and Scripture readings as well. The people's participation in worship is limited to congregational singing, or leading others in song through the choir. The organ is again the instrument of choice. When Communion is celebrated, this often begins after non-members have been dismissed. Deacons or elders assist the preacher with simple prayers of thanksgiving, after which communion is distributed to the congregation in their seats. The lectionary and church year are usually optional. Where these are followed, there is often a great deal of ignorance about how and why.

Traditional hymn and preaching churches are usually free-church Protestant in their origins. God is viewed as one who has acted in history through the events recorded in the Bible, but who now lives in heaven having completed the work of salvation. The church is the community which gathers on Sundays to sing praise to God for this completed work. Its mission is to remember the story and live according to its ethics. Its members therefore seek to work hard for the sake of

their families, but they also give substantial voluntary time to agencies that care for the sick or the marginalised. The primary teaching authority is the ordained minister.

Traditional hymn and preaching churches are usually quite disengaged with contemporary cultural trends. They tend to preserve older cultures and theologies (either conservative or liberal), especially those associated with the member's formative years.

- 3. Praise and Worship churches.** Worship in these churches is led by a band of musicians and singers from the 'stage'. I use that word advisedly, because the church building resembles a theatre or entertainment centre. The people participate in worship through singing and through short, spontaneous, prayers. A long bracket of upbeat contemporary songs extolling God's character are sung ('praise'), followed by a number of quieter tunes expressing the intimacy of the worshipper with God ('worship'). Extempore prayers are offered by the singers between songs. There may be an extended period of 'singing in the Spirit', where short sentences are sung over and over in a hypnotic fashion. A short sermon on giving to God (in order to be blessed by God) is preached by the worship leader, with musical accompaniment, and the monies are then collected as a primary act of worship. This is followed by more singing, then a longer sermon from the senior pastor on typical suburban concerns. There is very little reading of Scripture, usually only a few verses. During the next bracket of singing, people are invited to come forward for prayer ministry. This part can go on for a very long time. When the Lord's Supper is celebrated, it is usually attached to the end of this ministry time via a brief institution narrative.

Praise and worship churches see God primarily as the Spirit of Jesus, who is alive and living in the hearts of his people. The mission of the church is to change people's lives through an experiential encounter with Christ, and then to nurture them in this primary relationship through group-based bible-study and prayer. Teaching authority resides primarily in the charismatic senior pastor, who lives the life of faith in an exemplary way.

Praise and worship churches are usually very accepting of contemporary suburban culture, especially in its 'family-first' emphasis. There is much use of popular forms of entertainment and multimedia technologies. These churches are nevertheless very critical of 'leftist' or 'liberal' culture and values.

4. **Seeker Churches.** The seeker-churches are quite similar, in many ways, to Praise and Worship churches in their use of multimedia and contemporary music. The people participate by singing and by brief bursts of spontaneous affirmation. The building resembles an auditorium. The service begins with a long sequences of songs, often expressing praise or love of God, but in a language that is a little more 'everyday' in its register than with Praise and Worship. A few extempore prayers are offered by the worship leader between songs. There are informal bits where worshippers are asked to greet or converse with each other. The sermon is often presented as a creative piece of theatre or personal testimony, designed to convince 'seekers' that they need Christ. Scripture is read sparingly. An 'altar call' is usually issued after the sermon, with accompanying music. This can go on for some time. There is rarely a communion or Lord's Supper component in public worship.

God, for seeker churches, is hidden in the details of everyday life, calling and inviting people to follow Christ. The church's mission is to point this out to people, to identify the Christ in everyday culture and invite them to acknowledge this Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Having made this commitment, as with the Praise and Worship churches, the believer is nurtured in faith by prayer and bible-study, usually in small groups or in larger teaching seminars led by the senior pastor. The attitude to popular consumer culture is usually very positive. Seeker churches look for the 'Christ within culture', often using clips from movies or popular music during the sermon. Like Praise and Worship churches they are usually critical of 'leftist' or 'liberal' culture.

5. **Alternative Churches.** 'Alternative' churches can meet in grungy gallery-spaces, old church buildings, domestic lounge-rooms or coffee-shops. They tend to gather less-than-weekly, often monthly, and are mostly composed of younger people. The Bible is read and a communion meal is shared, often after the model of a domestic meal. The readings are presented and reflected upon using multi-

media technology or more traditional arts such as painting, sculpture or drama. The prayers for others are offered using sensory symbols such as rocks, candles or water. There is usually time for discussion, and sometimes lots of silence. The up-front leadership of the service is shared around.

God is seen, in Alternative churches, as a deep-structure that inspires and sustains the very best that human culture has achieved. There is often either a neo-pagan or 'historical Jesus' feel about these churches. The mission of the community is to show people how God is already involved in their lives, and how God wants to support and welcome them in the living of those lives. Teaching authority is formally democratic. It is the will of the Spirit, manifest in a consensus of opinion within the community as it gathers, that is authoritative.

Alternative churches tend to be very critical of both consumer-culture and more systematic or abstract versions of Christian theology. Narrative theology and poetry are very popular. Social justice is a major theme. Alternative churches are usually very welcoming of 'green' or 'socialist' culture and ideology.

6. **Ancient-Future Churches.**¹⁷ 'Ancient-future' churches explicitly try to blend the traditional four-fold liturgical pattern, including many of the traditional texts, with an 'alternative worship' sense of music, art and egalitarian intimacy. Worshippers participate by singing, antiphonal response, bidding prayers, and various body postures. Worship in the round is common, with a central communion table. Icons are placed or projected around the circle. Incense and candles are used with abandon, as are the church year and the lectionary. The preaching has a biblical/prophetic feel about it. The Eucharist is shared every Sunday and there is often a simple 'agape' meal after the service.

Ancient-future churches are usually very critical of consumer culture, but can be equally critical of 'trendy, lefty' alternatives as well. They are interested in 'converting' human culture from the inside out. Tending towards post-structural theologies that give priority to Christ as the Word, God is understood as a Trinitarian community who, in the paschal events, has *interrupted* human history

¹⁷ The term 'ancient-future' was coined and defined primarily by Robert E. Webber in *Worship Old and New*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994. See also his *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996.

and culture with a creative and salvific word from ‘outside’, which nevertheless wells up from ‘inside’ human experience. The mission of the church is to re/present this Word in ways which will continue to fracture and convert both the human heart and human culture. Ancient-future churches use a renewed form of the ancient baptismal catechumentate as a basis for evangelism and the formation of faith.

The pastoral leaders of Ancient-future churches are usually (relatively) young, well-educated, graduates from mainline Protestant seminaries. Most of them come from classically evangelical backgrounds, often in the ‘radical discipleship’ mode. They are usually ordained, or are training for ordination, within mainline churches. They wield considerable personal influence in the midst of what are otherwise, formally at least, very democratic decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Denomination-based ecumenical dialogue is faced with serious obstacles in the current climate. Deeply influenced by late or ‘post’-modernity, many Christian people are no longer inclined to be ‘joiners’ who commit themselves to a particular denomination for life. Neither is denominational identity so easy to define. Although participants in ecumenical dialogues must surely represent the ‘official’ position of their denominations, they can no longer claim that their member congregations actually *hold to* any of the official positions. In this environment, the ecumenical movement has tended to focus on what denominational agencies can *do together* in terms of Life and Work. What this policy has failed to achieve, however, is any measurable progress on the fundamental question of what the Christian faith is, and therefore how it is to be practised by the *whole Christian ecumene*. If we no longer believe that it is possible to answer this question in a genuinely inclusive and ecumenical way, then the colonisation of Christianity by secular modernity is, I suggest, already complete.

In the Uniting Church, we have been setting up *internal* dialogues for a number of years now, particularly around questions of human sexuality. In the early stages, these focussed on behaviour and ethics, but then we realised that there were perhaps more fundamental questions of faith and order at stake as well. Since then, the Assembly Standing Committee has been seeking to promote intra-church dialogues on questions

like ‘What is the role of the Bible in faith?’ and ‘How does one interpret the Bible?’ I humbly suggest that this approach, while fruitful in some quarters, is unlikely to become widely influential, mainly because it is seeking to answer questions that few believers are actually asking. Most Uniting Church people have *already been formed* in their answers to such questions by the *way in which they worship*. If we begin with worship, I suggest, if we gather to talk with one another about the faith being formed in our different worship practices, then we shall perhaps be able to see not only the real *source* of our differences, but also discern ways to listen for a new *proclamation* from God that is capable of changing our minds and hearts, every one.

I have therefore argued, in this paper, for a three-fold change of strategy in ecumenical dialogue.

- (1) While the inter-denominational dialogues clearly need to continue, these should give renewed priority to questions of faith and order.
- (2) In recognition of the fact that our denominations are themselves very diverse in faith and practise, we would do well to set up *pan*-denominational dialogues between segments or regions of the ecumenical church which are clearly operating out of different understandings of the faith.
- (3) A promising way to do this, I suggest, is to identify and gather together representatives of these different approaches to *worship*. A dialogue within and about worship, I have argued, immediately takes participants into questions of faith and order, for worship is that place in which revelation and ethics dialogue with one another in a pre-eminently formative manner.

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