



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Review: Leaning into the spirit: ecumenical perspectives on decision- making in the church

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Leaning into the spirit: ecumenical perspectives on decision-making in the church

Editors: Virginia Miller, Bishop Stephen Pickard, Archbishop Emeritus Sir David Moxon. (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

Many of the chapters in this excellent book are sourced from the 4th International Conference of Receptive Ecumenism (2017), which was held in Canberra. The 5th such Conference was to have been in Sweden this year but, because of COVID19, has been deferred till late June in 2021.

This thoughtful book fills the gap and gives us further opportunity to consider the implications of this action of the Holy Spirit known as “Receptive Ecumenism.” Receptive Ecumenism, it will be recalled, focuses us on learning from others rather than entering relationships with an intention to only teach and correct! One can readily see, from even a rudimentary view of recent Church politics, why the Holy Spirit might be encouraging such a movement of grace!

In launching this book, in the presence of the distinguished editors, at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture on February 27, Archbishop Christopher Prowse (Catholic Archbishop of Canberra and a former Auxiliary Bishop in Melbourne), emphasised the importance of friendship in Christian unity.

In the Preface to *Leaning into the Spirit*, the ongoing friendship and collaboration of Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby is affirmed. As we know, an atmosphere of friendship helps us to better receive the gifts of one another and helps us to then share matters that are from the depths of our souls.

Informed friendship leads to constructive plans and shared projects for the common good. A refrain from this time of pandemic has been, “we are all in this together”. This statement of the obvious, then takes us into the question of how we build and sustain unifying leadership which is capable of dealing with challenges like the pandemic, climate change, a so-called ‘security system’ based on weapons of mass destruction; a depleted and debt-laden economic system which now makes those who are vulnerable even more vulnerable!

Suffice to say, anything that might actually inform the way we enhance unifying leadership, will be rather useful at this time! Whilst “Receptive Ecumenism” might have emerged initially in relation to pathways for ecumenical dialogue, the connections to interreligious dialogue quickly became obvious. Now we can see the relevance of this methodology for all people of faith and good will as we recognise that if our children and grandchildren are to flourish, humankind’s leaders cannot just keep shouting at and threatening people they have barely met!

Reading this book, juxtaposed with publicised tensions such as our relations with China, is a sobering reminder of the prophetic edge to this movement of the Holy Spirit. Imagine if, instead of the harsh statements and clear threats, there had actually been some carefully prepared and discreet meetings in which all parties sought to learn from one another, recognising their own limitations and, yes, that we ARE all in this together! With around one million people with a Chinese background now in Australia, surely, we have the basis for some receptive learning and more intelligent discourse, as we strive to be constructive partners of, rather than wedged victims of both the powerful USA and China.

Leaning into the Spirit takes us into particularities of local and regional dialogues; matters of reconciliation between churches; what churches of the West and of the Global South might learn from each other and what receptive ecumenism looks like in Africa and in India. But, at the back of all this is the aching reality that we are a wounded and wounding human family on a tiny planet in a vast universe of divine creation. The lessons we have learned painfully from Christian division, now, ever so humbly, need to be offered more widely. The knowledge we have acquired about unity is knowledge the world craves for.

This book helps remind us of what we have learned and why we had to. Obviously, I therefore think it is fairly useful!