



Ecumenical Worship

Guidelines for Ecumenical Worship in Rural and Remote Areas
Ecumenical Task Group on Collaborative Local Ministry (1997)

SUNDAY MORNING in a remote western Queensland town. Today the Lutheran pastor from a neighbouring town is rostered to celebrate Eucharist in the local Lutheran church. A Catholic priest who serves a wide area made his monthly visit to say Mass last week. The members of the Uniting Church are fortunate enough to have a resident minister – for the time being at least!

So what do the locals do about Sunday worship? Do they have separate denominational services led by a lay person when their ordained leader is unavailable? Should Anglicans, Lutherans and Catholics join the Uniting Church congregation with its minister of the word and sacrament when their own clergy are unavailable? Should they come together for an ecumenical service when ‘leaderless’ but leave the group to worship separately when their own pastor comes to town? Or do they do both?

It was in response to such questions that the Ecumenical Task Force on Collaborative Local Ministry was established in 1993 by the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane, the Lutheran District Council, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, and the Uniting Church Synod of Queensland. The purpose of the group was to clarify general principles by which the Churches could collaborate in local ministry and to specify opportunities for collaboration in both new and established areas.

A major concern for the Churches is ministry to people in western and remote areas of Queensland with declining populations, financial resources and access to clergy. The reality is that many towns can no longer support full-time clergy of several denominations and are serviced by one or two with occasional visits by others. People in more remote geographical areas have, during the past ten years or so, pioneered ways of gathering faith communities together for lay-led services of the word - with or without communion – or, in some instances, the rite of Christian burial. The visit of a priest or pastor is the occasion for smaller local communities to gather for combined worship.

Many of the issues concerning worship in remote areas emerged in a project conducted in 1994 for the International Year of the Family by Margaret Madden RSM on behalf of the Queensland Catholic Education Commission and the Catholic Bishops of Queensland.

At the end of 1995, the Ecumenical Task Group on Collaborative Local Ministry established a group to look at models and practical/pastoral guidelines for ecumenical worship in western Queensland and in some urban areas.

The group examined the services of the word in the worship books of the four traditions involved in the project. The high degree of commonality found there was used as the basis for these Guidelines that they produced.

GUIDELINES FOR ECUMENICAL WORSHIP IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

INTRODUCTION

An examination of the services of the word for Lutheran, Anglican, Uniting and Roman Catholic Worship revealed a remarkable similarity (see Table). In view of this, it made sense to use the existing services on a rotational basis so that people can experience their own traditions but also be enriched by the traditions of others, rather than write a new service. There will of course be a variety of different situations – different mixes of denominations, availability of ordained ministers and so on. In each situation an agreement between participating churches should be in the form of a written document.

The committee discussed three possibilities which might establish general principles to cover all eventualities.

1. The situation where there is an ordained minister resident in the town.

While recognising that some of the nuances of each tradition might be lost, it is recommended that the services of the participating churches represented in the congregation be used on a rotational basis.

2. The situation in which clergy from a number of traditions visit on a regular basis.

In this instance each minister could lead the service in his or her own tradition. Where one denomination is not represented in the visiting clergy, some consideration might be given to including a service from that tradition on a regular basis.

For example, if there are Anglicans, Uniting Church and Lutherans among the participating churches and only an Anglican and Uniting Church visitor available on a regular basis, there might be a service based

on the Lutheran form on a monthly basis, alternately replacing one of the others.

3. The situation where there are no clergy.

Services should be led by a lay member of each tradition, bearing in mind some of the issues referred to below.

Whatever the situation, the key to effective worship will be the sensitivity of the leaders and their understanding of all the traditions.

GUIDELINES

1. Wherever there is collaborative worship, the services of each participating Church is to be used on a rotational basis.

2. The music of each tradition represented will need to be taught so that it can complement the worship.

3. In each centre, there will need to be a local worship group consisting of trained people from each denomination. Such a group will represent the congregation and be involved in planning the worship, whatever the clergy situation.

4. It will be important to maintain denominational integrity/identity. This may mean that members will need to learn about their own tradition as well as learning about the traditions of others.

5. The Revised Common Lectionary would be the most appropriate source for the readings. Each community would make the most appropriate choice of Old Testament readings.

ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED

A number of issues related to ecumenical worship will need to be borne in the mind by those with leadership roles in worship. The following is not an inclusive list, but indicates some of the differences between traditions which might cause difficulties if sensitivity and education are lacking.

1. Some traditions are used to liturgical processions and some are not.
2. Though the services are the same, the language differs (see Table below).
3. The form of absolution and who gives it varies across traditions. Even the word 'absolution' may cause difficulties for some.
4. In all traditions the wording of the absolution and the blessing is changed if the service is led by a lay person.
5. The style and use of music in liturgy varies across the traditions.
6. There will be special occasions which will affect normal worship patterns – for example, pastoral letters from Church leaders and special programs.
7. There are varieties of practice within each tradition, which is where a local committee will be useful.

EUCCHARIST

Though the Eucharist was outside the initial scope of the group, it was felt by the group that it was a difficult issue to avoid. If there is only one ordained presider present, one or more tradition may not be able to receive communion on a regular basis. This will raise issues for collaborative ministry.

It was felt that to have an ecumenical service of the word followed by a denominational Eucharist would be divisive for two reasons. One group might always miss out and those who are able to attend Eucharist might feel that they do not want or need to come to the ecumenical service.

In the Catholic and Anglican traditions, it is possible for licensed lay people to administer the pre-consecrated elements. (It is possible in the Uniting Church for lay people to be given permission to preside). This being the case, it is suggested that on Sundays when there is to be communion, an ecumenical service of the word might conclude with the offering and the

peace greeting. Two alternatives could follow: either the community separates into different denominations to continue with communion or Eucharist, or preferably, the community could share a cup of tea or coffee before dividing into separate groups for the Eucharist or communion.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE GUIDELINES

If these guidelines are to be put into practice, issues concerning authority and training have to be addressed. Communities will need assurance that the form of worship used and the person leading the service are officially sanctioned by their own Church. Licensing of lay leaders should be given consideration, especially in the area of preaching. Both lay and ordained worship leaders will need to be trained in the structure and nuance of all four forms of service in order to be able to lead each with style and grace.

For Roman Catholic people, ecumenical services of the word as described in the guidelines will raise a number of important liturgical questions. What is the meaning of the assembly gathered for worship if the make-up of that assembly varies from week to week according to what clergy, if any, are available to lead the service? How do they retain their Catholic identity? Normally a Sunday service of the word for Catholics looks forward to the next celebration of Mass and maintains and expresses the identity of the local assembly for the celebration of the Eucharist. A broader ecumenical assembly for Sunday worship expresses our common baptism into Christ, but will it compromise the eucharistic assembly when it can occur?

From ancient times, the Church's teaching has clearly stated that the Eucharist is the centre of Christian existence and normative for Sunday worship. The *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* recommends that when Mass is not possible a service of the word, completed if possible by communion, be celebrated.

How does the understanding of Eucharist as the norm fit with the guidelines' suggestion that an ecumenical liturgy of the word be the regular form of Sunday worship?

In addition, the unity of word and sacrament is fractured if, as the guidelines recommend, the community separates into different denominational groups to celebrate a communion rite.

Margaret Madden surfaces some of these concerns in the concluding lines of the chapter on "Liturgical Prayer and Worship" in her excellent 1994 report:

Ecumenism is developing most naturally at grassroots and the Christians express desires to share not only the word but also the Eucharist. Combined with this are the Catholic communities' endeavours to continue to live as Eucharistic and sacramental worshippers. Therefore, the time is urgent and ripe for at least some of these Catholic/ecumenical communities to participate actively in the doing of a theology of Eucharist that searches the truths, the realities and the practicalities for enabling Eucharist to actually be the central sign and sustainer of Christians' lives.

Services of the Word

| UNITING | ANGLICAN | LUTHERAN | CATHOLIC |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Gathering | Gathering | Preparation | Gathering |
| Call to worship Greeting | Greeting Sentence of Scripture | Call to the Presence of God | Greeting |
| (Prayer of Adoration) | Prayer of Preparation. (2 Great Commandments) | | |
| Confession | Confession | Confession | Penitential Rite |
| Declaration of Forgiveness | Absolution | Absolution | Opening Prayer |
| | Kyries | Kyries | |
| Gloria | Gloria | Gloria | |
| Service of the Word | Ministry of the Word | Service of the Word | Liturgy of the Word |
| | Collect | Collect | |
| First reading | First Reading | First reading | First reading |
| Psalm | Psalm | Psalm | Responsorial Psalm |
| Second Reading | Second Reading | Second Reading | Second reading |
| Gospel | Gospel | Gospel | Gospel |
| Preaching of the Word | Sermon | Creed Sermon | Scriptural Reflection |
| Affirmation of Faith | Creed | | Profession of Faith |
| Offering | | Offering | |
| Prayer of the People | Intercessions | Prayer of the Church | Intercessions |
| Lord's Prayer | Lord's Prayer | Lord's Prayer | Lord's Prayer |
| | | | (Sign of Peace) |
| Sending Forth | The Sending out of God's People | | Concluding Rite |
| Blessing | Blessing | Blessing | Blessing |
| Dismissal | Dismissal | | Dismissal |

Note: The positioning of hymns has not been included.

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| Lay person could lead and preach. | Anyone can lead. Only a licensed lay person can preach | May be a lay person. Only an ordained person can preach. | Lay person could lead, and with episcopal delegation, preach. |
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