

Bishop Michael Putney

Memorial Lecture 2015

Forming the Ecumenical Mind Being Church in a Polarised World

Rev'd Dr Ray Williamson OAM

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Two weeks ago, I was in Auckland. We were conducting a week-intensive course, *Looking beyond Division: an Introduction to Ecumenism*. One morning, we were privileged to have the new Cardinal with us, Archbishop John Dew. He led one of the sessions for us on the Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement. It will be no surprise if I tell you that he began by talking about Michael Putney.

He spoke of Bishop Michael as “a great ecumenical leader in Australia and New Zealand”. What an appropriate and accurate description! Though, indeed, not to be limited to this region of the world; for as the Cardinal also acknowledged, Michael was a significant ecumenical leader internationally: in his own church as a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; in multilateral dialogue, as one time a member of the WCC Faith & Order Commission; and in bilateral dialogue, as co-chair of the Methodist – Roman Catholic dialogue for many years. Much of that experience is reflected in the collection of his essays published last year, *My Ecumenical Journey*, in which, in two separate Forewords, Dr Geoffrey Wainwright describes Michael as a scholar and leader and speaks of his “standing in the international ecclesiastical community”;¹ and Cardinal Walter Kasper says the essays “demonstrate a depth of theological scholarship and a breadth of ecumenical experience” and pointed to Michael’s “deep commitment to Christian unity”.²

We all would strongly endorse those sentiments from our own experience of working with Michael, especially in the ecumenical endeavour. So, I am deeply grateful for the invitation to be here this evening to give this memorial lecture in his honour. It is a great privilege.

The last time I worked with Michael was here in Brisbane. It was another time when we were offering the introductory course on ecumenism, and he was our guest lecturer – a task in which he shone as the marvellous teacher we all knew him to be, and which he fulfilled with the wonderful grace that so typified this deeply Christian man.

It was also typical of him that he would willingly commit himself to several days at such a course. It showed the high place he gave in his ministry to ecumenism; it demonstrated the importance for him of the need to pass on the ecumenical vision, the

¹ Putney, Michael, *My Ecumenical Journey*, Adelaide, ATF Theology, 2014, p. xiv

² Ibid., p. xi

necessity – indeed, the urgency – of forming people in and for the ecumenical endeavour.

FORMING THE ECUMENICAL MIND

In Western society generally, the dominance of the market-place has changed the prevailing view of education. For many, education is purely utilitarian; it is a means by which people are given the knowledge and skills that make them economically productive. There is great pressure on education to be subservient to the economy.

In contrast, at an international conference on education in 2004, the director-general of UNESCO argued that only quality education can:

Assist young people to acquire the attitudes and competencies of what might be called the ‘democratic mind’. There is room in such a mind for stable and enduring values such as tolerance, solidarity, mutual understanding and respect for human rights. ...³

To modify those words slightly, we might say that one urgent aspect of the ecumenical task is quality education to assist people, to assist our churches, to acquire the attitudes and competencies of what might be called the ‘ecumenical mind’. How might we describe such a ‘mind’? In it, there needs to be room for those same enduring values. But much more as well! Tolerance of, even respect for, people in churches other than my own might take us beyond the old hostilities, but that is not anywhere near far enough. Growing in mutual understanding, willingly and actively cooperating with one another, building a sense of solidarity with one another across the denominational divide takes us much further, but still leaves in tact the way we are in our dividedness. So, the ‘ecumenical mind’ will be shaped by the vision of the Church’s unity; will be thoughtful and practical in giving expression to that vision; will characterise people who serve the *Oikoumenē* as signs of hope.

The ecumenical mind will be shaped by both love and truth. As Bishop Michael wrote, “With only the former [love] one can avoid the divisive issue. With only the latter [truth] one often cannot get past the obstacles they create. Ecumenism [the ecumenical mind] requires loving truth and truthful love”.⁴

The Vatican’s *Ecumenical Directory* (1993) states that “the objective of ecumenical formation is that all Christians be animated by the ecumenical spirit [have an ‘ecumenical mind’, if you like], whatever their particular mission and task is in the church and in society”. It involves more than the transfer of a body of knowledge – important as that is. You have to get it! Catch the vision! It involves discerning the ecumenical imperative, and living it in our particular situations.

Bishop Michael clearly had a well-formed, extremely mature ecumenical mind. That was so because of the extraordinary ecumenical journey he travelled throughout almost his entire life. He dates it from 1965, while he was a seminarian, when he took part in an oratory competition, in which he chose to speak about “the life and message of Paul Couturier ... who was in some ways the father of the modern form of the *Week of Prayer*

³ Quoted by Simon Oxley, “Forming a Movement: Origins and Opportunities”, *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 57, Number 1, January 2005.

⁴ Putney, Michael, Op. cit., p. 10

for *Christian Unity*". While he won the competition, Michael wrote that "what happened more significantly for me was that he won me to ecumenism as a deep, spiritual commitment of my life. It was a real moment of conversion for me". Perhaps as a result, he became the first Catholic representative on an inter-seminary committee with students from five other churches and so became involved in organising ecumenical gatherings in the respective seminaries. Thus, he said, "I experienced my very first exciting discussions with fellow Christians who were not Catholic. My ecumenical journey had begun".⁵

Personal encounters, the building of friendships, across our different traditions can open us to the other, help us to understand and appreciate the other and the tradition that has shaped them and in which they live their faith. Writing in *The Ecumenical Review*, Phyllis Anderson (Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California) said, "embracing diversity involves getting out of one's own capsule far enough that one may actually see others as they are, as they hope to be seen".⁶ Such openness to the rich diversity that is found in all our traditions creates and shapes an ecumenical perspective – an 'ecumenical mind' – in us.

The Unity of the Church

As Bishop Michael reminds us, the ecumenical mind will be shaped by both love and truth. Foremost amongst the truths to which the ecumenical mind will be committed is the truth that the Church is one – that we have our unity in Christ; and therefore the ecumenical mind will be deeply disturbed by knowing that we, as the Church, live a contradiction: we have our unity in Christ, yet the Body of Christ is fractured. We do not live according to what we are; we live a contradiction.

The ecumenical mind will be convicted that it is the unity of the Church that is normative, and the present, so-called 'normal', state of division among the churches is a sin. Such a mind will recognise that the goal of healing those divisions challenges us to take seriously the fact that Christ wills the unity of the Church, however inconvenient, or indeed impossible, that may appear.

Tragically, however, many in the churches can imagine only a future in which they continue to exist in their present, divided forms. Some believe that the search for visible unity of the Church no longer matters – that somehow we have moved beyond that. In this so-called 'post-modern' world, the classic goal of the visible unity of the Church has become irrelevant and unattainable. Already enough unity is expressed locally, it is often said, and that is all that matters. Paradoxically, in this globalised world where the individual and the local have become the focus, there is a desire to discard the 'big picture' of ecumenism.

But the ecumenical mind will not rest content with the idea that we can just shrug our shoulders in that way. It will not be satisfied simply with a polite appreciation of the other, because amidst the richness of diversity that is to be welcomed and honoured there is the harsh reality of the divisions that keep the churches apart, that fracture the

⁵ Ibid., pp. 1-2

⁶ Anderson, Phyllis, "Formation of an Ecumenical Consciousness", *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 57, Number 1, January 2005.

koinonia with one another, that give the lie to our unity in Christ, that seriously damage the authenticity of the Church's mission. The statement on unity, from the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, declared the Church's unity (*koinonia*) to be both a gift and a calling: unity is a given, we do not create it; but God calls us to conversion, to cease violating the *koinonia*, to address the divisions, which are of human origins, in order that the God-given unity be visible to the world. This is the ecumenical task: to make our unity in Christ more visible; and it necessarily means facing and engaging with the painful issues and differences, always with respect for each other and never ignoring the order and discipline of the other church tradition. Nothing less than full communion between Christians will do, because that is much closer to the heart of the New Testament than just a shoulder-shrugging co-existence.

"There is one body and one Spirit", we read in the Letter to the Ephesians, "just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all".⁷ That expresses who we are – the one Body of Christ. The challenge is to become what we are. Visible Christian unity is not a modern dream, but a permanent and central aspect of Christian life. The unity exists already, in virtue of our common faith, which unites us in the one God through Christ: that is who we are. But it also continues to call us beyond the differences of theology and worship, which have developed over the centuries, to a deeper unity of common prayer, common witness, shared conviction and mutual acceptance. The ecumenical challenge arises from the perception that Christians belong together, and that the unity that is already ours must appear more fully in our worship, our mission and the structures of our religious life. The ecumenical imperative for the churches is to help each other to come to fuller understandings of what it means to live the *koinonia*.

The formed ecumenical mind will recognise that imperative, will be grasped by it, and will be committed to the task of making our unity in Christ more visible.

Unity and Mission

But in the ecumenical perspective, such a task is never an end in itself. It is that the Church might engage more authentically in its mission, in the ministry of reconciliation.

Let me say again, as Bishop Michael reminds us, the ecumenical mind will be shaped by both love and truth. As I have been suggesting, foremost among those truths to which the ecumenical mind will be committed is the truth that the Church is one. But also importantly amongst those truths is that the quest for the Church's visible unity is for the sake of its mission, because that mission is for the unity and renewal of the whole human community.

This has been expressed in countless places in many different ways, such as in a WCC Faith & Order Paper:

[t]he divisions among the churches and the failure of their members to live in true *koinonia* ... affect and hinder the mission of the Church. Mission has as its ultimate goal the *koinonia* of all. The mission belongs to the essence of the nature and being of

⁷ Ephesians 4: 4-7

the Church as *koinonia*. This makes the restoration of unity between Christians and the renewal of their lives an urgent task.⁸

Understood in this way, ecumenism confronts whatever works against unity and wholeness in every situation. It is fundamentally an attitude towards everything we do; it is a way of doing; it is not a task, and certainly not an extra task; it is an approach, a mind-set; it is a way of being Christian people engaged in the ministry of Christ. So, yes, it does confront us at the points of division within and between the churches. But it confronts us, also, at the points of division in our world, and it calls the Church to be an effective instrument of God's Spirit in seeking wholeness – peace through justice – in God's world. The ecumenical mind will see that the call of God to us is for nothing less than the renewal of the church in its mission, God's mission, to bring everything, in all the richness of the diversity of God's creation, "together in Christ".

It involves the reclaiming the vision of the unity of all humanity as belonging to the one family of God, and that incorporates the yearning and the struggle for a more truly human society. It has always been emphasised within the ecumenical movement that the quest for church unity is, and must be seen to be, related to the overcoming of human divisions and the meeting of human need. Indeed, it has been said that the movement was born at the intersection between the church and the world. This means, as Wesley Ariarajah once wrote, "ecumenism is at its best when it is about bringing healing, reconciliation, justice, peace and wholeness into the lives of all peoples and communities. Therefore, ...the search for a just and righteous ordering of the social, economic, and political life of communities and nations has also been at the centre of the theological understanding of what ecumenism is about".⁹ Bp Michael calls them "the two great strands of the ecumenical movement, the search for visible unity and the work for the transformation of the world".¹⁰ These two great strands, the ecumenical imperative and the mission of the Church, are intertwined, inextricably. The quest for unity – for full communion in faith and sacramental life – is no light matter. It is vital for the effectiveness of Christian witness and mission. Unity and mission belong together, and should be seen together, if a searching, yearning world is to discover the gracious generosity of God.

It is this ecumenical vision that forms and shapes the 'ecumenical mind'.

BEING CHURCH IN A POLARISED WORLD

A former Moderator of the WCC, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicea, Aram I, once said that the ecumenical movement is about "being church", which means at least "rediscovering the centrality of unity. A divided church cannot have a credible witness in a broken world. ... Speaking with one voice and assuming together the church's

⁸ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, F&O Paper 181(1998); also *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, F&O Paper 198 (2005).

⁹ Ariarajah, Wesley, "Some Basic Theological Assumptions of the Ecumenical Movement" in *Our Pilgrimage in Hope: Proceedings of the First Three Seminars of the Asian Movement for Christian Unity* (St Pauls, Manila, Philippines: Christian Conference of Asia and the federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, 2001), p. 41

¹⁰ Putney, Michael, Op. cit., p. 27

prophetic vocation are, indeed, essential requirements of 'being church' in a polarised world".¹¹

The question of what it means to be church in a polarised/fractured world leads to other challenges that we are to confront – challenges that can generally be expressed as a powerful, on-going, fundamental engagement between the gospel and the world, and the particular challenge to discern how that engagement is to occur in the context of changing times and circumstances.

'Mission' is a key word in many churches at the moment: we are to be 'missional'. Of course, such language merely signifies the Church's great reason for being. The Church has always understood itself to be God's primary instrument for God's mission in the world. The challenge is to discern how to reclaim and renew our effectiveness as that instrument. The challenge also is to recognise that we cannot have a 'missional' church that is not an ecumenical church, that does not have an 'ecumenical mind'.

Catholicos Aram also posed the question to the churches about the kind of Church we want to be: "a church ... exclusively concerned with its self-perpetuation or a missionary church open to the world and ready to face the challenges of the world".¹²

Such a question still seems to be particularly pertinent to the more traditional, institutional churches, especially in Western countries like Australia. Many congregations in our churches are aging and declining in numbers, and often that means a loss of a sense of mission: the focus becomes inward-looking, concerned with self-preservation. Sometimes that re-focusing of attention inwards has been due to new difficulties, disagreements and tensions within the churches: the issues relating to sexual orientation and same-gender relationships easily come to mind as a current example; the ordination of women has been another; and underlying them all is the issue of hermeneutics, interpreting Scripture. Therefore, addressing internal problems, rifts and tensions is a legitimate and necessary expression of our concern for the visible unity of all Christ's people. The reconciling power of God in Christ must find clearer expression within our churches as well as between them. But the danger is that the internal concerns can be a complete distraction from the broader ecumenical quest for the visible unity of the whole Church, and so perhaps, for the sake of their own healing and faithfulness, our churches need to commit themselves anew to the biblical vision of unity, which is God's gift and to which God calls the Church.

Until we get this right, the Church will be greatly weakened in its capacity to proclaim in word and deed the gospel message of healing and reconciliation in our globalised, fragmented and polarised world, filled with much division and conflict – a world in which our gospel message is absolutely vital and sorely needed.

The good news of Christ for healing and reconciliation means that, as Christians, we have an alternative to offer that is a counter to the dominant mind-set of society. As a society – indeed through most of the Western world – we are so distracted by the desire for security against terrorism that we are not able to address the causes of injustice and

¹¹ Moderator's Report to the Ninth WCC Assembly, Porto Alegre, 2006

¹² Ibid.

suffering that are breeding the terrorism we fear. Yet within the Christian faith community, the great vision of the Kingdom of God brings us to seek ways of building a culture of peace. Yet we cannot effectively do it in our separation from one another. The more we come together across the lines of separation, the more we can offer an extraordinary counter-cultural witness to the world at large – a witness of risk-taking for harmony, for unity within diversity, for peace. That is the point where the engagement of the gospel with a polarised world really counts.

Last Sunday, many of us heard the gospel reading from John 6: the feeding of the 5000. One reflection on that passage, which I read, spoke about the distinction between a theology of abundance and a theology of scarcity, with that passage being one example in the Scriptures of the experience of a God of abundance. A theology of scarcity sees God ruling over scarcity, doling out who gets the blessings and who gets cursed. This reflection went on to suggest that our globalised economy works on the assumption of scarcity, and so encourages us, entices us – or at least those of us who have the means to do so – to struggle to get more and more because there won't ever be enough. The economic system works because of the power of the belief in scarcity – a belief that makes us greedy, mean and un-neighbourly. The result is ever-increasing inequality in our world and in our societies. It is the depth of that injustice (it seems to me) that is one of the strongest underlying causes of such horrendous violence that so terrifies us – and governments seem only to exacerbate it. Take the massive cuts in Australia's foreign aid, for example.

Yet, in such a polarised world, the Church has the alternative message of the good news of God in Christ. Jesus invites us to know God as the God who gives life abundantly. The story of the feeding of the 5000 is unique in John's Gospel in that it is a little child who brings forward the fish and loaves, not the disciples. It is the child – in that society, someone of no account – who shows the kind of faith that ushers in God's Kingdom of abundance; and Jesus shows that if bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. He really demonstrates a reordering of our realities. Our polarised world desperately needs to hear from the churches, speaking with one voice, a witness to such an alternative. Imagine how much more powerful that witness would be if the churches could work more cooperatively together, share the resources that seem scarce so that they actually proved to be enough. Imagine how much more powerful our witness would be if we could be a foretaste, a prophetic sign, of healing and reconciliation.

Perhaps we have seen the potential for such witness in recent weeks on the issue of climate change. The Papal Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, has attracted enormous interest and has raised awareness and discussion. Naturally, it is the Encyclical that has got the public attention; but it did not stand alone. In anticipation and support of the Encyclical, A Lambeth Declaration was issued one day earlier. Signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, three other Anglican Archbishops and representatives of other churches, as well as by people of four other faiths, it calls on people of faith to join the campaign for meaningful response to climate change. But the Encyclical is broader in its appeal. It is addressed to the whole of humankind, not only Roman Catholics, not only all Christians, but to "every living person on the planet"; and it is a plea for the whole human family to come together at this moment in our history to seek sustainable

development across the earth. Unmistakably, there is the ecumenical concern for the *oikoumenē*!

It is fascinating that the voice of a religious leader has been given so much attention – no doubt it has much to do with Pope Francis as a person and his integrity – because paradoxically in our polarised world, religion is increasingly regarded with disdain by many people. In our highly secularised society, religious faith is dismissed by many as superstition that has passed its use-by-date, and the churches are looked upon with hostility – currently made worse by the child sex abuse scandal. More broadly in our world, Islam is held in great suspicion, even fear, because of the way a small minority use it as a reason for horrific brutality. More generally, religion is a cause of division amongst people in many ways. In such a climate in a polarised world, inter-religious relationships have fresh urgency. Seeking the visible unity of Christians is one thing. Building bridges of understanding, trust and cooperation with people of other faiths is, of course, quite another. But one can assist the other. Though each exercise has a different goal, the lessons learned as people of different churches have reached out to each other should be borne in mind as different religious communities set about doing the same. There is now a compelling reason for the churches to help people engage with other faith communities: we have lessons to learn from one another to develop models that can be useful for such engagement. But again it is more effective and authentic if we can do it together. And again it is a witness to an alternative in our polarised world. Inter-faith relationships can be seen as competing with ecumenism's primary focus on Christian unity. Certainly they should not replace or eclipse that primary focus, but neither should they be a distraction, for they are a legitimate and necessary dimension of the call to give clearer witness to the healing and reconciling power of God in Christ.

Another paradox of our time is that while there is a growing hostility towards religion and a sharp decline in church involvement in Western societies, there is a marked interest in faith and spirituality. In a world of materialism and consumerism, there is still a yearning for something other – something that relates and speaks to the deeper dimension of the human person. In a world of fragmentation and individualism, people have a deep need to belong somewhere – to feel that they are accepted and wanted. This quest shows itself in many different ways. One example is some of the newer expressions of Christian community. Back in 1935 Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ.”¹³ Over the last 25 years, our councils of churches in Australia have had a lot to do with the Taizé Community, with frequent visits by one of the Brothers to lead us on a Pilgrimage of Trust through prayer and reflection and retreats. In the light of Bonhoeffer's words, it is interesting that the ecumenical Community of Taizé sees its mission as preparing for a life of following Christ, according to the spirit of the beatitudes: *joy, simplicity and mercy*. For more than fifty years people, especially youth, have been visiting Taizé to join in the prayer and other aspects of the community life, and doing so in their

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Monasticism

thousands. In two weeks time it will be the tenth anniversary of Brother Roger's death. There is some expectation that the number of people who will gather there on that day will be in the tens of thousands. It clearly suggests that in such places, in such expressions of the life of faith, people find something that relates and speaks to the deeper dimension of the human person. But these days, there are many expressions of what is called 'New Monasticism'. It is a diverse movement in many parts of the world, and includes varying expressions of contemplative and prophetic life. It is also not limited to a specific church or denomination. It is an example of how people now come together across the denominational divides, or ignore them altogether. It is a new 'ecumenical' reality – very different from the realities of the churches at the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. Can we see in the many new expressions of the life of Christian faith the emergence of a new ecumenical springtime?

But one reality has not changed. In spite of all the tremendous advances that have been made through the ecumenical movement, the churches still remain in denominational separation. In fact, in that regard, the situation has become worse. There has been an almost endless fragmentation of the Church because of the great proliferation of new denominations, church-plants, para-churches, mega-churches that has taken place. The danger with all 'fresh expressions', especially those that have a non-denominational base, is that they end up becoming a separate church, and the proliferation, the fracturing of the Body of Christ, goes on.

So the ecumenical challenge remains: how to draw others who are part of that proliferation into the ecumenical endeavour; how all of us can stand in communion with one another to learn from one another, and to correct one another, that together we might be God's instrument for God's mission, witnessing effectively and authentically to the gospel.

Recognising that a divided church cannot have a credible witness in a polarised world, the challenge remains for us as churches urgently to seek to grow more visibly into the unity we already have in Christ – a unity that is both God's gift and calling.

A NEW COMMANDMENT

Bishop's Michael's strong affirmation that "ecumenical relationships must involve both love and truth" reminds us that the great words from John's Gospel about loving one another – the new commandment – have extraordinary relevance when we think about the challenges facing us as Church. The command to love is Jesus' way of ensuring the continuation of his spirit among his disciples. The love that is to characterise their lives and their relationship is the love that Jesus has lived among them, the love he has embodied for them. He has washed their feet! The love we are to live is the love which he showed by his selflessness, his understanding, his forgiveness, his self-giving: there was no limit to what his love would give, to where his love would go. Jesus' love is an offering of self that liberates from whatever wounds and breaks our lives, our relationships, our community.

The gospel writer also places the same new command to love in the context of the discourse about abiding in the vine: "I am the vine, you are the branches". As Christian

disciples, this is really where we find our fundamental unity: it is in our abiding in Christ. This is another great ecumenical truth: the closer we come to one another, the closer we come to Christ; and the closer we come to Christ, the closer we come to one another. Bishop Michael spoke of it as being held “in the divine communal embrace”, and it is this that provides the hunger for being one.