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Receptive Ecumenism: a journey in patience, love and humility

Geraldine Hawkes

Introduction

In a world that is often broken, and where divisive and dualistic behaviour and attitudes are pervasive, Jesus' prayer that we may be one seems as elusive today as it did 2000 years ago when he uttered those words.

Many homes, neighbourhoods and nations are fragmented, and individual lives destroyed, diminished or discarded, while the exercise of power is often abused, and decisions are taken without regard to the least among us. It is into this space, this reality, that the voice of Jesus speaks.

When I first heard of Receptive Ecumenism, around 2007, I heard echoes of the gospel and an interiority of heart, both for the individual and for any institution, that was invitational and incremental, with the potential to draw us into a disposition where the individual and the institution might journey towards our greater wholeness and integrity.

I was serving as Executive Officer with The South Australian Council of Churches (SACC) at the time and had worked in ecumenical circles for several years. We were in what had been described by some as an ecumenical winter, and Receptive Ecumenism seemed to offer a glimpse of spring.

As I began engaging more deeply with Receptive Ecumenism, I became aware that it also offered fresh and enduring possibilities in response to our fragmented world and the urging of Jesus 'that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me' (John 17:21, NRSV).

And so my curiosity was aroused by a new approach that might invigorate our relationships, ecumenically and beyond.

In this paper, I will describe the background to Receptive Ecumenism, its essence and the spiritual demeanour that it elicits and needs, its pastoral and community-enhancing effects, and its relevance in these days of ongoing polarisation.

Background

Paul Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Durham, gave birth to the term and concept of Receptive Ecumenism in the mid-2000s. He described it in these words:

Receptive ecumenical awakening is properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments to closer relationship might be overcome.¹

Murray suggested that Receptive Ecumenism invites us to ask not, 'What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?' but rather, 'What do we need to learn from them?' and that 'if all were asking this question seriously and acting upon it then all would be moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into more intimate relationship.'²

Since that time, the understanding and practice of Receptive Ecumenism has been developed and extended by various ecclesial bodies, particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden and the USA, through five international conferences with participants from various parts of Africa, Asia, America, Europe and Oceania, and an ever increasing number of resources, projects, activities and academic publications, of which one of the most current and comprehensive is *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning*.³

Around 2008, following a year-long discernment process, SACC turned its attention more intentionally to Receptive Ecumenism. It started by sharing the basic outline with members and, as these occasions were received enthusiastically, SACC began exploring Receptive Ecumenism pathways to guide SACC in serving the member churches by drawing them more authentically into unity with renewed insight and energy.

From then on, SACC initiated and facilitated a range of conversations, workshops and presentations, created a series of practical, educational and spiritual resources, and invited people in any experience of church in any arena across seventeen traditions state-wide, and beyond, to continue the journey with a new disposition both towards themselves and towards the other.

The essence of Receptive Ecumenism and the spiritual demeanour that it elicits and needs

Murray's description of 'falling in love with the experienced presence of God' in another tradition, of searching 'for ways in which all impediments to closer relationship might be overcome', and of 'moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into more intimate relationship' resonated deeply with the prayer of Jesus and his yearning for us all to live in unity with one another and in the heart of God, the heart of the Trinity.

1 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*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

2 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/constructivetheology/receptiveecumensim/>.

3 Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Receptive Ecumenism indicated the capacity for guiding us from divisive behaviour and dualistic attitudes, drawing us closer towards one another and into more authentic expressions of our life in Christ, and towards a greater manifestation of unity in our Triune God.

Achieving such unity of mind and spirit is elusive as we frequently succumb to our human propensity for divisive behaviour and dualistic attitudes, for power over, where unhealthy love of self or of one's institution, or feelings of superiority over another, often dominate and may lead to the diminishment or destruction of the other, perceiving them as a problem to be resolved rather than as a gift to be received.

Our ecumenical journey has generally tended to focus on an exploration of *what others need to learn from us, or what we need to tell the other*, sometimes with the attitude that if only 'the other' could be 'more like us', the problem of division would drift away.

At the same time, many positive results and initiatives have emerged through these encounters and dialogues, and we celebrate the immense shift in our understanding of one another and of ourselves, as a result.

What is less clear is the impact on the daily life and mission of the various church bodies: inner change and any resultant growth and action appear to remain generally at the individual level, with seemingly little impact on the structures, systems, processes and practices of the life and mission of our churches.

With Receptive Ecumenism, the question is: *What can our church learn and receive, with integrity, from our ecclesial others?*

Implicit within this question is that we recognise the need for healing from within our own tradition.

To even consider and then name any weaknesses or vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to institutional structure, practices etc., and then approach another and name that weakness or vulnerability, let alone seek their wisdom and insight, can be a huge challenge for many. Yet, recognising our own weakness and our need for others are vital parts of being human.

Awareness of our institutional weaknesses or vulnerabilities often starts from a yearning, an awareness or a frustration that some practice, process, system, or structure within our own tradition may be an inadequate or distorted expression of our unity in Christ.

Receptive Ecumenism invites us, through a spirit of humility and desire for healing, to share this yearning and our desire for healing with our ecumenical other, in the hope of discovering some new insight from listening to the other that we can integrate into our own expression of church with authenticity and so grow more fully into manifesting our unity in Christ.

Receptive ecumenism is more about self-examination and inner conversion than convincing the other; Anglicans and Roman Catholics can help each other grow in

faith, life and witness to Christ if they are open to being transformed by God's grace mediated through each other.⁴

The challenge within the SACC, then, was how to nurture such awareness and openness, recognising it required a spirit of patience, love and humility.

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:2-6).

The facilitation of this new disposition formed a vital characteristic of SACC's work, and we embarked on a journey of assisting all to look, with patience, love and humility, on one another in the same way as God looks on all of creation and to be open to receiving each other as gift.

Its pastoral and community-enhancing effects

Receptive Ecumenism as a Leaning into the Spirit of Loving Transformation.⁵

Receptive Ecumenism is not about settling for less than the churches already are, nor diminishing the tradition of our various churches, nor is it about carrying out a program. Rather, it is a movement of the Spirit with an openness to transformation.

Its strength and effectiveness rests more on process than content. So, at SACC we developed a focus on activities which would especially embrace and nurture patience, love, and humility as values we considered inherent within Receptive Ecumenism and necessary to its practice.

Gatherings were arranged so that people could be encouraged to shed any desire or tendency to tell the other about themselves, and instead, in that spirit of patience and humility, be drawn into a stance of listening lovingly with hospitality of heart, both to the other and to the movement of the Spirit, with an openness to learning and discovery.

Receptive Ecumenism is about every arena of church, whether parish, congregation, agency, council, synod, conference or board, growing more fully in Christ, and becoming more authentic and more reflective of the gospel than it was before.

If we are practising Receptive Ecumenism well, then we will end up being more Baptist. It is not about learning all about other traditions...it's more about learning from other traditions. What is it that the Catholics can teach us about a life in Christ

4 Communique from the Meeting of ARCIC III at Bose, Italy (May 2011), https://iarccum.org/archive/ARCIC3/2011-05-27_arcic-iii_communique_bose.pdf.

5 Paul D. Murray, 'Foreword: Receptive Ecumenism as a Leaning-into the Spirit of Loving Transformation,' in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*, ed. Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2018), xv-xxiii.

that will not only help us, but help us to be more Baptist.⁶

What follows is a description of some of the activities that SACC developed, together with a brief outline of the processes used and their impact.

Naming the Gift of the Other

Naming the Gift of the Other was a fairly simple process and was the first practical activity we used to introduce SACC General Council (and later many others in parishes, congregations and committees) to the way of Receptive Ecumenism.

People were invited simply to ponder, in silence, and then name a gift, the charism, that they recognised as being present in another denomination.

Gifts named ranged from *a strong sense of social justice, a capacity for silence when needed, inclusive services, solid moral teaching, vibrant gospel engagement, singing, and a transcendence during communion.*

Not only was there delight in each denomination as ‘their’ gift was announced, the effect on those naming the gift was to turn their attention towards deeper appreciation of the other and, as a further step, to invite the other to describe more about the context and expression of that gift within that denomination.

Each time SACC hosted a gathering on *Naming the Gift*, people expressed a sense of hope in their being drawn closer together on their journey in Christ.

Signposts

Signposts was an exercise that any church body, such as a council, school board or synod, could conduct. The exercise rested on being aware of what was generally a major strength of a church council, board etc. but which had experienced ‘mission drift’ and become what might be described as a weakness or vulnerability affecting the capacity for its mission.

Some examples of ‘Signposts’ are:

- We tend to place too much authority in the hands of our leaders so that when things go wrong it becomes difficult.
- Our processes and systems feel like they have become so committee-ised that we seem to seldom ever move forward.
- We have isolated ourselves from other traditions thinking that we have nothing to add to the conversation and that we’re too different to be able to be understood anyway.

Where *Naming the Gift* turned attention to the richness in another tradition, *Signposts* assisted bodies to recognise an area within its own domain that may be in need of healing so that they might reclaim integrity in their life and mission.

6 Rev David Smith, President (2010–12) Baptist Churches of South Australia & Northern Territory, in SACC, *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands: The promise and potential of Receptive Ecumenism* (Adelaide, 2012). The *Healing Gifts* booklet is available from sacc.asn.au.

Conversations of the Heart

Conversations of the Heart was a delightfully simple gathering, grounded in hospitality. A modest meal of soup and bread was arranged to which SACC invited 4–5 people, as companions, from different experiences of church.

No preparation by companions was needed. The focus was on being present to one another, on listening and the sharing of stories as a way of building friendship, trust and hospitality of heart. Many described the experience as enabling them to be more vulnerable with one another and to speak more freely about their hopes and their anxieties.

Over time, as other gatherings were held, more complex processes were developed, such as *Receptive Ecumenism: Gifts of Healing* and *Reimagining our Unity in Christ through Receptive Ecumenism*. These are more fully described in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*.⁷ Again, participants appreciated these experiences, describing them as illuminating, evoking tenderness and graciousness, and a letting go of feelings of self-absorption.

Other ecclesial bodies such as Australian Catholic Theological Association, the Lutheran Church of Australia, Melbourne College of Divinity and various church and ecumenical councils also invited SACC to assist, guide, present or facilitate using the learnings and methods of Receptive Ecumenism.

And beyond Australia, SACC resources and experience were picked up and developed in places as diverse as the Anglican Centre in Rome, the Workgroup for Mission Theology at the Christian Council of Sweden and the Swedish Mission Council, and Durham University, UK.

In responding to Bishop John Henderson to assist the Lutheran Church of Australia in its preparations for the General Convention of Synod in 2015, SACC offered, from its experience of Receptive Ecumenism, suggestions about processes and rituals in relation to the sessions on 'Women and the Call to the Office of the Public Ministry' to help nurture patience, love, humility and hospitality of heart across participants.

Subsequently, Rosie Scheffe in her daily Synod News report, wrote:

My impression was that delegates were growing in confidence in the process, that they trusted their tablemates, regardless of whether or not they agreed with what they were saying. It wasn't so obvious in their words...but in their body language. Again they leaned in, smiles abounded, and as they moved in to a time of table prayer, the spirit of love and concern for each other was strongly evident.⁸

7 Geraldine Hawkes, 'Nurturing and Nourishing a Receptive Disposition Through Process', in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*, ed. Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2018), 91–94; 96–97.

8 Rosie Scheffe, 'Dialogue continues: exploring the church's story and God's story,' Synod News report, 2 October 2015, <http://www.lcasynod.org.au/2015/10/02/dialogue-continues-exploring-the-churchs-story-and-gods-story/>.

The relevance of Receptive Ecumenism in these days of ongoing polarisation

Words and actions marked by patience, love and humility appear to be infrequent or absent in society, and even, according to some, in the experience of some parts of church life, within each denomination as well as across the churches.

But patience, love and humility are by no means alien to our understanding of the gospel and the person of Jesus, who embraced his humanity, endured humiliation yet remained grounded in and held in love, patiently open to the other, to the good thief, until his last breath.

As I conclude, there are two aspects I wish to name about the potential of the way of Receptive Ecumenism and the place of patience, love and humility for the churches, and then for the healing of our world as it faces the challenges of ongoing polarisation.

For the churches

‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ (Luke 24:32)

Major teachings or decisions can tend to be divisive within any church and cause strong feeling and opinions, often causing us to divert from our mission while dealing with internal institutional matters.

One example from within my own tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, is the ordination of women as priests and deacons where the issue has been discussed by some, but the decision has been taken and pronounced that ordination is reserved for men only. This continues to tear at the garment of unity for many.

It has led me to wonder what more the Roman Catholic Church might learn about ordination by sitting at the feet of others who ordain women, such as the Anglican Communion or the Lutheran World Federation, and listening to their insights from scripture and current practice about Christ’s will for the church in relation to women and ordination.

Is there some aspect that may have been obscured or as yet unrevealed to us as Roman Catholics? Is it possible that what will be heard and subsequently discerned may illuminate some other aspect about ministry—ordained or lay—that may draw the church more deeply into facets of the gospel that have not yet been considered?

The other aspect I wish to acknowledge, is that early on in our journey, SACC recognised it was important also to be attentive to the criteria for receiving into one’s own church the institutional gift of the Spirit, of charism, that we see exemplified in another church. As a response to this aspect of reception, Rev Dr Denis Edwards, a priest of the Archdiocese of Adelaide, offered the following for consideration:

1. It can be recognised by the receiving church as an authentic expression of biblical and apostolic faith.
2. The proposed institutional charism leads to Christ, and to authentic discipleship.

3. It is not opposed to the deepest self-understanding of the receiving church.
4. It can be seen as an organic development of the faith of the receiving church.
5. It brings to the receiving church a renewed energy and life.
6. It is accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22).⁹

Through each church discerning what it still has to learn, and to opening itself to listen patiently, lovingly and with humility, both to ecumenical friends and to the Spirit, the hope is that each will discover creative and imaginative processes and responses to help in the healing both from within as well as across the churches.

And, with that approach, to be able to contribute to a change of attitude, process and action on critical issues facing our world.

For the healing of our world

Each day we see and read stories, locally and globally, that are ultimately about people who are yearning for leadership that is patient, loving and humble, that is willing to listen and to take the deepest hopes and greatest fears of people seriously and to act on them.

In our own country of Australia we know that many Aboriginal people continue to be disregarded, that many people live with unemployment or inadequate income across generations, while others, with the support of particular attitudes and social policies towards property and material 'success', generate far more wealth than seems necessary for daily life; we hear of land being plundered and rivers and seas degraded; of people who are old, or living in poverty or with a disability being ignored and generally excluded from a life that honours their full dignity; of people whose unique gift remains unnoticed, under-valued or even rejected. Where many are perceived or described as a problem to be resolved, rather than as a gift to be received.

Supposing, particularly through our various institutions whether faith, business, community or government, we were to cease from 'telling the other' or from providing for others based on what 'we' think they need, and, to turn instead, in patience, love and humility, toward the other and invite them to help us, help leaders, to be more fully attentive to their deepest yearnings, their unique gift and our connection with and need for one another.

This sentiment is beautifully described by Kylie O'Loughlin, a Naarungga/Kaurna artist, in the notes to her painting *The Secret Water Hole*:¹⁰

As I stand to look at you, I look in awe, pride and sorrow. I look at the thousand of years you have existed and provided life to my ancestors. You sit harmoniously

9 Rev Dr Denis Edwards (1943–2019), Archdiocese of Adelaide, in SACC, *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands*.

10 Kylie O'Loughlin, Naarungga/Kaurna, notes to her painting *The Secret Water Hole* 2004, in Tili Arts Exhibition, Adelaide Botanic Gardens, June 2024, and at <https://tiliarts.com.au/product/the-secret-water-hole/>.

and anonymously in the landscape. You appear humble, and yet you are the most important element to life. Without you we would cease to exist... But in finding you, I found myself...

And supposing each of us were to approach any encounter and relationship aware of the most tricky part of ourselves—the lost sheep—and, in a spirit of patience, love and humility, invite the other to walk with us and guide us in enabling that ‘trickiness’, that lost sheep, to be transformed so that it grows into a beautiful manifestation of love with and for the other.

How might attitudes and behaviour in family life, neighbourhoods, industrial relations, government, faith, education, health, international relations and all of life, be transformed? How might encounters and relationships, institutionally as well as individually, become open to searching, nurturing and celebrating the most beautiful part of the other, committed to do nothing to deny, diminish or destroy and to do everything possible to enable the other to grow and flourish.

...so just let God act, and be at one. As far as you are in God, you are in one-ness; and as far as you are outside of God, you are outside of one-ness.

Lack of unity comes from people and not from God.

Nor is there anything to fear in God, and nothing in God to cause sadness; but God's being can draw only love from us. It is true, they who have all they wish for may know joy; but no one has this joy fully except those whose will is one with God's will.

May God grant us this union.¹¹

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11 Adapted from the 13th century German theologian, Meister Eckhart.