



QUEENSLAND CHURCHES TOGETHER:

A Potted History

This is an adapted version of a paper written by Revd Don Whebell of the Uniting Church. Don was Acting General Secretary of Queensland Churches Together for several months in 2004. He based this paper on an earlier one by Elizabeth Harrington, who is the education officer with the Liturgy Commission in the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane. Don Whebell's paper has been slightly adapted and updated by Glenine Hamlyn, General Secretary of QCT.

1. The early 20th Century – churches hardly together

In the first half of the 20th century, relations between Christian denominations in Queensland were marked by disrespect, suspicion, antipathy, and downright denunciation at worst, and by very occasional co-operation at best.

I can vividly recall the songs which we State School kids sang at the Convent kids:

*"Catholic dogs
Sitting on logs
Eating toads
as if they're chocolate frogs"*

And their song in reply:

*"Catholic, Catholic
Ring the bell
Protestant, Protestant
Go to hell!"*

We learned the lyrics from our parents.

We've come a long, long way since then.

Two important signposts along the way were:

- The World Council of Churches was inaugurated in 1948, embracing many churches in the Protestant and Orthodox traditions;
- Vatican 2 in the 1960s, which confronted Protestant churches with a different attitude from Rome. Pope John XXIII was winning universal respect and affection among us all.

In Queensland, ecumenical activity was practised by the Anglican Church as well as ecumenically-minded Protestants in the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. Nevertheless within each of these three churches there were people who nursed an underlying prejudice against anything that smacked of 'Romish practices' - and for some, that included the Anglican Church!

2. The Queensland Ecumenical Council of Churches (QECC)

The emergence of the Queensland Ecumenical Council of Churches (QECC) in the 1960s was, however, a response in Queensland to the ecumenical imperative of the Gospel - particularly with awareness of the prayer of Jesus in John 17.

That body had connections to the Australian Council of Churches, which in turn was connected with the World Council of Churches (WCC).

QECC included the Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, as well as the Society of Friends (Quakers).

Some Protestant churches - like the Baptist Church and Churches of Christ in Qld - chose not to belong to the QECC, which was perceived as being too liberal. Attempts to bring these churches into conversations with the QECC failed, and they formed their own coalition with the name Queensland Council of Churches (QCC).

At this time, the Roman Catholic Church was not part of any of the ecumenical councils that were associated with the World Council of Churches, the Australian Council of Churches or the Queensland Ecumenical Council. Nor was the Lutheran Church. Yet both the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church had Observer Status in the QECC.

Both of these churches have been member churches of Queensland Churches Together since its inauguration (1991, see below).

From the 60s onward, the situation in Queensland and elsewhere changed dramatically following the new stance of Roman Catholics after Vatican 2. Shared services and shared witness became increasingly common, and there was some sharing of facilities between Roman Catholics and churches related to the ACC and the WCC.

In the 1960s there were the first moves that led in 1977 to the inauguration of the Uniting Church with the merging of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches (some congregations of the Presbyterian Church chose not to join, as did some Congregationals).

3. The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is born

The Uniting Church adopted an agreed Basis of Union which commits its members to working for closer relationships and union with other churches in seeking for that unity which is Christ's gift and will for his Church.

The UCA became a member of QECC at its foundation.

The spirit of the World Council of Churches and its counterparts in Australia was a great encouragement to Australian Protestants involved in the UCA and to the national and state ecumenical bodies. It also encouraged them to seek closer relationships with the Roman Catholic Church at national, state, regional and local levels.

4. Training together for ministry: the Brisbane College of Theology

In 1983 the Brisbane College of Theology was formed.

Under this arrangement, people preparing for ministry in the Anglican, Uniting and Roman Catholic Churches undertook their theological studies together. This was a significant step in Queensland ecumenism and aroused much interest at national and international levels. This arrangement continues until today.

5. Striving for one ecumenical body

Early in 1988 Bishop Jim Cuskelly, on the advice of the Brisbane Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenism, proposed to a meeting of the Catholic bishops of Queensland that they should look for a way of setting up a single structure in Queensland which would be more representative of the churches than the two existing councils.

This proposal was subsequently put to a combined meeting of the Queensland Anglican and Catholic bishops. Both parties supported it.

In the same year, QECC invited all the churches in Qld to appoint representatives to a working party which would draft a constitution for a new State Church body which all churches would feel able to join. It was to replace QECC and perhaps also QCC. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese and Lutheran District of Queensland appointed representatives to the working party. Some more cautious member churches of QCC did not participate.

The working party worked through 1989 and into 1990 to design a structure which would be acceptable to as many churches as possible. The drafters hoped that the Baptist Union, the Churches of Christ and the Presbyterians might eventually participate. That has not yet happened, but various links with them remain.

During this time your Commission for Ecumenism of the Catholic Church, through its many contacts in the parishes and by means of its newsletter, was keeping the people of the Archdiocese aware of what was happening.

In May 1991 each participating church sent a delegation of four to a consultation which was to formally respond to the draft constitution.

The delegation from the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane was: Bishop James Cuskelly, Mrs Elizabeth Harrington, Father Michael Putney, who was Chair of the Commission for Ecumenism and Vice Rector of Pius XII Seminary, and Brother Eric Blumenthal FMS, Executive Officer of the Commission for Ecumenism.

Bishop Cuskelly was also representing the other four Catholic Dioceses of Queensland.

The consultation met over three days and recommended to their respective churches that they accept the constitutions. It was proposed that the new structure be called **Queensland Churches Together**, and a date was set as the date for the inauguration of the new body: 1 December, 1991.

The name was chosen because it has a more dynamic ring to it than one which spoke of a 'Council of Churches' - and probably because the word 'council' evoked memories of past difficulties and conflicts.

6. Queensland Churches Together (QCT)

On 1st December 1991, the inauguration of the new body was held in the chapel of St Peter's Lutheran College with a very encouraging attendance.

It was an inspiring service built around the theme of light and water. Each participating church had prepared a banner which was carried in procession into the Chapel and tied symbolically to a large paschal candle. Catholic Archbishop Francis Rush gave the homily, in which he focused on Christian unity and the work of Queensland Churches Together, referring to it as a "long and costly endeavour...The reconciliation that we aim at, like our Lord's redemptive work, can be achieved only through suffering and the cross. "Our journey to glory, like that of Jesus Himself, can only be through Calvary."

The heads of churches were all represented in the service and washed each other's feet in an act symbolising service to each other.

7. Regional ecumenism: Rockhampton Churches Together

On Wednesday, 11 December 1991, a service to celebrate the inauguration of QCT was also held in Rockhampton. St Paul's Anglican Cathedral was packed.

Leaders and worshippers from the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches throughout the city affirmed their support for this new and exciting step towards ecumenism.

In his address to us, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rockhampton, the Rt Revd Brian Heenan, emphasised our oneness in Christ, that we are truly brothers and sisters no matter what denomination we may belong to.

He prayed that the churches would foster Christian unity through prayer, worship, dialogue and direct action.

Soon after, Rockhampton Churches Together was born. It continues to be represented personally at QCT meetings by Dorothy Demack.

The leaders of the participating church continued - and still continue - to meet together regularly, as do their counterparts in Brisbane (Heads of Churches meetings, held bi-monthly).

8. The Members of QCT

The churches which originally formed QCT were:

The Anglican Church of Australia

The Antiochian Orthodox Church

The Armenian Apostolic Church

The Greek Orthodox Church

The Lutheran Church of Australia

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

The Roman Catholic Church,

The Romanian Orthodox Church and

The Uniting Church in Australia.

The Queensland Congregational Fellowship joined in 1993.

The Salvation Army and the Churches of Christ participated as Observers. While the Churches of Christ have since ceased to participate in the life of QCT, the Salvation Army became a member in 2004.

QCT's newest member is the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has only recently joined us (2007). This brings the number of members to twelve.

9. The first staff and office-bearers of QCT

On Sunday 31 May 1992, a service of worship for the commissioning of Revd Helen Mills as QCT General Secretary was held at Seton College Chapel, Mt Gravatt.

Helen held this post for five years before leaving to take up an ecumenical parish in England.

The next General Secretary, Revd Russell Morris, was inducted into the position at an ecumenical worship service at Toowong Uniting Church on Saturday 8 March 1997. Russell left QCT in March, 2004.

I myself (Revd Don Whebell) served as Acting General Secretary.

On October 1, 2004, the current General Secretary, Glenine Hamlyn, commenced work with QCT and was inducted into the position at a service in the chapel of St Francis College, Milton, on 15 October of that year.

Following Bishop James Cuskelly's term of office as inaugural President of QCT, this role has in turn been held by:

Revd Professor Han Spykerboer, (Uniting Church)
Pastor John Vitale, (Lutheran)
Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, (Anglican)
Revd Dr David Pitman, (Uniting Church)
Bishop Michael Putney, (Roman Catholic)
Bishop Ron Williams (Anglican)
Pastor Tim Jaensch, (Lutheran)
Revd Dr Ray Reddicliffe (Uniting Church)
Bishop Brian Finnigan (Roman Catholic)
Bishop Richard Appleby (Anglican)
Pastor Tim Jaensch (Lutheran)
Lt Colonel Ed Dawkins (Salvation Army)
and the current President, Revd Dr David Pitman (Uniting Church).

10. The development of QCT's work

Several commissions and sub-committees were soon established to carry out the work of QCT: the Faith and Order Commission, the Churches' Education Committee,

the Ecumenical Hospital Chaplaincy Advisory Committee, and the Ecumenical Refugee Support Committee.

The work of **Christian World Service (CWS)** has been closely allied with Queensland Churches Together since its inception. CWS is a national programme of education on global justice issues and support for ecumenical partners overseas in their work for justice and peace. CWS was preceded by the Committee for World Christian Action, which reported to the first General Meeting of the body.

The present Co-ordinator of Christian World Service is Ms Tanya Richards, who carries out the CWS programmes in Queensland.

In addition, QCT is the host for an ecumenical ministry helping to build bridges between Indigenous people and other Australians through awareness-raising and advocacy: the **Churches Together Indigenous People's Partnership (CTIPP)**. This important ministry began in Han Spykerboer's time as President – and has been one of the most significant parts of the work of QCT. It is supported mainly by the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches.

CTIPP is directed primarily to non-indigenous people in our churches. It complements – never competes with – the ministries of the denominational churches among Indigenous people. CTIPP is ecumenical – and that is unique.

The growth and broadening of the scope of the work of Queensland Churches Together over the past ten years is seen in the number of committees and other groups which now come under its auspices, namely:

the Faith and Unity Commission;

the Ecumenical Projects Team with its two working groups:

- on School Chaplaincy

- on Tertiary Chaplaincy;

the Commission for Christian World Service;

the Commission for Churches Together Indigenous People's Partnership (CTIPP Committee);

the Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Program, and

the Commission on Liturgy.

In recent years interfaith dialogue has become increasingly important to QCT. Here are just some of the key aspects of this work:

- QCT sends an ecumenical delegation to the Queensland Forum for Christians, Jews and Muslims, which was founded in 2004. Its other members are appointed by the Islamic Council of Queensland and the Jewish Board of Deputies.

- QCT works closely with the Multifaith Centre at Griffith University.

- From time to time representatives of QCT are asked to take part in multi-faith initiatives hosted by Queensland Government.

A number of local interchurch councils have become Members in Association of Queensland Churches Together.

These usually go under the name of 'Churches Together in...'

Hence we have:

Churches Together in Rockhampton,
Churches Together in Woodgate,
Churches Together in Bundaberg,
Churches Together in Caloundra,
Churches Together in the Border Region
Etc.

QCT relates to other local ecumenical groups, some of them with a long history, which are not formally associated with QCT. These include, for example, the Stanley River Ecumenical Pastoral Council, the Council of Christian Churches in Mount Isa, the Mackay and District Interchurch Council and the Western Suburbs Interchurch Council. In addition links are maintained with ecumenical schools such as Jubilee School on the Gold Coast.

I happily leave the last word to Elizabeth Harrington:

"A special feature of Queensland Churches Together is the variety of denominations involved, from the Society of Friends (Quakers) to Roman Catholics, with their widely disparate styles of worship, church structure and understanding of authority. ... these differences are riches to be shared, not issues to be used to maintain divisions.

The different gifts and traditions we bring when we come together enrich us all.

Christian unity is not about obliterating our differences and creating one super church. It is about understanding and accepting our different ways of being church and working together with strength as we share our gifts."

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