

Reinventing Ecumenism for the 21st century

Can we move from conference table to dinner table?

This reflection is about reinventing ecumenism – especially in Aotearoa New Zealand, because I am concerned about the future of the movement that defined so much of our lives as Christians through the 20th century.

Many of us lived and breathed ecumenism and saw it as the only way ahead for the church. We became post denominational Christians because we thought our denominations had seen the writing on their walls. But not everyone wanted to read what was written.

For generations after mine in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is as though the ecumenical movement never happened. Certainly not in any structured and institutional way. I look back on forms like the National Council of Churches, the Campaign for Christian Order, the Plan for Union, publications like *Moment* and *Accent* and think of them with the same affection and nostalgia as my old Vauxhall or my Ariel 650cc Huntmaster; elegant, state of the art vehicles that once defined my life and now rust away in obscurity.

I am struggling to find a comparable campaign that had a similar impact and suffered a similar disappearance. Moral Rearmament? The Charismatic Movement - except that continues on more obviously?

Maybe that last comparison is worth lingering over. Maybe ecumenism also continues on, only less obviously and visibly? What used to be called rather condescendingly ‘wild ecumenism’ still flourishes. Churches work together at local, individual, informal levels; Protestant parents don’t have heart attacks any more at the prospect of their children marrying Roman Catholics, or Bahais. Muslims pose more of a challenge. But most parents are pleased that their children get married at all.

And the obvious wisdom of inter-faith dialogue and mutual respect is not the scandal it was fifty years ago. Whether religions can find a way of getting on with each other is no longer just a theological challenge. It is an issue for the survival of the planet.

And the broader meaning of ecumenism beyond any church walls – the search for shalom among all God’s people, across the whole inhabited earth, seeing the whole world as the oikos – the house of an indwelling God who lives and breathes through the whole creation – that sort of ecumenism has never been more fashionable, more welcomed, more urgent.

So what happened? What stopped the ecumenical movement so suddenly? In an earlier essay entitled “When the kissing had to stop” I explored some of those reasons.

“What stopped us? A lack of nerve? A lack of courage and commitment? A lack of clarity? Shortcuts in consultation and preparation? Shortage of leaders? None of those things. I think we underestimated the real depth and breadth of the ecumenical vision we claimed. I think we trusted too naively and uncritically in the denominational legacies we carried so proudly. We treated them like battleships when they only deserved to be tug boats that would nudge and bump us out of our safe harbours and send us out to sea.

“I think a huge amount of ecumenical energy was diverted from structural and political reform into experiential revival provided by the charismatic movement. That was itself a form of untamed and unlicensed ecumenism

though in retrospect it hasn't proved to be very revolutionary in crossing theological lines. But it certainly resonated with the individualism and sensory aesthetic of the age and proved more attractive to baby boomers than institutional ecumenism.

"I think we were prisoners in a monocultural orthodoxy that simply wasn't resilient and robust enough to prepare us for the turmoil of the 1990s and the new millennium.

By and large the ecumenism of the 1970s and 80s did try to come to terms with the gender revolution, the challenge of feminist theology, the beginnings of an inclusive language for thinking and talking about God. Three women sharing the leadership of the Conference of Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand spoke volumes about the commitment of the conference.

"In hindsight, we underestimated the strength and depth of the Maori renaissance well underway at the time of the Plan for Union and the new conference. The Presbyterian Maori Synod (1954), the Methodist Maori Division (1973), the Bishopric of Aotearoa (1978), Te Runanga Hahi Katorikia (1983) were all signs pointing to a determination of Maori Christians to shape their own brand of ecumenism. I don't think we read those signs carefully enough.

"A sobering question for Anglicans is whether we would ever have been able to revise our constitution and begin a three tikanga church sharing authority and power with Maori and Pasifika if we had said yes to organic union and become part of a uniting church?

Structurally, the new ecclesiology proposed by the plan for union would have made that move impossible. And the bicultural hospitality we have so slowly and painfully begun to learn how to give and receive would not have happened."

All of that is the backdrop to what is still a dilemma and a mystery to me. More recently I've wondered whether the paralysis has more to do with a failure to find the right trigger or tipping point. The volatility of ecumenical energy and the inspirational breadth of the ecumenical vision has not gone away. It is rather that we so often fail to find the catalyst to catch the vision.

What made the modern ecumenical movement so powerful was the immediacy and urgency of the issues it focused on. The disunity of mission – competing brands and territories undermining the sacrificial work of the men and women in the field. Then the youthful energy of the lay movements post the first world war – YMCA and YWCA especially - hungry to connect with and serve other young people across national divides. Then the idealism and huge commitment to rebuild a war shattered Europe, with its millions of hungry, homeless refugees, and to restart the broken conversations between its peoples. Then in the seventies the ecumenical focus on combating racism as post colonial Africa and Asia and Aotearoa too, started to reclaim self determination and listen to indigenous voices.

The list of trigger issues is much much longer of course. The leadership of the ecumenical movement had great instincts to single out the questions that excited and united us and give them visibility. At the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver in 1983 it was the nations of the South Pacific that put the issues of nuclear testing and destruction onto the world stage. Women from the Marshall Islands and Tahiti spoke graphically of the birth deformities caused by radiation as their region became a dumping ground for nuclear powers.

Time and again, it was the ecumenical movement that had its finger on the issues of

life or death, war or peace, Very often, but not always. Some of our slogans didn't resonate far, despite their worthiness: for example the Humanum Studies: the search for a Just Participatory and Sustainable Society; the New World Information and Communication Order. We wrote solemn declarations about these utopian dreams and got assemblies to pass motions about them, but they disappeared into archive boxes and got lost down memory lanes. I helped to write some of them and think they are still worth rereading, but we failed to find the triggers that would connect them with hearts and minds and hands.

So if it's true that the ecumenical movement is an authentic expression of God's global generosity and shalom, and is waiting to be seen and engaged again in the life of our churches and communities of all faiths and none, what might the new trigger points be for our time and place? Well it won't be a corporate style restructuring of our existing ecclesial shapes and styles, merging and rationalizing what we have got to make it more cost efficient and market shareable. And it probably won't be a doctrinal summit in the tradition of the first ecumenical councils of the church that sorted out the Trinity and the order of procession of the Father and the Son; or the councils of the last century that worked out a faith and order consensus on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It's hard to get these theological concepts to play on the big screen, even though the patient scholarly work of finding consensus thankfully still goes on.

It could be the new fascination with ecology and ecotheology. That does play on the big screen, as the success of Avatar showed us, to say nothing of the \$20 billion tourist dollar earner called "clean, green and a 100% pure". And even if the Manawatu river is the dirtiest in the OECD, and UNESCO's latest environmental audit of New Zealand gives us a "five out of ten, could try harder" mark, the dream behind the pure green slogan still works its magic. You could build a new ecumenical movement around it. As you could around a new musical genre, with better lyrics than Hillsong and a little more popular than baroque revival and not quite as monastic as Taize. Music is the art form of the age. The Charismatic Movement wouldn't have worked without it and the global nature of ecumenism chimes perfectly with the World Music genre that Womad has popularised so effectively in this country.

Alternatively, there must be a new trigger point for ecumenism buried somewhere in the faith –and science debate. In the Victorian era it was geology that drew the crowds – a huge public fascination with how the world began and how long ago. Darwin triggered a tornado of controversy with his claim that the world began 300 million years ago, rather than last Thursday, or to be more precise according to Archbishop Ussher, on the 23rd of October 40004 BC.

Today the trigger won't come from geologists but more likely astronomers and astro physicists as they get more mystical, and theologian scientists like Teilhard de Chardin move from the eccentric fringe to the mainstream. The interface of world religions is another hot centre of a new ecumenism as Christian-Muslim and Muslim-Jewish dialogue becomes a life and death survival skill in the Middle East and Asia.

The triggers or tipping points we need to activate a new ecumenical movement won't be a single issue but several, provided they are concrete, visual, melodic, politically interesting and able to become personal enough to engage a new public.

My money is on the art of hospitality. You don't have to look far to see how essential it is to the Gospel and the very nature of God. The essence of ecumenism is the capacity to offer and receive hospitality – to be generous and gracious in the way we care for our neighbour, especially if that neighbour is unlike us, in order that we may better reflect and reveal the Christ in us.

Consider the number of New Testament parables that are about eating and drinking, including those about people who usually don't get a seat at the table. Many scholars argue that the most revolutionary thing Jesus did was his practice of open table fellowship. It was his brand of hospitality that caused the greatest outrage of all.

Everything about the Christian life can be measured against this benchmark of hospitality – even something like evangelism which at its best is the extension of God's welcome and acceptance, the unconditional offer of a place at God's banquet table, what D. T. Niles called one beggar telling another beggar where to find a bit of bread.

Theologically, I don't think there is much of an argument about the fundamental importance of hospitality. Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread in a prayer that makes it clear you don't go asking for food or forgiveness or love or anything else unless you're prepared to give back what you have received and share it around. There are few if any other activities closer to the heart of God. When you satisfy someone's hunger or thirst in my name, says Jesus, you are satisfying me.

The inherent holiness of the food business, feeding others and being fed, is all about this inextricable web of giving and taking. When someone feeds you, the desire to feed them in return always follows. The ancient tradition of offering hospitality to a stranger is based on the belief that the stranger might well be a passing angel, able to offer you a place at God's own table. To share hospitality, the giving and the receiving is an instinct both human and divine.

But is hospitality a trigger point? Does it ignite energy and excitement, new life and hope? I'd like to argue that it does, with great timeliness for our day and age. However we take it for granted, gloss over and ignore its power to renew and transform. Hospitality is timely because it's not something abstract. Hospitality is an action not an idea. You know it by doing it, physically, by hand. There is no such thing as an air guitar equivalent of cooking. Food and drink is made out of animal, vegetable and mineral material.

A friend of mine went looking for God by becoming a welder in a French factory. He wrote to me "Gradually I began to get a feeling for metal, and discover the satisfaction of argon welding, guiding this ball of molten steel which is the weld which you control with your electrode, dipped regularly in the filler metal, leaving behind tiny waves of steel – white, red, purple, all the colours of the liturgical year – this ball which follows the arc as the sea obeys the moon, leaving behind the imprint of its ripples on the sand. There was born in me, all frail, a relationship with matter, wherein my eyes and hands, rather than my reflection and speech became the intermediary (with God)."

Hospitality is like that in the same hands on, material way. To prepare food and serve it, to eat it and share it, that is something we all can do, and need to do, and love doing, in order to be human.

So much of ecumenism at its weakest was conceptual and abstracted, universalised beyond belief. The movement at its strongest was always about doing something concrete, local, hands on – visiting, healing, feeding, breaking down barriers.

On a good day such hospitality is central to the life of every Christian community. Eucharist in church, a cup of tea and good food afterwards – the sacrament continues in the hall.

The tragedy and the scandal is that the sacramental meal that symbolises all that unites us still divides us ecumenically. That is the contradiction that paralyses all ecumenical hospitality – the meal that Catholics and Protestants still cannot share.

When I taught at Knox in the eighties and we attended mass at Holy Cross Seminary with our fellow teachers and students, a Presbyterian colleague would bring with him a handful of wafers and pass them around while the Catholics received communion. It always left me feeling upset. Imagine going to a dinner party and pulling a packet of biscuits out of your pocket to eat alone while the host served the main course.

While living in Europe we would spend Christmas in a little French ski village and go to mass, the priest would pass around a clothes basket full of chunks of bread for the foreigners. The local faithful enjoyed the body of Christ. We made do with stale baguette.

The then World Council of Churches General Secretary, Emilio Castro, startled an international mission conference by calling for a civil disobedience movement across the eucharistic divide between Protestant and Catholic. Storm the altars and demand the sacrament be shared. The dialogue with the Vatican went cold for a while.

Sarah Miles in a remarkable book tells a story of St Gregory's church in San Francisco (*Eat this Bread*, p 76) where the altar on Sunday became the foodbank counter, following the mass:

“The entire contradictory package of Christianity was present in the Eucharist. A sign of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, it was doled out and rationed to insiders; a sign of unity, it divided people; a sign of the most common and ordinary human reality, it was rarefied and theorised nearly to death. And yet that meal remained, through all the centuries, more powerful than any attempts to manage it. It reconciled, if only for a minute, all of God's creation, revealing that, without exception, we were members of one body, God's body, in endless diversity. The feast showed us how to re-member what had been dis-membered by human attempts to separate and divide, judge and cast out, select or punish. At that Table, sharing food, we were brought into the ongoing work of making creation whole.”

It could well be that the hardest lock to break to get the ecumenical movement moving is in fact access to eucharist which depends on an open table as much as it does on bread and wine. It may well take a campaign of ecclesial disobedience from the ground up to crack that obstacle, in the same way that local congregations have called and encouraged gay people into leadership roles, despite the cautions of their hierarchy. But my deeper confidence in hospitality as an ecumenical trigger point is its cross cultural relevance and power.

There has of course been an attempt to globalise and corporatise the food industry, to make food a fast commodity, governed by profit and appearance rather than nutritional value and the authenticity of its origins. But for all the success of McDonalds and KFC, there is a huge counter movement to make food healthier, safer, shared more justly and enjoyed more slowly and socially. Christians have been part of this resistance movement in a modest way with pot luck dinners and food banks, sales tables and liturgically framed meals.

In my time as bishop in Waiapu, I was astonished to find how little parishes valued their skills as caterers and celebrants of good food. Gathering, cooking, presenting, sharing food was core business, especially in country parishes, but rarely acknowledged as ecumenical, theological, or anything much to do with God. We need to be bolder and more confident in the way we serve and share food and drink. It may be the most effective way we tune into the wavelength of our so called secular communities, where people increasingly don't gather to eat, don't know how to cook or entertain around a dinner table.

We still know how to eat with people like us, in clubs and family and like-minded groups, but we have lost the art of inviting strangers to join us and making them feel welcome. To share food with people unlike us, as eucharist requires, even with the unworthy, the unreliable, even the traitors like Judas, requires a very robust faith. It can be uncomfortable, messy, awkward, even dangerous. If you don't believe that Jesus is really present when you break bread in his name you are taking a big risk by opening up your table. But when you do, exciting things happen. Lonely people make some friends. Withdrawn people break their isolation. Troubled and grieving people find support. People on the edge are drawn into the centre. Broken people find healing. When we prepare and share food together the world looks like a brighter place to be for a while. Isn't it amazing how the memory of a great meal stays with you, and how it is easier to remember the names of people around a dinner table than lined up in a meeting room.

The power of hospitality to cross lines of generation and culture is what makes it so potent for rebuilding an ecumenical movement. We failed last time round by never managing to break the eurocentricity of the movement. I remember the debates in the seventies about moving the headquarters of the World Council of Churches from the middle of Europe to the middle of Africa or Asia or Latin America. It would have saved money at a time when the Swiss franc was gold plated, but culturally it was simply too hard to break those ties.

I believe that the Achilles heel of our efforts to restructure the National Council of Churches into a broader conference of churches was a misreading of the bicultural and multicultural issues at the time. The history of a colonial church wrapped us still too tightly. Vatican constraints didn't daunt us, but tino rangatiratanga did.

If we had invested more time in eating together and sitting on marae as often we did in church halls and conference centres, if we had remembered that our settler forebears depended heavily on the hospitality of Maori to build their first houses and churches, then ecumenism might have moved very differently in Aotearoa in the 1980s and 90s. We might have remembered how Marsden's first preaching of the gospel on Christmas Day, 1814, depended entirely on the hospitality of Ruatara, and when that ended with his death weeks later, so did the mission he established for nearly a decade. And even if we had forgotten how Maori fed us at the start, we might have recalled the Kiwi culture that settlers evolved where you always added an extra potato in the pot for the guest who might turn up hungry.

I say all this sadly and wistfully, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, and it may well have been that our Maori partners were not any more ready than Pakeha were for that conversation. I don't know. What I do know is the brand of ecumenism that drove me at the time was not brave and wide eyed enough to show up the constraints of my religious culture and spirituality. What I thought was cutting edge was too blunt for the job of transformation and renewal.

My plea now is really a simple one. To look again at the ordinary business of feeding and entertaining each other around the table as a way of kickstarting the movement that has stalled on us, and doing that in a very intentional way. Assembling our guests lists from unlike people, even including our enemies, ignoring the conventions of having to impress the diners with expensive or elaborate fare, daring to ask all sorts of people, even those suspicious of us, to contribute, and always, always, beginning with a prayer, even a silent prayer, that the Christ who promised to be present when we break bread in his name, will be present again. If we do that then it doesn't matter too much what we eat and who we eat with, because as we eat we will be reconnected with the gift of life itself, God's free gift, given unconditionally and waiting to be

enjoyed by all God's people, across the whole inhabited earth, an ecumenical blessing, waiting to be rediscovered again.

To show how simple it is, let me end with a passage from Alexander McCall Smith's Botswana novel, "The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency"¹

"That evening, in the house in Zebra Drive, Mama Ramotswe prepared herself a meal of stew and pumpkin. She loved standing in the kitchen, stirring the pot, thinking over the events of the day, sipping a large mug of bush tea. Several things had happened that day.

She stopped. It was time to take the pumpkin out of the pot and eat it. In the final analysis, that was what solved these big problems of life. You could think and think, and get nowhere, but you still had to eat your pumpkin. That brought you down to earth. That gave you reason for going on. Pumpkin."¹

¹ Alexander McCall Smith *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Abacas 2003, 82&84