

A BAPTIST MINISTER PREACHING IN A CATHOLIC CHURCH ?

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On Sunday the 16th May, I was asked to preach in a Roman Catholic Church, twice. It was Ascension Sunday, a day in the Catholic calendar when Christian unity is prayed for and encouraged. I was very excited to be asked over my cappuccino, which is a present to the world from a particular group of Italian Catholic monks.

I work in an aged care facility, Ashfield Baptist Homes, and every day must be Ascension Sunday, because each and every day we promote Christian Unity. There are significant differences between denominations, and there are past events that prevent unity. However, in the everyday workings of the aged care facility, the Christian worship and pastoral visitation, working together, are prime aspects of our caring role.

I was asked to come to St Vincent's as the Baptist chaplain of Ashfield Baptist Homes because of the way in which I work to show the love of Jesus through my faith and work. There are some people whom I can reach very effectively with the gospel; there are others I can not. However, my neighbour Michael, the local Catholic priest, can reach those in the Catholic tradition more effectively in order to bring them closer to God, in particular our Italian residents who speak little English. So we work together to show God's love to the residents, mostly now widows (James 1:26), their families and the staff who care for them. As part of a team, I work to show God even to the families who do not know God, or have Church connections. I have also learned from Catholic thought and prayers about how to visit non-verbal and dementing residents of the Catholic faith, to present prayers, offerings and Holy Communion.

I was welcomed into the service at St Vincent's Church, and preached on "What have I seen God doing this week"? I encouraged the people to look into their lives and see with their eyes of faith what God is doing around them.

My 5 year old daughter got confused about the service. She had read in her Easter book that angels wear white robes. Here she was in a Church, people at the front in white robes (the altar attendees and the priest), and then I was going up to the front of the Church to be with the people in white robes. Did that mean I was in heaven? A simple misunderstanding. But this caused me to think if I misunderstand aspects of Catholic life and practice for the sake of my Baptist beliefs.

The experience I felt brought us closer together. I was elated to be asked to come as a Baptist. I received Holy Communion from Michael, a sign we could one day be one Church in Jesus. I leave the theologians to work out the details. Many friends I spoke to also praised the whole idea. A lady in the congregation spoke to Michael the priest later and told him that she had tears in her eyes as “the beautiful Baptist man spoke of his faith in Jesus in my Catholic Church.” It has always been a burden in her heart that Jesus’ Church is divided.

Michael and I continue to work together in Jesus’ name, and with other Christian denominations in Ashfield Baptist Homes. We work to show God’s love sometimes in different ways. We agree to disagree on some things, but we both look forward to more opportunities to work together.