THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY?

My title has a question mark: ‘the future of Christianity?’¹ Before you wonder whether you should have taken something to keep your spirits up while reading this, let me assure you that the answer to the question is: Yes. Christianity has a future, because its future is in the hands and promises of God. I do not need to be a prophet to assert that. But there is no guarantee that any particular expression of Christianity will last forever. One of the greatest of the ancient churches, the North African church which produced St Augustine, was swept into the dustbin of history and is no more. Will the churches we know, in which we were raised – which we used boldly to describe as ‘mainstream’ – last out this century?

The church I was raised in, in country Victoria in the 1940s and 50s was entirely Anglo-Celtic in ethnicity, and its services were attended in one’s best suit or dress and hat. It was a polite society, with unspoken rules because everyone accepted the rules. Most ecclesial issues were referred to a British example.

The rest of the world was foreign, and that is where the missionaries who visited us from time to time had gone to. I don’t believe I ever heard a native of a ‘mission field’ address us in my youth. Famously, very few of the recipients of such mission had attended the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference for which so much is claimed.

Methodists and Presbyterians were basically mutually acceptable, but other forms of Christianity all had something wrong enough with them for us to stay away from them. Catholics were particular sinners because they played sport on Sundays, which evangelical Christians did not. (The Orthodox simply did not exist.)

As a theological student in the 1960s, my ecclesiastical world suddenly expanded. The Student Christian Movement brought together all the

¹ The paper was given as an address to the Christian Unity Working Group National Conference in 2011– and as three Lenten lectures earlier that year in honour of the late Dr Richard McKinney, and again in a developed form to the ministers of the Synod of Western Australia.
mainstream protestant churches – Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and Anglicans (I even married one of them). The Evangelical Union dealt with the rest, and would not pray with us. I first experienced a united church when I served the SCM of India in 1969.

So much else has changed in my lifetime. If Christianity was a creature of Europe and North America at my beginning, its strength now lies in which is inaccurately called ‘the Global South’. Whether Australians and New Zealanders like that or not, the figures speak for themselves. In 1900, 82% of the world’s Christians lived in the northern hemisphere, some 428 million. By 2005, the North represented a mere 35% of the world’s Christian population, 758 million. That is, 65% belonged in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The distinguished Yale (though Gambian) missiologist, Professor Lamin Sanneh has remarked, ‘Increasingly, Europe is a new Christian margin’.² This, of course, means European Christian Australia is as well.

If missionaries went chiefly from Europe or America to the ‘dark’ continents (and America is still the dominant sender), the fact is that the next most vigorous of missionary-sending churches are now in Korea, displacing the UK; Korean missions are found in 176 countries today, staffed by some 22,000 people. The other recent fact is that of migration, whereby the churches of the ‘South’ have now established themselves in the North – or, in our context, from the Pacific and East Asia (and many other places) in Australia, among whom is the large Orthodox diaspora.

But I have not yet mentioned the real point of growth. You have leave to doubt the statistics, because such figures are variously calculated – but their comparative volume is probably about right. Virtually no church called itself ‘Pentecostal’ in 1900. That movement experienced its first present ‘wave’ in the first decade of the 20th century, American types usually dating themselves from the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles

in 1906-09. The wave more familiar to many of us was in the mid-1970s, when the ‘charismatic’ movement became an issue in our polite congregations and disturbed our peace. It divided us and produced new churches, but it also took root in many of the mainline denominations, and not least successfully in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1970, there were over 72 million people who owned the name of Pentecostal or Charismatic; in 2005, some count 590 million, some fewer, but still in the high 400 millions. Projections (always a dangerous leap) suggest a figure of more than 800 million by 2025.

But then there is the family of churches, mission societies, Bible societies, youth movements, and much more, who claim the name ‘Evangelical’. One of their overarching organizations, the World Evangelical Alliance, originating in London in 1846, now counts some 600 million members. The Australian EA is a part of this; of course, many members of our churches sit comfortably in both their own denomination and in some evangelical group.

If you add together the present Evangelicals and Pentecostals, you reach a round figure of a billion. The largest single church in the world is the Roman Catholic, now numbering about 1.2 – 1.5 billion. And if, by contrast, we add together the churches belonging to the ‘Christian World Communions’ – the Anglican Communion of about 85 million, the World Conference of Reformed Churches, about the same, the World Methodist Council, 75 million, the Lutheran World Federation, 70 m, the Baptist World Alliance, 40 m (plus its dissenters), we reach a mere 355 million. Who then, is best described as ‘mainstream’? Not Australian churches of European origin.

You may be interested to know that there are currently 41,000 denominations in the world. There is another change. Our best theologians in my youth predicted that the mainstream Protestant churches would be united by the end of the 20th century. I have spent my

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4 I don’t have the comparative Australian statistics, but my concern here is the world distribution.
entire ministry working to that end. It is not going to happen. ‘Denominations’ are on the increase.


…the four movements which are most likely to dictate the shape of a future Christianity [are]: Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism, evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It will be obvious that there is an omission here. Mainline Protestantism seems very unlikely to survive the next century in the west, at least in its present form.\(^5\)

He is – along with many other Evangelicals (and on the whole the Pentecostals don’t even think about it) – a harsh critic of the World Council of Churches. He and they think it is stuck in its institutionalism, hopelessly liberal in its theology, and useless in its advocacy of anything which they would call mission or evangelism. Certainly the WCC has not significantly expanded its membership to reflect what is happening in world Christianity, but there is a new player in the field which is already enlarging the conversation, the Global Christian Forum – and I will say more of this later.

Without particularly relying on McGrath, let me say something briefly about the state of each of the four groups of whose future he is confident. I draw on what is really a very large and increasing literature in this field of missiology. I also had the pleasure of meeting some of its major authors in Istanbul in January this year, in a seminar sponsored by the Global Christian Forum, and I have drawn on all this material in this lecture.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The RCC is the largest single church in the world, truly a global church (and, of course, sees itself as universal in a particular way). Its growth

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roughly keeps pace with world population growth, but it is uneven: Catholic growth in Africa, which is great, is greatest in French-speaking regions; the southern States of the USA are keeping pace better than the northern ones, but a key factor is migration, mostly Hispanic, and so on. That ‘reverse migration’ touches Australia significantly: Nigerian and Indian priests have been invited as priests to parishes across Australia in recent times, promising considerable changes to both cultures involved.\textsuperscript{6} This reflects the ageing and decreasing body of Australian priests.

Meanwhile, Pope Benedict XVI has set up an ‘Office of New Evangelization’, or perhaps better, of ‘re-evangelization’ since the target is ‘de-Christianised Europe’ in particular in the face of secularising science and technology, the widening of individual freedom and lifestyle choices, profound economic changes, the mixing of cultures and the growing interdependence of peoples. ‘While such changes have brought about benefits for many people, they have often been accompanied by "a worrisome loss of the sense of the sacred,"’ the Pope said at the launch of the new Pontifical Council, which also has an eye on the inroads which evangelical movements are making on Catholic Latin America.

This whole move suggests a key to the likely future of Catholic Christianity. Its very conservativism (here not a ‘boo’ word) meant that when the 1960s broke upon the Christian world, the Roman Church took a far more critical approach to it than other western churches. The Second Vatican Council was not interested merely in ‘modernising’ its church, but in aggiornamento, a reinvention of itself, refreshing the apostolic church to meet the dawning era. Alister McGrath summarizes their approach as ‘in fact what we’re saying is we will use this opportunity to review various things we have done and various things we have fought, and see if this can be a moment of reformation of our thinking prompted by the cultural changes, but not actually determined by it’. He says of his own Anglicanism, that its response was ‘simply setting in train a process by which the dominant culture of the 1960s is

given a very critical place in ecclesiological self-reflection. In other
words, you define yourself by the cultural mood of the time. The same is
certainly true of mainstream Protestant churches.7

In 1960, Catholics in Africa numbered some 23 million; in 2011, the
figure is 200 million, just half the Christian population of Africa. It is in
Africa that the challenge of ‘inculturation’, particularly in the liturgy,
encouraged by the Second Vatican Council has had the greatest impact.
African Christianity has become indigenous. This new confidence in this
large non-European Catholic population will, I believe, challenge the
Latin way of doing things by the second, if not the first African Pope!

THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES

The total Orthodox Christians in Australia is about half the Uniting
figure and catching up by birth and immigration. The Copts can stop the
traffic of Melbourne’s CBD as they march on their embassy in (safe)
protest about persecution in their homeland. The Greeks can reach high
in local influence. The National Council of Churches in Australia now
cannot secure a senior politician to address it, and a mega church is
more likely to. The church in Russia has reclaimed its place in its post-
Soviet nation after seven decades of atheistic Communism in
astonishing ways, and how they survived has important lessons for the
beleaguered western churches. The Moscow Patriarchate also faces the
challenge of a large population completely uncatechised in Christian
faith but eager to belong, and which has resulted in tens of thousands of
adult baptisms but a 10% church attendance.8 The fifteen-hundred year
breach between the two Orthodox ‘families’, Eastern and Oriental, is in
the process of healing, and will slowly change the face of them all. The
long-awaited pan-Orthodox Council, with an agenda to address their

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7 So McGrath in a Religion Report interview on the ABC Radio National, 20th March 2002 see
8 A church which was virtually destroyed under Communism, the present Patriarchate of Moscow in
2010 has 160 dioceses, 207 bishops, 30,000 parishes, 28,000 priests, 788 monasteries and growing. New
churches for 280 parishes in Moscow alone, in one year, were approved recently. But the other side of it
is that while 80% of the population registers as Russian Orthodox members, probably 10% are
involved in church life. So Hegumen (‘Abbot’) Philip Ryabykh at the Global Christian Forum
inter-relationships and adaptation to the modern, that is, western world, their new home, is closer to realisation.

There must be added Orthodox success in meeting the spiritual needs of modern western Christians, notably former Protestants. The story of the 1700 Campus Crusade members, with a score of their pastors, forming a special mission of the Antiochian Orthodox in America in 1978, and the significant numbers of other converts is frequently told, including in Australia. If such ‘conversion’ (surely not a good word in the context) has been hampered by the ethnic and cultural specificity of Orthodox churches, that too is changing, and the Orthodox Church of America is a fine example of a now autocephalous, western-based Orthodox church.

It is a curious fact that there is much common language between Orthodox and evangelicals at the present time. And (with recent experience of those churches in mind) the power of a familiar (that is, not ‘creative’ or ‘innovative’) liturgy, which presents the faith in uncompromising terms, through symbol, in the context of great beauty, cannot be discounted as an evangelical force.

EVANGELICALS

It is worth people of an ecumenical mind recalling the basis of the formation (in 1846) of the Evangelical Alliance:

… we propose no new creed; but, taking broad, historical, and evangelical catholic (sic) ground, we solemnly reaffirm and profess our faith in all the doctrines of the inspired Word of God, and the consensus of doctrines as held by all true Christians from the beginning.

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The ‘fundamentals’ which defined the early movement, and to which many non-evangelicals objected (particularly the insistence on the Penal Substitutionary theory of the Atonement\(^\text{10}\) ) had their difficulties, but they provided a secure credal basis for their united work, which other churches may yet need to reconsider as some contemporary theology ‘progresses’ into no theology at all.\(^\text{11}\) It is also true that the Evangelical Alliance in several of its branches have ‘softened’ the wording. These things do not stand still: not all holders of fundamentals are fundamentalist.

A significant change occurred to this family of growing Christians in 1974 in the calling together, chiefly by Dr Billy Graham and Dr John Stott (who recently died), of the International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lausanne in Switzerland. It was marked by what Dr Stott called ‘a note of evangelical penitence’ for the separation of evangelism from its diaconal outcome, its neglect of the justice corollaries of the faith. The Lausanne Covenant has been the guiding document of the movement ever since, and has some important self-critical sections, e.g.: ‘we confess that we have sometimes pursued church growth at the expense of church depth, and divorced evangelism from Christian nurture’ (section 11).

More recently, in another evangelical source, someone has sharply asked whether (not least in terms of numbers) ‘instead of making disciples, we focussed on making converts. We told ourselves we were saving people from Hell, but we didn’t take the time or put forth effort to build them up in the faith. As a result, our churches were quickly filled with infant Christians who stayed infants for most of their lives’.\(^\text{12}\) In the old

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\(^\text{10}\) For instance, the IVF adopted a doctrinal basis in 1948 which defined this interpretation as follows: ‘Redemption from the guilt, penalty, dominion and pollution of sin, solely through the sacrificial death (as our Representative and Substitute) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God’. The SCM insisted there were other ways of describing redemption in the Scriptures and in theology, and that the universal Church has never insisted on a single interpretation.


\(^\text{12}\) Unknown author in Christian Post, ‘Evangelicals: larger in size, smaller in influence – where did we go wrong?’ sent by a friend.
mainstream churches, we might ask whether in baptismal and confirmation practice, we made parallel mistakes. We have been so concerned to keep hold of any youth who looked interested that we asked so little that the offer to belong was not worth taking up.

It appears from many witnesses that the most recent Lausanne gathering, at Cape Town in January 2011, did not have the challenge or the ‘fire’ of its predecessors. The other recent world church conference, commemorating the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, even though it focussed more on its mission and evangelism legacy than its ecumenical, also seems to have failed to catch the imagination. The older global instruments seem a little uncertain as to where to go.

PENTECOSTALS

I don’t have room to say more of Pentecostalism except this: it also is not a single or a uniform category. A key Pentecostal theologian, Dr Mel Robeck of Fuller Theological Seminary, writes, ‘What is it that makes one a Pentecostal? It cannot even be said simply that “speaking in other tongues“is the sole agreed mark.’ There are many forms of renewal within global Christianity ‘including Evangelical movements, liturgical renewal, Bible-study fellowships, and house church movements’ [says Robeck]. ‘There is a great deal of overlap between most Pentecostal groups. There is a good deal of harmony between many of them. But there are substantial differences between some of them, which provide them with unique qualities or voices, emphases such as apostolicity, holiness, deliverance, healing, prosperity, ethnicity, and the like.’

Pentecostals are also more politically active these days, not least in Latin America. They have a particular approach to politics, of course: you change society by beginning with the conversion of an individual, then their family, and so on to the nation. They are more ecumenically engaged. I am aware of two world churches who have completed a period of dialogues with a Pentecostal Church, namely the Assemblies of God (led by Dr Robeck): the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World
Federation. Robeck’s other concern is for the theological equipping of younger Pentecostal leaders, whose congregations have become educated beyond the level of their pastors. Part of this call also demonstrates a real Pentecostal interest (as they get older, but also in contrast to western slippage) in recovering the theological basis of historic Christianity. And he recognises the problems of his churches’ personality cults, autocratic manners, serious moral lapses – all of which they do not have alone.

THE INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

The last category I wish to mention is the child of both Evangelical and Pentecostal parents, but not without connections with the traditional churches: the indigenous churches of the ‘global South’. To summarise Professor Lamin Sanneh’s thesis: the great legacy of the missionary era was the translation of the Scriptures into local languages. The churches were planted and grew, yet colonialism was an obstacle to true growth. There was a delayed effect. Following the widespread nationalist movements and the return home of the missionaries, the local people realised that the Scriptures did not in fact belong to the western sojourners, and were not a tool of oppression, but were the word of God which they could now read in their own tongue and in their own way, without tutelary oversight. More than proclamation, they now shaped the very life of the churches in their own way, from liturgy to leadership patterns. Youth and women found new roles. And this allowed also a reclaiming of the deep structures of their own native religion and its symbols which rooted their recovered Christianity in new and distinctive ways.  


Our western missionary memory makes some nervous about this development, but it also asks us to reconsider the ways in which we have unknowingly tied our own Christian proclamation and way of being church to the modes of our culture. The explosion of new churches is indeed giddying. It is hard for the staid ex-British mind to restrain an indulgent smile at churches that call themselves the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Society, out of Anglican roots, with about two million members. The story of the African Instituted Churches is a unique one, but accounts, with its Latin American and Asian counterparts, for much of the recent growth in world Christianity. A common factor is the founding leadership of a charismatic man or woman, e.g. the Francophone *The Church of Christ on Earth by His Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu* of some 5.5 million believers in the Congo, with an emphasis on healing and a puritan ethic. Post-colonial, post-missions, post-apartheid, African churches, from Anglicans to Dutch Reformed, face a common challenge - and a common path forward.

In our context, mention must be made of the new ways of being church in China. There is, as we know, the governmentally approved church, based on the ‘three-self movement’ (with other Protestants, perhaps 58 million, plus 9 million Catholics and 20,000 Orthodox). But the real growth is in small churches across the nation, many of charismatic nature, and unregistered; one informed source counts them as 81 million. Put it another way: on any given Sunday, there are more Christians at worship in China than in the entire United States.

THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM

I want to give the briefest possible account of the body which is bringing together this worldwide family of Christians who have never talked to each other in any serious capacity before, indeed, have assiduously avoided speaking to some of their fellow-churches.

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Beginning about 12 years ago from a suggestion of Dr Konrad Raiser, then General Secretary of the WCC, observing that the Council was not welcoming more than a few of the burgeoning new churches and communities across the world, a number of church leaders sought to create a ‘forum’ in which a much wider constituency could find themselves in conversation, without threat to their own integrity. They began with a meeting at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, and in their self-introductions, which focussed on their personal faith journeys, they discovered something significant. When you give an honest account of how your life was encountered by Jesus Christ, and how that encounter has brought you to your present vocation and ministry, the witness of a Sri Lankan Catholic bishop, a Pentecostal pastor from Peru, a bearded Coptic monk from Los Angeles, a Bolivian Baptist catechist, a Methodist nurse from Norway, or an Anglican woman bishop from Canada, sound remarkably the same. And each carries a palpable integrity. And from such encounters, I have seen real friendship develop between such former bitter rivals bearing fruit in common service to the poor and marginalised as they continue to meet.

That is the essence of the GCF. It met in regions for a decade, including Hong Kong for Asia in 2004 and after the first global meeting in Limuru in Kenya in 2007 and a testing external assessment of what it was doing, again in Korea for Asia last year (with Australian delegates at each), it met in many other places with local church leadership until the second global meeting in Manado in October 2011, with 287 participants from all these categories we have explored, from some 65 nations. There is website for the Forum, with the texts of addresses, media reports and news. Truly there is nowhere else where such a diversity of Christians has gathered together since apostolic times.

WHITHER CHRISTIANITY?

What are the implications of all this for us in multicultural, multi-religious Australia? I have, of course, paid as little attention to our own Uniting traditions as Alastair McGrath, with whom I began, did – but his point was that all of the forms of Christianity are changing, and whether or not we survive this century depends on how and what we change. As reality presses closer, and our churches try to work without adequate pastoral leadership and ministry, and see much-loved church buildings being sold or demolished, our response has been, in my observation, a sort of undirected panic. I have heard too little sober reflection and enquiry as to what the Spirit is saying to the churches – for something is being said.

One recent approach goes by the name of ‘receptive ecumenism’.\textsuperscript{18} This evocative phrase shifts the ecumenical focus of churches from self-protective self-regard to a serious asking how we could remove prejudices and other barriers on our own side which prevent a neighbour denomination from finding it easier to work with us in the closest possible common mission. As the 2006 report of the international Catholic-Methodist dialogue says,

\begin{quote}
It is time to return to the concrete reality of one another, to look one another in the eye, and with love and esteem to acknowledge what we see to be truly of Christ and of the Gospel, and thereby of the Church, in one another.’ \textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

We might observe from church history that all branches of the Body of Christ sprang from the same root, and ever since have defined themselves \textit{over against} the others; it would seem that prejudice and bad

\textsuperscript{18} This notion was worked through in two ecumenical conferences in Durham, UK in 2006 and 2006, under the leadership of Dr Paul Murray of the Centre for Catholic Studies at that university. Dr Murray is visiting several Australian states in July and August, 2012. The 2011 National Conference of the Christian Unity Working Group took this as its theme.

\textsuperscript{19} Par. 97. \textit{The Grace Given You in Christ, Catholics and Methodists reflect further on the Church}, report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, 2006, Eighth Series, Lake Junaluska NC, USA: World Methodist Council. An even more precise summary of the long term work of this dialogue is \textit{Synthesis: Together in Holiness, 40 years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue}, Lake Junaluska NC, USA, 2011, which may be read on the WMC website \url{http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/} (under ‘Highlights of the 2011 WM Council meeting’).
memories are handed down much more effectively than the Gospel of reconciliation itself.

The lessons of this kind which acquaintance at a deep level with other churches might teach us are not all obvious. For instance, part of the strength of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches is their claim unequivocally to be the Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Rome has declared, generously at the Second Vatican Council, more cautiously since, that while the true Church ‘subsists’ (is fully present in all its essential elements) in that body of Christians which claims continuity with Peter, ‘numerous elements of sanctification and of truth’ may be recognized in other ‘separated Churches and communities’. There was a storm of protest when this was reiterated in 2007. But what if we look at this in terms of ‘receptive ecumenism’? Is not one point to challenge Protestants that we are reticent to claim for ourselves the title ‘Catholic’ – or indeed ‘Orthodox’? What precisely are we distancing ourselves from? Why do we so devalue our part in apostolic continuity? Does this actually weaken our claim to preach the apostolic faith? Is this why we are not taken seriously – that we are seen as selling something other than the real thing? Is this not an important point for our repentance and amendment?

And as ‘denominations’, the inheritors of the stirring times of the Reformation and the Wesleyan revival, have we lost the living link with our founders who were scholars, revolutionary thinkers and ground-breaking theologians, on every page of whose writings we also find quotations from the ancient Fathers of the Church? Have we ceased to follow the hard road of clear, well-informed thinking, of theology worthy of the name? To those who think doctrine should be abandoned as too difficult for modern ears, Dorothy L. Sayers declared, more than a century ago, ‘The Dogma is the Drama!’ Further, whatever the justification for ‘denominations’, they do tend to preserve important

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20 In the statement regarding some aspects of the doctrine of the church from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 29, 2007.
21 In her essays of ‘popular theology’, Creed or Chaos? London: Methuen, 1947. I have always liked Professor Dietrich Ritschl’s definition ‘Doctrines are propositions without which the understanding of the Christian Faith is unnecessarily difficult.’ That’s it.
insights and cultural treasures – Bach’s piety distilled in Lutheran chorales, the Wesleys’ careful teaching in hymns, Orthodox spirituality in the writing of icons, the monastic tradition’s disciplined life of prayer, and the protests against the ‘mainstream’ by Anabaptists, Quakers and the Salvation Army (not to say Evangelical and Pentecostal groups)? Do we not need to ‘receive’ all of these, if we claim to be Catholic?

Protestant Christians inherit the wise counsel that we are a Church ‘reformed and always being reformed’ – though the phrase is always governed by reference to the Holy Scriptures, a criterion sometimes loosely applied. Such reform is not merely the fruit of human genius. Above all we are a people who listen to the Holy Spirit, a partner in our gaining insight into the world in which God is missioner. Further, Christianity is communal; we learn from each other: therefore let us make sure we continue to gather, around ‘bath, book and table’, as Gordon Lathrop says. And let the bath, book and table speak to our own times in as powerful and faithful ways as we can release them to do, under the Spirit’s guidance.

And if we seek to learn and be reformed by the witness of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches whose ministries seem to be so fruitful at this time, there are more questions to ask ourselves. First, we should rejoice that tens of thousands – including the poor, ill-educated and marginalised peoples of the earth, whose entire existence should drive them to despair – have found faith and hope in Jesus Christ in our time. Then, are we able to defend ourselves in the Uniting Church from their accusation that we are stuck in a desperate ‘maintenance mode’ and evince almost no sign that we seek to convince new people of the truth of God as it is in Jesus Christ, and recruit workers for his kingdom?

Or take their simple readiness to pray, and to believe that prayer might make a difference (even to the one praying!). I think my greatest alarm since the publication of worship books in the Uniting Church is leaders’,

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22 And given recent re-considerations in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by representatives of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation at Augsburg in 199, and co-signed by the World Methodist Council in 2006, by the Roman Church as well, what does this title still mean? An ecumenical joint study of its biblical foundations is forthcoming.
both ordained and lay, inability to lead prayer in a way which draws the listeners into that prayer. We have become as ritualistic in regard to texts as any bookish Anglican of our myth, while those who have abandoned ‘liturgy’ altogether are equally vain and repetitive. Let worship leaders work hard at how they lead a service. Let them, as it was said of the great Puritan Richard Baxter, enter from the vestry as if they had come from the presence of God.

I recently read the autobiography of one of the founders of the GCF, Dr Wesley Granberg Michaelson.23 He was for many years the General Secretary of the Reformed Church of America. When he took up leadership, he determined that its central mark would be prayer. As General Secretary, he took regular times away for prayer and retreat, and he took his leaders away similarly. Prayer at the beginning of a meeting was not perfunctory. Time was genuinely set aside to seek a thoughtful biblical perspective on major issues on an agenda. It was more important to discern ‘the mind of Christ’ than to meet a deadline.

Being open to the challenges of traditions other than our own does not mean meek uncritical following. We have an inheritance of intelligent thought and well-tested experience, and we listen to a broad range of contemporary witnesses. But it’s obvious that the renewalist preachers have found a way of speaking relevantly to the needs of a great many people of this generation. I believe we need to reaffirm the importance of intelligent biblical and pastoral preaching, but also to ask again what is the role of emotion in worship? When did you last hear a passionate preacher, who touched both your heart and head? When were you last moved in worship? I have seen it exploited, of course, recently in a Black Methodist Church in the USA – but is the alternative none at all? I see no advance in replacing a pulpit or a parson with the paraphernalia of a pop-group, but I do think we need to find new ways of creating spaces which encourage us to pray, which do not set us up like a concert audience (as most of our buildings still do). At least people get excited and feel ‘together’ in the warehouse of a mega-church. But what is the

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23 Wesley Granberg Michaelson, Unexpected Destinations, An Evangelical Pilgrimage to World Christianity, Eerdmans, 2011.
role of beauty in worship? In many churches of other traditions, the visitor is struck by godly simplicity on entry. And you know the building is for Christian worship, because it tells you by art and symbol.

Again, we struggle with styles of leadership. The Uniting Church flattened its structures, simplified ministerial titles, changed its decision-making procedures. The renewalist world, like most churches in history, is strictly hierarchical. At a recent Forum meeting, I met not one but two Apostles, and a bevy of bishops, archbishops and Prelates, certainly mostly male, and all Protestant or Pentecostal. Decision-making in Africa and Asia is done by the leader alone or by elders. I think we have come a long way in the Uniting Church, but it must be said we sometimes lack a clear word of guidance at some points, whether from assembles or Moderators. Few tall poppies are left to be cut down. Are there understandings of democracy (and other western cultural norms) which need to be challenged by the Gospel? We are not the only church asking these questions.

What I cannot easily convey is the liberating blessing it has been over the last four decades in my work for the Uniting Church in the ecumenical movement, to discover the charismata of Christians across the full range of contemporary world Christianity, to make friends, to change my mind about them, to surprise myself about what I could now dream of. If you think we are in an ‘ecumenical winter’, you are watching the wrong weather report. The possibilities ‘out there’ for growth, in both numbers and depth, are huge, but church people of my generation seem insulated against and isolated from them, and afraid that if they give up the familiar, all will be lost.

A future for Christianity? On God’s side, an assured Yes. On ours: if we watch and pray, listen and learn, discern and discover, within the extraordinary diversity of the oikoumene, if we are ready to be radically changed – that is, to grow again from the same roots – will not God honour that?