

# Celebrating Diversity

by Robert Thompson

Celebrating diversity has been a long time coming. Personally, I love that one of the Enduring Principles of Community of Christ is "Unity in Diversity" and for many of our younger generation it may seem one of the easier principles to embrace. However the shift from tolerating diversity to celebrating diversity has been a long and hard journey. As we read the following stories from a diverse group of members of Community of Christ, we start to see more clearly how people's own journeys have been shaped by shifts in the social, political and spiritual landscape. These stories talk about gender equality, expanding thinking on sexual behaviour, bio diversity in nature, interpretation of scripture through different lenses, how to bring about political change, blessings of cultural differences and commonality, expanding our mind through education, exploring the diverse understanding of spirit through Dreamtime stories, embracing habits to understand ourselves and other more effectively and the blessings of a church in its imperfection striving to navigate through to where God wants us to be. To understand this journey prior to hearing these uplifting stories I feel it may be helpful to our younger readers to give some context, which means traveling back in time. As a teenager in the 70's

when the family ventured out for a celebratory meal, my father would invariably head off with us to the Bamboo Garden restaurant in Beverly Hill in Sydney. My father was not a person who easily embraced change and once he found what he liked, there he would often stay. He rarely strayed from his tried and true restaurant and whilst he would always troll through the menu, he always ordered a sweet and sour. In fairness Australia had little to offer in diversity of eating places back 50 years ago. A "Spring roll" was challenging the meat pie as lunch-time fare and a few brave ladies were following Margaret Fulton's lead with international dishes like "Hungarian Goulash" and "Spaghetti Bolognese". The term "New Australian" was heard regularly around the dinner table as a reference to anyone who was new to the country and while it seemed fine to have Greeks and Italians owning fruit shops or fish and chip shops, anything more than that felt a bit uncomfortable. However, the face of Australia was changing, the "Racial Discrimination Act 1975" meant Australia was becoming more diverse as new people from countries all over the world added more colour, flavour and spice to our everyday life. As Australia grappled with more women being empowered by joining the workforce, the political and social landscape changed and there

was an inevitable smorgasbord of social upheaval. It was the end of an era for many religious institutions, as sports and pubs were open for business on Sundays. Churches came under pressure, as what was once a social and spiritual hub became a thing of the past. It was hard to "Celebrate Diversity" because everything was changing too far, too fast, and with change came resistance and fear. Therefore, for a time we were not celebrating diversity, we were tolerating diversity. There is much wisdom in biblical scripture and this verse from Ecclesiastes reminds us, "there is a time

and place for everything under heaven". We had to journey through this time of change, where long held beliefs were challenged. God was leading us to a new place, a new way of being and I believe we are catching up to where God is pointing us towards. It is a joy and a blessing to be on this journey together in all of our uniqueness. I hope you will be as uplifted and blessed as I have been by the following literary offerings as they are a veritable buffet of stories (including sweet and sour) but with a universal seasoning that hero's each one...Celebrating Diversity!

## Val Morley

WPH Congregation

I grew up in an era when ordained priesthood was exclusively a male domain however I enjoyed active participation in church activities and fulfilled many service opportunities. I happily supported both my husband Col and son Craig as priesthood members. It was much later that rumblings were occurring in the US church for women to be called to the priesthood. After several World Conferences, the church accepted the move to embrace women into the priesthood and I was most surprised to be called to be an Elder in Community of Christ. I remember talking with one long serving minister, Jack Gunning, and saying how will it be different to what I am already doing? I told him that I already plan worships and am involved in so many leadership activities. Jack just looked at me and said, "ordination will enliven the power of the Spirit in you". So, I accepted the call, and as time went on, I did feel that blessing of the Spirit. This started my journey into priesthood. Col and I became joint pastors, which at the time was quite ground-breaking. I was later called to be a Seventy and it was a delight to experience the spirit of this office. Whilst attending the church's World Conference I felt challenged whilst meeting with the other Seventies from around the world. There was a sense of freedom and joy to reach out and tell the story of discipleship. At this time the World Church were exploring new administrative models to help streamline administrative functions with a shift from Districts to Metropolises. In Sydney we were asked to set up meetings to explore the advantages of the Metropole system. Bill Gillard and I were to chair these meetings held over several weeks. There were exciting suggestions and it was Bill's skill that guided us. Mission President, Ray Burdekin asked to see me and suggested I consider taking the role of Metropole president. I was stunned. I needed to think. I struggled for some time feeling there was no way I had the ability to take on such a task. It was during this period of indecision and feelings of inadequacy that I recalled all the drama work I had done in the church. For ten years I had organised Drama Festivals, where all six Sydney congregations produced a one

act play over two nights. I produced a number of plays involving wonderful talented and gifted people from around the church and beyond. All of these wonderful talented people worked so hard, and we had such fun. I decided I would draw upon my past organisational experience and tackle the challenges of creating the Sydney Metropole. I accepted the position of President of the Sydney Metropole with the proviso that I could remain in my priesthood role as a Seventy as I so enjoyed that ministry. Col and I had a manufacturing business at that time. I worked five days a week handling office, wages etc. How could we cope with the added responsibilities that my new role of leadership required! It was decided we would employ a young lady to handle office duties and I would go in once a week and do wages and accounts. For five years I worked for the Australia church as Metropole president, six days for the church and one day in our business. My priesthood journey was again to lead me above and beyond and I accepted a call to the office of High Priest. As we worked together, we strived to unite congregations and with a great team of dedicated pastors and leaders we made great strides and I felt we accomplished a lot during our time together. After five years however my involvement as leader came to an end. Looking back, it was clear not everyone had embraced the changes that we were part of and that has caused me some heartache, but I was proud that I made the decision to lead and go beyond the boundaries of my experience. I did not stand for President at the next conference and the Metropole continued in a fashion for a couple of years until a new administrative structure was created. My love for the people and for God had not changed however my focus as a minister was about to, as I received a letter calling me to the office of Evangelist. Col's call to Evangelist came at the same time and we were ordained together. For one who had no idea about priesthood I have been on quite a journey. Jack Gunning was right, ordination does enliven the power of the Spirit in you. I am most grateful to have had this journey.

## Pat Harrison

Drummoyne Congregation

I was born into a church family and was baptised at nine years of age. My recollections of church attendance at the Balmain branch consisted of Sunday School which I attended with my father every Sunday, communion or prayer and testimony on Sunday afternoon and preaching service on Sunday evening where my mother sang in the choir. Often meals were brought to the church and we spent the whole of Sunday there. Very often Saturday night was spent with social evenings in the church hall, well attended and lots of fun. One pound (money) dinners were introduced during the 1950's as a means of raising money for the new church to be built at Drummoyne. Much of my early life was centred around the church activities. Anniversaries, Sunday School picnics, prize giving followed by moving up in classes was a very exciting time of the year. Zion's League, Conferences and Reunion were great events.

I was married in 1955 and Ray and I travelled to the United States where he had a post doctorate fellowship at Northwestern University in Evanston Illinois. The Church became a much bigger picture for me. No matter where we went on the journey or during the two and a bit years we lived there, we met and stayed with church members, that feeling of acceptance and being part of a greater family was very evident. The hospitality we received was

## Adam Wade

President of Seventy

In recent years I have found that the more I travel, where the diversity of the groups with which I share and encounter broadens, the more I see similarities between people rather than differences. Yet do not misread this as a simplification saying basically everyone is the same. Cultures and sub-cultures across the globe are diverse and varied; from the different kinds of food they eat, to the way they express their feelings, what you do for fun, what an average day looks like, and the list goes on. This is even true within our own culture; people are certainly diverse!

However, when you spend time with others, and look below the layers of unfamiliarity, it does not take long to find connections. That people express love and want to be loved; whether displayed by a low bow or arms wrapped around another in a hug. Special moments are had across a table eating together over good food; where one is spiced cabbage and the other fermented fish. Swapping stories that have been key defining moments in their lives; walking up mountain paths

so memorable and I would say unique in religious communities.

When we left Australia in 1955, some things like Sunday sport in general, was not played as it is today, shops were not allowed to open for trading, in fact most shut at lunchtime Saturday, Easter was always a four day shut down, and public holidays were just that for everyone, except perhaps transport workers, hospitality and essential services. This was not the case in the States, and on one occasion I recall at a communion service at the church we attended in Chicago, after dispensing the emblems, the priest left early to attend a baseball match!

Fast forward to the present, how different is the scene now. Attitudes have changed considerably, in our thinking, in our actions, in our acceptance, in our outlook, and in our understanding. I love the words of the hymn "there is room at the table for all..." and as Peter Lonsdale said in his message during the online worship, scatter the seed in abundance, no matter where it falls, just keep scattering it, for we will never know where it will take root and grow. We have become a much more inclusive group than the church of my early life, Community of Christ is so much more who we are and who we would strive to be.

or moving across the sea. A desire and compassion to serve and help others. People grieve, cry with one another, laugh together, and have hopes and dreams for the future.

When we first encounter someone new, it is easy to see the differences. Instead, what a gift it would be to approach someone new with the thought "we have more similarities than I think, and I will try to discover those and see this person as God sees them."

I believe one of our greatest blessings as a globally diverse Christian community is that we are striving to find those similarities as disciples and working together for the mission of Christ, to be one people, in many places, with a strong and powerful faith in the God who loves each and every one of us.

# Anne Sutton

Brisbane Congregation

**H**ow can we best navigate and steer future direction in Community of Christ within a framework of diverse opinions and thinking?

Covey's '7 Habits of Highly Effective People' – a 1990's program that was adopted by some church leaders and implemented here in Australia is an excellent strategy in considering how Community of Christ members and friends who have diverse opinions/thinking may become unified in their endeavours.

I trained in this program and used it with church communities as well as in my work as an HR Manager. The Habits and Principles are relevant to any organisation, including Community of Christ congregations.

**Habit 1** Be Proactive – we are free to choose our response in any situation. Proactive people don't blame genetics, circumstance or conditions for their behaviour.

**Habit 2** Begin with the End in Mind – we need a shared vision of where we are going - a 'mission statement'.

**Habit 3** Put First Things First – do the important things first, because where we are headed is more important than how fast we are going.

**Habit 4** Think Win Win – it constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. It makes all persons feel valued and satisfied – leads to teamwork and better relationships

**Habit 5** Seek First to Understand then to be Understood – the key to understanding is listening with the eyes and the heart

**Habit 6** Sharpen the Saw – renew and enhance the greatest asset we have YOURSELF

**Habit 7** Synergise – two heads are better than one – creative cooperation - teamwork

All need to feel valued and viewpoints heard in order to collaboratively design a 'Mission Statement' for the Mission Centre and/or the congregation. Using the principles of the '7 Habits' will encourage diverse opinions to be heard with the aim of seeking a unified direction for the Australian church and/or the congregation.

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Adam Wade

# Maddison Cotton

## Drummoynes Congregation

Like most people, I have a wide array of perspectives and opinions, on an even wider array of topics. These perspectives are based on experiences I've had and things that I've learnt. Sometimes my perspectives on different things don't align perfectly, and they don't remain fixed; they grow and change as I grow and change. In recent years particularly, I've learnt a lot about different and diverse perspectives, embracing these and developing my own.

As I reached adulthood, my education has become possibly the most significant influence on my perspectives. In addition to the immense benefit of general learning across multiple subject areas, university has allowed me to build academic skills which can apply to everyday life, and has helped me to develop and expand my perspectives. In my study in Law, I spend a lot of time arguing, with assessments often requiring me to form my own unique line of argument based on my study and evaluation of the perspectives of others. Although assignments are always stressful, I genuinely have fun writing essays, and enjoy the challenge of researching and evaluating other Academics' perspectives, and using these to craft my own argument.

I think that self-reflection and critical evaluation are vital for understanding our own, or anyone's perspectives on a matter, and is an important part of our growth as individuals. This does not have to be a laborious academic task, and I find that you can reflect on your perspectives as simply as asking yourself a few questions: What do I think about x? What experiences or reasons do I have for thinking that? What information do I have to back up this opinion, and is it reliable? In addition to all that I've learnt (although admittedly I forget a lot the minute my final assessments are submitted), university has instilled in me a greater appreciation for learning and enabled me to develop in my ways of thinking, changing the way I think about how perspectives are formed.

More recently, I've ample opportunity to consider my own and other's perspectives outside the relative 'comfort' of university classes and assessments. In January of this year, I was appointed as an Officer in the Royal Australian Navy. Although as an Undergraduate Officer I have spent only a limited amount of time working and training so far, I have already met a huge amount of people, all with different life experiences, educations, backgrounds and opinions. In an organisation as diverse as the Navy, it's a guarantee that there are going to be many varied views. Even in

the office where I work with five other Legal Officers, all these things, including our perspectives, vary drastically. This has given me the chance to consider a wider range of perspectives. As a group of lawyers, there's always some heated but ultimately good natured debating, and this allows us all to express and test our own perspectives, while considering new points of view.

Within the academic context it's often easy to refine and restrict the perspectives you research or pay attention to, and this is not the same outside of university. Being exposed to a wider range of experiences and perspectives has given me the opportunity to further reflect and discuss with people on how their experiences have contributed to their views. It's also given me a greater appreciation for the simple fact that everyone has diverse life experiences and diverse perspectives, and that this can be a positive thing for fostering conversation, further education and productivity.

In particular, in being exposed to a wide array of opinions, I feel like I've learnt to appreciate differing perspectives, when I can see the reasoning or thinking behind them. One of my friends in the Navy and I fundamentally disagree on just about everything. I might have once thought this fatal to a friendship but we respect each other's views, and frequently debate and discuss a wide range of issues. I appreciate that although we might take a different stance, his opinions are based on researching, learning and critical thinking. In today's age, people are quick to form opinions and make statements, but I maintain that it's important not just to have a perspective, but to have a learned perspective. Our debates have often allowed me to strengthen my own views, but also reconsider and reshape them in response to information, experiences and perspectives I had not considered before.

Often confrontation with diverse perspectives, especially when they contradict one's own, is confronting for people. I feel like often, this is something to be embraced and enjoyed. When people respect a diversity of experiences and perspectives, and take care to form their own educated and informed views, we can all learn and grow.



# Sue Palmer

Pastor - "The Open Door" congregation

**T**he gospel of Jesus Christ is expressed best in community life in all its diversity where people become vulnerable to God's grace and each other.

True community includes compassion for and solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

True community upholds the worth of persons while providing a healthy alternative to self-centeredness, isolation, and conformity.

My memory is not the best. But I do remember in 2000, twenty years ago, being invited to come share at the Australia National Gathering (if that is what it was called) about this new group called the Open Door. At this point in time, the Open Door had evolved from being a coming out group that met on a Thursday evening to a group that identified as Christian and LGBT, meeting on a Sunday night. We didn't really have a format but I knew God was doing something with us, and it was fun.

Now it may have been at Vision Valley or Crosslands.. my memory here is not the best.. but there were lots of church people in attendance. And the new president of the church, Grant McMurray, was also present. So on the way up there, I called my new friend from Open Door, Denise Jeffery, to tag along. I told her we were going to a church thing and she said ok. She didn't know anyone in the church apart from Bill and Betty Gillard and Bruce and Ronda Wooderson who she had met at Open Door earlier in the year. On the way to the venue I asked Denise if she would like to share her story when we got there. (She probably thought it would be a little group like Open Door). To her surprise she discovered that the gathering was quite large. But to her credit, Denise still would give a talk.

It was the afternoon session. I remember being introduced and I remember the butterflies in my stomach as I stood up to speak. I had not formally 'come out' to the wider church community until this moment, but I sensed the love and the support as I walked to the microphone. I told my story. I cried. I told about losing my mum two years prior. I cried more. Then it was Denise's turn. She 'came out' as well and told her story. I don't know if she cried too but I know she also shared her heart with everyone there.

When the session had finished people started coming up to hug us. We were inundated with hugs! In fact, a queue formed in front of me and Denise to hug us! And in that queue was Grant McMurray! He lined up to give us both a hug! Denise said later

she felt like a celebrity. I secretly did too. It wasn't until 2009 that Denise was baptised and became a member of the church. But I know that it was this day that was the starting point for Denise to be loved into Community of Christ.

God has given us something special. As Hymn 350 goes, We lift each other up. We leave no one behind. We have a love, a profound love for each other that we are each called to share in our lives. But I tell you what. When we are together, this love is fantabulous! Thankyou, dear brothers and sisters, for loving me, for loving our LGBTIQ members and friends and for helping each one to find a place amongst us.