**UCANZ FORUM 2017 – “REDEEMING THE CONVERSATION AS HOLY ART”**

Recently on my way back to New Zealand following a long awaited holiday with a US friend I hadn’t seen for over a decade, I purchased a new summer hat at Los Angeles Airport. I found it in a shop upstairs in the International Departures, a shop called – ‘The President’s Shop.’ As you can guess it was full of items and memorabilia acknowledging the role of Presidency in the American political arena, and in particular items related to named Presidents of more recent history.

My cap – which I will put on my head for you now to see – has the caption above its peak – ‘Alternative Facts – Lies’, the letters making up the second portion of the caption are taken from those letters buried within and making up the first two words. I like my cap and wear it a lot finding it raises eyebrows, smiles and stimulates interesting conversation in all manner of places.

The caption – ‘Alternative Facts’ – point us towards something of the reality of the age we now find ourselves in. The age and times of today, when we pause to both celebrate and review the past – where we have come from and plan for the future – where we might commit ourselves to go in this most precious and sacred path of working together in both dialogue and action across different denominations and I add in religious faiths for the very purpose of enacting the mission of God for this time and place.

At the end of 2016 the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries announced the ‘Word of the Year.’

Their selection was the hyphenated word – ‘Post’- Truth’, defining it as shorthand for ‘circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’ Its precise etymology is disputed, though there is general consensus that it was first deployed in a 1992 article in the internet news source *The Nation* by the Serbian-American writer Steve Tesich. So traumatised were the American people by Watergate, Iran-Contra and other scandals that they had started to turn away from truth, and collude wearily in its suppression. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Especially so in the UK, USA – post Brexit, post-Trump political contexts the descriptor of “post-truth” describes that type of campaigning we saw witnessed especially in these two contexts in the year just passed, which succeeded in turning the political world upside down.

Fuelled by emotive arguments rather than fact-checks – solid reliable facts, post-truth was a phrase that tried to capture the gut-instinct, anti-establishment politics that swept Donald Trump and Brexit supporters to victory.

A key ingredient in this post-truth culture has been the rise of social media.

You could say, it’s not the soundbite any more, but the “I-bite”, where strong opinion can shout down solid evidence.

This post-truth phenomenon is about, ‘My opinion is worth more than the facts.’ It’s about how I feel about things.

It’s very narcissistic, empowered by the fact that you can so readily via social media publish your opinion on almost anything. All you need now is an I-Phone. Everyone can publish their opinion – and if you disagree with me, it’s an attack on my and not my ideas. (‘The fact that you can muscle your way on to the front row and be noticed becomes a kind of celebrity.’)

“Fake news” on social media became a part of the post-election debate in the US – and it is extremely difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.

Award winning British journalist Matthew D’Ancona writing about this post-truth phenomenon which we are all in the grip of states;

“At the heart of this global trend is a crash in the value of truth,

comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock. Honesty and

accuracy are no longer assigned the highest priority in political

exchange. As candidate and President, Donald Trump has demeaned

the assumption that the leader of the free world should have at least

a glancing acquaintance with the truth: according to the Pulitzer

Prize –winning fact-checking site political Fact, 69 per cent of his

Statements are ‘Mostly False’, ‘False’, or ‘Pants on Fire’. In the United

Kingdom, the campaign to leave the European Union triumphed with

Slogans that were demonstrably untrue or misleading – but also

demonstrably resonant.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What does any of this have to say to us here in this context of Aotearoa New Zealand?

It matters greatly in relation to the quality of our interactions, and notably I believe the depth and quality of our conversations which lie at the heart of our commitment to be together across differing denominational understandings, and across different religious frames of reference which come to shape our identity.

It matters greatly in terms of how we might extend hospitality and extend the boundaries of our table to include ‘one more.’ For we are living within a context which some have called – an age of ‘distraction’, an age where intent listening which requires a depth of presence is becoming almost a lost art. Hence the title of this presentation – ‘redeeming the sacred and holy art of conversation.’

*“When is the last time you had a great conversation, a conversation which wasn’t just two intersecting monologues, which is what passed for a conversation a lot in this culture?*

*But when had you last a great conversation, in which you overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew? That you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost and a sense of an event of a conversation that brought the two of you on to a different plane? And then fourthly, a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards, you know? I’ve had some of them recently, and it’s just absolutely amazing, like, as we would say at home, they are food and drink for the soul.”*

* *John O’Donohue*, On Being

A good conversation, like good food, good wine, is something we continue to savour over time.

For those of us living in the 21st Century’s digitalized world, we feel as if we have less time to savour much, whether food, relationships, or conversations. Many of us find that in our effort to maintain a breadth of connection, we compromise the depth of our connections. We often feel distracted, as we struggle to keep up with all the messages that fill our screens, unable to bring our full attention to any single encounter, let alone have enough time to reflect on them.

More and more of us are feeling the need to disconnect selectively from our phones, iPads, computers in order to reconnect with our experiences, inner lives, and relationships.

Great conversations are enlivening. We feel fully alive as we engage in a really good conversation.

Margaret Wheatley – American writer and management consultant reminds us that “human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community and organisational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel, and we listen to what others see and feel.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

As we converse with one another, we have the opportunity to learn about a reality far bigger than our own and to learn more about ourselves. When another person listens to us, rather than advising or analysing us, it increases the likelihood that we will speak the truth of our heart. We hear ourselves saying things that we didn’t know we knew or thought we had forgotten.

The original meaning of the word “conversation” is the action of living or having one’s being among persons.

Song of Solomon – a much neglected portion of the Hebrew Scriptures – uses the words to express what we desire at depth – “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice” (2:14) says one lover to another.

Being so present as to see their faces and hear their voices is the very nature of conversation, for when people are seen and heard, they find new and life-shaping speech.

It can involve a sharing of thought, question, silence, concern, laughter, forgiveness, confusion, celebration, and much more. All of us want to engage in significant conversation about our lives in safe settings and with people we trust.

We all want to be heard and valued in our own language.

Carol Gilligan –pioneering developmental theorist writing about the importance of women claiming their own authentic voice.

*To have something to say is to be a person.* ***But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act…by voice I mean something like the core of the self****. Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath, sounds, words, rhythm and language. And voice is also a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds.* ***Speaking and listening are a form of psychic breathing****.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

This intensely relational act of listening and being heard is in jeopardy in this ‘post-truth’ environment when the stranger is more than often ‘demonized’ and made into an object of suspicion or…………

In his “philosophy of dialogue,” Martin Buber (1878-1965), an Austrian born Jew and one of the very important philosophers of the twentieth century, explores holiness in relationships, the potential for goodness in the individual, and the importance of the here and now.

Buber believed that we encounter the reality of God by meeting God in between – in our relationships with one another.

In his book, *I and Thou,* Buber proposed that there are two attitudes toward existence: I – It and I – Thou.

In an *I-Thou* mode of relating, our intention is to *converse with* another in a fully personal manner. Buber believed that when we address another human being as someone made in the image and likeness of God, we encounter God.

Conversely in an *I –It* mode of relating, we speak to one another in an impersonal manner as if he or she were an object. Because I treat you as less than human or don’t recognize your full human dignity that reflects your being made in God’s image, I ignore or deny God.

Buber’s understanding of relationships reminds us that every time we interact with one another, we are offered an occasion to encounter the sacred.

Buber calls our attention to a reality beyond the participants in a conversation that characterizes true dialogue – the realm of “between.”

Buber’s invitation to encounter the realm of between can help us better understand distinctive characteristics of the sacred art of conversation:

1. To focus our attention on engaging with one another.

Conversation practiced as a sacred art is not a passive activity. In an I-thou encounter, we participate in conversation by actively choosing to open our hearts to one another.

An I-Thou encounter requires self-awareness, a willingness to surrender control, and an investment in energy in getting to know another rather than a passive acceptance of someone else’s definition of our partner in conversation.

We can’t sit back and resort to existing definitions, categories, or concepts to define the other.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman – John 4: 1-26 – Jesus could have chosen not to talk to her because of her marginal status as a woman and as a foreigner. He extended his boundaries and there was a mutual engagement.

Jesus and the Syro- Phoenician woman – Mark 7: 24-27 where the woman herself confronts directly with his own exclusive and racist attitudes and beliefs. She speaks the truth, openly and boldly and in so doing opens up the in-between space for truth to exchanged and new truths to come forth.

1. To keep the focus on what goes on between us:

In the sacred art of conversation, we try to shift our focus from me, myself, and I to what’s going on between us. Of course our worries, fears, desire to make a good impression, fears about expressing our deeper truths – all then to keep us focused on ourselves and from opening up. Devoting time to self- reflection before or after our conversations increases the likelihood that we will maintain more of a focus on the encounter.

1. To keep our focus on the here and now by improvising:

Improvising requires us to focus our attention on the here and now – to what is happening in the moment. Rather than clinging to a preconceived idea of how a conversation or encounter should go, how another person should engage with us, how our relationship should unfold, we pay attention to what is unfolding in real time and respond accordingly.

We take what happens and try to make it work – that’s what jazz musicians do – improvise one to another – crossing over and weaving new melody lines and chords.

Improvising is about if you like – making it up as you go along. It has to do with spontaneity and creativity. It happens when one is truly present to the moment and the space in-between, and I would say attuned to the creative mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit. It’s about making something from what is available in the here and now, but it cannot happen if you are distracted, or bound up in your mind about ‘what do I do or say now’? or already have jumped ahead and have the ‘perfect response’ to make’, or the judgement you feel must be made here to put things straight.

Such engagement in I-Thou relationships is what makes dialogue and conversation across differences in denomination, in religions, across ethnicity and cultures different from that which we feel most ‘at home’ in, across differing expressions of gender and sexuality.

Such engagement at depth and holding these within a sacred frame of reference are at risk in this ‘post-truth’ environment we are currently caught up in.

It is only out of such engagement – such sacred depth – can we live out the gospel ethic of hospitality.

Pivotal stone of ‘oikonomia’- ‘economy’ – ‘household management’ is the concept of hospitality as a metaphor for the moral life - an ethic of public and private life.

**Hospitality…the willingness to make common, at least temporarily, what is in some sense private, which is how we think of home.**

Hospitality, even in its most restricted sense is about breaking down barriers. To invite another person into the space I regard as my own is, at least temporarily to give up a measure of privacy. It is already to make a breach in the division between the public and the private to create the common - and it happens in the space called home.

Ancient symbols and rituals govern the practice of hospitality. The guest is sacred, because the guest represents the “other”, that which cannot be entirely controlled once the door is opened, and is therefore in some sense the God. It is the ‘in-between’ space Buber calls our attention to. Hospitality requires a depth of presence – an opening of space – to improvise – believing that a new pattern, weaving will emerge.

Hospitality can be dangerous in the very literal sense that makes people put double locks and spy holes on their doors and in the more profound sense that the breaching of barriers is also a breaking of categories and therefore a harbinger of revolution.

That’s why our culture protects the home space by restricting hospitality to chosen friends and relatives and setting limits of time and space: visitors are to be kept in the living room for a few hours; others more intimate may stay longer and penetrate the bedroom; while still others are to be entertained appropriately only in impressive public spaces.

But however we try to control it, **hospitality is of its essence a surrender of total control.** The private sphere, the domestic sphere, home as we think of it, **is in some sense redefined.** It is no longer entirely private; **it has become common.**

We here at this gathering celebrate 50 years of ecumenical dialogue and commitment which has brought us to this date and time as UCANZ. 50 years of disciplined committed conversation in order to be hospitable one to another across denominational differences, for the very purpose of receiving and exchanging riches of difference in union together.

Last week Pope Francis and World Methodist Leaders celebrated in Rome 50 years of Methodist Catholic dialogue.

Pope Francis stated; “After fifty years of patient dialogue, he said, “we are no longer strangers” but rather, through our shared Baptism, “members of the same household of God.”

True dialogue, the pope continued, gives us courage to encounter one another in humility and sincerity” as we seek to learn from each other.

He spoke of Wesley’s example of holiness – when we recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in other Christian confessions, “we cannot fail to rejoice”, as they can “also help us grow closer to the Lord”.

The Pope also noted how our faith becomes tangible when it takes the concrete form of love and service to the poor and marginalized.

That is as always the very purpose of our committed conversations – our holy conversations. We extend hospitality one to another, across denominational differences, across the differences of religions for the wider purposes of God’s mission to the world.

1. D’Ancona, Matthew. *Post Truth. The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back.* London: Ebury Press, 2017, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future,* 2nd ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development.* USA: Harvard University Press, Reprint edition, 2016, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)