

# Church Unity

By Philip Hunt

Church unity is dead. At least, any idea of all the churches coming together into a single super-denomination—that is a dead issue.

Instead there is a different kind of unity abroad among the churches.

In Box Hill, Victoria, a dozen churches cooperate to run a weekly free meal program. The churches take turns to cook and serve the meal in a central location rented from one of the churches. All the churches participate in raising funds and providing volunteers to keep the program going.

“The local level is the real core of ecumenism these days,” said John Henderson, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

Maureen Postmaa, General Secretary of the Victorian Council of Churches agreed. “There’s a lot more church togetherness than decades ago.”

In Boronia, local churches combine to run ‘Easterfest’ a free fun fair for the whole community just prior to Easter each year. Churches and other community groups work together to put on the show. Anglicans provide a barbecue. The Assemblies of God give a concert. Another group teach children mime. Someone else stages a coffee shop.

The entire program is completely free. A gift to the community in celebration of Easter. Hundreds of local people attend each year.

“In Australia, church unity is more and more expressed at the local level,” said Postmaa. “Churches join together to celebrate the World Day of Prayer for example. And they combine in some forms of social outreach, or jointly fund a chaplain for the local school.”

Henderson cited the emergence of cooperating parishes. In Seaforth, South Australia, the Uniting Church, Anglican and Lutherans are cooperating to share common buildings, equipment and administration. Henderson expects that soon there will be examples in poorly served rural areas of churches agreeing to cooperate in worship. “Perhaps the Uniting and Lutheran folk in an area would accept leadership of worship and pastoral care by one of their ministers for everyone,” imagined Henderson.

This form of church unity is very different from the way unity was discussed a generation ago. Then there was a widely held view that unity required common structures. This movement resulted in the blending of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches into the Uniting Church.

Yet this trend to amalgamate denominations is now a spent force.

“It’s a dead issue these days,” said Ian Allsop, former President of the Council of Churches.

“It’s not a good time for churches to lose their identity,” suggested Postmaa. “Membership of churches overall is falling, income is down, so there is a tendency for churches to promote their identity.”

It’s a way of identifying themselves from the pack.

Now the mood is to celebrate diversity and look for ways to work together.

“We are creating an ecumenical space for churches to act and work together,” explained Henderson.

Allsop said, “The theme these days is ‘Covenanting’. It’s about validating diversity. We agree to differ, and move beyond the differences.”

Postmaa suggested that “dialogue” is the present theme. “There are many dialogues going on. Between Lutherans and Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans, Lutherans and Uniting Church. And so on.”

“It’s about gaining an understanding of each other’s theology and practice,” explained Postmaa.

This all seems very far removed from the vision of One Church. A Super-Denomination which would transcend all divisions and fully express, in a single institution, the Body of Christ. Instead there is an emphasis on recognising that the Body of Christ, like any body, is made of many different parts.

“You would hardly recognise the ecumenical movement now compared to its beginnings in the fifties,” said Henderson. “There have been massive strides since then.”

“For example, in 1948 at the first meetings of the World Council of Churches, Roman Catholics were forbidden by their church to attend,” said Henderson. “Some Catholics did attend, but only clandestinely.”

By contrast, today the Roman Catholic Church is a full partner in the National Council of Churches. It joined in 1994.

“In the area of justice, for example, the Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Uniting Churches collaborate extensively to run national programs and to make joint statements,” said Henderson. “They share information, programs, staffing and funding.”

The aim is not to submerge the identity of any group, but to work at practical issues where unity brings strength and increases effectiveness.

“Each church brings something special to the table,” suggested Henderson. “There are 15 members of the National Council of Churches in Australia.” It includes the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, other major Protestant groups and a number of Orthodox churches.

Henderson cites worship as an example of how this new “ecumenical space” is working to create a new kind of cooperative unity.

“The Orthodox churches have forms of worship that most Australians would see as different,” said Henderson, “and their’s is completely different, for example, from the Quakers. Combined worship can be a problem, but we find that dialogue breaks down stereotypes and creates understanding.

“People are finding out that the differences are not as great as they thought,” said Henderson.

And the future for church unity? Henderson summed it up—“The future of the churches is together, not apart.”