



EPHESUS and THE SEA of FAITH NETWORK



Ian Harris, a founder member of both organisations, compares and contrasts.

Every so often someone in the Sea of Faith Network gets wind of a group called “Ephesus”, and wonders what it’s all about. Is it the same as the SOF? If so, why not use the name? If not, what are the differences?

Ephesus describes itself as “a group which is exploring new ways of understanding Christian faith in the increasingly secular world of New Zealand in the new millennium”. It is “a process – open, questioning, supportive, sharing”. And it “welcomes anyone, linked with a church or not, who is prepared to share in its search”.

The group predates the SOF Network in New Zealand by three years. Its formation followed my stint as Director of Communication for the Presbyterian Church in the late 1980s, when I became aware of a number of people who had had a lifelong association with the church hanging on by their fingernails, or quietly dropping out.

The intriguing thing was that this was happening not through loss of faith, but out of a profound feeling of dissonance between what rang bells for them in matters of faith and belief and where their church was – a dissonance felt most acutely in services of worship. These people felt there was no space in the church's activities where their doubts and honest questionings could be raised; or if they were to raise them, they knew they would be dumped on, or sidelined, or patronised. However careful they might be, they were bound to upset some people. Not wanting that, they felt it best to back off, and over time they would quietly withdraw.

The church's stock response to the challenge was to talk of renewal and do all the old things more fervently. But that didn't hold out much prospect for the people I was concerned about, for whom the traditional answers presented in the traditional way didn't cut the mustard any more. The questions had changed, and they'd changed because the whole cultural context in which faith has to make sense to us and be lived out today had evolved out of all recognition.

In my communications role, I thought it would be good for the church to make space for people like that to be free to raise their questions and explore issues of faith in an open-ended sort of way, without the sense that sooner or later the discussion would be foreclosed in favour of conclusions which the church had predetermined many centuries ago. I also thought it would be good to open up that exploration to people who had let their church connection go, or perhaps had never had one.

I put those ideas up within the councils of the Presbyterian Church, but after some initial interest, those who counted decided they weren't interested in sanctioning an approach along these lines. So I decided to pursue the concept with others who were more encouraging. After months of mulling it over, early in 1990 we invited a number of likely folk to join in trying this alternative approach out on the fringes of the church, where no one would have the authority to knock it on the head.

That was how Ephesus in Wellington came into existence – a shoot from the stump of the church, complementary to it in drawing from and exploring the Judaeo-Christian tradition we are heir to, but with one big assumption colouring everything we do: it assumes that the last 400 years have happened, and that those 400 years have made a fundamental difference to the context of faith, and therefore to faith itself.

Secularisation

The key to this change is the process of secularisation and the emergence of the secular culture in the West. We take our culture for granted most of the time – it's in and around us and so natural and pervasive that it's almost like the air we breathe. So in the Wellington Ephesus group we take for granted that we are secular people in a secular culture. It follows that if our faith is to be real for us, it must be expressed in terms of that culture.

That idea isn't exactly new. In New Testament times Paul and John took the Jewish understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus, his death and the resurrection experience that followed, and transposed it into a Greek world view. Nowadays we talk about a Maori response to the gospel, or an Indian, or an African. So if our culture is secular, why not a secular response, using secular as a neutral word meaning “of this world”, or belonging to the here and now?

That is not, of course, to be confused with “secularist”, an ideological stance that makes a dogma out of non-religion.

Ephesus

Since that experimental beginning in 1990, Ephesus in Wellington has met fortnightly between March and early December each year, from 5 to 7 on a Sunday evening. Other people heard about it and set up parallel groups on the Kapiti Coast, in Timaru, and more recently in Eastbourne, Wellington. When the SOF Network was formed in 1993, it met a similar need in other parts of the country.

Each group operates in its own way, but Ephesus in Wellington begins with a shared meal, to which everyone contributes, and that gives people the chance to catch up and talk with one another. Then we sit down in an open circle, usually between 20 and 30 of us, giving a sense of relating and equality around a common space. The group is open and inclusive in intention, though in practice it's self-selecting in that people who find its approach useful stay on and contribute, while others who find it less congenial don't.

Our meetings have covered a wide range of topics and themes. In the first few sessions, when we were very much feeling our way, it was striking how angry a number of people were with their churches, and that came tumbling out. Some of it was from feminists, some from people who were finding out that a whole revolution had been taking place in theology for nearly 200 years and they had never heard a word of it from their ministers – or if they had, it was usually negative. But once they'd got that out of their system, we could get on with more constructive stuff.

I have heard the same about many SOF groups, and a sampling of the kind of programme we have followed will show there's a huge overlap – I'd put it at 80 to 90 per cent:

1. In a number of our sessions someone has been asked to introduce the thinking of theologians such as Don Cupitt, Paul Tillich, John Spong, Phyllis Trible, Thomas Merton, Marcus Borg, Karen Armstrong, Gordon Kaufman.
2. We've also had excellent sessions arising out of more secular books that raise essentially religious questions, such as *Fugitive Pieces*, *Galileo's Daughter*, *City of God* (E L Doctorow's, not Augustine's) and *Spirit in a Strange Land* (an anthology of New Zealand spiritual verse).
3. We've had facilitators as varied as Lloyd Geering, Jim Veitch, Michael McCabe (from the Catholic Bioethics Centre), Bishop John Spong and Don Cupitt themselves, Henryk Skolimowski, a Jewish rabbi (on a Jewish view of Jesus), and Don Brash (on "Are Good Economics Bad for Society?").
4. We've had sessions on artists such as Stanley Spencer, Colin McCahon, Jacques Rouault. We've also had art workshops in which we got stuck in ourselves.
5. We've tried to tease out what we mean when we use the word "God", the relative merits of "spirituality" as opposed to "religion", faith contrasted with belief, sacred times and sacred places, what we understand by transcendence, what we'd say as a group if we tried to write our own creed – certainly not what other people should be required to believe, but what we ourselves put our faith in when it's all boiled down. (We never completed that one, but the process was worthwhile in itself.)
6. We've looked at some of the important contemporary questions such as science and religion, the human genome project, bio-ethics, eco-philosophy, the feminist challenge to settled ways of doing things, biculturalism, sanctity of life versus quality of life, fundamentalism, the nature of consciousness.
7. We've dug into biblical passages both from an experiential perspective and with the help of academics. We've had sessions on the Jesus Seminar. We've asked ourselves how we would express our understandings and faith experience in secular liturgies (that is, liturgies that don't depend on any supernatural element) – and we've devised them and done them, especially around Christmas and Easter.
8. We've also set aside a weekend each year to go to a house at Otaki Beach where the programme was built around watching and discussing video series – *Sea of Faith*, *The Power of Myth*, *Healing and the Mind* – or to tackle other themes in a more extended way than is possible in a couple of hours on a Sunday evening.
9. And from time to time we've gone to a movie or play and joined together afterwards to chew the fat, or done other things together socially. It's been stimulating. It's also been fun.

A positive learning curve

Looking back, it's been a positive learning curve. It came home to us very early that having good content was not enough: the process in a session needed as much attention as the substance.

We discovered an extraordinary range of talent within the group, including knowledge, life experience and creativity, and I've no doubt the same would be true of other groups. The ordained ministers in the group (there've been about eight over the years) seem to value being able to join with lay people as companions in our explorations, including facilitating a session from time to time, instead of being permanently up front.

Ephesus never set out to be a support group, and we still are not that – except that when there is an illness or bereavement, that's exactly what emerges. We never set out to be a “church”, and we haven't become that either, thank goodness. Members have come from the Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist and Catholic churches and from none, but denominational tags are totally irrelevant to the group.

About half of us retain an active association with a church, others don't; but that doesn't make any difference in practice. I would maintain that we've become a faith community out on the margins, and it's on the margins because that's been the only place where we could make our own way and do our own thing.

Ephesus and the Sea of Faith

From the beginning, Ephesus has had close links with the SOF. When Lloyd Geering took the initiative that led to the Network's formation at the Hamilton conference in 1993, all but two of the first organising committee were members of Ephesus. The overlap is such that there has never been any sense of rivalry between the two, though there are clear points of difference.

One is that Ephesus continues to focus consciously and constructively on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whereas SOF likes to cast its net much wider. The very name “Ephesus” is a metaphor reaching back into the first century of Christianity. It stems from the tradition that it was at Ephesus that John took the understanding of Jesus in a Jewish context and transposed it into a Greek understanding of the world and of ultimate reality. In New Zealand the name is used to suggest that in today's secular culture a transposition of similar proportions is necessary if the truths at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are to be known and experienced in the modern world.

Another key difference in Wellington is that we work on ways of expressing faith through occasional liturgies or rituals that we create ourselves. It is obviously easier to do this by tapping into one faith tradition and its symbol system than if the liturgists are trying to juggle ideas and symbols from a range of faiths – or to keep them all at arm's length.

The word “liturgy” seems to induce tremors of disapproval, even hostility, among some SOFers, but the Ephesus liturgies bear little resemblance to traditional church services. In practice, they have proved an invaluable growing edge.

Latterly, when we have come to the end of a cluster of heady discussions and explorations, we have developed a liturgy to reflect on the themes and approach them experientially and in a broader context, happily drawing on the Christian faith tradition which has moulded us. Increasingly, it would seem, it is those experiences that distinguish the Ephesus experience from that of the SOF, which often appears more interested in religion in the abstract.

But it's horses for courses. One size will never fit all.

Ian writes a very popular weekly column under the title “Honest to God” in the Wellington Dominion Post. You can see the Wellington Group website at www.ephesus.dns2go.com/ and contact Maureen Roxburgh of the Kapiti Group on 04-297-2037