



My Ecumenical Journey

Address of the Rev. Max Wright (Churches of Christ) to the NATSIEC Meeting, October 2004

Let me say to you Graeme and to Jim thank you for giving me the opportunity of allowing me to talk to us about a very important subject and issues that we face today. I have been asked to speak about how do I see myself in an ecumenical environment. How do I see myself working within the context across sections of churches? I would like to just sort of give a background to what I am saying, because I think when I give a background of myself then it will give you a picture of where I am at in the whole concept of ecumenicalism.

When I was a child I was taken away from my parents at the age of six months and placed in a mission, under the care of missionaries. This missionary society was an evangelical, fundamental Bible believing mission, which anything outside of their charter would be classed as false and be classed as the enemy. It would be classed as not preaching or teaching the truth of the word and even to the extent of not being Christian.

We had a struggle in the context of what you see in your own self and in your own life and in other people as we face communities. As we see other people in the context of their church or in the context of their community. How do you see them when you are being taught that this is the only way to God. Of course there are verses that have been used something like this "no one comes to the Father, except by me", and so we understand as we think about our approach to God and our approach to our fellow man to the extent of having tunnel vision. So I was brought up to be able to see and I am focusing here. Just in here not outside, no way can we look at people who are of different faiths, different denominations and different churches. We are only to focus here and anybody outside was going to hell, if I can use that phraseology and that is the kind of thing we would talk.



If you understand that for the first 14 years of your life you have been taught this and it seems that what you thought and how you thought about things like that. There is a saying and I'm not sure who has this saying. I think people who have communistic influences, say to you this way, "if you can teach a person to be certain things and to learn certain things and be certain things from one till about seven, then you will not lose them. They will always think within that particular calling or particular area of where they live or what they have been taught. So I think that is pretty realistic in this sense, because after I left the mission and the following years that I grew up and worked as a young person I tended to have that kind of vision of seeing other people in the light of what I had been taught.

Phrases like this came up to me and I remember going to Kalgoorlie and hearing a phrase like this 'beware of the Roman Catholic Church they will get you, especially those nuns'. Have you had somebody tell you that? Are, really. When I first met a nun I realised that these guys were just the same as me, they're human, they have an approach to God and that idea changed rapidly within me.

Where did I get this experience from? It was my first experience of ecumenicalism, it was on Palm Island. Does everyone know where Palm Island is? Palm Island is not far from Townsville, and a lot of you North Queenslanders know where Palm Island is. I lived for four years on Palm Island as the Pastor of the AIM Church. The AIM Church is pretty conservative in its outreach and its pretty fundamentally regulated to conservativeness. How come I had my views changed? The Catholic priest there was a Franciscan priest, a lovely old chap, very nice man. One day he was listening to me in my evangelical fundamentalist teaching the kids in the classroom next door at scripture. I was going on about images, idols, and all kinds of things. He heard me talk about the Catholic church to my kids and he cornered me the next day. He said, Pastor, I said yes what can I do for you. He said I would like to have a yarn with you". Oh, ok, we will have a quick yarn, it was near the Post Office, the Palm Island Post Office.

He said, can I help you to understand part of what you are trying to condemn there? I want you to understand how those things that you say that were idols and images were symbols of Christ. Symbols of whatever that was in the Church that day or was



in their church. It helps us to understand God more and helps us to worship God in a more effective way than we can otherwise do.

That was a different point of view. I took that to heart and then we started to get together and became very good friends. The Protestants and Catholics at that stage were not really talking, there was no dialogue between people of that kind of nature. I think it was just beginning that they were starting to talk about how people can work together as a Christian group as opposed to church forgetting differences and so on.

But there were only three churches on Palm Island. There was the AIM Church, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. So one day Ferdi, I call him Ferdi. Father Ferdi said to me, Max do you think we can sort of have some coffee together. Do you think we can have some dialogue and talk and share and somehow help, I will help you to understand the Catholic church and you help me to understand the AIM church. So we did that, we met for coffee, he would come down for tea at our place, he would invite us up to his place. So we formed a friendship. Then we said, why don't we ask the Anglican guy to come as well. I have forgotten what his name was.

Then we started talking and we got together. We got together once a month, once a fortnight and so on. So, then out of this came a small force of being able to share together as a community, as a church and we had some services together we were able to share scripture lessons together and so on. So we were really dialoguing in this fashion and being able to then understand people for who they are and to not only understand but to accept, for if you don't understand then you are not able to accept.

The Catholic brothers were able to help me understand music, they played a lot of good music so between me and them we were able to share music. So there is a lot of areas in which we could work together which we had in common and we worked on the things that were common to us, rather than the things that divided us. So from there, I am not sure how it is today, but it grew that we were looking forward to once every three months we would have something at our own church, something



at the Anglican church, or something at the Catholic church so really it was my first experience of ecumenicalism where people worked together were ready to forget differences, to share together, to understand people together and then to be able to move from there.

We were only working in the church we hadn't gone out into issues that were confronting the communities at that stage, because understanding in working together must have a beginning and must also have its influences. Then out of it, it would grow.

My next experience was in Victoria. I had moved from Palm Island down to Victoria and was thrown in like that. Somebody said the Anglican minister said to me, I want to see you at school on Wednesday. Why in the wide world do you want to come to school for, so we found out?

In Victoria they had what they call the Joint Board. I was talking about the Joint Board of Education, Christian Education. Then we used to get together to work out programs to have and to work together, so then there is now a Catholic, an Anglican, the Uniting Church and Church of Christ. So then we found that not only were there ministers and priests involved, but there were lay people who were involved because the Catholic church had a charismatic division within it, who were able then to bring about a different aspect and perspective of the Christian church and the Catholic church. The Anglican church were quite conservative still, the Uniting church had a spot of charismaticism within them. The Churches of Christ we were still very conservative, we were not, we were very well dressed, still wore a tie and all that kind of thing.

But that time together in those five years that I spent there, there were things that happened. One of the things that happened was that we had a Mission together, Church of Christ, Anglican, Uniting Church and Catholic having a mission together to the community. Who would have heard of such a thing. So we planned, we made all kinds of preparations. I was asking the old late Reverend Ben Mason to be part of that, but the other guys said, why can't we come and help you. Come on in, let's join and see what happens. So we ran a mission, we rented a hall, we had all kinds of



different activities. We just didn't only have just church, we had a ladies' event, we had a men's event, we had a children's event, youth activities, but the one aim was to work together and present a unified front to the community.

The last day of the Mission, we were told to dress up in our regalia. The two Catholic priests came in their robes and their crosses and all that, the Anglican minister came in his, the Uniting minister came in his robe and his stole and I came dressed like this. I thought I was the odd man out, but no I wasn't. Yet, when it hit the paper when it was written in the paper, in the Shepparton News, here on the front page were these five guys standing outside the Marumpta(?) hall.

One the reactions that came, and I can see it and hear it clearly, by one of the very conservative groups said to me, Max you know what, you have gone and joined the World Council of Churches, and I said, I don't think so, I don't think I have joined the World Council of Churches, but this is what they said to me. You have joined the World Council of Churches, you have gone over the edge, you are finished, you've gone to hell.

Oh, so I never said anything, disgusted at that. When I talked to the guys, I said do you know what you guys? I have been told I've gone over the edge, I'm mad. Don't worry about them as long as we know what we are doing together is something that is going about God's business, that was interesting. So from there we then began to work in being able to talk about other issues, other than things that are of the church. Issues, social issues, justice issues and so then we were able, because we had already formed a relationship and we were able to use that as a springboard to go out into our communities and talk more about issues concerning not only the community but indigenous issues at large.

So we were able to establish a relationship, and it really taught me a lot of things as I saw myself broadening myself, opening my heart, opening up my life to other things, which is a bit scary at the time. Because I was a guy that sat in a corner and never said a word, unbelievable isn't it? They tell me, I have a gift of the gab, but if you had seen me before I started talking and working in relationship with ecumenism. You wouldn't understand where I came from. I would sit in a corner



and not say a word you could talk over the top of me and I would agree wholeheartedly with you and I wouldn't say anything, not a thing, until it was that we was able to experience first hand how do we work in conjunction with other churches.

It took a lot of work, it took a lot of faith on my part, but I think it took a lot of faith on others people's part too as well, to understand where we came from, the background in which I grew up under and the background of other people of their acceptance of the way they have been taught and somehow to dialogue and to talk and to bring about an understanding and an acceptance of other people who they met.

Let me share an experience I had yesterday, the day before yesterday, on Friday. I was talking to an Aboriginal Pastor in Adelaide and he dead against two groups of people, he is dead against charismatic and pentecostalism he said they are not Christians the other group of people are the catholic people. He said none of you Catholics are going to heaven and I laughed at him. He said really Max really, what are you laughing at? I said well, as I read my scriptures the Bible talks about out of every nation out of every tribe out of every kingdom there will be those who will be there in the kingdom of God that includes the Catholics that includes the Pentecostals that includes all other kinds of different people who have a love for God.

He got real angry with me and he walked away, because he has that negativeness, because he has that tunnel vision which he can only see himself for who he is. He is the judge and he is what we call, the marking stick in which we mark ourselves against. I said I feel sorry in a sense, because I am not marking myself against you, I mark myself against the Master, the Lord Jesus.

If each of us mark ourselves there and I use an example one day of a wheel, a bike wheel, if I could use this in this sense. A bike wheel has the out, what do you call it, the outside, the rim, yes, the rim on the outside. I should know, because my son tells me all about his bike. We argue all the time about his bike. It has the rim on the outside, the circumference is the word I was looking for. It has the rim on the



outside, and it also has the hub and to join the hub to the rim it has spokes. The rim I represented as the church, the church universal, the church in its location where you and I live and our communities and the hub I would describe as the Lord Jesus Christ himself, God. The spokes are connected from the rim to the hub. We notice that the hub is smaller than the rim and you will notice on the bike wheel that when the spokes are put in they are put in through the hub and when they come down to the hub, they are closer together. So the closer we get to the hub, the closer then we get to each other, the closer we get to God, the closer the church is together. It is a good example of using it in an ecumenical sense.

My experience has been broadened in working ecumenically. Let me say to you, I have worked in conjunction with Nungalingya, which is an ecumenical college, as some of you know. I have taught at Nungalingya, I was accepted there, my son was already there when I came up. I did some teaching, they could have said, no Churches of Christ get out. But they didn't, they understood and they accepted me for who I am and so we continued to have our connection with Nungalingya, which is a Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church college.

The work of training Aboriginal Christian leaders, which we call TAFL in Adelaide, is made up of five denominations. Our aim is to train indigenous people in South Australia for ministry, but without being church orientated, or without being community. Our example has been the Nungalingya Bible College and we have been endeavoring to work along those examples and the churches that are involved are the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, Lutheran and Churches of Christ.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission is made up of member churches and you and I sit here tonight as representative of that ecumenical movement. I worked along side the Baptists. I have worked in the ADF Bible College, I have worked with Catholics, Anglicans, Uniting Church, Baptists, Christian Men's Fellowship, Bible Society and so on. So the more that I do in my ministry and in my working community has been so that we worked on a broader scale. I worked in the prisons with other men, I worked in many areas and so we find that the opportunities are there to be able to work. But first we have to dialogue and understand other people for who they are and then accept them on that



basis. When we do that we will see other people's point of view, their faith.

We in our community and also in this forum that we are using, we have been able to have a strong voice on important issues, such as reconciliation, stolen generation, refugees, asylum seekers, the war in Iraq, the sexual debate the passing and rejecting of Bills that affect our communities and we can do that as we have an ecumenical base to work from and the more voices that we have the more we are able to do thing together which is far greater than we are trying to do ourselves. It's understanding and acceptance is important to me I have no problems at all working with an ecumenical movement. But I must say it took a lot of work to open one's self up and to move out of my comfort zone was one of the biggest steps of faith that I ever made.

Thank you for listening.

Rev.Max Wright