



UNDER THE GREAT CROSS

**Moral Conversations &
Enlarged Thinking**

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As I think about the Wellspring Community Gathering in Canberra in March 2005, several images come to mind.

The clapsticks, given to Peggy Goldsmith and me at Kata Djuta when the leadership of the Wellspring Community passed to us, form the first image. These clapsticks, presented at the most recent gathering of the Community, carry the spirit of that Gathering. These clapsticks, used to commence each meeting of the Wellspring Community Council, continue to symbolise the gathering of the Community.

Clapsticks have traditionally given the cadence and rhythm when Aboriginal people have gathered to perform their ancient ceremonies. So these clapsticks embody the cadence and rhythm of the Wellspring Community. Yet the cadence and rhythm is not simple and predictable to non-indigenous ears. It does not blend easily with contemporary Western culture although it is expressed through clear and arresting tones.

“Come gather ‘round people wherever you roam,” the opening line of Bob Dylan’s *The Times They are A-Changin* is the second image. Dylan’s song is a call to gather and in doing so to admit that we need to change if we are to survive the current times. It is a call for prophetic people to think carefully, to contemplate the situation deeply, and then to speak out boldly. It is a warning to leaders of all kinds not to cling to



the status quo. It is a call to the older generation to commit to creating a better world. It is a call that echoes Jesus' words "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16) where he challenges taken-for-granted views about justice. Dylan's call reminds us that we gather in order to change our society, our world, and ourselves.

A hen gathering her chicks under her wings is the third image. Jesus uses this image in Matthew 23:37. Dylan's song



resonates strongly with the images that surround the hen and chicks symbol. In Matthew 21, 22, and 23 Jesus sketches the changing times of his day. In Chapter 21 Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the capital. He comes to the Temple, the focal point of the whole city, and he challenges its practices and policies. He breaks down barriers to allow entrance to the dispossessed and marginalised. He spends the night in Bethany but he returns to the Temple the following day. He tells the temple leaders the story of the two sons (21:28), one who refuses to work but later thinks better of it and does so, the other who says he will but doesn't. Jesus asks, "Who did what he should do?" He compares the temple leaders to the greedy farmhands and reminds them that God's kingdom only comes to those who live out the kingdom life (21:43). He compares the temple leaders to guests invited to a wedding but who spurn the invitation that is then extended to the outcasts of society (22:9). When the temple leaders confront Jesus with questions about the most important of the laws, he replies that we are to love God with our whole being, and equally, we are to love others with our whole being (22:37). He reminds the temple leaders that everything hangs from these two commands, that these commands must drive their every action, that they must view everything through these powerful lenses.

Continuing in the Temple, the focal point of the capital, Je-

Jesus turns to his followers in Chapter 23 and warns them against leaders who impose petty but burdensome rules, who enjoy public acclaim, finery, status, and power. He advises his followers to lead simple lives characterised by humility, service, openness, and transparency (23:11). Then he rounds on the temple leaders again accusing them of blocking others from entering God's kingdom while not entering themselves (23:13). He accuses them of having their priorities wrong so they ignore the essence of God's law: justice, mercy, truth, fairness, compassion, and commitment (23:23). He attacks them for their hypocrisy, their pretences at purity when their lives are characterised by corruption, greed, gluttony, and cruelty (23:25-36).

Jesus does not paint a pretty picture of the times and its leaders. With all these images uppermost in his mind, he says he has ached to embrace them, to gather them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. In turbulent, dangerous, corrupt and greedy times, Jesus wants to gather the temple leaders and the people under his wings. He wants to protect them all from the dangers but he also seeks to nurture them, to transform them, to form them into true subjects of God's kingdom.

A flickering flame is my fourth (and last) image of gathering. This image characterises the gathering (again in the capital Jerusalem) of the early Christians in Acts 2. This image contrasts with the Old Testament gathering in Babel (Genesis 11) where the people were unified in their pride, self-sufficiency, and autonomy only to be divided and dispersed by God as he confused their languages. In Babel the people said, "Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad, upon the face of the whole earth" (11:4). These proud people were afraid of, and re-



sisted, being scattered throughout the world. Yet in the previous chapter (v. 18, 32) and in Genesis 1:28, scattering is part of God's plan and is blessed by God. These people sought to make everyone the same, to centralise, homogenise, and control whereas God favours diversity, difference and plurality of political, economic, and cultural centres.¹

In Acts 2 these enthusiastic but uncertain Christians from many lands (every nation under heaven (2:5)) and diverse languages are unified by the coming of the Holy Spirit only to be dispersed later throughout the world to "make a name for God", to bring the transforming and illuminating good news of Jesus to the politics, culture, and personal lives of people everywhere.

These four gathering images (clapsticks, Dylan song, hen and chicks, and flickering flame) suggest some features that may characterise our Canberra Gathering. The Gathering has the potential to be an expression of the cadence and rhythm of the Wellspring Community. The Gathering has the potential to be a stimulus to reflection on our times, to discernment of God's intentions in these times, and to bold, prophetic proclamation in word and deed of the need to transform and transcend the status quo in all aspects of our personal, cultural, spiritual, and political lives. The Gathering has the potential to draw us together to unify and strengthen our communal bonds, to nurture and transform us and then to scatter us across the nation again as people becoming the transforming and illuminating good news of Jesus to the politics, culture and personal lives of people everywhere.

I now want to elaborate a little further on some of these images. In what ways does the Gathering have the potential to express the cadence and rhythm of the Wellspring Community? The cadence and rhythm of the Wellspring Community is particularly well-suited to the site for the Gathering. The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is

located within the Parliamentary Triangle.

Parliament House dominates Canberra. Its steel spire draws our eyes upward but rather than leading us to symbols of God or leading our eyes to heaven, this spire leads us to our national symbol of autonomy and national pride. Its manicured lush green lawns proclaim our dominance over a harsh environment. Its bollards and security walls may be a confident expression of our strength and ability to look after ourselves but they also serve to separate our great house of the people from the people. No longer can we roam freely around the “forecourts” of the focal building of our national capital.

The Australian Centre, however, is dominated by the Great Cross, a 20 metre high steel cross on the high point of the site. The lesser symbols here are the beautiful indigenous poles, the campfire (another symbol of gathering), the native grasses instead of cultivated lawns, and the pathway that encourages reflection and meditation. The unfenced site welcomes all who wander in and expresses a willingness to be open and vulnerable.

The focal building of the site lies at the bottom of the hill. It lies between the centre of the parliamentary triangle and the Great Cross. It does not dominate the site but is more a sound shell opening onto an amphitheatre. It is not a building of prestige and power. It allows the people, the multitude, the masses, to sit on the grass in community, to be together, aware of the other great national symbols in the knowledge that they sit at the foot of the Great Cross. The building brings people together and facilitates communication, reflection, and the possibility of communal and individual action. In the Temple, the focal building of Jerusalem, Jesus called the national leaders to account. However, on the slopes of a hill, on the grass, he encouraged his followers on how they should live (Matthew 5-7). He spoke of justice, mercy, forgiveness, suffering, humility, forbear-

ance, generosity, dependence, trust, openness, service, anxiety, and the dangers of wealth.

The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is one of several lesser symbols that form the base of the parliamentary triangle. From left to right there is the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, the National Gallery, the High Court, the National Science and Technology Centre, and the National Library. These symbols of knowledge, enquiry and intellectual endeavour, justice, human creativity, and Christian spirituality in an Australian context are in some ways the foundation on which the great national symbol rests. It is fitting that the National Gallery and the Centre are to the left of the other symbols. In my imagination, the five symbols form a sentence that in some way interprets and informs the dominant national symbol. In this sentence, the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is the subject. This is the lens through which the other symbols may be interpreted and informed.

The Centre's position on the left is significant in other ways. Left can refer to those who support varying degrees of social or political or economic change designed to promote public welfare.² We often consider the arts as expressing left perspectives. The dramatic arts, including film, and other creative and expressive arts frequently make bold statements designed to draw our attention to the necessity for social and cultural change. As I write this in England, controversy rages over the play, *Behzi* (Dishonour), by Sikh playwright, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. This play is a "scorching indictment of repression and hypocrisy . . . sometimes found in [Sikh] culture . . . [Bhatti] shows the Sikh faith to be a source of strength and wonder. But, she also depicts some very dark deeds taking place in the gurdwana or temple."³ Bhatti says that courageous "writers sometimes cause offence . . . But perhaps those that are affronted by the menace of dialogue and discussion need to be offended . . . [The] play was designed to

test the Sikh community's stated principles of truth and egalitarianism."⁴

For the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (and by implication, the Wellspring Community) to be to the left of the national symbol for creative arts is a challenging thought. There are many among us who express great creativity through their music, art, poetry, and writing. There are many among us who express their creativity through science, research, teaching, preaching, liturgy, healing, and business. May our creativity in all these areas be outstanding in ways that truly promote the public welfare. As we gather at the Centre it is worth considering if we wish to be more provocative, more challenging, even more offensive than the arts. As we do so perhaps we can ponder the words of Oscar Romero:

A [community] that doesn't promote any crisis,
A Gospel that doesn't unsettle,
A word of God that doesn't get under anyone's
skin,
A word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the
society around it,
What Gospel is that?
Very nice, pious considerations
That don't bother anyone;
That's the way many people would like preaching
to be.
Yet does such a Gospel
Light the world we live in?
The Gospel of Christ is courageous;
It is the 'good news'
Of him who came to transform
And take away the world's sin.⁵

Let's return to the hen and chick image, the flickering flame image, and their connotations of gathering and dispersal. In the following discussion I draw heavily on a pa-

per by Robert McAfee Brown.⁶ Drawing on Karl Rahner, Thomas Merton, Stephen Neill and others, he suggests that the church is gathered for the purpose of being dispersed. The diaspora is the true nature of the church—a people scattered across the face of the earth, a tiny minority in comparison to the whole of mankind. Citing Barth, he reminds us that God reconciled himself to the **world** so much that for **it** he gave his son (John 3:16). This suggests that if we are looking to find God we will find him with those in **the world** that he loves. We gather, not so much to find God but to encourage each other to go to the world to find him.

In similar vein, Brown directs us to Hebrews 13:12-13: “Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to consecrate the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him **outside the camp**, bearing abuse for him.” If we want to find Jesus let us leave the security of the home base and go outside the camp, outside the walls, go to the city dump where they crucified him. Go to the wilderness, the wild places, go where the real issues are, go where the most crucial decisions must be made. Be a people no longer cemented together in the gathering but go in perpetual adaptation allowing the circumstances to form us under God’s creative hand while at the same time forming the circumstances and conditions of the world under God’s creative hand.

During the Gathering, we will come together from time to time to worship God using liturgies prepared by members and friends of the Community. These liturgies will draw us together and they will be creative expressions of the gifts and talents of our people as they seek to connect our worship to our lives as Australian and global citizens. But liturgy is not contained by gathering. Brown points out that liturgy derives from *laos* and *ergos*—the people’s work. At its deepest meaning liturgy is something that happens outside the camp, in the world, something that is done by the

diaspora. Brown points out that liturgy is our daily work: fulfilling jury duty, playing football, singing praise, washing nappies (as Lisa Wriley reminded us recently), counselling the sick, making love, designing buildings, reading Scripture, or teaching Grade 9. We gather to encourage each other, to build each other up so we can go out to do the liturgy, to do the people's work.

Brown reminds us that few churches get the balance right between gathering and dispersing. Some focus on gathering to the exclusion of dispersing. They look to God but ignore the world. Others focus on the world and its problems but ignore God as the motivator of their dispersion and as the mighty loving and creative presence who can transform the world. These churches become indistinguishable from social service agencies that offer no witness (and remember that 'witness' is a translation of the Greek *marturia* from which we derive 'martyr') to the transforming and sacrificial love of Jesus Christ in whom they live and move and have their being.

Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* reflects some aspects of the theme of gathered-dispersed, inside the camp-outside the camp, inside the church-outside in the world. Exclusion reflects the inside theme while embrace expresses the outside theme. Volf offers some helpful ways forward as we seek to be a dispersed people in our contemporary pluralistic societies. We should be wary of our Gathering becoming a retreat into certainty, as a means of excluding the world. It has the possibility of becoming a means by which we strengthen each other so that we are encouraged, equipped, built up, prepared and enabled to move effectively into the diaspora. Volf picks up on McIntyre's use of 'tradition'. McIntyre argues that in pluralistic societies each person inhabits a tradition. We each belong to various social groups. Each group has its own tradition—its own system of ideas on what is right and wrong and how we relate to one another. Each tradition has its

own ways of interpreting and explaining the behaviour of others. Each tradition has its own ways of making value judgements.

As members and friends of the Wellspring Community, we inhabit a Christian tradition but as an ecumenical community there is even variation within this tradition. For instance, some of us believe that Scripture alone should guide all that we do while others believe that Scripture is primary but attention may also be given to the wisdom distilled through the teachings of the Church over the past millennia. Our community reflects in a small way the plurality that exists to a much greater extent “outside the camp.”

So what do we do when we encounter plurality, difference of opinion, and different value systems? A typical response is to turn inward, to exclude other points of view, to look once again at what our tradition says, and to appeal to our convictions. But this response generally sharpens the disagreement and conflict between the opposing views. We end up with an “I’m right; you’re wrong!” situation. According to Volf, McIntyre argues that people who have rounded understandings of their own tradition are able to engage in “rational debates not only with members of the same tradition, but also with those who inhabit rival traditions.”⁷ Volf says that this is fine in principle but often only results in fine-tuning our own tradition while doing little to resolve the basic disagreement.

Volf suggests that Christians inhabit two worlds: the world of the biblical tradition (inside the camp) and the world of their own culture (outside the camp).⁸ Within each tradition we can identify a series of interrelated basic commitments, the core beliefs and practices of the tradition. As Christians we bring these basic commitments to bear on the social realities we encounter: “armed with basic Christian commitments, [we] enter boldly the ever-changing

world of modern cultures.”⁹

When we move forward in these ways we are not locked into strongly formed, closely articulated, highly integrated traditions. Holding on to these basic Christian commitments, we are more open to interpreting the experiences and beliefs that are discrepant with our own. We are moving towards opening conflicting social worlds to each other. If we wish to make an impact on the other social world we may need to practise **enlarged thinking** where we actively try to take into account the perspective of the other. We engage in **moral conversation** when we try to reverse perspectives to try to reason from the point of view of the other and to sensitively hear their voice.¹⁰

We do not abandon our basic Christian commitments in this process. We use them as a screen through which we engage with the other. We let the
voices and perspectives of others . . . resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. Nothing can guarantee in advance that the perspectives will ultimately merge and agreement be reached. We may find that we must reject the perspectives of the other. Yet we should seek to see things from their perspective in the hope that competing [views] may become converging [views] and eventually issue in agreement.¹¹

Volf cites Matthew 15:22ff as an important example of this process of enlarged thinking and moral conversation. The Syrophoenician woman asked for help. Jesus replied that he was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She was not of that house so he can't help her—in fact, she belonged to his and his people's oppressors. Jesus said that she is “outside the camp” and he excludes her from his

help. But the woman engaged his basic convictions. She argued that, “Even in your house you don’t keep all the food for the children. You exercise a kind of mercy by letting a few crumbs fall to the floor for the ‘non-people’, the dogs. If you exercise this kind of mercy to the dogs surely I, even as a non-person in your eyes, deserve mercy, too.” This moral conversation seems to enlarge Jesus’ thinking because immediately he went to the Sea of Galilee where he healed and fed more Gentiles (Matt. 15:29ff).

This incident with the woman is the story of the Cross writ small. We are the oppressors of Christ; we are the perpetrators who crucified him. Yet God has made a space in his very self for us—he has opened his arms to invite us in. So we who follow in the footsteps of the Crucified should create space in ourselves for others and create space for their perspectives on us and on them.¹²

Here we return to the concept of embrace that was the basis for the 2004 Reaching Out theme of the Wellspring Community. We seek to embrace the other, the different. We seek to embrace the unjust, the cruel, and the arrogant. As we noted in the paper on Reaching Out, the embrace involves four steps:

1. We open our arms to the other. We make a space in ourselves and indicate a willingness to allow the other in—a willingness for our basic Christian commitments to connect with the basic commitments of the other.
2. We wait. We stop at the boundary of the other person. We create a space. The wait encourages them to move towards me. I don’t force myself on the other. If we embrace, we do so because the other person wants me just as I want the other.
3. If the offer is accepted, we move into the embrace. We close our arms around each other. We enter the space of the other and the other enters our space—our basic commitments engage each other.

This embrace is not a bear hug in which we try to dominate the other. This is the embrace, the gentle hug, that Michael Long recently wished to share with the Prime Minister. He offered the hug but it was not accepted. He said, in effect, "I am opening myself to you. Symbolically, my people are opening themselves to you. We are showing you who we are and what we stand for. We are exposing our basic commitments. Will you do the same for us so that our basic commitments may explore each other, connect, and find areas of mutuality? Can we have a moral conversation with each other? Can we both seek to do some enlarged thinking? Can we enrich each other by this exchange? Can our perspectives merge and agreement be reached?"

4. We open our arms again and step back. Even if we haven't reached agreement, even if we have not fine-tuned our basic commitments, we are different people. We are changed because we have tried to understand each other. We have translated our basic commitments into terms that the other can understand. We now understand more about our basic commitments and ourselves. We now understand more about the other and their basic commitments. So we are enriched. We go on. We separate. We move forward seeking new opportunities to engage with other traditions, other perspectives, and other social worlds. We seek further enrichment. We ready ourselves to open our arms once more.

For me, the purpose of the Gathering is to

1. help us to enlarge our understandings of our basic Christian commitments.
2. practise enlarged thinking and moral conversation within the limited plurality of the Wellspring Community.
3. strengthen our bonds of mutuality and community

in ways that allow us to encourage and support one another as we move “outside the camp” to the more complex pluralities of the social worlds of the wider culture. In the wider culture we can continue to practise and refine our skills of enlarged thinking and moral conversation in the hope, the Christian hope, of merging our basic commitments with the basic commitment of others who once seemed alien and dangerous but with whom we have now found agreement.

In closing, I must make it clear that these ideas are mine alone. I have not discussed them with my co-leader Peggy or her husband Jim who have been the driving forces behind this Gathering. However, if these ideas hold any validity we, as individuals and as a community, may like to consider the following:

1. The Gathering may become more significant for us if, during the three days we are together, we consciously and deliberately look for ideas and experiences that enhance our understanding of our basic Christian commitments. We might look, too, for ways of finding mutuality with some others at the gathering who we may seek to encourage and be encouraged by as we seek to go “beyond the camp.” These people may prove useful “sounding boards” for us as we think through the implications of enlarged thinking and moral conversations as we lead our daily lives. How do we engage enlarged thinking with controversial issues in our churches eg homosexuality, lay presidency, and fundamentalist interpretations of Scripture? How do we engage in enlarged thinking as we respond to publicly to controversial public issues? How do moral conversations shape the way we write letters our politicians, other public figures, or the newspapers? How do moral conversations shape the way we make public statements any issue?

2. As we leave the Gathering, we may like engage in a symbolic act of going “beyond the camp”. We could walk or drive from the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture into the heart of the parliamentary triangle for a final reflection on the dominant symbol, the lesser symbols, and the place of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (and by implication, the Wellspring Community) among them. We could deliberately and symbolically move out of the triangle, across the bridge, and up Northbourne Avenue. Head north, out into the world, out into Australia committed to the process of moral conversation, enlarged thinking and embrace.
3. As we move out, the following prayer may encourage us:

Don't hide,
Don't run
But rather
Discover in the midst of fragmentation
A new way forward:
A different kind of journey
Marked by its fragility,
Uncertainty
And lack of definition.
And on that path
To hold these hands
That even in their brokenness
Create a new tomorrow.
To dance at the margins,
And to see the face of Christ
Where hurt is real
And pain a way of life.
To be touched
In the eye of the storm,
Aware that tomorrow may not bring peace.

Impossible, you say;
Let me retreat
And find my rest.
What next, my friend,
In these fragmented times?¹³

Unless thou lead me, Lord,
The road I journey is too hard,
Through trust in thee alone
Can I go on.¹⁴

Endnotes

1. Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p.226-227.
2. Definition from www.cogsci.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/webwn (WordNet, a lexical database for the English language, Cognitive Science Laboratory, Princeton University, 221 Nassau St, Princeton NJ 08542). Accessed 2 January 2005.
3. *The Times*, Tuesday December 21 2004, p.11
4. *Times*, p.11
5. Cited in Peter Millar, *An Iona Prayer Book*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998, p.70
6. Robert McAfee Brown, True and false witness: architecture and the church. *Theology Today*, Vol. 23, No. 4, January 1967, pp. 521-537.
7. Volf, p. 206
8. Volf, p. 208
9. Volf, p. 210
10. Volf, p. 212
11. Volf, p. 213
12. Volf, p.214-215
13. Peter Millar in Millar, p. 130-131
14. Toyohiko Kagawa in Millar, p. 130-131