

South Australian Council of Churches



Reimagining our Unity in Christ through Receptive Ecumenism

For use by any church council/committee/agency/synod/diocese etc. Feel free to adapt to suit your context. The approach is from the perspective of Receptive Ecumenism.

The following process has been developed through the South Australian Council of Churches (SACC) in conversation with others, and modified and enhanced following use in a variety of contexts.

The aim of the process is to nurture a receptive disposition and to lead people into a meaningful engagement with Receptive Ecumenism with its potential to draw any church body into inner conversion and a deeper encounter with Christ.

Receptive Ecumenism is a fresh ecumenical process emphasising listening, learning and receptivity. Receptive Ecumenism is the experience of learning from others in order to learn about ourselves in relationship with others. It is a journey of openness, conversion and response to the Holy Spirit.

By reflecting on what we still have to learn, and opening ourselves to listen, both to our ecumenical friends and to the Spirit, it is hoped that we will each discover creative and imaginative processes and responses to critical issues affecting any part of our own church context, and so be drawn more closely into our unity in Christ.

There are three stages in this process:

1. Preparation: at least six weeks before date of event.
2. Event: allowing about three hours.
3. Action: reconvening in the week or two following the event.

1. Preparation

Step 1

Decide on issue/learning question. The selection of an issue/learning question would normally follow a process of discernment, in which the group - a church council, or committee, or agency, or synod, or diocese etc - seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit towards an aspect that may be in need of 'healing'. It would also be an aspect that is within the group's sphere of influence.

Of interest in these early stages of Receptive Ecumenism is also what happens when we move towards an attitude and behaviour of humility and vulnerability in listening to and learning from our ecumenical other. Sometimes a learning question is selected as a means towards that end. If this is the case, SACC recommends asking about an aspect that is likely to be common to another church and within the lived experience of any participants.

For example:

Q 1: How does your Church welcome newcomers, nurture hospitality, nourish an active congregation?

Q 2: How does your church arrange for the experience of ecumenical learning in education and formation of ordination candidates/theological students?

Q 3: How does your church form people as Disciples?

Step 2

The group selects a date/time for the event to take place in about six weeks' time, allowing for about 3 hours. It also agrees on an event facilitator(s) and may select four or five 'receivers' who will take some specific action before and during the event.

Step 3

If receivers are selected, the event facilitator(s) and receivers arrange to meet, preferably over a simple meal or coffee, to explore and become familiar with the processes and possibilities for their role and the arranged event. Especially they discuss how they intend following through on Steps 4-5.

Step 4

The receivers, individually or together, contact at least one person, preferably two or more, from another denomination with the 'learning question', and invite them to meet. In choosing a date, the receiver(s) recognise that the other denomination will need sufficient time to gather their response.

Generally, the receiver(s) will act as host to the other denomination(s), and arrange the venue and other aspects as mentioned in step 5.

Step 5

When they meet, and following hospitality and prayer together, the receiver(s) listen to the response of the other denomination to the learning question, without judgment or comment, other than to clarify. In addition to practical or structural descriptions, of particular interest will be the theological or scriptural basis for their denomination's response to the issue. Up to two hours may be needed for this step, depending on the group size and the time spent in prayer and hospitality.

Step 6

In the days that follow, each Receiver takes time to reflect on what they heard:

- How did you **feel** as you listened?
- What caught your **imagination**?
- Was there anything which you consider may have the potential to lead towards **conversion** or **reform** within your part of the church?
- What **Gospel story** is evoked by your reflections?
- In what ways might it **inform** or **illuminate** your experience?

This reflection is undertaken in the hope of bringing inspiration and insight which may engender institutional reform, renewal and healing.

During the event, there will be time to hear briefly from the Receivers especially on Step 6 above.

In addition, all members of the church council, committee etc may follow steps 4-6 above, as they wish. The event would include time for sharing this experience with others and so contribute to the insights of the whole group.

2. Event outline (suggestion - based on four receivers – for adapting as needed)

Time	Who	What
0.00		Hospitality served before and on arrival. Ideally more than 15 minutes would be allocated, and people would gather for a meal, sitting together at a table. Event seating should be arranged informally eg in the round, without tables or other 'barriers'.
0.15	Welcomer	Welcome & Prayer, followed by a little about ecumenical learning and receptive ecumenism.
0.25	Facilitator	Introduction to one another and to process/context, including a short time of stillness to assist our receptivity
0.35	Receiver #1	Describe: to whom they listened and from which church; how they felt as they listened; from what they heard, the gift they received – something that caught their imagination, or was new or illuminating, and which they consider may have the potential to lead towards reform, renewal or healing within a process, practice, system or structure in their own church.
0.40	Facilitator	Invite any question for clarification
0.45	Receiver #2	As Receiver #1
0.50	Facilitator	Invite any question for clarification
0.55	Facilitator	Stillness for a few moments, perhaps with some music...then invite all gathered to exchange in 2s or 3s what they are hearing/noticing/receiving...
1.00	Receiver #3	As Receiver #1
1.05	Facilitator	Invite any question for clarification
1.10	Receiver #4	As Receiver #1
1.15	Facilitator	Invite any question for clarification
1.20	Facilitator	Stillness for pondering, perhaps some music in background
1.25	Facilitator	Stories from any who have contacted an ecumenical other.
1.40	Facilitator	Gathering the insights and learning - <i>leaning into the Spirit</i> . Invite all: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you hear/notice today? What image is evoked? • What feeling or thought is stirring within you, what insight, wonder, delight or possibility is emerging [whether process or content] that may have the potential to draw your part of the Church more fully into the ways of Christ? • Is there some aspect which has been obscured, dimmed, or even invisible within your experience or understanding of church and which, from what you have heard, is becoming more clearly illuminated by the light of Christ, with the potential for growth in faith, life and witness?
2.05	Facilitator	<i>Dialogue with Scripture</i> All participants and receivers listen to the Word of God randomly selected and read by one person. Following this reading, all are invited to respond: what new insights are stirring in the light of the reading; what new thoughts and possibilities are emerging which may engender institutional reform/ conversion within your sphere of influence.
2.35	Facilitator	<i>Our learning and leaning into the Spirit</i> - All to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What steps can I take to nurture this 'stirring'? • Who could be my companion[s] in taking these steps?
2.50	Welcomer with All	Concluding remarks including eg what story or image will I share with others about today's gathering ...? With whom shall I speak? With whom will I act? Followed by closing prayer.
3.00		Conclusion

3. After the Event

A time is scheduled for one or two weeks later to gather the insights and the learnings - and to *lean into the Spirit*.

The steps described at 1.40 onwards in the Event Outline will assist in the discernment, eliciting what action, if any, needs to be taken and who would be the companion[s] in taking these steps.

For comment or suggestions about this process, contact SACC Community for Ecumenical Learning or Geraldine Hawkes, Ecumenical Facilitator – we'll be pleased to hear from you.

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Information/resources on Receptive Ecumenism:

- For a comprehensive listing of RE publications and resources - Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University:
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/publications/>
- For various resources and presentation - SA Council of Churches especially **Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands: The promise and potential of Receptive Ecumenism** - a booklet to assist us all in the way of Receptive Ecumenism www.sacc.asn.au
- **Receptive Ecumenism: *Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ***. Editors Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes, with Foreword and Afterword by Paul D Murray (Durham University, UK). Published by ATF Press.

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