Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy:
from exclusion to pluralism – Christian theological reflections

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Abstract

The individual chaplains at Flinders have grown together as a multifaith team on the basis of their pastoral responses to issues confronting them.

This paper sketches one chaplain's engagement with change over the past decade, from traditional to multifaith chaplaincy, from exclusivist to pluralist theologies.

A charter for multifaith ministry is presented for discussion

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1. Traditional Chaplaincy

The film *Chocolat* provides an image of chaplaincy, as it has traditionally been understood. The church is situated in the centre of the village and opens up on to the market square. Everybody in the village goes to church on Sunday morning as expected. It is the tradition.

In days long past, universities were also constructed on this model. The chapel was at the centre and attendance was normative. It assumed a Christian consensus.

Chocolat explores what happens when this consensus is upset. The arrival of the Pagan with her exotic skills in chocolate making parallels a similar arrival of the Pagan Association at Flinders. This arrival could be seen as a threat or a gift.

Traditionally, the chaplain was a priest who took the mass to those who were geographically displaced or unable to attend their local church – hence hospital, prison and armed forces chaplains. Until relatively recently university chaplains assumed this model. Each ministered to their own adherents on campus so that, collectively, the religious needs of the majority of staff and students, in an assumed Christian consensus, were being met through the traditional priestly activities – preaching, teaching, worship, fellowship, prayer and pastoral support.

2. Professional Chaplaincy[1]

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[1] Maness M.G. (nd) *Meaning of Chaplain: Traditional & Professional* retrieved 11 October 2004 from

When I commenced chaplaincy at Flinders University in 1997 changes were already afoot. Hospitals were beginning to employ "coordinating chaplains" to manage the large numbers of volunteers who visited patients on behalf of their churches. These "coordinating chaplains" were paid by the hospital. They were chaplains, not so much to their own adherents, but to **the institution**. A "coordinating chaplain", financed by the Government's Correctional Services, was also appointed to the central SA prison.

During the 1980's inclusivity had become a political issue. Institutional codes of practice were being developed, particularly in response to Equal Opportunity legislation. "Coordinating chaplains", responsible to the CEO's of institutions, were expected to be inclusive in their approach to all Christian traditions.

To my knowledge, there were no chaplains of other religions working in any official capacity in such institutions at that time. Chaplaincy was assumed Christian.

To address issues of inclusivity confronting "coordinating chaplains", the South Australian Heads of Christian Churches Chaplaincy Committee, an ecumenical body which assumed responsibility for all chaplains, developed a set of guiding statements for three areas which they considered paramount:

Holism:
> Chaplaincy should be an integral part of the University. Its focus is in the unique pastoral and spiritual contribution to the overall care provided. It is integrated and congruent with that offered by other disciplines and adds to the totality and 'completeness' of the care the University provides.

Spirituality:
> Spirituality is that which gives meaning and purpose to being. Chaplaincy provides a spiritual resource for University. It respects and can transcend differences of denomination and religion, recognising aspects of grace in all. The chaplain may minister to students, staff and the University itself, in ways that enable questions of life and death, reality and meaning, fear and hope to be articulated in a manner that encourages an exploration of such issues in an honest, caring environment.

Pastoral Care:
> Pastoral care is a caring resource at the client's point of need. It allows the client to 'set the agenda' with the Chaplain being available to journey with the client as a vulnerable, caring, listening fellow human. The chaplain may provide a spiritual perspective and a liturgical resource as a tangible adjunct to pastoral ministry.

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http://www.preciousheart.net/chaplaincy/Meaning_Chaplain.htm

So by the time I had commenced university chaplaincy in 1997 an inclusive approach to chaplaincy was being developed, even though the majority of churchgoers and the general public still understood chaplaincy in traditional terms.

Such discrepancies were well illustrated in the terms of my own appointment. The Uniting Church appointed me Uniting Church Chaplain to the institution, though my written job description reflected the traditional activities of the traditional chaplain.

3. Realities at Flinders

Today's universities are internationally competitive. They are competitive for Federal funding, for students and for the internal budgetary dollar. Their population is diverse – multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual. Competitiveness heightens their sensitivity to global events and the global environment, above and beyond the heightened background related to security issues. Increasingly, courses are being taken on-line; face-to-face contact between students and teaching staff and between students themselves is reduced. The introduction of education fees (HECS) has resulted in a majority of students being additionally occupied in casual employment. In this sense most students are now 'part-time', too busy to be engaged in the student activities traditionally offered by the clubs and guilds. Additionally, the recent introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) by the Federal Government has reduced the capacity of the University to offer extra-curricular activities. Tertiary education in all its aspects has become "user pays". Student life on campus is greatly diminished and tertiary education commodified.

Any one of the above changes in tertiary culture has spiritual consequences. The cartoonist Michael Leunig makes this point as he reflects on globalisation:[2]

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[2] Leunig, Michael *The Stick and other tales of our times* (Penguin 2002)
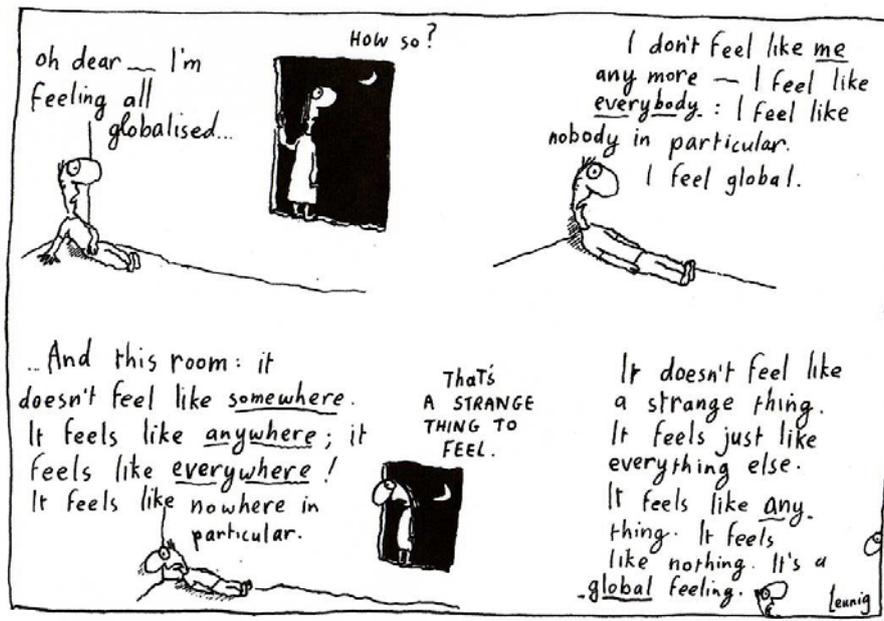
4. The Religious Centre at Flinders

At the time of Flinders' inauguration in 1967 the South Australian Heads of Christian Churches Committee decided, in the spirit of the ecumenism of the time, to offer Flinders University a *Religious Centre* as a gift, rather than attempting to establish religious residential colleges. The Jewish community also contributed to the building fund. At its opening in 1968 the Religious Centre was dedicated "for the spiritual benefit of all".

However by the 1990's it had become dominated by the "evangelical" *Christian Fellowship* club. Christian 'wars' between this club and its perceived rival had become normative. Other religious clubs simply avoided using the centre or steered clear of the "Christian Fellowship". The centre itself had also become run down and shabby.

5. A theology for change

The CEO of the Chaplaincy Commission of the Uniting Church in South Australia, Rev Richard Miller, encouraged me to develop a ministry to the institution, which was relevant, engaging and credible. Aspects of the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church, particularly its motif of 'journey' and its openness to new revelation also encouraged me to undertake a re-imagining of tertiary chaplaincy.

The suicide of a member of staff within the School of Biological Sciences prompted me to look for Biblical paradigms and insights which might be helpful in journeying with the School. I found Walter Brueggemann's writings on "exile" very fruitful.[3]

I was encouraged by texts of promise to exiles, such as Isaiah 43:19

> *Watch for the new thing I am going to do.*
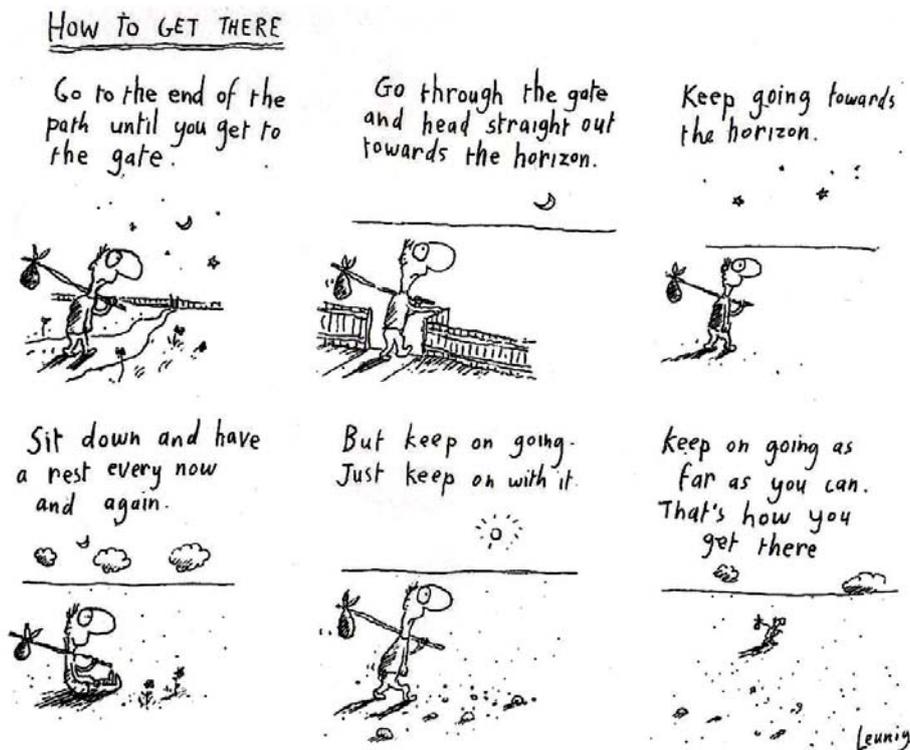> *It is happening already – you can see it now!*

This "watching" is also reflected in John Wesley's two questions:
What is the Spirit of God doing?
How shall we meet the needs of this hour?

The permission giving of the Uniting Church, a re-reading of the Biblical exilic texts in response to an ongoing pastoral situation under the tutelage of Brueggemann, and the focussing questions of Wesley provided an underpinning for re-imagining and change.

Nevertheless, the day-to-day reality might better be illustrated by another Leunig cartoon:[4]

HOW TO GET THERE

Go to the end of the path until you get to the gate.

Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon.

Keep going towards the horizon.

Sit down and have a rest every now and again.

But keep on going. Just keep on with it.

keep on going as far as you can. That's how you get there

leunig

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[3] Brueggemann, Walter *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope – contested truth in a post-christian world.* (Fortress 2000)
Brueggemann, Walter *Cadences of Home – preaching among exiles* (Westminster John Knox 1997)

[4] Leunig, Michael *Introspective* (The Text Publishing, Melbourne. 1996) p 27

6. Pivotal Moment #1: 1997

 The four chaplains, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and myself, were part-time. Not long after I commenced at Flinders in August 1997 we decided to form an ecumenical team. In this way we could arrange our times on campus so that one of us was always available in the Religious Centre. Each of us found it difficult to generate student interest in our activities. Low turnouts, even at combined events, became the norm.

We began to invite excluded groups, like the Latter Day Saints group, to use the Centre and I began to make contact with the President of the Islamic Society.

7. Pivotal Moment #2: 1998 -2001

The formation of the Flinders University Pagan Association in 1998 elicited *Chocolat* – like responses. The leader of the *Christian Fellowship* adopted an aggressively exclusivist stance and opposed the formation of their association. University polity demanded inclusion and non-discrimination and the Religious Centre was "for the spiritual benefit of all".

I decided to accept the new reality and began to have contact with the Pagans. By the time they enquired of me about the possibility of a Pagan chaplain, I had developed the view that they were an authentic religious movement and that they had every right to the same privileges as the Christians. It was a matter of social justice.

But could a Pagan be a chaplain when chaplaincy was understood within a Christian tradition? I offered the Pagan Association the Christian protocols and guidelines documents governing Christian tertiary chaplaincy and asked if their chaplain could work within the spirit of those guidelines. She could.

So in 2001, after about two years of dialogue and discussion, the Pagan Chaplain was appointed by her religious body and accepted by the University and the Tertiary Campus Ministry Association (TCMA), the chaplains' national professional body. A Buddhist Chaplain soon followed.

Because a culture of inclusivity had been established among the Christian chaplains, who had decided to work together as a team, the chaplains of other faiths were simply added to the team. The understandings of *holism*, *spirituality* and *pastoral care* developed by the Heads of Christian Churches Chaplaincy Committee to adapt traditional chaplaincy to professional chaplaincy were assumed within the emerging ethos of the new team

So as chaplains, now from various faith traditions, it seemed logical for us to see ourselves as a *Multifaith* Chaplaincy Service. We would work out what that meant as we travelled along together.

8. Pivotal Moment #3 1998 East Timor's Independence

As atrocities by Indonesian-backed militias began to be reported during the lead up to the independence vote in East Timor, Indonesian students became the object of anger from Australian students. The President of the Islamic Students Association and I decided to hold a public meeting in the Religious Centre to express our (religion's) rejection of violence; for me this was a way to affirm the Indonesian students at a time when they felt under attack.

Following this very moving meeting it was decided to immediately hold prayers for peace each day at noon in the Religious Centre, each session to be led by a different religious tradition. The leaders of the *Christian Fellowship* would not participate in prayers led by anyone other than themselves, but reluctantly agreed to lead one of the prayer meetings, so representing the Christian tradition. Each day students from various faith traditions attended.

I was struck by the dignity, respect and grace within the other faith traditions, stark contrast to the *Christian Fellowship* group. So, for example, members of the Pagan Association volunteered to help distribute about 500 tea light candles, with "Pray for Peace" attached, to students across the university. They also brought flowers and added creative, welcoming touches to the Religious Centre.

As a result of this simple act of hospitality a number of Muslim students began to meet with me each week for a "friendship lunch". This group became my most valuable resource when Churches and community groups began to contact me to talk with them about Islam after the attacks of 9/11. But the incapacity of the *Christian Fellowship* group to even recognise the distress of their neighbour confirmed in me the inadequacy of their exclusivist theological position. For them love for neighbour seemed merely a proposition.

9. Pivotal Moment #4: 2001

Conflict with the *Christian Fellowship* club finally came to a head when their intention to sponsor a visiting fundamentalist speaker was challenged. The Registrar, at my request, convened an enquiry into the conflict within the Religious Centre and as a result, the University established the Religious Centre Committee as a forum for all matters pertaining to the management of the Religious Centre.

Through this committee the chaplains initiated a program of refurbishment, funded by the University. In 2001 the Centre was ceremonially "Re-opened" by the Chancellor. A multifaith blessing ceremony was held and grand dinner followed.

For the chaplains, the light and space created by the knocking down of walls and the lively colour of paint and furnishings heralded a new beginning - a centre, hospitable to all!

10. Inclusivity

Paul Knitter defines religious inclusivity as "the approach that affirms the truth and beauty of other religions but assesses that truth/beauty according to its own criteria and then seeks to bring the value of the other religions to an even greater fruition by inviting them to be 'included' or fulfilled in its own."[5]

Once I had been confronted with the reality of working with a Pagan as my colleague it became clear to me that assuming she would become a Christian was unrealistic. So while one aspect of the inclusivist model remained – "affirming the truth and beauty of her religion and assessing that truth/beauty according to its own criteria" – the second aspect of inviting her to be 'included' or fulfilled in my *own* faith seemed to me to be paternalistic and disrespectful of the integrity of her faith journey.

In addition, the effects of the exclusionary attitude of the Christian Fellowship leaders had sharpened my awareness of superiority, self-interest and religious colonialism.

So for my part, I decided to accept her as she was. The images of Jesus' acceptance of the marginalised and outcast of his time strengthened this resolve. "Who is my neighbour?" was the question put to Jesus, and was answered by the story of *The Good Samaritan*. But my question had become "who is the Samaritan"? Against the backdrop of exclusivist Christianity the *Good Samaritan* at Flinders seemed to be a Pagan. In fact my Pagan colleague looked more "saved" than my *Christian Fellowship* brother!

11. From Diversity to Pluralism through Mutuality

Inclusivity recognizes diversity. It asks that difference be respected. It is Australia's 'fair go'.

But during the East Timor crisis the evangelical Christians claimed they *respected* the Muslims.

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[5] Knitter, Paul F. *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A. 2002) p217

So is recognition and respect enough? Is recognition and respect enough for the priest who walked by on the other side of the road, in the story of the Good Samaritan? Surely Christian love demands more than inclusivity, even though inclusivity may be a good start!

Diana Eck of Harvard's Pluralism Project suggests a category beyond inclusivity that strengthens the need for relationships:

> "Pluralism is an encounter of all of our differences. It is a reconstruction and renegotiation of our common life in light of that encounter. Pluralism requires something of us; it is not a given; it is an achievement. What is required is the kind of six years of work that the Multi-faith Council here at Wellesley has put into it. This is one of the stories of the movement from diversity to pluralism that is still being written."[6]

12. Mutuality

Mutuality[7] is a means by which pluralism may be attained. Mutuality starts when persons look outward, beyond themselves, to see urgent human tasks needing to be done. The chaplains at Flinders have accepted each other as valid practitioners of their faiths and identified their task as "nurturing spirit, building community". In this common project, we "encounter all of our differences" as Eck says, and "reconstruction and renegotiation of our common life in the light of that encounter" occurs. This reconstruction and renegotiation results in drawing on each other's strengths; it promotes mutual 'gift-giving'.

Now the chaplaincy is not individualist, even though we remain identified in our separate traditions and still minister to our own adherents. We are a *community of colleagues* who demonstrate working together, looking outward in common service and sharing mutual support. And we have become good friends.

Reflecting on Schillebeeckx' conclusion that "there is more religious truth in all religions together than in one particular religion" Paul Knitter suggests that "the most appropriate image for the religious future of humankind is…not to form a new, singular religion but to form *a dialogical community of communities*"[8] Our mutuality as a *community of colleagues* forms the basis of Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy. Truth is known, not through studying creeds but through

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[6] Diana Eck, Pluralism Project, Harvard University
http://www.wellesley.edu/RelLife//transformation/edu-ngpluralism.html retrieved October 10, 2006
[7] Knitter p134 - 148
[8] ibid p8

conversation, "not in a state of being but in a process of becoming".[9] Such a ministry is described by my Buddhist colleague as "radical cooperation", an antidote to the consciousness of competition, the enemy of compassion, so deeply embedded within us.[10]

13. A Charter for Multifaith Ministry

In helping us articulate an understanding of multifaith chaplaincy, Dr Norman Habel has proposed a set of principles that might form a Charter for Multifaith Ministry.[11]

Multi-Faith Ministry Charter
(Draft)

A multi-faith ministry is informed by the following principles:

1. **Principle of Mutual Recognition**

   A multi-faith ministry recognises the right of all faiths to meet the needs of their respective members in any given community.

2. **Principle of Mutual Concern**

   A multi-faith ministry intends to meet the pastoral concerns of, rather than convert, members of the various faiths.

3. **Principle of Mutual Understanding**

   A multi-faith ministry seeks to understand the values and beliefs of each faith in a given community rather than to pass judgement on them.

4. **Principle of Mutual Service**

   A multi-faith ministry is committed to serving the spiritual and personal needs of each member of each faith tradition in the community.

Since then the chaplains have added two other principles to the Draft:

5. **Principle of Mutual Advocacy**

   A multifaith ministry is committed to advocacy for other faith traditions in terms of what is known to be the best in each tradition.

6. **Principle of Mutual Deference**

   A multifaith ministry encourages direct contact with authentic sources of information rather than mediating in any investigation of one faith tradition by a member of another.

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[9] ibid p8

[10] Nouwen, Henri J.M. McNeill Donald P, Morrison Douglas A. *Compassion* (Doubleday 1983) p19

[11] Norman Habel, nhabel@esc.net.au, 17 August, 2006

14. Conclusion

The urgency of Kung's dictum is evident: "No peace among nations without peace among religions. And no peace among religions without a greater dialogue among them"[12].

Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy is a faith venture, thinking globally and acting locally. But it also accepts that there is no peace among nations or religions unless there is peace within ourselves. The sources of such peace lie within the religions. So we seek to remain grounded in our own separate traditions to individually tap their resources. But, to draw on Miroslav Volf, our peace is not content only to let "the other" be "other", but to embrace "the other" as mutual companion on the journey, in this case, ministry together.[13] We have become friends in common service. We miss each other if one is absent. We are discovering, as Miroslav Volf would say, that to find wholeness, one *needs* "the other", one is incomplete without "the other". But in this embrace "the other" does not stop being herself. [14]

What began as an issue of social justice, the right of minority religions to have a space and a voice, and their own chaplains, has turned into a centre of friendship and radical cooperation embracing religious difference. It is now a question of how it may continue to be nurtured and sustained.

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[12] Quoted in Knitter p100

[13] Volf, Miroslav *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the wake of "Ethnic Cleansing"* p39 in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*. William A. Dyrness ed. (Zondervan 1994)

[14] Ibid p39, 40

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