

Bishop Michael Putney Lecture

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1. Introduction

First, I thank you for the welcome to this land of the aboriginal peoples living here for generations. Furthermore, thank you for the welcome to Brisbane and to this place of theological learning and reflection, where so many of you have come from the different churches and communities here in this place. And thank you very much for your gracious welcome and for the honour of offering the Bishop Michael Putney Lecture.

I bring you greetings from the World Council of Churches (WCC), a fellowship of 348 member churches around the world, representing half a billion Christians. There are three member churches based in Australia, with an additional significant number of member churches present in your country. We have a long tradition of working with the National Council of Churches in Australia. The ecumenical witness in this country has been a gift to the global community in many ways, but most especially through the Canberra Assembly in 1991. Its theme was “Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation.” This emphasis on creation deepened the WCC’s perspective and action for care of creation through our programmes, but also offered a new direction to our understanding of the unity of the church. You can, in fact, trace this legacy to the unity statement of the most recent assembly in Busan, South Korea in 2013.

I would like to pay tribute to Bishop Michael Putney, for whom this lecture is named. As a Roman Catholic bishop, he was deeply committed to Christ’s great hope and calling to the church, ‘that all may be one.’ In addition to his work within this country, he offered his gifts as a theologian globally, in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and as the co-chairperson for the International Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission.

It is a timely moment to recognize his latter contribution, as just a month ago the latest publication of the international commission, *A Call to Holiness*, was introduced at the World Methodist Conference that I attended as a guest speaker. This publication, which celebrates 50 years of this bilateral dialogue, was affirmed by Pope Francis earlier this year. Referencing John Wesley’s words, “If we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike,” His Holiness affirmed that doctrinal differences, which still remain, are in no way an impediment to offering a common witness of this love to the world. We should be grateful to Bishop Putney for his place in the evolution of that dialogue and the strength and hope that it offers to the ecumenical movement.

2. Ecumenical Attitudes

In the presentations I have seen of his many insights and efforts for the ecumenical call, I was particularly interested in what was said about his reflections on what *attitudes* are required for our response to Christ’s call to be one. This has been also my particular focus in my studies and also my work for the ecumenical movement.

Attitudes are a significant category for moral reflection. I owe a lot to one of my Norwegian professors from the Norwegian School of Theology, Prof. Dr Ivar Asheim, for the more precise reflections on attitudes. Attitudes are more than the emotional approach and more than generally feeling attracted or not to something or somebody. It can be compared to the category of “virtue”, but it is emphasizing something else. While the focus on virtues requires a focus on the excellence

we have or not have in ourselves, the focus on attitudes draws our attention more to the relationships we have and the qualities of those relationships. From a Lutheran standpoint, it is a significant shift of perspectives. The qualities of relations we can develop to one another are and should be a reflection of the relationships God has to us through Jesus Christ. It is not the excellent personalities we might have or not, but the reflections of the justification by grace into our just relations and the peace from God reflected in our relations of peace that matter.

I have on this basis (e.g. in my book “The Truth That We Owe Each Other” tried to explore which qualities of relations can be defined as the most adequate ecumenical attitudes for the people of God, living in communion with one another in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. These qualities are described in different ways, directly and indirectly, in many of the documents of the WCC, exploring our expressions and models for Christian unity. The most interesting concept I have found, is *mutual accountability*. This can be defined as an attitude, expressing transparency, reliability, responsibility and mutual love for each other. The dialogue of truth and the dialogue of love must be expressions of the same calling to be one; the one cannot really make sense without the other.

I see that we live in a moment of truth in the ecumenical movement. We have to answer whether we affirm the fruits of the dialogues and the work that has been done by many before us, whether we are mutually accountable to what we have been learning and given together. We have a truth that we owe each other that also comes from the common results of the ecumenical movement and dialogues. We cannot separate the question of confessions and doctrines from the question of attitudes. We have to give account of what we believe and hope together, cf 1 Pet 3:15. The faith in God is a trust in God, an expression of hope based on the gifts we share in the faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. This is a trust in God our creator and the way God cares for all dimensions of our lives. This is what we have received, this is what we have to share in mutual accountability to God and to one another. The principle of mutual accountability in the church is based on the principle “Freely we received, freely we give”.

In the focus on mutual accountability, I share a common interest with Bishop Michael Putney. The Methodist tradition and church order has talked about mutual accountability as significant for the “connectionalism” between the different parts of the church. In those contexts it is both a principle for the structures and the accountability within the structures and the attitude of belonging to one another in an accountable way.

3. Defining the Ecumenical Movement

I want to discuss with you how we might define and assess the ecumenical movement, and consider its future vision.

We cannot live as if we are alone. We have the responsibility of accountability to one another for the truth of the gospel we share, an accountability that is grounded in love. We have a moral imperative as well as an ecumenical imperative to be especially accountable to the less privileged in our world, the vulnerable, and those who are marginalized for many different reasons. Unity as churches, as human beings, and as part of all of God’s creation takes its inspiration from the trinitarian relationship of love. This is an unchanging motivation for fellowship as churches and love should be the characteristic of our relations that inspires all other ways of seeking and existing in unity.

The Unity Statement adopted in the Canberra Assembly more than 25 years ago defined our ecumenical task in this way:

“The Holy Spirit as the promoter of koinonia (2 Cor. 13:13) gives to those who are still divided the thirst and hunger for full communion. We remain restless until we grow together according to the wish and prayer of Christ that those who believe in him may be one (John 17:21). In the process of praying, working and struggling for unity, the Holy Spirit comforts us in pain, disturbs us when we are satisfied to remain in our division, leads us to repentance and grants us joy when our communion flourishes.”

Several things stand out from these concluding words of the Canberra Statement. It does not normally occur to us to see restlessness as gift. Restlessness could be viewed as frustration or distraction, impatience even. Yet there can be no other state of being as Christians when we know that the fullness of who and what God calls us to be can only be realized by responding to the call to unity. I would say that it even belongs to the spectrum of attitudes of mutual accountability. We do not get structures or expressions of our unity just to have them, but to move forward to more visible expressions of this love and unity in the triune God in which we are participating.

We also learn from the Canberra statement that gift and blessing is found not only in the longing for unity, but also the process of seeking it. There are many motivations for the full visible unity of the church. Different streams of the ecumenical movement visible today at the WCC including mission and evangelism, faith and order, public witness and service, take their origins from past moments of urgency and priority, and carry those historical traditions to the current time. At its heart, ecumenism is a desire for transformation, and the measurement and impact of our response to this calling is seen in a willingness to *“stay together,”* as the WCC’s constitution says, and to *“move together,”* as the Busan Assembly message promised. Joy and repentance are constituent parts of a common life that must be characterized by love, prayer, and the unceasing work of recognizing God in the other. This is also reflected in the theme for the WCC in this period: *“Together on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”*.

The Unity Statement at the Busan Assembly in 2013 builds upon this earlier articulated approach to unity. As the World Council of Churches, the statement says, we must seek *“gifts enabling the fellowship, under the Spirit’s guidance, to discern the will of God, to teach together and live sacrificially, serving one another’s needs and the world’s needs.”* At this moment, we see many places of fracture and division, violence and hatred. We live in a time of global demographic shifts in Christianity, challenging tasks of moral discernment, and increasingly complicated and urgent socio-economic and political conditions around the world. And we do sometimes see signs of retreat from the agenda to be one, signs that are often the result of a preferred desire to strengthen confessional, national, or other identities. We also see that confessional or traditional positions might be used to label what is more than that, e.g. manifestations of national, tribal, political or ethnic identities and interests. We are not finished with the critical and accountable discussion of the so-called *“Doctrine of Discovery”*, particularly not in contexts like yours here in Australia.

For those reasons and others, the consequences of disunity compel us to action. The church has the ability, through its own commitment to be one, to offer signs of hope in unity to situations where there are divided peoples. We saw this when churches cried out for an end to apartheid in South Africa, as they together, from many confessional families and from many parts of the world, identified the dehumanizing conditions of prejudice and systemic injustice as sin and called for change. We know of many other examples of where peoples are divided, and where the church’s commitment to integrity of relationships might offer healing to places of fracture. Some examples on which we are working closely are South Sudan, Burundi, Nigeria, the Korean Peninsula and Ukraine.

Again, we see that the attitudes of the churches are significant for not only the unity of the church but also the unity of humankind. We also see that the gifts that unite us as churches are highly needed in any relationships that shall express the unity of life: grace, faithfulness, hope, love.

4. Ecumenism Today

The vision of pilgrimage defines the ecumenical movement at this time. We are journeying on a pilgrimage of justice and peace. This embodies the call to unity as we walk together, and it brings our focus to the places in the world where discrimination, violence, disempowerment, persecution, injustice and hatred exist. This pilgrimage is informed by prayer and spirituality but characterized, too, by the necessity of action. We should bring attention to these issues and events and do all that is in our capacity to right these wrongs.

This theme is both a metaphor and a call to concrete actions. Pilgrimage is effective when we travel together and is strengthened when we allow our perspectives to be broadened by those around us. In committing ourselves to the qualities of God's kingdom, justice and peace, we should be equally attentive to the qualities of living in unity for this goal. In this way, as both the Canberra and Busan unity statements urge us, we can be transformed already – even as we seek a unity that we have not quite reached.

In August I joined representatives of many of the churches in Nigeria as they gathered to launch together with Muslim leaders of that country a new interfaith centre for peace and harmony in Kaduna. This was one of the pilgrimages we do in a concrete form and in a metaphorical sense, to show that where the sanctity of life is under threat we should be together. The way to launch this centre has in itself been a way of such a pilgrimage of justice and peace. The way we shall look together, is into the future, based on healing of the past. Healing, justice and peace are so very closely related.

The recent interfaith prayer for peace in Assisi showed also how the most responsible leaders in many faith communities are committed to focusing on justice and peace. The upcoming commemoration of the Reformation in Lund, Sweden, will be based on the document and concept "From Conflict to Communion".

In the commitment to be pilgrims together on the way to unity, Pope Francis shows himself a support to this approach to our way forward. We celebrate the signs of unity we share, but we cannot wait till everything is settled before we move forward together giving a common witness and offering a common service in the world for justice and peace.

You are as churches responding these days to the very significant document from Faith and Order "The Church – Towards a Common Vision". This is indeed an opportunity to harvest many results from other processes of dialogue as well. One is the upcoming joint commemoration of the 500 years since the Reformation. There are many 50-year anniversaries of ecumenical dialogues these days. I believe that the Reformation anniversary can refresh our understanding of the unity we have as an expression of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ. Based on the calling in Christ, we have the right perspectives that also can strengthen our common visions. In dealing with the remaining and even new differences and divisions, we must not underestimate how much has happened over the last decades that manifest how much we have in common. The challenges of the time urge us to find expressions of unity and solidarity in the body of Christ.

The characteristics of mutual accountability are expressed well in Ephesians 4:1-3:” [L]ead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The origin of the Greek verb *peripateo* is nuanced, and can mean to walk around, or hence to live or to behave. This offers an interesting connection then to the ecumenism of today, a dynamic of movement and walking embodying the qualities of unity and peace.

The nature of this pilgrimage looks different wherever we stand in the world. In your own context of Australia, where is God calling you to move? What places of hurt and pain does God want you to see? How will you act to bring peace and justice where they are lacking?

5. The Future of the Ecumenical Movement

One of the well known Biblical texts about ecumenical attitudes and mutual accountability, is 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul uses irony to describe the negative attitudes in the body of Christ. The attitude “I have no need of you” does not belong to this body. Therefore, the attitude that we can ignore the other or ignore the other’s need for us, is against the very nature of being one body in Christ. There is a need for mutual accountability to what we are with our different gifts, and to what we are called to be together. The alternative is described in the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, by the attitudes of faith, hope and love. Love is able to believe, love hopes everything. This is the attitude of giving account of our hope.

I believe the future of the ecumenical movement is filled with hope. By that I do not only mean that I think the prognosis of ecumenism is hopeful, although it certainly is, given the momentum of hope we see in the new common understanding of the ecumenical movement as a joint pilgrimage.

The ecumenical movement is hopeful when it continues in its original task of building relationships where they did not exist before and unceasingly works to deepen the bonds of fellowship once they are formed. The visions for unity from Canberra and Busan are guiding our efforts. When the conditions for integrity and mutual accountability in dialogue and action are formed, hope flourishes. We not only have reason for hopefulness about our vision of unity of the church, humanity and all of creation, but we create hope by living out our commitment. And that hope is not just for me or those like me. It is a hope for all.

To be one is to unite in what is life-giving: our faith and our hope resting in the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sharing that hope is the best sign of our shared love given by God. May God lead us as one to justice and peace, in Australia and in the world in which we live together.