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ACC Catalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



Yesterday, Today Tomorrow

Uniting
Church
Celebrates
40 Years

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EDITORIAL

The Road Ahead



Warm greetings in Christ in this 40th anniversary year of the Uniting Church.

During the month of June there will be a number of UCA events, and in this edition of your magazine, several members, reflect on matters related to the past, present and future of the Uniting Church. ACC is grateful for the contribution of Dr Keith Suter, who provides a further reflection based around his PhD thesis on future scenarios for the UCA.

Of course, there is another anniversary this year; the 500th Anniversary of the reformation, and in this edition some resources are highlighted, and by the time of publication, the SA ACC Movement will have held their wonderfully titled conference **The Radical Gospel: Listening to the Reformation Witnesses**.

Peace and grace,
Peter Bentley

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Leaving a Legacy

by Robyn Painter

Pastor, Peterborough Uniting Church

“William Edgar and Benjamin Rebbeck, you are now discharged.”

These words were spoken on August 14th 1873 by a judge named R. D. Hanson. They are not from some famous historical trial, the sort that has been made into a movie with famous actors and big budgets. No, in the grand scheme of things these words seem unimportant. However, for me these words are very significant. You see, Benjamin Rebbeck was my great-great grandfather. He was on trial as an accessory to murder and the Crown Solicitor made a case that he and his three friends should all be hung.

If the judge had decided against my great-great grandfather, he would have died before his 21st birthday. That would mean that I would never have come into existence and nor would any of my mother's relatives. I owe a lot to that one sentence spoken by a judge over 130 years ago.

All of us are a product of our past. We exist because of decisions made by people in the generations before us. Not only that, we live in democracy because of the efforts of others in years gone by. We are allowed to own land, to worship God, to have justice and a right to free speech because of the words and actions of others who went before us.

Some of the problems we face are also due to the legacy of others. Illicit drugs exist because somebody got rich from discovering and manufacturing them. Some people treat others badly because they have been treated badly. Some abuse can continue for generations.

Our words and actions, too will leave a legacy for the people in generations to come. Someone once said, “The

proper time to influence the life of a child is a hundred years before he is born”. What we do now will shape society in ages to come. That's why Jesus taught the way of forgiveness. That's why the Bible says we should repay evil with kindness - it changes the legacy.

Some people will not take a stand against something that is wrong, for fear of becoming unpopular with others or of facing persecution. So the wrong is allowed to continue and grow and affect the future. When you start to think in terms of generations, all of a sudden it doesn't seem so important what people are saying about me this week.

Jeremiah spent his lifetime speaking to the people of Judah, urging them to return to God. They refused to listen and treated Jeremiah badly, and in his lifetime he saw none of the fruit of his ministry. But God has used his words to inspire people in every generation since. When we live in obedience to God he will make our lives count. Who knows what a difference to the world our legacy will make!

Robyn



Hilary Sandeman

ACC NEWS

Humbly relying on God, the ACC National Council has developed a set of goals for consideration at the 2017 National Conference.

ACC Vision and Goals Statement 2017 - 2027

Mindful that the Assembly of Confessing Congregations has, with God's grace, established a network of congregations, groups and supportive individuals, the ACC commits together to continue the confessing cause within the Uniting Church in Australia. We will continue to grow in compassion and care as a movement, where the lost, lonely, broken, shamed and guilty can find forgiveness, wholeness, and hope in new life in Jesus Christ in this changing country and world. We commit to do this by:

1. Strengthening and growing our Prayer Network and provision of prayer resources.
2. Continuing to foster ecumenical relationships, especially with like-minded groups in Australia and internationally, and providing encouragement and support to the international confessing movement.
3. Providing intentional gatherings for encouragement and training for ministry workers within ACC congregations, principally at the ACC National Conference.
4. Establishing and developing a School of Faith that will
 - train, enhance, and deliver the possibility of a wider pastoral ministry for ACC congregations, groups and clusters;
 - provide theological papers and resources that will enhance evangelical scholarship throughout the Church, and
 - develop our ministry as a commentator on Australian life, faith, attitudes and values.
5. Affirming the Emerging Leaders Camp and undertaking to support this venture as a foundation for our national youth leadership and ministry development.
6. Strengthening our cross-cultural and indigenous relationships within the Uniting Church and the wider Australian Christian community.
7. Furthering the Church's understanding of Australia's Christian heritage and ethos, and the heritage and ethos of the Uniting Church in Australia and The Basis of Union.

We've been everywhere

Grahame and Fran Abrahams recently completed another period of ministry service at Ulverstone Uniting Church (November 2016 – March 2017), as part of their third year of wider itinerant ministry in Australia serving ACC lay based member congregations.

To date the Abrahams have been in WA, NSW and Tasmania. Congregations interested in exploring a connection can contact Grahame on: 0429995649 or email gka004@gmail.com.



Rev. Grahame and Mrs Fran Abrahams outside Ulverstone Uniting Church, alongside their trusty caravan (and home).

Guest of the House

On Tuesday 21st March 2017, I had the honour of representing ACC NSW at a gathering of leaders of various faiths at Parliament House in Macquarie St, Sydney. Hosted by the Christian Democratic Party, this was an opportunity to meet both the NSW Premier and Education Minister and affirm the value of Special Religious Education (Scripture) in our schools. In NSW we are blessed to have our ability to enter state schools and teach children the Christian faith protected via legislation, although as is the case elsewhere around Australia, this is increasingly coming under assault. As one would assume at a meeting of politicians and religious leaders (representing some 4 million people across the state), the mood was very positive and respectful. You can see me (just) up the back squeezed in between the archbishops, rabbis and imams!

Rev. Peter Chapman, Secretary, NSW ACC Movement and Minister at Gerringong Uniting Church.

Marriage Discussions in the Uniting Church

It is important for ACC members to be aware of the ongoing Assembly arrangements for the consideration of the theology of Marriage within the Uniting Church. The timetable for the work on Marriage leading up to the 15th UCA Assembly to be held in July 2018 in Melbourne was outlined at a meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee in November 2016 and the full resolution is included below for reference.

The two consultations on marriage mentioned in (b) were held in Brisbane (10-12 May) and Sydney (6-8 June).

The ACC was not formally invited to send a representative. The ACC understands that the base for the consultations was Synod nominated reflecting the 'cultural and theological diversity' of the UCA. The facilitator is Rev. Lindsay Cullen, an ASC member. ACC National Council Member, Rev Lu Senituli was nominated to attend one of the consultations and Hope Network, (and ACC member), Rev Ian Clarkson was nominated (by Hope Network) to attend the Adelaide based consultation.

Further updates will be provided as information is made available.

Extract from the Assembly Standing Committee minute record 17-20 November 2016

Note: the underlined section is for ACC noting of the consultations referred to above.

3. Marriage Update Geoff Thompson introduced Document 16 and 16A, consisting of a progress report on the Worship Working Group's work on marriage and the next steps to 15th Assembly re the issue of marriage and marriage equality in keeping with Assembly and ASC resolutions.

Table discussion followed.

16.66 It was resolved to:

16.66.01 receive the report;

16.66.02 request the National Consultant, Doctrine, Worship and Christian Unity, National Consultant Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry and Interim National Coordinator UAICC to develop a resource that enables people to live in the diversity that is the Uniting Church;

16.66.03 a) request Doctrine Working Group to provide the interim work towards their report by the end February 2017;

b) request the General Secretary to provide the support needed to facilitate two consultations hosted by the President, of 30 people each using the Space for Grace process to consider theologies of marriage and that these consultations occur prior to 30 July 2017;

c) request the General Secretary to provide support needed, including insights from the consultations, for Presbyteries & Synods to have conversations prior to end November 2017; and

d) requests Doctrine Working Group to provide their report to March 2018 ASC meeting, including the direction of possible proposals to be taken to the 15th Assembly.

Some resources to recognise the 1517 Reformation



Martin Luther (1528)
by Lucas Cranach

In this year, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, there are many events being organised and special resources being made available, and a few are noted below and others will be included on the ACC website. Please email the editor with details of events and resources. Some resources on the Reformation

In Sydney at Moore Theological College, there is a public program of lectures.



Further information see www.moore.edu.au.

19 July. Public Lecture: Why the Reformation Still Matters – this event, held at Moore College will consider why the Reformation still matters today. To be delivered by Dr Graham Cole, Dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Chicago and former member of the Moore College faculty (1980–92).

7:00 PM – 9:00 PM, Marcus Loane Hall, Moore College, 1 King Street, Newtown

3, 7-11 August. The Annual Moore College Lectures will be given by Carl Trueman, a well-known church historian who has written extensively on reformation themes.

26 August. Reformation Rally – this event, held at St Andrew's Cathedral, will be a morning hearing Archbishop Glenn Davies, Gerald Bray, Kanishka Raffel and will include a service conducted from the 1552 Book of Common Prayer.

13-14 September. The School of Theology will be a conference assembling Reformation scholars from around Australia who will present papers on Reformation theology, significant reformers as well as the reception of the Reformation in the five hundred years since.

Resources on-line

The Presbyterian Church in Australia is preparing a series historical video presentations, for use in small groups. These will highlight Luther's life and his discoveries that led to the Reformation and will be available online for downloading in time for the October celebrations.

The English Reformation and the Puritans: Their Unlikely Story is Ours

Few stories contain heroism, betrayal, ricocheting monarchs, bold stands against repressive authorities, and redemption like this one. And fewer generations have modelled commitment to the gospel and the application of God's Word like the Puritans of England.

In this 12-part series, Dr. Michael Reeves surveys Puritan theology and the work of the Holy Spirit when the Reformation flourished in England. Major milestones of this movement underscore the Puritan's special place in history, as they displayed spiritual wisdom and discernment still benefiting pulpits and believers today.

<http://www.christian.org.uk/resources/series/the-english-reformation-and-the-puritans/>

Ideas that Changed the World

DVD & workbook on the Reformation produced by Dominic Steele (Annandale Village Church) & available through Matthias Media

<http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/ideas-that-changed-the-world-bundle>

Professor Carl Trueman lectures on the Reformation are now available through the Gospel Coalition. (Professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, as well as the author of Luther on the Christian Life.

<https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2017/02/17/take-an-entirely-free-video-course-with-carl-trueman-on-the-reformation/>

A Pilgrim People

JOHN 20:8

“THEN THE OTHER DISCIPLE ALSO WENT IN AND HE SAW AND BELIEVED.”

We Christians are not a people of this day, year, century, or age.

We are a people of the first resurrection.

And we wait in anticipation for Christ's return. The wonder and the glory for the first Christians was that Jesus was actually resurrected and alive, but it took some time for them to accept that the impossible had become possible.

This joyous fact influenced all they said and did during and after Pentecost.

The early Church structure and life was overpoweringly influenced by this wonderful event.

Are our churches so occupied in developing structures and programmes,

that we have lost sight of the fact that we should be first, glorious people of the Resurrection?

Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me shall never die.”

What a rich and wonderful promise that can live with us now and right on into eternity.

I believe with all my heart that loving is living for a purpose.

It is so important that we should begin each new day with a prayer of thanksgiving because Jesus is really alive.

Mary's resurrection message to the disciples was not “He is risen” but “I have seen the Lord” and that is significant.

As people of the resurrection we can walk each day by the Spirit and not by the flesh.

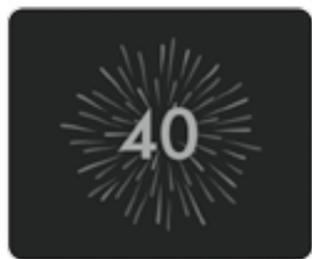
The promise of eternity should create for us our resurrection joys for each day.

Reverend Bob Imms is a member of ACC Southern Cluster in Tasmania



PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS



All of this is us



Forty Years in the Wilderness

The fortieth anniversary of the UCA is on 22 June 2017. Assembly-led celebrations are in train. Church leaders have called the church to 40 days of prayer. They met together for 40 hours beforehand. Lectionary readings focus on 'Looking to Christ' and prayer and music resources are also on the Assembly website.

These fine preparations are undermined by the banal motto - "All of this is us" - accompanied by a logo 'which can be viewed as a starburst, fireworks or a dandelion head whose seeds spread on the wind. The image brings to mind celebration, diversity and all the varied parts of the Uniting Church'. The UCA's cross-centred symbol, depicting hope for a darkened world, is not considered suitable to express our identity!

Promised or Waste Land?

President Stuart McMillan is enthusiastic about the UCA's

achievements in valuing the gifts of all members whatever their sexual orientation and providing leadership in reconciliation, justice, multiculturalism, welfare and decision-making. "These are just some of the ways the Spirit has led us. I'm sure you have own highlights or things to be proud of". It is a time to give thanks to God for our blessings.

Indeed. But where, amid the self-congratulation, is the call to pray that 'God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in her life'? Nothing is said of widespread embarrassment about the claim that truth is uniquely embodied in Christ or hostility towards classical preaching, teaching and evangelism. Not a word about our silence on abortion and euthanasia or the bureaucratisation of church agencies. In the official promo, Jesus is not celebrated as the crucified-and-risen Lord of heaven and earth, the fully human Son of God who came to redeem humanity from the power of sin and death. He is depicted as the servant of God preaching acceptance of diversity.

This is no time for cheerleading and papering over the cracks. Steely realism is required. The UCA, like the Israelites, has become a wasteland where the thirst for truth remains largely unquenched. There is an air of desperation in trying to put a positive spin on our plight. Members must be made to feel a sense of wellbeing and bonhomie as part of a successful church led by trusted leaders and agencies.

Imposed diversity

The UCA's standard of 'truth' is now 'diversity'. Often applied with authoritarian rigour, the

new dogmatism has become the ruling framework for interpreting Scripture, creeds, doctrine, liturgy, social justice and identity. Thus the governing principle of the Basis of Union, 'unity in Christ,' has been sabotaged and replaced by 'unity in diversity.' This radical inversion has resulted in treating those who uphold classical Christianity as heretics who represent one most unwelcome form of diversity.

The UCA has a fine history of engaging with, and encouraging participation of, Christians from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The basis of this rich, mutually beneficial heritage has been our common 'unity in Christ'. In some quarters, however, the 'dogma of diversity' has been insinuated to imply equivalence between indigenous and ethnic forms of cultural diversity and sexual diversity. Despite pressure, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress (UAICC) and the many cultural and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) have reaffirmed their opposition to same-sex relationships on theological, not cultural, grounds. Their resistance is cause for celebration. Unwarranted manipulation is not.

Grounds for hope

There are things to be grateful for, but little to celebrate on 22nd June. In four decades, we have seen the collapse of our reformed, evangelical heritage. By and large the UCA has trashed her rich theological heritage, treated reformed and evangelical members as heretics, and praised as orthodox those who have displaced 'unity in Christ' with 'unity in diversity'.

There is no reason to celebrate when appeals to the classical Christian tradition are generally treated as 'power plays' or attacks on our sacred 'values' and 'identities', and decisions about the 'truth' of Scripture, tradition, doctrine, liturgy and ethics are primarily based on our feelings and choices.

If 'All of this is us', we will have cause to celebrate when we face up to the wasteland within and simply, and unselfconsciously, look to the triumphant reign of Christ crucified-and-risen amidst the social, cultural and political wilderness of our age where nihilism is glorified and increasingly sanctioned by the State.

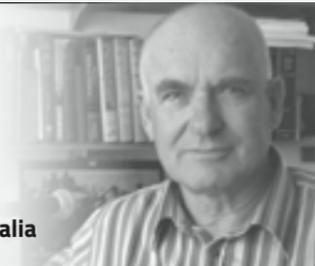
What a pity the UCA's cross-centred symbol isn't the centre of our anniversary celebrations!

dsale/istockphoto.com

Staying Alive in Unity & Diversity

Ian Clarkson

UCA Minister - South Australia



Breaking away from the church breaches unity, whether actively undertaken (and arrogantly) or passively in indifference, or through the fancies of 'cunning and craftiness'. Such breaks may occur from the top as well as the bottom; from leadership as well as those who are led. To break from heresy may mean simply and courageously remaining steadfast, walking in truth. The confessing church is the remnant church. Proof of unity is holding to the once revealed apostolic testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, walking and practising His supreme command to the Church, to love by obeying His commands².

The confessing Church has always been reformed from within and when reformed it is always a truer expression of what it was in the beginning. Reformation reverts to type. Founded on apostle and prophet, endowed with its primary

gifts the Church finds its unity in the fullness of Christ. Because the Church has always lived and functioned in a hostile environment, it must continually reform towards true unity. Luther called this the Babylonian captivity of the Church, necessitating the true Church to throw its chains off and be true to the Scriptures, reforming itself after the teaching of Christ. Most of the denominations in existence today, are from historic ruptures, the process of finding the truth and maintaining true unity, albeit with pain.

The unity of the Church is not found in social or political diversity. Diversity rightly belongs to the way of life of the open society and the secular state, apparent in Western democracies. But the quality of this diversity in daily life depends upon the unity of the Church that alone can sustain its quality. Clearly put by a Nigerian Bishop interviewed on ABC Religion Report "The Church is there to sanitise society. If the Church fails to do that, that Church is corrupt and has no reason to exist. When people turn away from the teaching of Jesus Christ, that is corruption and it is more pernicious than poverty". The unity of the Church is in its preaching of the Gospel and its practice. "It is when the Church fails to preach the Gospel, that corruption will pervade society."

The Church is not called to mirror the diversity of the world or catch up with the political correctness and social constructions of the day developed by lobby groups. It is mandated to keep the unity of the Holy Spirit, and by exercising diversity in spiritual gifts the church can protect society to enjoy a healthy diversity.

If the Church absorbs the world's ways of gossip, reviling, suing, distrust, sexual promiscuities, unnatural relationships, it corrupts its own heart. Its dignity bleeds and its power to restrain evil is lost. In the prophet's words it becomes a 'worthless thing amongst the nations'.

This is how we should understand our calling as congregations within the Uniting Church, particularly our ACC fellowship. Let us thirst for the Spirit, hear His voice today, meet regularly, encourage each other daily, realising that each one of us has a unique role in building up the Body in beautiful unity.



Back to the Future

Dr Keith Suter has kindly provided a re-cap and update to his December 2014 article for ACCatalyst on The Future of the UCA.

Dr Keith
Suter
Church Futurist



Three years ago, I was awarded a PhD from the University of Sydney on the Future of the Uniting Church. The technique used was scenario planning, whereby four possible “futures” are devised. They are not predictions; they are speculations on how the Uniting Church could evolve.

I regret to say that, with some notable exceptions, the PhD has been largely ignored within official Uniting Church circles. Most Synod publications, for example, have ignored it (despite my employing a public relations company to run a media campaign to publicize it).

The Nature of Scenario Planning

Scenario planning as a management technique is designed to encourage discussion about the future. It is not about “predictions” as such. Instead, it encourages the creation of skills for how to react to change and so acquire an adaptive capacity.

Two or four scenarios are created (never three: because the client would then go for the least threatening middle one!) The intention is to encourage people to get out of their comfort zone and “think about the unthinkable”. More information is available on the website:

www.churchfutures.com.au

However, there is always a risk that the scenario planning process may be too confrontational; people prefer to be comforted rather than confronted. As the poet TS Eliot commented: “humankind can only bear a little reality”.

This has been my experience with the PhD.

The Four Scenarios

1 “Word and Deed”

This scenario is based on an Australian society with a high level of Christian Spirituality and a high level

of government expenditure for church welfare.

This would see a Uniting Church as an organization of a small number of large parishes providing both spiritual activities and social welfare (virtually a set of regional missions). This Uniting Church could evolve from the amalgamation and consolidation of many existing small congregations.

2 “Secular Welfare”

This scenario is based on a low level of Christian spirituality and a high level of government expenditure for church welfare.

This would see a Uniting Church letting the congregations fade away and instead focus on the provision of social welfare (albeit derived from a Christian tradition). Much of the work of the existing Uniting Church is already focussed on social welfare and this is growing, while the congregations are currently in decline.

3 “Return to the Early Church”

This scenario is based on a high level of Christian spirituality and a low level of government expenditure for church welfare. (Current surveys show a great public interest in Jesus but a low regard for churches themselves).

The Uniting Church could reinvent itself along the lines of the first three centuries of the Christian church, when the church was marginal within the Roman empire. The Christian numbers were small but the members were enthusiastic. This scenario taps into the “emerging church movement” and sees a Uniting Church that is tired of the corporate ethos that underpins much the government-financed social welfare work; it recognizes (as did the early Christians) that it is competing in a market place of many faiths.

4 “Recessional”

This sees an Australian society with a low level of Christian spirituality and a low level of government expenditure for church welfare.

This would mean that the Uniting Church should be wound up and its assets dispersed. The currently flourishing parts (such as the regional missions and Uniting Church schools and colleges) should be individually incorporated and have separate institutional existences. Uniting Church Assembly, Synods, and Presbyteries would no longer be required.

The risk is that under this scenario the Uniting Church would ignore the warnings and could just wither away, thereby frittering away its resources. It should therefore

devise an exit strategy for a coherent wind up, with the remaining resources being used in ways that reflect Christian stewardship (such as assisting the rapidly expanding churches in the Global South).

These scenarios have been too controversial for most Uniting Church officials and so they have ignored them. I have had some interest in the WA and Qld Synods. I have also spoken at some regional gatherings. But overall there has been an official Uniting Church neglect of the PhD.

Observations from UK Research Trips

To obtain a different perspective, I have had the benefit of a Crawford Miller Research Fellowship at St Cross College, University of Oxford. In my trips back to the UK to see how the Methodist Church has been faring, I have been able to see how another church has been grappling with the prospect of decline.

UK Methodists number about 200,000 and are declining. Some parishes are too reliant on key members; it is not clear what happens to the parishes what these key people die. The Church is mainly seen as a social club for old people.

There is reluctance at the local level at encouraging the amalgamation of declining parishes. The Church is asset rich and cash poor. The Church has an amazing heritage (especially in its old buildings) and this is being used to encourage “heritage evangelism”. The church buildings are wonderful tourist attractions but this is not leading to an increase in membership.

In London “people born outside Britain” (such as West Indians) represent a majority of parishioners but it is not clear whether their UK-born children will follow them into church membership.

Child abuse allegations have encouraged an internal focus and so diverted attention away from evangelism.

In short, the Methodist Church grew

in a religious and social environment that no longer exists. This provides a clear warning for Uniting Church congregations.

Methodists are not major players in the delivery of welfare services (very different from the Uniting Church). The Methodist Homes for the Aged is already a standalone organisation.

[cont...]



Back to the Future



The strength of the Uniting Church (and the bulk of its assets) are now devoted to welfare work - and this will continue as long as government is willing to fund it. The Uniting Church will, in one form or another, probably last longer than its UK antecedent.

Confronting the Future

What if the "Recessional" scenario were coming into play? The warning signs of congregational decline would result in two options:

(i) **Uniting Church membership continues to decline (while the welfare work continues to expand) and so there is a gradual (or perhaps not so gradual) haemorrhage at congregational level**

OR

(ii) **the Uniting Church identifies the problem of congregational decline and begins a reorganization to salvage the congregational parts that can be salvaged.**

I think that the first option is the more likely because the second option requires a degree of leadership that the Uniting Church may not be able to muster. It is too focussed on putting a rosy spin on everything. There is no sense of urgency about confronting congregational decline.

Where to From Here?

Ideally there should be more public discussion of the four scenarios at all levels of the Uniting Church. Experience over the past three years suggests this is going

Contemplating the demise of Uniting Church congregations may seem hard to do, but here are some lessons "digital disruption" and the Story of Encyclopaedia Britannica. In recent decades the publishing company failed to monitor the rise of online reference works and ran into financial problems.

The authors identify three lessons:

- (i) "the most venerable can prove the most vulnerable" [note the speed of the collapse]
- (ii) "a strong corporate culture can blind business leaders to events that do not fit into their collective mental framework" [just because a company is a vital part of today's community, there is no guarantee it will still be needed tomorrow]
- (iii) even if executives do fully grasp the impact of change, they may be at a disadvantage because they are "saddled with legacy assets"

I suggest that the Uniting Church can learn some general lessons here:

- (i) Uniting Church is too slow to note the speed of change
- (ii) too much of the Uniting Church leadership is in denial: there is too much optimistic "spin" in official statements; there is a reluctance to reflect about the implications of the decline in membership
- (iii) Uniting Church has "many legacy assets" (a lot of buildings)

to reduce it). But the welfare work could over time come to represent more of a secular government department rather than a church body.

There could be the irony that the Uniting Church, via its welfare work, outlasts its antecedent UK Methodist Church, but it will have little of that body's Christian ethos. Unitingcare (or Uniting) could become more secular and less Christian.

These are some of the larger issues that are being ignored in the lead up to the Uniting Church's 40th anniversary.

Keith Suter



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to be very difficult. The enthusiasm and vision that underpinned the launch of the Uniting Church 40 years ago have largely evaporated. There is a sense of combat fatigue. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Official Uniting Church statements and publications provide an optimistic spin to gloss over the Uniting Church's congregational decline. The PhD jars with that official perception of the future.

In my presentations, I have suggested that a network could be formed to foster discussion of the PhD's implications. There has been some interest in this proposal but not enough people have come forward to constitute a viable network.

One issue that needs to be addressed is how can the expanding welfare work of the Uniting Church still retain a Uniting Church ethos? Clearly on present indications the welfare work will continue to expand (government shows no sign of wanting

OPINION

Fight the good fight for marriage

...but don't forget those in the field hospital.

Ben Smith

Catholic Diocese of Parramatta



Ben Smith provides a succinct and very helpful reflection about some of the public comments and statements from Pope Francis on marriage, gender and sexuality.

On October 1 2016, Pope Francis declared in a meeting with Priests, Religious, Seminarians and Pastoral Workers in Georgia that, "Marriage is the most beautiful thing that God has created." However he went on to observe that, "Today there is a world war to destroy marriage." This war, according to Pope Francis, is taking the form of "ideological colonisations which destroy, not with weapons, but with ideas." His comments were aimed at gender ideology that is creeping into schools, workplaces, unions and parliaments all over the Western world with significant negative consequences.

Gender ideology "denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family." (*Amoris Laetitia*, 56) Furthermore "this ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time." (*Amoris Laetitia*, 56)

In the context of Australia, the "Safe Schools" Coalition program, that has received considerable media coverage in the last 12 months, promotes gender ideology in over 500 state schools across the country. In terms of legislation,

marriage equality advocates have promoted gender ideology by embracing a vision of marriage that involves a partnership between two people irrespective of their "sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status" in a number of private members bills that have been introduced into Federal Parliament in the past two years.

Pope Francis warns of the danger of gender ideology when he states that, "Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent." (*Amoris Laetitia*, 56)

These are strong words from Pope Francis. Some people may find it hard to reconcile these words with his promotion of mercy and forgiveness for those on the margins. He was asked a question by a journalist on this issue during his flight from Azerbaijan to Rome on October 2. His response pointed out that, "In my life as a priest, as a bishop - and also as Pope - I have accompanied many people with homosexual tendencies and also homosexual activity. I have accompanied them, I have brought them closer to the Lord; some cannot do it, but I have always accompanied them and never abandoned anyone." His response also highlighted how he was accompanying a transgender man who recently got married to a woman.

It seems on the surface that Pope Francis is being hypocritical by saying one thing and doing another. But a deeper reading of the matter leads to a different conclusion. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis cited a quote from a speech given by Martin Luther King that states, "When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system." (*Amoris Laetitia*, 118)

So "as Christians, we can hardly stop advocating marriage simply to avoid countering contemporary sensibilities, or out of a desire to be fashionable or a sense of helplessness in the face of human and moral failings. We would be depriving the world of values that we can and must offer." (*Amoris Laetitia*, 35) But at the same time we are called to reach out in love to all members of our human family, including those who are experiencing gender confusion or same-sex attraction, to accompany each other on our journey towards the Lord.

Ben Smith is the Director of the Life, Marriage and Family Office for the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, NSW. This article first appeared in Catholic Outlook, November 2016.

“Faithful” homosexuality

versus the Basis of Union

Dear ACC members,

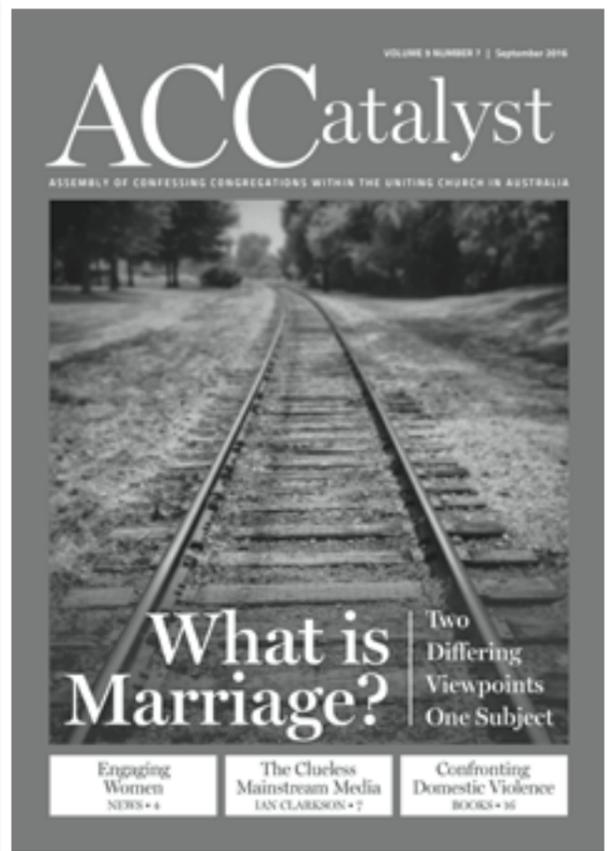
In *Catalyst* September 2016 I reported that the Presbytery of Tasmania has instituted a ‘focussing session on the Basis of Union’ at the commencement of the business meeting. I also said that, in the original Basis wording, the language of ‘she’ for the Church derives from the biblical imagery of the Church as the Bride of Christ and *Ephesians 5: 21-33*, with contra-indications for proposed changes to the Marriage Act.

Some of us are aware of an attempt to argue that ‘faithful’ homosexuality is consistent with the Basis of Union. This argument leaves out the current betrothal situation of Christ and the Church and the destined marriage of *Revelation 21-22*. Para 3 of the Basis states: ‘The Church lives between the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which he will bring; she is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here she does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come’. The short answer to arguments in favour of recognizing ‘faithful’ homosexuality is the truncating effect of such recognition on the biblical grand narrative.

Last year the ACC Conference in Tasmania received a visit from representatives of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine. The Working Groups is charged with reporting on attitudes to marriage and same-gender relationships in the Uniting Church and also focussing on paragraphs 5, 10 and 11 of the Basis of Union in terms of ethical decision-making and theological discernment. But instead of discussing the Basis, the representatives relativised New Testament teaching on marriage and celibacy (contrary to para 5) as well as the archetypal role of Christ and the Church for human marriage (contrary to para 10). It was disappointing that no attention was paid to the need for ecumenical discussion and independent scientific enquiry (contrary to para 11).

We have nothing to fear if the sexuality debate focuses on the Basis of Union. It pays for us in the ACC to know it well.

Katherine Abetz is a Member of the ACC Mid-Northern Cluster



The Basis of Union: A continuing cautionary tale
Dear ACC members, I think the time has come to re-examine the Basis of Union. First, a list of key changes to the Basis of Union, ratified after the 2009 Assembly included the addition of Clause 39, which has the effect of removing the obligation of the Assembly to refer matters of ritual importance to other members for concurrence. After this we placed a proposal to alter the Basis on our table in Presbytery meetings to say that the ACC create the addition to

Standing firm together ...on Gender

Keynote Address to the Assembly of Confessing Congregations 2016 Conference

Rod James

Minister of the Word - South Australia



Genesis 1:27

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Matthew 19:4-6

He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

A few years ago, all of this was taken for granted, but today the binary nature of gender (‘male and female created he them’) is under serious and concerted attack. New terms like transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender-neutral, agender, non-gendered, and gender non-conforming have emerged to describe those who identify somewhere other than in the designations of male and female. One website lists 112 genders and 70 sexual orientations.

One concerning place where a new view of gender is being promoted is with children in the Safe Schools

program. Promoted as being an anti-bullying program it contains a deliberate ideology designed to break down the ‘male and female’ view of humanity. This perspective in turn erodes the centrality of the biological family.

Children are taught that if you don’t like the gender you are born with, you can change it. In a curriculum story for four-year-olds, entitled *The Gender Fairy*, pre-schoolers are told, ‘Only you know whether you are a boy or a girl. No one can tell you’. If you are a boy who doesn’t like wearing the boys’ uniform, you can wear the girls’ one. The girls’ and boys’ toilet rule is loosened to allow gender-questioning children to use the toilets of their choice. Teachers are encouraged to introduce discussion about gender in every aspect of school life, and children are actively discouraged from regarding heterosexuality as normative. Asking the usual question about whether a new-born baby is a boy or a girl is discouraged as “heteronormative”, and terms like ‘boys’ and girls’ are considered non-inclusive.

Someone who has become concerned about the new views on gender is Dr Paul McHugh of Baltimore who, out of his extensive experience in the field, has published a paper entitled *Transgenderism: A Pathogenic Meme*. Here is a selection of quotes from his paper:

For forty years as the University Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical School—twenty-six of which were also spent as Psychiatrist in Chief of Johns Hopkins Hospital—I’ve been studying people who claim to be transgender. Over that time, I’ve watched the phenomenon change and expand in remarkable ways.

...The idea that one’s sex is fluid and a matter open to choice runs unquestioned through our culture and is reflected everywhere in the media, the theatre, the classroom, and in many medical clinics...It is doing much damage to families, adolescents and children, and should be confronted as an opinion without biological foundation wherever it emerges.

...The champions of this meme, encouraged by their alliance with the broader LGBT movement, claim that whether you are a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is more of a disposition or feeling about yourself than a fact of nature.

...At Johns Hopkins, after pioneering sex-

[cont...]

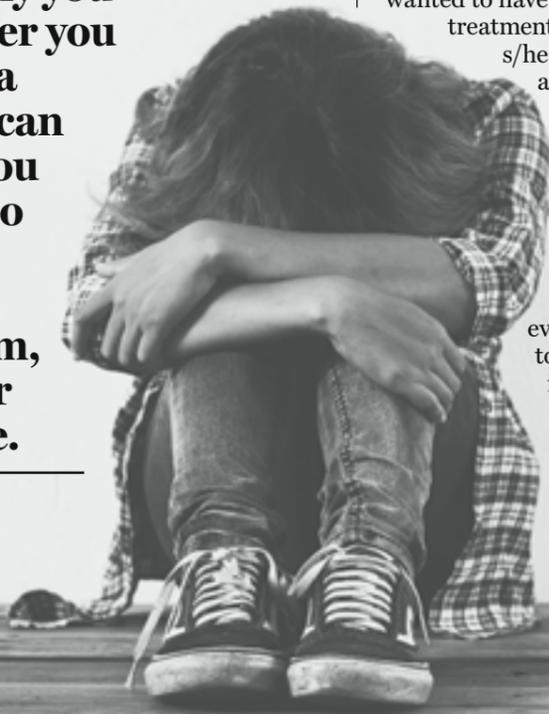
Standing firm together ...on Gender

change surgery, we demonstrated that the practice brought no important benefits. As a result, we stopped offering that form of treatment in the 1970s. Our efforts, though, had little influence on the emergence of this new idea about sex, or upon the increase in the number of “transgendered” among young and old.

...The most thorough follow-up of sex-reassigned people—extending over thirty years and conducted in Sweden, where the culture is strongly supportive of the transgendered—documents their lifelong mental unrest. Ten to fifteen years after surgical reassignment, the suicide rate of those who had undergone sex-reassignment surgery rose to twenty times that of comparable peers.

...Transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men. All... become feminized men or masculinized women, counterfeits or impersonators of the sex with which they “identify.” In that outcome lies their problematic future.

In a curriculum story for four-year-olds, entitled *The Gender Fairy*, pre-schoolers are told, ‘Only you know whether you are a boy or a girl. No one can tell you’. If you are a boy who doesn’t like wearing the boys’ uniform, you can wear the girls’ one.



Speaking of the professional help available for children suffering from gender dysphoria Dr Hughes laments:

The grim fact is that most of these youngsters do not find therapists willing to assess and guide them in ways that permit them to work out their conflicts and correct their assumptions. Rather, they and their families find only “gender counselors” who encourage them in their sexual misassumptions.

Dr Ray Blanchard, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, best known for his research studies on paedophilia, transsexualism, and sexual orientation, has created an expression which he calls “autogynephilia”—from gynephilia (attracted to women) and auto (in the form of oneself). Autogynephilic transsexuals are men who are sexually attracted to women, but whose sexual interest makes them want to go further and permanently change their bodies to become the objects of their attraction. Strangely, rather than being ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body’, these heterosexual men are attracted to the feminine because they are men. Sadly, the attraction, for whatever reason, has been turned inwards upon themselves.

Among woman who have sought to transition to being men, an unusual phenomenon is occurring. A significant number of these ‘trans-men’ (as they are called) still wish to give birth to their own child. In the September 12, 2016 issue of TIME magazine, Jessie Hempel shared about her ‘brother’ Evan who was born a woman. Evan wanted to have a child so s/he paused ‘his’ testosterone treatment long enough to give birth to a son. This s/he was able to do with the full cooperation and encouragement of the reproductive professionals he consulted. Evan’s sister Jessie spoke with Dr Harvey J. Makadon, a Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. She asked Dr Makadon:

Just how many trans people have given birth? ...He couldn’t even guess, but he said he expected to see the numbers rise based on the increasing number of trans patients coming to the clinic. Fenway currently sees more than 2,000 of them, a figure that has doubled in less than a decade. He said that, as he visits hospitals across the country, he hears a lot of stories about health providers treating pregnant

‘trans men’. “There’s more of it than we know, that people aren’t tracking,” he told me. “There’s a lot of people just doing it.”

In the eyes of these professionals and the would-be parents two things are clear:

- The desires and aspirations of the adult eclipse the needs of the child.
- To the professionals and patients alike gender plays no significant part in ideal parenting.

Compassionate or insane?

The question needs to be seriously asked, ‘Are Western societies becoming more caring and inclusive, or are they going insane?’ One use of the word ‘insanity’ is being unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. The separation of ‘gender’ from biological sex seems to stray into such a fantasy. Laws are being constructed in Western societies which allow for the changing of one’s birth certificate to record one’s ‘gender identity’ rather than one’s biological gender at birth. In some instances, these laws allow a person to do this without undergoing any gender reassignment surgery. In similar fashion, birth certificates are being produced which, instead of recording a person’s actual biological ‘mother’ and ‘father’, record one biological parent as ‘parent 1’ plus another person who is in relationship with the parent at the time of birth as ‘parent 2’. All of this suggests a trend to create a preferred, parallel world alongside the facts of the situation. Dr David van Gend in his recently published book, *Stealing from a child*, the injustice of marriage equality, argues against this dangerous unreality. He calmly reasons with us:

We must cling to sanity in these culturally surreal times and that means clinging to nature. By the standard of nature, a human being with male chromosomes and genitalia is a male no matter what other traits he exhibits...He is male if he is an effete poet or a heavy weight boxer. He is male if he wants to play with dolls rather than trucks. He is male if he is sexually attracted to men rather than women...That is where gender realists part ways with gender gnostics: we accept that we are defined by nature while affirming the vast variety of ways to be male; they do not accept that we are defined by nature and insist the identities of male or female or genderqueer or agender are fluid and free and all in our mind. Van Gend continues:

When we sit with a gender-confused child, gender realism sounds like tough love while gender gnosticism sounds compassionate. But it is false compassion to affirm a gender-confused boy in his mistaken assumption that he is a girl; he is not, he is an effeminate boy—and we still love him. Tough love requires understanding

the sources of his confusion, helping heal any emotional wounds, keeping him company as he finds his way through puberty—at which time most young people get over their confusion.

...And it is a capitulation to craziness to buy the idea that boys and girls are “socially constructed” and therefore we should make girls play with trucks and boys play with dolls to overcome society’s gender-stereotyping. We are mammals, and nobody suggests the differences between stag and doe are socially constructed. We are male and female, equal but different. The abolition of male and female is a sinister enterprise that will eventually fail, because nature says it must. But it will do grave damage to our children and our culture before it is tossed on the scrap heap of inhuman ideologies.

Society has a duty of care to note that wherever children are taught that they can choose their gender, the incidence of gender dysphoria (the sense of being the wrong gender) increases enormously. Where human beings are offered the option of being a member of the other gender, this advertised possibility generates an aspiration in some to take up that option, and desire develops into a longing that demands to be realised. On the other hand, if human beings understand that gender is a given, that it is actually impossible to become a person of the other gender, and that any attempt to do so will only be cosmetic and imitational, the great majority choose to accept the authenticity of their given gender, rather than the difficult and illusory process of ‘gender reassignment’.

For those whose gender dysphoria is so strong that they feel compelled to live as a ‘transgender’ person, it is important that the information given to them reflects the realities and difficulties of living contrary to their given gender. Such people deserve compassionate understanding tempered with realistic information and advice. There is a danger that these unfortunate people may become pawns in a game of engineering society according to revisionist gender theory. If they choose to undergo gender reassignment surgery, they require long-term follow-up that takes into account the high incidence of suicide in post-transition people.

Short-term gain, long-term pain

When there is ferment for change that is away from a long-established wisdom, it is often promoted by idealising a short term ‘good’—if we do this, it will reduce the incidence of that. For example, if we introduce the Safe Schools program into our schools it will reduce the incidence of bullying of LGBTI people and help those children who are suffering from gender dysphoria.

But a perceived short term gain can often obscure

[cont...]

Standing firm together ...on Gender

much greater long-term losses. The normalising of homosexual acts and relationships, the fundamental alteration of the nature of marriage, the affirmation of single-gender parenting, and the deconstruction of gender are all being idealised as solutions to minority problems. It is my belief that they will create far bigger majority problems for human society. Altering the created good, and amending the commandments of God, in order to effect a perceived advantage is the sad and ancient theme of Genesis chapter 3 and following. The outcomes of this process have never been beneficial in the long run, and have opened the proverbial 'Pandora's box'. As Hosea warns, 'they sow the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind' (Hosea 8:7).

Teaching 'gender fluidity' to children has the perceived, short-term benefit of making a very small minority of children feel better about themselves, but has the long-term effect of an exponential rise in the number of children entering gender clinics and, sadly, undertaking gender-reassignment therapy. Coincidental to the role-out of the Safe Schools program in Victoria, the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne has reported an increase in cases of transgender confusion in children from one case in 2003 to around 200 cases in 2015. This could be seen as a good thing—children are now getting the help they need—until you realise that, of children wanting to be a person of the other gender, over 80% grow out of these feelings after puberty. But no one in the gender clinic will tell them that, or warn them about how difficult and unsatisfactory gender reassignment is.

Now let us briefly explore two motivations behind the gender revolution.

1 Removing 'gender violence'

Daniel Patterson is an Australian evangelical Christian studying gender for a PhD at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He gives some helpful insights into one motivation for breaking down society's understanding of gender. He points out that to queer theorists, 'queer' does not mean homosexual, or effeminate, or even weird. Rather, queer is a stance of rebellion against gender norms that are perceived as oppressive and violent.

Gender is (seen as) a harmful institution because it frames society's social subjects according to a particular set of norms. The queer theorist's goal, therefore, is to break down the institution of gender by undermining the norms that constitute it. It is for this reason that queer theorists target norms.

...By calling gender a constructed and an enforced myth, and exposing the violent nature of it...gender as biological is slowly undermined—queered. Through queering gender, we learn that man and woman may be something other than that which we have always been told our bodies naturally tell us. Politically, the body loses

its inherent significance, thereby relinquishing its capacity to tell society how each member of society should understand him or herself, and how each should act socially and sexually.

Patterson points out how queer theory has influenced medical views and language about gender.

The most recent revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, which is the most prominent medical resource used by the medical profession to identify psychological disorders, renames Gender Identity Disorder as Gender Dysphoria...The change in language is an attempt to distance the diagnosis from the notion of disorder, with the thought that the term "dysphoria" would better characterise the feelings of those affected, thereby reducing the attached stigma (violence). A cursory inquiry shows that the name change is not simply re-labelling, but a substantial reconfiguring of how gender is conceived.

In the *DSM-V*, terminology has been revised to disconnect gender from biological sex. One no longer has a "sex", but an "assigned gender"...The issue then is not whether one's perceived gender is congruent with one's biological sex, but whether one's perceived gender is congruent with the gender one was assigned at birth. The possibility enabled by the revision becomes clear: if gender is assigned, then gender can be reassigned. The term "assign" is a metaphor that renders gender (boy/girl) identification at birth provisional pending either confirmation or replacement at a later stage.

We pause to observe that so often the Uniting Church seems to adopt automatically the world's innovations without any theological reflection. For example, when registering for the QLD Synod Meeting this year, participants were asked to indicate their gender as one of the following: Male, Female, or Other.

Patterson concludes,

...If gender as bio-logical is a myth then the changes made to the *DSM-V* would seem appropriate. If, however, gender is not a socially constructed myth, then the theorisation behind the language change in the *DSM-V*, as well as the language found in the Safe Schools Coalition program, inaccurately and inadequately describes and treats the kinds of gender and sexuality confliction that characterises human bodies.

2 Using the deconstruction of gender as a political tool

At first sight gender may not seem to have much to do

with political agendas. However, those who have aspired to control a nation with unassailable power have long known that there are two institutions which stand in their way. These are the Christian church and the biological family. Totalitarian revolutionaries and regimes have therefore sought to persecute and marginalise the church and to undermine the strength and influence of the family. From Marx and Engels writing their *Communist Manifesto*, to the so-called Frankfurt School coming to America from Germany in the late 1930s and fostering what they called 'the sexual revolution', to Ros Ward the Marxist in La Trobe University founding the Safe Schools Coalition. The common thread is to manipulate society by undermining its sexual and gender structure, thus breaking down marriage and the biological family, and eroding the authority and influence of parents in the lives of their children. It sounds like a fantastic conspiracy theory, but each of these movements is real and well documented.

Many in Australia are amazed at how rapidly these objectives are being realised. It starts to make sense when you realise that they are being fanned along by well-planned and executed movements that have deep historical roots and sinister designs. Many advocates of same-sex marriage and genderfluidity would have no idea that what they are seeking aids and expresses these political agendas.

Now let us take a change of tack, from looking at what is happening and critiquing it, to looking at the biblical view of gender. And, dare I say, let us celebrate that view.

Four things from the Bible about gender:

1 Gender is God-given.

The old saying is that 'You can't choose your relatives'. They are a given. If there's one thing the modern world does not like, it is a given. People say, 'No one tells me what to be. I do the choosing', and 'You can be whatever you want to be'.

Gender, however, is an ontological given, which we do not choose. As someone has quipped, God has split the Adam, creating man in his own image, male and female (Genesis 1:26, 2:21-23), giving one expression of humanness to men and the other corresponding expression to women. While men and women can have characteristics in common with the other gender, we can't have it all in ourselves. By God's design the other half of humanness is to be experienced through personal relationship. Part of accepting the authority of God is accepting the gender He has given you. God, your Creator, has made you who you are, a man, or a woman.

Trying to buck your gender is a bit like trying to defy the law of gravity. The law of gravity is a given, and it is futile to say, 'Gravity? Oh, that's OK for other people, but it's not for me'. My uncle tried that when he was a boy. He jumped off the shed roof and tried to fly. You might say that gravity made quite an impact on him that day!

While there are a very small number of people whose

gender is indefinite (one research figure is about one in 5,000) the rest of us are either male or female. There are some who feel they should be a person of the other gender and they take extra-ordinary steps to undergo 'gender reassignment'. However, each cell of their bodies retains its original chromosome make-up: XY (male) or XX (female). Such people have to be content in knowing that they have not really changed gender, but are living as a person of the other gender. This transition, as we have seen, often turns out to be more difficult and less satisfying than they had hoped and expected because of the ontological given-ness of their birth gender. Even in the womb male and female chromosomes and hormones are influencing the development of the brain.

In the end, we find that God-given gender assignment is authentic and good, but man-made gender reassignment is illusory and unsatisfactory.

2 Human gender is a glorious gift of God

In my opinion the most beautiful thing in this world is a woman. I'm not talking about Marilyn Monroe or Kylie Minogue. I'm talking of woman as she is within the matrix of family and humanity as a whole. In Revelation 12 we read that a great sign appeared in heaven: 'a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars'. The woman is Israel and the stars in her crown are her children. She is engaged in an intense battle with the evil one as she gives birth to the Christ-child. Every mother knows about the great battle she has with the evil one who desires to destroy her children. In the Scriptures woman is not a sex object. Nor is she a mimicker of men. Rather she is the great 'mother' and nurturer, whether of her own children or of all children. Nor does mothering exhaust her great qualities for she has so many other gifts as well.

Likewise, true manhood is not expressed in personal prowess, ambition, power, and sexual conquest (machoman). In contrast to this false man, we see Jesus Christ, the true man, who dedicates his life and lays it down for his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:25-27). Man's true courage is not expressed in 'biffo' and bravado, but in his strong and steadfast defence of truth and right, and in his courageous and sacrificial protection of women and children. Just as God protected His wife Israel and her child, the Messiah, from the red dragon in Revelation 12, so man, as God's servant, finds his true vocation, as Jesus sacrificially did, in protecting the woman and her holy seed from the destroying designs of Satan. This God-given manhood can be exercised even if a man does not have a wife or children of his own.

The wonderful thing about God's gift of gender is that you don't have to try to be a man; you are one for God has made you one. And you don't have to try to be a woman, you are one for God has made you one. And

[cont...]

Standing firm together ...on Gender

there is room for diversity in gender; the delicate man is still a man, and the tomboy girl is still a girl. We are not talking here about rigidly imposed cultural stereotypes.

3 Gender is about gentilis (i.e. family)

Gentilis is the Latin word for clan or family. We get our word 'gentle' from gentilis, so a gentleman is a family man, not just a knock about bloke. The Gentiles are the families or tribes of the earth.

Gender, marriage and sexual intercourse do not make sense, in the creation of humanity, apart from the family and its generations. Together with St Paul, we bow our 'knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' (Ephesians 3:14-15). The primary desire of God, as our heavenly Father, is to have many children and to bring 'many sons (and daughters) to glory' in his eternal family (Hebrews 2:10). By God's design, then, a father brings something rich to his children's lives which is more than just being 'parent 1', and a mother brings so much more than just being 'parent 2'.

To understand yourself as a human being you have to hold two realities in tension: on the one hand, you are a discrete individual person that you know as 'me'. But, like the members of the holy Trinity, you are not an individual in isolation. Rather you are a person within the matrix of a family and community, and gender is about family. As a man, I am part of a human family as son, brother, husband, father, and grandfather. Likewise, a woman is part of a human family as daughter, sister, and possibly wife, mother, and grandmother. In a lovely sense, every man is a brother to all women, and every woman is a sister to all men. In each of these relationships love takes a unique and appropriate form—husband-wife love is different from parent-child love which is different from brother-sister love, and so on. In the scriptures, we are exhorted to model our relationships generally on the primary family relationships.

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity.

1 Timothy 5:1-2

St Paul loved his younger fellow workers as his children in the Lord (1 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4, Philemon 10), and he acknowledged that Rufus's mother had been a mother to him also (Romans 16:13). Every good man is like a father towards all children, and every good woman is like a mother towards all children.

4 Gender leads us to God's grace

So much of our sense of inadequacy arises from our perception of ourselves as a boy or a girl, a man or a

woman, and so much of our failure and consequent guilt comes from our family life as a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, or as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother.

The problem for us all is that sin has messed, both biologically and socially, with our powers of manhood and womanhood. We have all been raised in a society abounding in false images of what it means to be a man or a woman, and Western culture and its media constantly bombard us with overtly sexual, and distorted gender, images. We live with accusing caricatures of men and lewd caricatures of women, and we participate in the spoken and unspoken antipathy that exists between the sexes. Manhood and womanhood are deeply flawed in family relationships, scarring the gender development of children.

Consequently, although there is a divinely-inspired glory about manhood and womanhood, every man and every woman has sinned and falls short of that glory (Romans 3:23). Therefore, every human being is in a similar situation:

We all have a recurring desire to do what is contrary to God's stated will.

We all experience a desire to do what feels good and seems right, but isn't.

We all have urges that are difficult or impossible to control in our own strength.

We all experience misunderstanding and judgemental attitudes from other people about our personal struggles.

And we all know condemnation within ourselves because of our failures.

In all of this we can easily assume that God is against us and condemns us.

It would be nice to report some miraculous fix that can resolve all our gender issues and struggles. While many can testify to divine healing in this area of their lives, others find that God's grace is expressed in another way. Dr Mark Yarhouse, the Chair and Professor of Psychology at Regent University in Virginia, is an experienced gender therapist and an evangelical Christian. He observes in his book, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*,

...many people who know and love Christ have besetting conditions that have simply not resolved as a result of their belief in Christ as their Saviour. Indeed, it may very well be that it is in the context of these enduring conditions that God brings about greater Christlikeness.

Daniel Patterson expresses what Christian grace is, and is not, in dealing with gender struggles.

...the Adam and Eve pre-fall ideal is not to be the measure by which some "perfect" humans are able to judge others who transgress God's intentions for human life. Rather, the Adam and Eve ideal reveals that we all fall short of

God's intention for a flourishing gendered and sexual existence revealing the universal need to encounter Jesus, to receive his mercy and grace, and to embrace the call to live as God intends.

St Paul shared with the Corinthians that he struggled over a long period with 'a thorn' in his flesh. The Greek word for 'flesh' is sarx, so in college we used to say that Paul had a prickle in his sarks. It is part of human life that we all have at least one prickle in our sarx, i.e. in our flesh, which God has chosen not to remove. But God's word to Paul is His word to us all.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

The sufficiency of God's grace means that we can trust His power at work in us as a man or as woman.

Standing firm on gender

The person struggling with gender issues, and the church that is trying to help them, share together a common battlefield. To the right of them are the "Shape up or ship out" religious zealots, and to the left of them are social and political revolutionaries who wish to use gender-dysphoric people in their political objectives to deconstruct marriage, family and society, and to construct a new world order; an order created by them in their own image, rather than by God in his image. Waiting ahead of us on this field are professional therapists who have a quite different view of gender to the biblical one, and whose remedies are radical and irreversible.

Those who take a stand on this highly-contested battlefield in the name of Christ will need to steer a grace-course of understanding and compassion, balanced with honesty that is faithful to the biological realities and to the will of God.

History has repeatedly shown that, in the end, both the religious zealots and the political revolutionaries fail to bring in the kingdom they so fervently promise and promote, and the medical interventionists create far more side-effects than they advertise. Divine grace, on the other hand, is the effective interaction of God's necessary judgements on all that is contrary to His will, and His mercy toward all who entrust themselves to his saving work. The prophet Isaiah expresses for us the good news which is the biblical word of God's grace.

Therefore the Lord waits to be

gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice blessed are all those who wait for him.

Isaiah 30:18

Rev. Rod James is a minister of the Word in South Australia and past Secretary of the ACC National Council.



Note: Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Standing firm together ...in Christ

Opening Sermon by ACC Chair Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki to the Assembly of Confessing Congregations 2016 Conference, Monday 7th November.

Hedley Fihaki

ACC National Chair



“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love”
(1 Corinthians 16: 13, 14).

Paul, in this section of his letter to the church in Corinth, had been talking about Timothy and Apollos. He, pauses, however, from talking about them to interject with this short, sharp exhortation to the Corinthians.

The Corinthians had shown a distressing immaturity in some things, and the apostle in a series of compelling imperatives points them to a better way.

Firstly, he calls them to ‘be on your guard’

That is, Paul is calling them to make a determined effort to be awake; be ‘alert’. “Wake up!”, as says Jesus in *Revelation 3: 2*.

Romans 13: 11 similarly says, “The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed”.

1 Peter 4: 7 “Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray”.

Secondly, Paul says, “stand firm in the faith”.

He says this because stability was distressingly absent from the Corinthian Christians. So, Paul says, “stand

firm, in the faith’, that is, in Christ.

Paul in *2 Timothy 4: 3* reminds us what instability looks. “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

In this light, Paul asserts, ‘stand firm in the faith’, don’t be “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (*Ephesians 4: 14*).

Stand firm in the faith.

Thirdly, Pauls says “be courageous, be strong”.

Like *Psalms 31: 24* that also says, “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD”.

Paul faced ‘danger’ at every turn (*2 Corinthians 11:26*), including in Ephesus, even as he wrote this letter (15:30–32; 16:9). But because Paul’s readers were forced to endure ‘the same sufferings’ (1:6) as he did, he encourages them to be ‘courageous’ and ‘strong’.

As Christians, our courage and our strength come not from within us as such, but from God. It is God who strengthens us in Christ and by the Spirit.

Philippians 4: 13, “I can do all things through him who gives me strength”.

Finally, Pauls says, “Do everything in love”.

This final exhortation, that their ‘every deed’ be done ‘in love’, is quite pointed [and direct] in view of their lack of love [that is] evident at many points.

- The theologically strong did not show love to the ‘weak brother’ (8:1, 9–13).
- The rich failed to love ‘those who had nothing’ (11:20–22).
- The verbally gifted spoke for personal self-display rather than in love to ‘build up’ the assembled church (14:1, 12).

- Paul’s famous ‘hymn to love’ (*1 Corinthians 13:1–13*) was written precisely for this church, to show its members how to love one another.

Here, then, is one more reminder for them to love. “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love” (*1 Corinthians 16: 13, 14*).

As we hear this command to ‘love’, it is vital to also particularly understand and to be very aware of the current powerful tactic or strategy that is being used to silence those who disagree with the advocates of the so-called “same-gender marriage”.

The tactic is to label those who disagree as being ‘unloving’.

Those who disagree with “same-gender marriage” ; as highlighted in our proposed ‘declaration of marriage’, are vilified as bigoted, hateful, unjust, and even weirdos or morons.

To stand firm, then, in the faith is to also stand firm against such strategies that seek to silence us by labelling us as ‘unloving’.

And, we need to particularly help our young people understand this important point, as they are being easily led astray by the shallow but powerful argument ‘love is love’.

Prof. B. L. Mauser, Princeton Theological Seminary makes this important point:

“It is said in the debate today that the New Testament insists on an ethic of love to which everything else is subordinate. Love embodying the Gospel, it is argued, breaks down legalistic barriers and reaches out particularly to the disadvantaged and the oppressed.

The validity of this insistence must be recognized without reservation. But it does not at all follow from it that Christian ethical thought, and ethical practice, must be restricted to the bare injunction to love without consideration of the concrete forms of exercising love which correspond to the Gospel.

Love is the fulfilment of the law, but this love is not without its embodiment in actual concrete areas of human life. “Love is the fulfilling of the law” ... but this love fans out into the concrete forms of commandments “you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet” (Rom 13:9–10).

Neither Old nor New Testament assume that human common sense, or a natural goodness of moral sensibilities, lead everybody to a universal understanding of what it means to love. Rather, love must be thought through and practised in accordance with the act and word of God in which love receives its distinctive form” (p. 4).

In *Matthew 4* regarding Jesus’ temptations in the

desert, it is important to take note of one of the methods that Satan uses against Jesus.

Satan says to Jesus in the second temptation, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘he will command his angels concerning you and that they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’.

Here Satan comes across in the guise of a Bible scholar, an expert in the law – ‘it is written’, that is, he knows the word.

And, the cunning thing that Satan does is that he pits the Word of God against the Son of God, who is the living Word of God.

An incredible attempt at deceiving Jesus the Christ.

But, Jesus sees through the deception, He sees through the misuse of Scripture and says,

“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Past president of the Uniting Church, the Rev. Dr. Dean Drayton, is quoted as saying,

“The Assembly has decided that we are a diverse church, we have great and genuinely-held differences, but instead of allowing these differences to divide us, we will hold together in something greater—our love of God and our love of the Uniting Church itself.”

Here, ‘love of God and our love for the Uniting Church’ is misused to justify sexual practices that are incompatible with the clear witness of Scripture.

Here love of God and love for the Uniting Church is used to justify making sexuality an issue that falls within the diversity of opinions or within the diversity of theologies acceptable within the UCA.

The past president is correct in saying that the ‘Assembly has decided’; the Assembly has made formal resolutions regarding this matter.

That is, ‘sin’ has been formally enshrined and instituted into the life of the church by way of formal resolutions, i.e. resolution 84 and resolution 108 regarding sexuality and leadership.

The ACC came into existence in 2006, precisely because we believed that such a situation cannot exist within the Church.

It is why we declared our belief that the 10th and 11th Assemblies of the UCA had been apostate in their decisions in relation to Sexuality and Leadership in the UCA because:

i. these decisions were a departure from the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,

ii. and because the Assembly had failed to observe its own prescribed processes when departing from its received tradition on sexual relationships.

[cont...]



Standing firm together ...in Christ

During our national conference, beginning today, we will seek to strengthen our confession and our resolve by declaring to the Uniting Church that marriage is a matter that enters into the 'substance of the faith'.

Therefore, in the light of this truth, we must also reject (in love):

- (a) the idea that adherence to the Basis of Union allows for difference of opinion on the nature of marriage,
- (b) the assertion that having a 'space for grace' allows for such difference of opinion, and
- (c) the misuse of 'conscience' to justify beliefs and practices contrary to Scripture.

Some have said that they can see why confessing Christ as Lord is important in the Uniting Church, but they can't see what that has to do with the issue of marriage and why same-gender couples can't marry.

This way of thinking, I believe, highlights the heart of the problem in the church, namely, the separation of marriage from our confession of Christ as Lord. That is, Christ and marriage are separated, as if they have nothing to do with one another.

It is why we must make very clear through our declaration on marriage and family that:

"Marriage is a reflection of Christ's love for us. At its foundation, marriage is not just about the bride and groom. It is about Jesus Christ and his Father's divine action in our world through the Holy Spirit. Marriage belongs to the whole story of creation and redemption.

Scripture begins with the marriage of man and woman and ends with the marriage of Christ and his Bride, the Church, new Adam and new Eve" (p. 5).

"Marriage is the sign and seal of the union between a man and a woman which simultaneously signifies the union between God and Israel and Christ and the Church in which humanity is sealed by grace and enabled to living hope" (p.6).

"The fact that

wedding feasts, bridegrooms and brides figure prominently in Jesus' parables and in Revelation is a sign of the sacramental or covenantal nature of marriage and its eschatological meaning. (p.6).

To put the matter clearly, in terms of what is at stake for us within the Uniting Church, let me quote important words that Rev. Rod James wrote in 2014:

To move away from this basic understanding of marriage (i.e. between a man and a woman) is to move away from Christ.

If a Christian denomination were to separate itself from this understanding of marriage it would be separating itself from Christ. By abiding in Christ the church bears much fruit, but if a denominational church does not abide in Christ it will be 'thrown away like a branch and will wither'.

If the Uniting Church were to depart from this definition it would separate itself from Christ and, sadly, consign itself to the dustbin of church history.

This is what is at stake. It is why we are called during this conference to 'Stand firm together in Christ'.

Standing firm together in Christ will involve, as Rev. Dr. Max Champion puts it, "exposing false arguments that have now become widely accepted as truth by many in the church and in the community regarding so called 'marriage equality'".

Of course, we will continue to be labelled as being 'unloving'. However, we are fully aware that this strategy is simply Satan's method of trying to silence us.

We will not be silent. We will continue to speak the truth in love.

The President of the UCA will be present tomorrow [8th November 2016], as well as members from the Doctrine Working Group to 'hear our voice'. This will occur, despite, ironically, the 2015 National Assembly rejecting the participation of the ACC in the consultation process regarding marriage.

Despite also knowing the reality, based on our past experiences, that the voice of the ACC will simply be forced into the 'diversity' framework of the Uniting Church, we welcome their presence with us so that they may hear directly our confession that Christ alone is Lord of the Church and the world.

"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love"

(1 Corinthians 16: 13, 14).

The DNA of the UCA

Peter Bentley reflected on the Uniting Church at the Queensland ACC Regional meeting held in March. Note: the specific Queensland comments have been mostly deleted, but they helped to provide a significant time of question and comment after the presentation. It is hoped to follow-up this presentation with another meeting later in the year in Queensland and at other locations. Comments and questions are welcome.

Peter Bentley

ACC National Director



A good deal is being made of the 40th Anniversary of the Uniting Church this year - 40 years. There are other significant 40 year times.

The people of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, and for those of orthodox, reformed and evangelical faith it has perhaps been increasingly like this in the UCA.

In a biblical context 40 years is often taken as a generation, though not in modern circumstances, but the context in the biblical era was that after 40 years a new generation had taken over. Are we at that stage of the UCA? Certainly, there were signs at the last UCA Assembly in 2015, with an older theological liberal element moving on, and a new more voracious liberal social-justice clientele coming to the fore.

I want to comment on the Uniting Church in this 40th anniversary year by considering our past - the denominations that came into union, the present context and our future.

One of the dangers of this contemporary era is that the past can be rendered obsolete - the idea that it has nothing to teach sophisticated people of today, but for people of the book and pilgrim people we need to be reminded of our history, our heritage and our foundation.

While the Uniting Church was inaugurated in 1977, the official formation of the Union committees occurred in 1957, and that was built upon the previous attempts at union. Uniting three major traditions, different church

structures, and practices of worship necessitated a new approach, and the focus for uniting was the faith of the church as reflected by the first report. Rather than simply illustrating a pragmatic institutional union, the resultant Basis of Union was founded on the faith given to us, and how that was related to our structures and governance. It is still a remarkable document, even though it has been increasingly marginalised and in some circles bizarrely treated as a museum item, rather than as an authoritative foundational document for contemporary guidance and understanding.



What were some of the features that our previous denominations brought into union?

Congregationalism

provided 5% of the membership at union.

Some of its distinctive features:

- Pioneering work in pacific missions
- a strong focus on lay leadership and helping lay people to realise their vocation
- involvement of women in ministry - Sometimes people in the UCA seem to imply that they invented the ordination of women, but 50 years earlier the Congregationalists in Australia presented possibility this as a reality. I will mention more of this connection later.
- intellectual scholarship within a liberal tradition and of course a focus on the integrity and autonomy of the local congregation.

Methodism

provided 59% of the membership at union.

The Methodist tradition brought into the Uniting Church:

- a rich heritage of music and hymns
- a personal connection to social activism, welfare and evangelism, especially through the development of Parish Missions
- and perhaps a focus on practical Christianity, and personal faith rather than doctrine, though this aspect can be debated.

Presbyterianism

provided 36% of the membership at union, though significantly Victoria had more Presbyterians go into union, providing the base for its more liberal development as conservative members were more likely to stay out of union.

Some of its distinctive features:

- An emphasis on good order and church governance
- Adherence to the foundational document, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)
- A strong foundation of eldership
- An understanding that each court or Assembly had particular responsibilities.

While the UCA was a new church, the Uniting Church was created with clear markers from the antecedent denominations, for example, a Presbyterian form of church government, where different councils had different responsibilities, significant empowered Synod Boards of Mission reflecting the Methodist evangelism and local mission context. There was also a clear stream of liberal theological beliefs reflecting the orientation of the liberal evangelical Congregational and traditional Presbyterian liberal academic emphasis, and this emphasis would continue to develop, especially within some of the training colleges.

In reality though, in the initial period most local Uniting churches simply exchanged their previous church sign for that of the Uniting

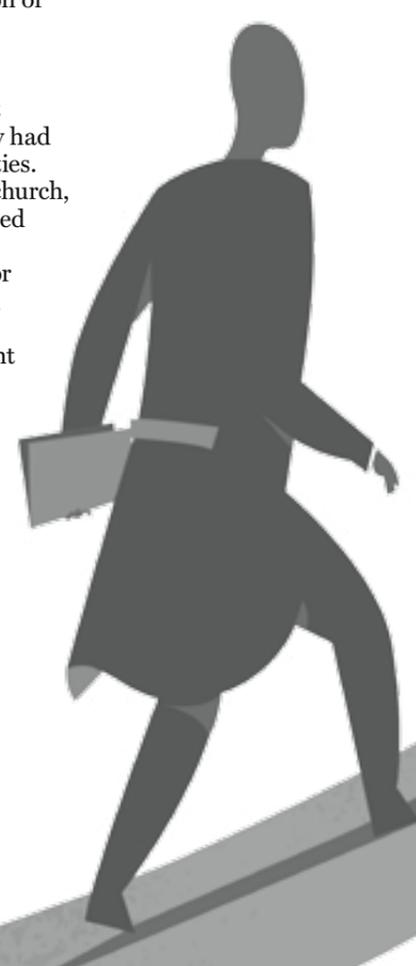
Church, and continued to worship in the same way they had previously, and certainly even today one can often detect the dominant antecedent tradition of a local Uniting church.

Overall though, The Uniting Church in 1977 was an evangelical, orthodox and dare I say Godly 'progressive' church, with its local membership very much in the warm evangelical and even pietistic traditions.

And importantly in our current climate, it is helpful to understand that all the denominations held to a sexual ethic of chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage and marriage was, of course, understood as being between one woman and one man.

There was simply no contemplation of endorsement of practising homosexual behaviour, and this was the understanding and basis on which the churches went into union and to say otherwise is simply to re-write history. It would be several years before change was even considered in most states in terms of de-criminalisation of homosexual behaviour.

[cont...]



The DNA of the UCA

...the PRESENT

Over the first few decades, the Uniting Church began to develop certain characteristics which could be regarded as central or distinctive features, giving at least some form of an 'ethos' in the minds of certain leaders at the National and State levels, though never to the same extent in the local church.

Some of these features:

Commitment to Social Justice and Social Concern

The UCA is widely identified in the community as a church that is prominent in its commentary on certain matters of social justice (including Aboriginal and Islander concerns), especially related to the welfare system, social services, political developments, refugees, and of course lately, GLBTIQ issues.

Some of these issues developed from specific events in Queensland during the era of the conservative government.

Commitment to Aboriginal and Islander Rights and Self-determination

The Uniting Church has been a strong supporter of justice for Aboriginal and Islander people, with the 1985 Assembly endorsing the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. The 1994 National Assembly witnessed the historic reading by the President of the National Assembly of the covenant and a response by the Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Islander Congress.

A commitment to Social and Community Service provision

There has been increasing development of Uniting Church Community services and social welfare agencies with a move from a local parish or congregational base to an institutionally managed focus, particularly with aged care and child-care.

Inclusive Language

An emphasis on inclusive language. This development was significant in terms of Australian churches, and had an impact on worship, but also notably, for example, the production of the 1992 edition of *The Basis of Union*.

Involvement of women in the church

The Uniting Church focused on involvement of women

at all levels and in all ways in the church, and for part of the first decade there was a quota for presbyteries and a target for other councils.

A Commission on Women and Men was formed in 1990 (continuing to 2002) and reviews were undertaken of the position of women in the church. Notably, women from other denominations seeking ordination entered the UCA, bringing in other denominational understandings and liturgical traditions.

A Liturgical Tradition developed

Uniting in Worship (1988) was produced and revised and developed to try to formalise a Uniting approach to worship. A liturgical tradition developed mainly in Victoria and WA, with varying levels of formal liturgy in other Synods, usually reflecting the previous church context.

Youth

There was an evident commitment to the inclusion of youth in decision-making with moves to formalise the involvement of youth in the councils of the church, particularly in Synod and Assembly. The usual liberal leanings of the youth enlisted have helped to fashion an image of social justice radicals, but in reality, most younger members are members of evangelical churches and not involved with the politics and structures of the church.

A prominent proponent of multiculturalism

The Fourth Assembly of the Uniting Church, held in 1985, adopted a statement that proclaimed the Uniting Church as a multicultural church, and various communities have now established their own national conferences and annual gatherings to reflect together in their own language, and one community, the Koreans have their own presbytery in NSW.

Procedures and Decision-Making

The Uniting Church introduced a new way of meeting and decision-making into the church with *The Manual for Meetings*, which includes a formal decision-making process, but has a focus on making decisions by consensus, rather than the older formal approach of debate and voting. A major feature of the meeting system is the use of small groups in which matters can be raised, opinions gauged and concerns or questions directed to a facilitation committee for further work and reporting back.

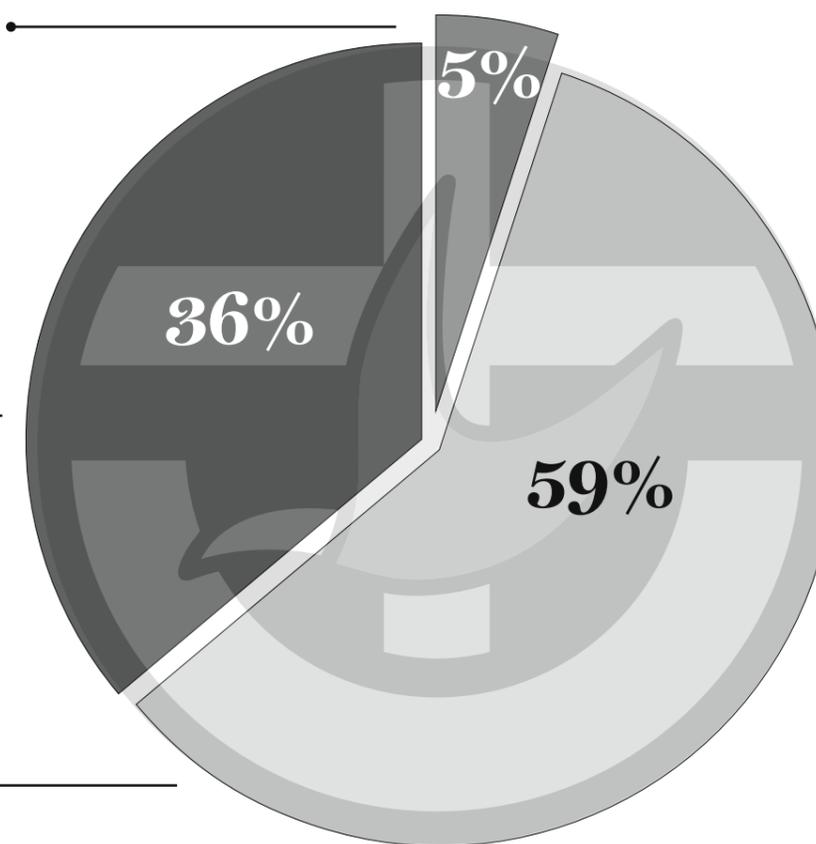
It would be intriguing to know how widely the manual for meetings is used at the local level, and it is varyingly experienced at Synods and Assemblies, depending on the ability of the leader, and other factors.

Other denominations have observed the UCA in action and most like what they see, but in my view this is because they do not really understand the overall political dynamics of the UCA, they only see a veneer. Interestingly, the World Council of Churches (WCC) adopted the same decision-making process, and it could be argued that this is probably a suitable decision-making process for an ecumenical body like the WCC.

Congregationalist

Presbyterian

Methodist



Changes in Governance and Leadership

There have been significant changes since union, with the Presbytery effectively euthanised or neutered in the Synods of Tasmania, South Australia and WA. It had never been strongly established in the Northern Synod, though there is still a distinct Congress presbytery, and Queensland has always had a more Synod based focus reflecting their Methodist heritage of a dominant state conference model.

Local Governance was changed with the move to a congregational polity in 1999 and a resultant promotion of individually based church councils. This change had a very significant impact on smaller congregations that were often left to fend for themselves. It can also be argued, however, that this move led to the development of further lay ministries and lay leadership. One factor that is very evident now is the dire situation of many smaller congregations, not only in rural areas, but also in city areas, that struggle with ageing leadership and an inability to attract and/or afford stipended ministry to help.

Eldership

Well what can one say? Unfortunately, eldership in the UCA is now in many cases an example of a failure to understand Christian leadership in community. The evident confusion about eldership and the number of possible understandings outlined at the 14th Assembly in 2015 echoes the tradition that has developed in parts of the UCA: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judge 21:25)

A Conciliar Church

The Ideal of the conciliar church has been pushed to the extreme by the UCA 'hierarchy'. It was never envisaged that one council like the Assembly, would simply act in a unilateral fashion on sexuality matters without understanding the impact of its decisions. The impact of decisions of the Assembly have simply not been fully considered in the past by most members (though some were only too aware), and more radical decisions risk the Assembly being perceived as arrogant, and as basically saying to the church membership "we do not want you as part of the church unless you conform, and play ball according to our revisionist rules".

This situation has also meant in practice that other councils of the church (mainly the Presbytery) have had to pick up the pieces and cope as best they could while they were still technically functioning. The prime reason for the move to have one Synod in SA and networks was to escape the internecine politics about sexuality in the regional council.

And lastly, possibly and ironically, a left-over concept for a Uniting church, a

Commitment to Ecumenism

As its very name implies, the Uniting Church was to be uniting in orientation, though perhaps intriguingly the 'uniting' fell off the agenda more quickly than people had thought would happen.

I am going to dare to suggest that the UCA pays its way still through involvement in state and national councils of churches, and in dialogues, but it is not as central as members would presume, and is now undertaken from a position of UCA establishment and among some leaders, an almost unconscious idea that the UCA is the one true church to lead the way for the rest. **[cont...]**

What will be the future for the UCA?

Overall, it will be hard for most established 'older' denominations in the future, but some factors have a greater significance for the UCA as it tries to define its identity as a denomination:

- there is increasing congregationalism, perhaps ironically fostered by the change of polity to the congregational model in the church, but also reflecting the increasing individualism in society, mirrored in our churches
- there is less identification with denominations by younger people in general and an increasing lack of adherence to the denomination. If people are not happy with a group or organisation they are more likely now to simply leave, even if they have been members for 40 years (or 90 years as I have found).
- increasing questioning of the perceived or promoted ethos of the UCA by older members, and by the failure of the UCA to create an identity that is understood and embraced by most its membership.

I have mentioned before that any church that moves to a radical agenda when they have little overall allegiance, identification and understanding of the agenda among its membership will simply find itself in a crisis (like it presently has with the sexuality debate).

The next 5-7 years are critical, because most our older members will move into the next stage of life, where they are not able to help with the running of the local church. This development could come at a time when younger families and people in evangelical and non-English speaking background congregations will leave (and there could be a catastrophic exodus) if the Assembly adopts more radical sexuality proposals such as opening marriage to same-sex couples. Any membership exodus from a congregation has a compounding effect as remaining congregations become non-viable.

“... with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever.”

- Basis of Union

What should the UCA DNA be?

Some leaders may hope for a fully realised socially progressive church and a social work agenda that believes good moral education will help all people to become lovely people – in essence, a Utopian dream that ignores the real state of the world, and the reality of sin. This orientation will sadly see the church become a type of political party without even the prayer (the UCA has now even been depicted as the ‘Greens at prayer’), and could lead to an even quicker breakdown of our structures and further denigration of the Basis of Union and our heritage.

The next few years are really the crux for the future of the UCA, and whether it will focus on the real DNA of the Uniting Church that came into being with The Basis of Union, or that of an esoteric church that is increasingly oriented towards providing good works as a social service agency.

Whatever happens, evangelical churches (and there are many that are not ACC members) – will hopefully continue to provide:

Faithful biblical exposition and teaching, rather than blatantly didactic personal narrative that places personal experience above the Bible.

A commitment to true Christian support and ecumenism – where we learn from other churches.

Highlight a governance model that helps the Uniting Church Assembly to truly hear other voices, and enables all councils of the church to fully consider and vote on vital Assembly decisions.

Foster a faithful connection of cross-cultural congregations based on an understanding that our cross-cultural members have a deeply held theological and comprehensive view of sexual ethics.

Develop a renewed partnership with Pacific and Asian churches that links our heritage and connects the generations that have grown up in Australia.

A renewed focus on being the Church in the World, and presenting truly radical counter-culture messages of faith today and awaiting “... with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever.” (Basis of Union, Paragraph 1).

Peter Bentley is the National Director of the ACC

For references, statistics and further information see the articles by Peter Bentley: Liberalism, Sexuality and Future of the UCA Part 1 and II (2010), published on unitingviews.com, and The Uniting Church in Australia, by Peter Bentley and Philip J. Hughes (1996), Melbourne: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.

OPINION

The generation brought up on self-esteem is struggling

Simon Smart

Centre for Public Christianity



The self-esteem movement has failed us. Maybe the Easter story can still help.

When I was in year four, my teacher used to line us up around the room in order of how well or poorly we had done on any given task. Aced the maths test? Up this end of the line. It even applied to our artwork, which

in my case meant an inevitable and regular walk of shame. Needless to say I haven't felt the urge to pick up a paintbrush since.

A recent mental health survey found that 70 per cent of tertiary students report high to very high levels of psychological distress.

Tough love perhaps, but it was terrible teaching based on humiliation and fear. Things could hardly be more different for my own kids and I'm grateful for that.

But the reaction from my generation to this kind of child rearing has been extreme and, we are now discovering, ultimately unhelpful. Social researcher Hugh Mackay identifies in modern Western culture a disease he calls the “utopia complex” – a world we dream of and think we are entitled to with outcomes that are always positive.

The victims of this way of thinking are children brought up in an atmosphere of constant praise by parents who think self-esteem is more important than self-respect or self-discipline. Bewilderment, confusion, and (ironically) self-doubt come from unrealistic expectations and eventually the shock of hitting the real world where most people do not in fact shine more brightly than the other “stars” around them.

A generation brought up on an endless diet of their own specialness appears to be struggling with the hard truth that most of us are just ordinary. According to a survey by the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, reported last week in the media, university and TAFE campuses are reporting epidemic levels of mental health issues, with 70 per cent of students reporting high to very high levels of psychological distress.

The reasons for this are complex, but many psychologists believe our prioritising of self-esteem based on the validation of others has taken a toll.

Could it be that our focus has been misplaced? *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, in his provocative 2015 book *The Road to Character*, says so. He identifies a shift from a society that once encouraged humility to

one where people are urged to think of themselves as the centre of the universe.

“As I looked around the popular culture,” he writes, “I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are ... this is the gospel of self-trust.”

The whole schema, as David Brooks laments, begins with the self and ends with the self, which is necessarily limiting and ultimately inadequate. Without facing our divided selves, our weaknesses and limitations as well as our strengths, we will have missed something profoundly important.

The story of Easter is increasingly out of sync with our culture. This is no light bedtime tale for the kids. It's an account of betrayal, brutality, death and political scandal. It's about the darkness of the human heart and the bad news that we are all implicated in that darkness. It says that, contra the self-help and actualisation movement, sometimes we feel guilty because we are guilty.

This is not language we are used to any more. It grates. But who of us, in our more honest moments, couldn't admit to varying degrees of selfishness, thoughtlessness, greed and petty jealousies? We are wounded and wounding people, prideful, resentful and responsible for making a hash of our relationships. Sometimes we are guilty of a whole lot worse than that.

“The Christian view of human nature,” writes theologian David Bentley Hart, “is wise precisely because it is so very extreme: it sees humanity, at once, as an image of the divine, fashioned for infinite love and imperishable glory, and as an almost inexhaustible wellspring of vindictiveness, cupidity, and brutality.”

According to Christian teaching, we are all alienated; from ourselves, from each other, from the very universe. But the central event of Christianity – the cross and resurrection – brings together in perfect unity the tragedy of that brokenness with the infinite love of God. Jesus' death represents the most emphatic measure of the value of each person, because it implies that despite our frailties and brokenness and (yes) guilt, we are worth the huge lengths to which God goes in finding a solution.

The self-esteem movement says you can find everything you need from within yourself. Decades of this programming have left many feeling deeply inadequate. Easter might appear grim on the surface, but something about its insistence that we are not OK on our own liberates us to see the world as it is, ourselves as we are, and a glorious vision of what we might become.

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<https://publicchristianity.org/>

He is a co-author of *For God's Sake: An atheist, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim Debate Religion*.

(This article first appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on April 14, 2017).

Love

Bella Easterbrook

ACC Member



This Valentine's Day, my husband got me a gift that spoke right to my heart, far above chocolates or flowers. It was a history book focusing on the reign of the Plantagenet kings from 1154 to 1399 (The Plantagenets, Dan Jones). I'm very much into my medieval English history and I read through that book eagerly. As I read, I gathered a picture of each monarch - what they were like and what motivated them to achieve what they did. Looking at this royal dynasty revealed further insight into what it meant to be a good English medieval king. Victory in battle, vast military ambition, expanding the borders of the empire. Often this came at the expense of the people, as heavy taxes were imposed to raise the money needed for their military campaigns. They were glorious, yes, but ruthless.

While I was reading this book, I was also reading through the book of Isaiah. Here, we find a vastly different picture of what it means to be a good king. Isaiah 42 speaks of the Servant of the Lord, defined by justice, but also by something foreign to those Plantagenet kings - gentleness. A bruised reed he will not break. Rather than oppressing the people for his own victories, Jesus cares for the oppressed, he lifts up those who are broken and tenderly ministers to them.

And, later in Isaiah 53, we see the extent of this sacrificial love. The Man of Sorrows was oppressed and afflicted to the point of death for the sake of his people. Jesus left the glory of heaven, all the honour and privilege that was rightfully his, and he came to this earth as a fragile human being. He walked humbly among us, his glory veiled, and spoke of the kingdom of God. There was no majesty in his outward appearance, nothing that we should desire him. Then, when the time came, he willingly gave himself up to a cruel death on the cross. There was intense physical pain, but worse than that was the spiritual pain, as the sins of all humanity were laid on him and he felt forsaken by his Father. He did this for his people, so that we could be free from sin, from death, from the evil one. So that we could have life abundant and eternal.

This is such a different picture of kingship than what the world has otherwise seen. Those warrior kings of the Plantagenet era showed glimpses of Jesus' power and victory, yet failed to reflect his gentleness and grace. Even now our leaders fall short of Jesus' sacrificial kingship. Jesus is the King of Kings, exalted now to the highest place and ruling from his heavenly throne in righteousness, mercy and love.



REFLECTION

Deuteronomy 7:7-8

"The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers" (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

Moses tells Israel that the reason God set His affection on the people was because He chose to, and the reason that He chose them was because He loved them. He chose to love them, and then He loved the ones He chose. This is the heart of covenant love. It is love not based on the performance of the one loved, but love based on the pure choice of the one who loves.

We are told hundreds of times in the Bible that God chooses us. This grates against our minds and our thought that we are in control and that we do the choosing. But if we accept this statement by faith, what peace and assurance we will have! The reason God loves us is because He chose to!

We have so many doubts and fears when we think that God's love is based on us, on something in us that makes us more lovable than others. But what would we do if we could realise, "he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." (Ephesians 1:4). Surely, we would love Him with all our hearts and live in thanks, glorifying Him.

Devotionals are provided by Rev. Derek Schiller and are available via an APP for iPhone or Android. Each day a new devotion is provided. You can download the APP from the St George by following the link: <http://stgeorge.unitingchurch.org.au/wcms/acc-devotion-app/> or the ACC websites



THIS IS THE ACC

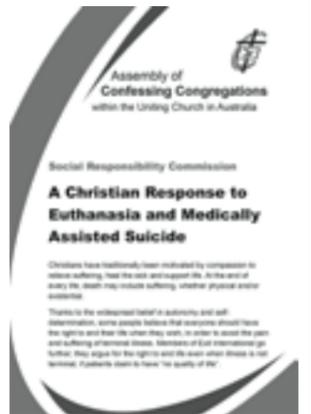
Featured resource:

A Christian Response to Euthanasia

Given the continued focus at state parliamentary levels on bills to legalise euthanasia, it is timely to re-visit the ACC's statement on A Christian Response to Euthanasia and Medically Assisted Suicide.

This substantial and very accessible booklet covers all the major areas in the debate and features expert opinion and reference. One person quoted is Professor Margaret Somerville, whom readers may have seen on Q & A in March 2017, helping again to add some clarity to the contemporary debate. This booklet is available on our website, or from the ACC office.

<http://www.confessingcongregations.com/national/item/a-christian-response-to-euthanasia/>



What happens next

- September 11-13: ACC National Conference, Mount Louisa House of Praise, Townsville



Mount Louisa House of Praise

For ACC resources see the website:

this includes every edition of the **ACCatalyst Magazine**

(available to download as a PDF).

confessingcongregations.com



Who we are

Within the Uniting Church context of a very broad range of theology and practice, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations is a nationwide body of congregations and individuals whose vision is confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the truth, renewing the church.

Our goals include

- Encouraging the confession of Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the UCA's Basis of Union.
- Providing resources, seminars and conferences to build up believers, develop their gifts, and equip them for life, mission and works of service.
- Encouraging Christian believers in earnest prayer through our Prayer Network.
- Encouraging younger members of the Uniting Church in their faith and participation.
- Communicating about current events and issues through our website, our national magazine *ACCatalyst* and local newsletters.

The objectives of the ACC

- The objects of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations are:
- To confess Christ according to the catholic, reformed and evangelical heritage in the Basis of Union, by:
 - upholding the Scriptures' prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for the Uniting Church's faith and life;
 - calling the Uniting Church to determine matters

- of doctrine and ethics according to the teaching of the Scriptures and the faith as understood by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church;
- calling the councils and congregations of the Uniting Church to uphold the Basis of Union and Constitution;
- providing biblically-grounded leadership in partnership with other confessing movements;
- developing ecumenical partnerships for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel in our pluralist nation; and
- establishing national, state and territory bodies to implement the Charter as approved by the inaugural meeting of the Association, and seeking the renewal of the Uniting Church.

b) To undertake such religious, educational or other charitable activities which are incidental to the above objectives.

How to join us

Membership rates for supporting members:

- Concession (single or couple): \$20.00 pa. (financial year basis)
- Full (single or couples): \$40.00 p.a. (see website)

- Contact (02) 9550 5358.
- Email: accoffice@confessingcongregations.com
- Post: PO Box 968 Newtown NSW 2042

FILM



Star Wars (1977) PG

Starring:
Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher
Written & Directed by:
George Lucas



Or as it is known now, Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away

Well, I thought it was suitable to comment on a film that was realised in the same year as the inauguration of the Uniting Church. I find it harder to believe this film is now 40 years old. It was a distinctly new and groundbreaking film, heralding in a new age of technology. Amazing special effects and it of course started a franchise and provided a toy and related-goods marketing bonanza.

There is a distinct religious and philosophical stream to Star Wars that is centred around 'the force', and this in many ways resonates with a popular view of religion that believes there is some higher force than ourselves out there that will provide help when we need. Other themes include people being tempted and won to the 'dark side', and some coming back to the 'right side'. There is also the idea that a simple good person will eventually prevail over a nasty evil person. Music is central, just like it is in our churches. In popular culture terms, who would fail to recognise the Star Wars introduction? And perhaps befitting a focus for some today on individual fantasy, it led to people stating Jedi as their religion in the census (approximately 65 000 in 2011).



Denial (2016) M 15+

Starring:
Rachel Weisz, Tom Wilkinson, Mark Gatiss
Directed by:
Mick Jackson



Denial is also a film based on a book, but in this case the non-fiction work "History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier," by Deborah Lipstadt, the US historian who had to defend herself against a libel charge by David Irving for calling him a Holocaust denier when she gave a lecture in England. In English law the burden of proof is on the accused, so the defence focussed on the facts of the Holocaust and by relation, proving that Irving was a liar. It is a well-made courtroom drama, with fine performances, though Rachel Weisz as Deborah Lipstadt has very much a supporting role as the legal eagles dominate the film. Deborah Lipstadt has often been asked about 'free speech' and among many comments, I thought it was helpful to consider the following quote from the film.

"Now, some people are saying that the result of this trial will threaten free speech. I don't accept that. I'm not attacking free speech. On the contrary, I've been defending it against someone who wanted to abuse it. Freedom of speech means you can say whatever you want. What you can't do is lie and expect not to be held accountable for it. Not all opinions are equal. And some things happened, just like we say they do."



A Man Called Ove (2015) PG

Starring:
Rolf Lassgard, Bahar Pars, Filip Berg
Directed by:
Hannes Holm



This Swedish film was recently released in Australia and has had a continuing run at some selected cinemas (I have been wondering if it may continue a run like As it is in Heaven (2004) – this ran for well over a year in Sydney, mainly by word of mouth).

I thought of briefly mentioning Ove because there is a similar philosophy about life and religion in the very popular Swedish film As it is in Heaven. I am sure that some people will see A Man Called Ove as simply a (mostly) charming and poignant film, but there are some questionable aspects, notably the theme of suicide. Ove consistently tries to kill himself, but is always thwarted, usually by the interruptions of neighbours, who are perhaps 'angels of mercy'. Overall, though the film promotes the idea that being good is the most noble way for a person to live. Ove hopes that when he finally dies, the church will be packed, and this clearly links with the concept of the 'good man' - people giving honour to him for what he has done.

**Check local guides
for showing times.**