

Another Doug is dreaming (of more than Christian unity)

After giving so much to the ecumenical movement Doug Hewitt now laments (*Pipeline March*) that the movement has stalled. But he is still dreaming of Christian unity.

Now Doug is a great mover and shaker for this cause and many others, and obviously a man of extraordinary tolerance, or he would not have suffered such an unflattering ‘mug shot’ of himself to be published with his article.

But maybe his god is too small.

My own association with the ecumenical movement is much more limited, but I recall the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s when I became the first full-time journalist appointed to the staff of the ‘Australian Council for the World Council of Churches’. The work of the Council was split between three offices in Sydney and Melbourne, and I commuted by train, editing *In Unity*, producing publicity material for the *Christmas Bowl* and promoting the resettlement of refugees in Australia. After the appointment lapsed for lack of continuing funding, I continued producing the Christmas Bowl material for several years until a new full-time appointment could be made.

Yes, there was great enthusiasm for ecumenism then, even Sydney’s Anglicans were involved; but the world has moved on, in spite of Doug’s prayers, and mine, and those of thousands, perhaps millions, of others that ‘they may be one, as we are One’. As Doug says, the Uniting Church has failed in its attempts to bring other denominations along with it; perhaps because they have become so concerned about their own internal disputes, their falling numbers and the abnormal ageing of their members.

In the 50s and 60s I was a Methodist local preacher, and have vivid memories of preaching outside Customs House as part of *Mission to the Nation*. But after moving to Queensland to take up a post in a regional university, I was offput by some fellow preachers and ministers who told me that too much learning was dangerous, and might lead me only to lose my faith; I needed simply to ‘sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from Him’.

So I became an Anglican, because the local Anglicans seemed more accepting of the idea of loving God with all the mind, as well as heart and soul and strength! I felt I had moved on, and I still feel I am moving on, from Christian ecumenism to inter-faith relations. And, yes, I am still teaching and studying – currently doing post-doctoral research into the links between religion, media and society.

Recently I was invited to play a minor role in a conference of inter-faith leaders in the Brisbane City Hall, organised by the Multi-Faith Centre of Griffith University and largely paid for by the (Buddhist) Pure Land Learning College at Toowoomba.

More than 320 men and women from many faiths attended, from a dozen or so countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. I travelled to Brisbane in the same plane as the new president of the Imams’ Council of Australia and the president of Sikh Council of Australia and the priest of the Coptic cathedral in Bexley, just around the corner from my new home in Sydney. The inter-faith dialogue began in the

charter bus taking us from the airport to the city!

For three days, members of the conference discussed ways in which people of faith could work together for peace and harmony in Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region and committed themselves to the task. Having been involved with the Brisbane multi-faith centre for some years, my personal commitment is to help negotiate the building of a multi-faith centre built in Sydney, either associated with one of our universities, as in Brisbane, or as a stand-alone facility.

Yes, Doug you are right, the ecumenical movement is stalling, in spite of our prayers. But is that because our prayers are too limited? Just as the ancient Hebrew people needed to learn that 'neighbour' meant more than a fellow-Jew, so perhaps we need to be praying for all people to be one, rather than for just for Christians to be one.

Like Doug, I have a dream – that people of all faiths and of none, not just Christians, will 'act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately'.

Doug Golding