RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM

HOW TO FIND OUT ABOUT RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM:

For information on and articles about Receptive Ecumenism, a google search using this title will give you 9 pages of references to web sites, conferences, resources, articles, books, study materials and organisations focused on this topic.

# Two overseas sources of information are:

✓ Centre to Catholic Studies, Durham University;

# Within Australia, web sites for:

✓ South Australian Council of Churches:
✓ South Australian Dialogue of Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches
✓ New South Wales Council of Churches
✓ Australian Council of Churches
✓ Centre for the Study of Society and Culture, Canberra Australia

as well as this web site.

# Authors who have written on Receptive Ecumenism include:

✓ Paul Murray
✓ Denis Edwards

# Conferences focused on Receptive Ecumenism have been held

✓ at the University of Durham, 2011
✓ in Connecticut USA in 2014
✓ in Canberra, Australia in 2017

# Conference papers were presented at the Canberra Conference by

✓ Harisun, Marelle, Alison Whish and Michael Trainor, for the SADRCUC, available on their web site
✓ Harisun, Marelle and Ernest Sorenson, for the Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of South Australia. This paper is available in full on the following pages.
CONFERENCE THEME: LEANING INTO THE SPIRIT: DISCERNMENT, DECISION-MAKING AND RECEPTION

Paper presented at the conference, November, 2017, Canberra

Case studies of RE: Denominational and Congregational

Synopsis

The paper describes how the Uniting Church In Australia, Synod of South Australia, has engaged with Receptive Ecumenism since the RE III Conference in Connecticut. The report to the 2014 Synod by an attendee resulted in re-establishment, after 15 years, of a Synod body to encourage receptive ecumenism within congregations and to make links with ecumenical bodies in other state denominations and in UCA. Members were attenders at 2013 Adelaide meetings with Paul Murray. Commitment to “receptive learning” resulted in specific inter-denominational relationship building in their congregations. The Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee (SERC) places an increasing emphasis on resourcing congregations and candidates preparing for ordination for commitment to RE.

Reflection on these experiences demonstrates that Ecumenism as an expression of church in many rural areas leads to co-operation between denominations essential for Christian community formation and survival in difficult times. Co-operation at congregation or regional level is often innovative and practical and arises from grassroots conversations or ideas.

Experience of training ecumenically at Adelaide College of Divinity also strengthened understanding and relationships in Congregational service, while this was an Ecumenical Theological College.

Short case studies of relationship building and greater cooperation are shared.

CASE STUDIES OF RE: DENOMINATIONAL AND CONGREGATIONAL

As a representative of the Synod of South Australia of the Uniting Church in Australia, Marelle Harisun attended the REIII Conference in Connecticut. On returning from that Conference, she presented a written and powerpoint report to the next full meeting of the Synod in late October that year, as well as a proposal that the Synod re-institute a Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee. There had not been such a body since 2001! This proposal was agreed by consensus, and the Synod Standing Committee (SSC) was authorised to appoint the Committee.

The SSC in due course appointed three members of Synod, a Past Moderator, and the two proposers of the group, in turn authorised to appoint the full committee. That Committee commenced in early 2015 with a Terms of Reference approved by the SCC and an allocated budget. The decision was made by the committee to focus on Receptive Ecumenism for its task of encouraging the Congregations and other bodies of the Church to engage in the processes of receptive learning. As strategic Three-Year Plan was developed to guide our actions. As part of the plan we identified the ecumenical bodies within the state of South Australia, and those of the Uniting Church national and state synod bodies focused on Ecumenical Relationships.
During the later years, we have faced some issues in implementing our strategic plan priorities.

1. Changes in original membership, and the difficulty in finding younger people to join the committee;

2. Apathy across the Uniting congregations for working with other congregations in their districts, let alone with those of other denominations;

3. Changes in the Synod structures, and consequent roles, that sometimes affected communication.

However, those who continue on the Committee and who have joined have remained committed to the ecumenical task of increasing the reception of RE as a way of becoming more truly the one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic church.

**Activities**

- The Committee now has a web page on the Synod web site, as a means of sharing relevant information and documents with the people of the church; and of inviting them to share their stories of ecumenical action and learning.

- The College for Theology and Mission staff are working on ways of engaging candidates for Ministry and other students in ecumenism, and access to resources around this developing theme.

- We have established links with the committees and bodies within the State focused on ecumenism, and have engaged in a number of joint activities focused around RE, sharing especially with the Anglican Ecumenical Network in gatherings where we explore significant documents in our traditions.

- Our links with interstate Synod Committees have been in the form of shared minutes, adoption of good ideas and of resources, and meeting with each other through representatives to the annual Uniting Church meeting coordinated by the Assembly Ecumenical Relations Committee, and listening to he reports of Interdenominational Dialogues of which the UCA is a member.

- Common membership with the state-based South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches, a body that has existed in this state for over 25 years, with the focus during the past three years on RE, and how they can encourage Bilateral dialogues between congregations of these denominations.

- Presenting an annual report to the Synod via the SCC, where a representative has been able to be present at a meeting to engage in conversation around the themes.

- Agreement that the Synod of SA will fund two members of the SERC to attend REIV as their representatives, with the expectation of a report to a meeting of the Synod/Presbytery.

- Celebrating the ecumenical action between the Roman Catholic Diocese of Port Pirie and the Lighthouse Uniting Church in the same city, as they have engaged in a Dinner of Light for the
two congregations annually, which has increased the connections made between congregation members as they engage in their daily lives, and in ecumenical action in providing support for welfare activities in the city, and for working together in serving the needs of young people. This story has been published in New Times, the journal of the Synod of SA (UCA).

- linking the membership of the SERC with that of the South Australian Council of Churches (SACC) and sharing reports of actions and ideas.
- joining in the celebration of the 70th Birthday Pilgrimage of the SACC earlier this year.
- being given time at Synod meetings to encourage participation in REIV, and in ongoing ecumenical relationships with other churches, as well as adding their stories to our web page.

Reflections

Reflection on these experiences demonstrates that Ecumenism as an expression of church in many rural areas leads to co-operation between denominations essential for Christian community formation and survival in difficult times. Co-operation at congregation or regional level is often innovative and practical and arises from grassroots conversations or ideas. However, cooperation with an building relationships with congregations of other denominations is very difficult to achieve in the City of Adelaide, because of the contextual factors affecting congregations i.e. diminishing attendance at and membership of local churches of all denominations, with its consequent ethos of fear and inward focus for survival.

The recent Census Report for Australians shows that there is a decrease in church affiliation and attendance in all denominations, and an increase in those naming themselves as “no religion”! This malaise will not make it any easier to encourage congregations to reach out to other congregations, and to their communities that are increasingly multi-faith.

However, if congregations can see these changes as an opportunity to be more clearly the Christian Church, as a whole, there is some hope for the future. Where Uniting Congregations in this city are making weekday connections with their communities in offering their resources for others lives and spiritual growth, these congregations appear to be surviving, if not thriving.

Presenters:

Dr Marelle Harisun, Secretary, Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee, UCA SA
Rev Ernest Sorensen, Minister in Placement, Port Pirie Uniting Congregation.