

## **Herd or hearth: “Receptive Ecumenism” in Church strategies of two Australian Catholic Church Communities**

Historically the size, shape and condition of Roman Catholic communities in Australia has been very specific to location. In more recent times since Vatican II there has been another factor that has distinguished the Church life within communities. For this paper I will term it the contrast between “herd or hearth” organization and mentalities in these local churches marked by diocesan boundaries. These words are not used of this phenomenon in Australia, but I have chosen them to indicate wider movements in the universal church and to avoid denominationalising what are movements towards small congregational forms and more mass gatherings of churches locally and across the wider Christian world. While some Reformed mega-churches are experiencing the phenomenon of mass membership (the herd) in contrast to small congregational worship and organization, some Roman Catholic dioceses have founded a corresponding movement to “small communities” (hearth) within the larger congregations of worshippers that are traditional in Australian Catholicism.

This paper sets out to examine what exchanges can be traced here between these different churches and whether they can be distinguished as examples of “Receptive Ecumenism”. At issue here is whether “Receptive Ecumenism” is necessarily intentional or whether a less conscious osmosis from church to church can also be recognised. Also can competition between churches, where similar congregational strategies are adopted in order to facilitate an increase in membership, be counted as “Receptive Ecumenism”?

Too little ecclesiology is written from the perspective of the congregational or lay membership. This is an attempt to consider examples of church structure from this perspective and in terms of the functioning of “Receptive Ecumenism” how each is informing each other’s experience ecclesially. This requires as much dependence on oral accounts as on formal documentation to provide ecclesiological resources.

### *The Hearth experience*

There is a presumed expectation among Australian Catholic parishioners that ecclesial experiences are confined to large group worshipping gatherings at Sunday masses, smaller gatherings for weekday masses and one on one experiences of personal confession and anointing of the sick. The significance of any contrasting experience for the majority of believers, whose work or commitments make the smaller gatherings for weekday masses irregular, only came to me from the following account of a middle-aged woman who attended for the first time a small parish Church for Sunday eucharist:

“I remember feeling surprised at the size of this community because of the smallness of the Church. This was different to being at Mass in a chapel or being in a small community at daily mass. I thought this must be like how Protestants feel all the time on Sundays. I was welcomed as a visitor because people knew each other so well that they knew I didn’t belong there. The priest greeted a number of people in the

community specifically referring to events that happened to them during the previous weeks. After communion I felt more at one with the other people there than I have ever noticed before in larger parish masses.”

While these are simple observations I detect in them some crucial ecclesial details that distinguish this experience: size, familiarity and communion. All of these details were couched within the denominational judgement that these belonged more to a Protestant Church experience. For this woman this was not a sectarian slight nor an example of a “moving fluidly between a variety of differing ecclesial traditions”.<sup>1</sup> Also significant is the congregational or lay source of this experience. This is not the usual ecclesiological locus, except in Liberation theology writings on Church.<sup>2</sup> The church described in this experience is a small single nave construction from the mid-nineteenth century, externally more resembling a Methodist chapel than the neo-Gothic or Baroque architecture of the majority of large Australian colonial Catholic churches.

Do these reflected upon experiences represent something of the exchange intentionally sought in “Receptive Ecumenism”? Do they have anything to contribute to our understanding of such “receptivity” in its active and not merely passive sense? I offer them as some expression of the problem of discerning the ecumenical aspect of such exchanges and as an articulation of that which “properly requires embodied, interpersonal, institutional expression” as Paul Murray described.<sup>3</sup> Yet the correlation implied here also requires more ecclesiological purpose and self-understanding before ascribing to it “Receptive Ecumenism”.

### *The Hearth strategy*

#### *Context*

South Australia was a convict-free colony, which had a predominantly Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational and Free Church population. It was proudly named “the paradise of dissent” by its early settlers. Consequently there was not the usual large population of Irish Catholic offenders found in other Australian states. The Roman Catholic population of South Australia came from a small number of free Irish who provided the servile class. South Australia is also distinguished by a small number of German Catholics from Silesia exiled in response to Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* and a large German Lutheran late 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration. Unlike the Catholic average of 26% in the other states, Catholics formed only a maximum of 19% of the South Australian population. This more minority position had some interesting effects on Catholic relations with the other Churches: from the earliest days Catholics shared resources and facilities with the other Churches. Among the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning — Establishing the Agenda’ in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 5-25 (p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> L. Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (London: Collins, 1986) ; T. Howland Sanks SJ and Brian H. Smith SJ, ‘Liberation Ecclesiology: Praxis, Theory, Praxis’ *Theological Studies* 38 (1977).

<sup>3</sup> Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism...’, p. 12.

resources shared were the Catholic performances of fine liturgical music by Mozart and Haydn. From when the first Bishop Daniel Murphy celebrated the opening of St Patrick's Church (West Terrace) with an harmonium accompanied choir, music featured in the Catholic life of the early colony. Attracted by the music "the large number of Protestants in the congregation were highly edified" also by his preaching, it was reported in the secular press.<sup>4</sup> As well since Vatican II there was an ecumenical openness and official encouragement in Adelaide well beyond the practice of other Catholic dioceses across Australia.<sup>5</sup> The local Archbishops, James Gleeson and Leonard Faulkner, engaged in and encouraged widespread parochial and Archdiocesan dialogue, prayer, social justice and Lenten study groups with the other mainstream Christian Churches.

### *Adelaide BECs*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide embarked on an adaptation of a Latin American strategy for re-enlivening its parish congregations.<sup>6</sup> The Basic Ecclesial Communities model followed was introduced and regularly formed from input by José Marins from Brazil.<sup>7</sup> He summarised this approach as: 'The BEC is a leaven and a first fruit of an ecclesial model that is communitarian, prophetic and liberating. It is the Church itself at the smallest level.'<sup>8</sup> Marins's model like that of most Churches in countries with a majority Catholic population was to shore up the Church by focusing on creating an activist elite, formed more in their faith than either nominal Catholics or the majority of Sunday mass attendees. This was effected through dedicated small groups where the membership experienced further spiritual and doctrinal formation, through shared Gospel reflection and small group eucharists on a regular basis.

While the ecclesiology behind this model of church is couched in the typical themes of Liberation Theology, it is also intentionally trinitarian and communitarian:

The BEC is not merely a sociological or psychological community but rather a theological one. It is the "socialisation" of the mystery of the Trinity and represents the seed of the new pilgrim People of God on the way to fulfillment.<sup>9</sup>

Marins does address ecumenism but with some resignation to the impeding conditions prevalent in majority Roman Catholic populations. Interestingly he observed a parallel ecumenical experience to that in Australian churches:

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret M. Press, *From Our Broken Toil: South Australian Catholics 1836 to 1905* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986), p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> For background to the Australian Catholic Church see: Paul Collins, *Mixed Blessings* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Ronaldo Munoz, 'Ecclesiology in Latin America' in S. Torres and J. Eagleson (eds.), *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (New York: Orbis 1981), pp.150-160.

<sup>7</sup> José Marins, *The Church from the Roots: Basic Ecclesial Communities* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Marins, p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> Marins, p. 29.

Ecumenism advances much faster at the basic level of prayer and solidarity with those who are most needy, rather than at the more intellectual level of discussion and clarification of concepts.<sup>10</sup>

The Adelaide BECs were aimed at the whole active Catholic Church population to organise and engage “100% of Catholics”, but as outlined in the Archbishop’s Pastoral Letter for Lent (1992) *Hope for the Future* it became clear this could not be imposed:

There are various ways of living Christian life, and I do not wish to imply that everyone needs to be in a small community. Obviously it is not necessary to be in a small Christian community in order to be a good Catholic parishioner. However I am encouraging this development in our local Church so that those who choose to participate in a small Christian community will find the support they need for the work of the gospel.<sup>11</sup>

In these small group associations there was an emphasis on not only sharing reflections on the Gospel but exploring the day to day reality of each member of the group, raising their consciousness to “the mission of every believer”. Seeding groups were set up in most parishes with the expectation that their witness and benefits would promote the expansion of more groups throughout each parish in the diocese. This was outlined in an earlier address by the Archbishop:

I believe that this vision of community and of mission should inform each of our parishes and every diocesan agency, and that it should challenge all aspects of our diocesan life. This would mean that these parishes and agencies would more consciously see themselves as called to make a difference in our world, and see themselves as called to do this precisely as communities.<sup>12</sup>

Their initial success led to the strategy being reported in *The Tablet* by Margaret Hebblethwaite in 2000.<sup>13</sup> It also evoked strong criticism and reaction from more traditionalist elements in the diocese who made the obvious connection with the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine and Faith’s criticism of Liberation Theology and had grievances with other innovative Archdiocesan policies.

From discussions with one of the promoters of the strategy, Fr Bob Wilkinson, it appears that some of the difficulty of the strategy lay in the breadth of engagement it sought. He observed that Marins and other French sympathisers with Basic Ecclesial Communities movements were amazed that the Adelaide BECs were intended to involve all practising Catholics and even were aimed at ‘retired Catholics’ who still yearned for some community

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<sup>10</sup> Marins, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Archbishop Leonard Faulkner, *Hope for the Future: Pastoral Letter, Lent 1992* (Adelaide: Catholic News Centre, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> This appeared in a ‘statement to the priests of the Archdiocese’ by Archbishop Leonard Faulkner, *Community for the World* (20 September, 1988), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Hebblethwaite, ‘Everybody Needs Good Neighbours’ *The Tablet* (29 July 2000): 1008-9.

context for expression of their faith beyond parish life. While the Adelaide project “tried to get to everyone it didn’t succeed”, he observed. The intention was decidedly not to create an elite. This was already the domain of the active, but declining Jocist movements, like YCW and YCS. Rather the strategy set out to engage those beyond only “Church-goers”, but not all the baptised and nominal Catholics. Wilkinson added that these different categories represented for him existing denominational contrasts in understanding church membership. He distinguished between the confessionalism of Protestant congregations that focus primarily on Church attendance as deciding membership, and the “whole baptised” membership presumed in populations where Catholics are the majority, eg the Philippines. The object of the BEC’s was both conversion of practice and membership as well as reorganization of a Church that was facing a serious decline in availability of priests to serve all existing ecclesial communities. He described this conversion in terms of “finding the Kingdom of God in personal reality”, as “contact with the life of every believer”.

It is in reference to this last comment that the suggestion of “Receptive Ecumenism” occurred. Wilkinson identified the source of this integration of faith and life as Luther’s teaching on “the mission of every believer”. He traced this through the residue of the *Devotio Moderna* that influenced Luther and later through the city-located ministries of the beguines and begards which emerged again in the Cardijn-inspired industrial movements of the early twentieth century in Belgium, Netherlands and France. Another trace occurs in the “French personalism” of Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*.

I wondered whether it is not a coincidence that such Lutheran ideas found some reception in Adelaide Catholics due to the strong Lutheran presence in that state. Of course there is very little supporting evidence for this as the Lutherans have been the least ecumenically engaged community in South Australia. Yet there was substantial local Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in preparation for the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* — a participant at this conference, Fr Denis Edwards, was one of those involved.<sup>14</sup> What is interesting is Fr Wilkinson’s conscious appreciation of Lutheran influence, given the already suspect association of the Adelaide BEC strategy with the unpopular (with traditionalists) Liberation/Latin American theologies. Admitting such an overtly Protestant influence would need be a reckless claim unless it was presumed to be rightly attributable. This could then present as an example of intentional Receptive Ecumenism. As well there is the possibility of the general influence on South Australian Catholics of a more congregational perspective from the current Uniting Church communities.

While this small community pastoral strategy would not have privileged Lutheran theology of personal mission over more immediate ecclesial objectives such as the prospect of “priestless parishes”, there is some significance that this innovative strategy was conceived in terms open to the ecclesial doctrine of a Church with which it is not in communion. As Paul

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<sup>14</sup> Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/CTS, 2000/2001)

Murray proposed “it is now more appropriate to view the capacity for receptive ecumenical learning *across* traditions as the necessary key for unlocking the potential for transformation *within* traditions.”<sup>15</sup> This was the observation made to me by a religious sister who was active in the implementation of the strategy at parish and small community levels: “It’s interesting how the people who became so involved with the BECs were also those who beforehand or later also joined ecumenical Lenten groups.” Another lay woman noted how her local ecumenical group had celebrated thirty years of meeting in 2008, and she mused on how much this was encouraged by the BECs.

Given the intentionality of this Archdiocesan strategy and these outcomes it does seem appropriate to represent it as an example of “Receptive Ecumenism”.

### *The Herd Strategy*

— Mega Churches and Roman Catholic responses

I contrast the earlier experience to another account: again by a middle-aged woman, but from a congregational Protestant background having attended a “contemporary service” at the Paradise (no that’s the suburb’s name, not the only the Church’s name) Assembly of God:

“It was so exciting. There were hundreds of people gathered there, all joining in the praise and singing. It was like the psalm: “make a loud noise to the Lord!” So much togetherness, so many people sharing belief in Jesus Christ, I was not alone in the world.”

Here is an altogether different experience of size, unity in community, and unity against the world. While she makes no reference to other ecclesial tradition, I was reminded by her ecclesial details of comments and claims made for the recent World Youth Day in Sydney.<sup>16</sup> Its organizers spoke of the importance of large numbers attending the events, with comparisons sought to the previous WYDs in the predominantly Catholic nations like the Philippines and Poland.<sup>17</sup> Local Catholics were encouraged not to let the side down, however reduced in numbers the 25% minority Catholic population in Australia could produce. Another echo of the Assembly of God was the often repeated experience felt by younger Australian Catholics who attended WYD in Sydney, Rome and Cologne that they no longer felt isolated in their faith, that the huge numbers of young believers from all over the world gave them a sense of not being “alone in the world”. They were no longer only “weird” individuals in the secular contexts of Australian youth life, but felt more confident in their witnessing to their faith because of the peers they had met and worshipped with during the WYD events. Again this experience and its echoes reflect the viewpoint of the congregational

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism...’, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> A similar observation is made by Tony Jones, “Who are the emergent Christians?” in *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), pp 67-84.

<sup>17</sup> John Allen, ‘Chance to recast relations with Rome’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (May 10, 2008) accessed: [www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/chance-to-recast-relations-with-rome/2008/05/09/1210131257947.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1](http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/chance-to-recast-relations-with-rome/2008/05/09/1210131257947.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1)

*The issues*

As I am still researching oral resources of the “herd” phenomenon I will only outline here some of the lines of this inquiry and the ecclesiological implications.

- Is there one “catholic instinct” for worshipping community? Is small the more “Christian” and less “Catholic” of congregational forms?
- Are these examples of exchanges between mega-churches and more traditional Roman Catholic massed gatherings really “Receptive Ecumenism” or only competitive emulation for the increase in membership?
- How do we proceed to discern a congregation ecclesiology beyond sociological data?

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