

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 6 | DECEMBER 2018

# ACCatalyst

ASSEMBLY OF CONFESSING CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



## Conference report 2018

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Decisions,  
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Cover photo - Supplied

## EDITORIAL

We give thanks to God for our 2018 conference. In these difficult times, coming together and sharing our faith is a blessing and something we should not take for granted. ACC members in congregations with liberal ministers often mention they find the conference a breath of fresh air. I am hoping that the contacts people made at the conference will continue to be an encouragement as people support each other by email, phone and mail. Most of the conference presentations are now available on the ACC website and it would be helpful to share these with your church members so they learn and understand more about the confessing movement.

Peace and grace,  
**Peter Bentley**



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## ACC NEWS

### Across the Tasman: 25 Years of AFFIRM

Members who attended the 2017 ACC Conference will remember Rev Dr Stuart Lange's excellent overview of the mission and matters within the Church in NZ.

In June of this year, Presbyterian AFFIRM had a significant birthday: AFFIRM was birthed 25 years ago, at a meeting held at Greenlane Presbyterian. The inauguration of AFFIRM reflected concerns that liberal theological agendas were leading the PCANZ in destructive directions, and that various streams of evangelical Presbyterians were not working well together to give a more helpful lead. AFFIRM was eager to see the Presbyterian Church re-emphasise the Gospel of salvation and new life in Christ, biblical orthodoxy, the work of the Spirit, prayer, discipleship, evangelism, church renewal, and church growth.

Presbyterian AFFIRM sought to work across the spectrum of all Presbyterians who saw themselves as evangelical, or charismatic, or reformed, or simply orthodox. Some AFFIRM members were also involved in Presbyterian Renewal Ministries, and some in the Westminster

Fellowship, and some in neither. The strong conviction was that it is best when we all work together, and that together we can bring positive change to the life of the PCANZ. Early leaders in AFFIRM included John McKinlay, Ian Woods, Stuart Lange, Beryl Howie, Bruce Nicholls, Anne Bowie, Ivan Moses, Steve Jourdain, John Evans, Peter Cheyne – and many more.

AFFIRM's name (which came from an inspired moment in a prayer gathering of Anglicans) is an acronym, and sums up what we are about: Action, Faith, Fellowship, Intercession, Renewal, and Mission.

Presbyterian AFFIRM has never been in any way a high-powered, well-funded professional organisation. We are essentially just a fellowship, a loose low-key network of like-minded people. We rely almost entirely on busy volunteers. People supportive of AFFIRM's vision for the church have been active in all areas of the church's life, seeking to make a constructive, Gospel-minded contribution. As a movement, we have sent out this free newsletter widely, on average about three times a year. We have helped produce

the interdenominational AFFIRM booklets. Over the years, we have run many conferences and events. AFFIRM has no authority over anyone: we are just a witness and a voice. But what we have said has resonated with many people and by the grace of God we have had some influence.

Sadly, AFFIRM's existence has coincided with the very difficult debates about sexuality which have preoccupied many western churches for the last three decades. We have not initiated those debates, but have simply actively defended a faithful biblical position. In doing so we have attracted both much support and quite a lot of antagonism. But those who have accused AFFIRM of being just a 'pressure group' on sexuality issues have completely misunderstood us.

In essence, AFFIRM exists to work with others for the spiritual and theological renewal of our denomination. Our by-line puts it another way: Presbyterian AFFIRM is a network of Presbyterians with a passion for the transforming gospel, biblical faith and vibrant churches.

**From Presbyterian AFFIRM  
newsletter - pre GA2018**



# Charlie's Angels

by Robyn Painter

Pastor, Peterborough Uniting Church

A few years ago I was having a chat with a young friend named Bradley. He was four years old at the time. Bradley was telling me about how Nicholas had come to visit him for the weekend, and all the things they had done together.

"Is Nicholas your cousin?" I asked. Bradley pondered this for a minute.

"Mmm, sometimes," he replied.

"Nicholas is sometimes your cousin?" said I.

"Yes. And sometimes he's my friend," asserted Bradley. I was left wondering whether Bradley thought they were cousins when they were friends, or at the times when they weren't!

We live in an age where choice is considered an indisputable right. And never in history has a society faced the number of choices as we have today. We can choose

between countless varieties of breakfast cereals. We choose our doctors and where we shop. By getting on the internet we can choose to fill our minds with pictures and information about anything we want. Choice of products is not even limited to what is available in Australia. I wanted a particular Bible which I couldn't get in Australia so I bought it from the US on Ebay. And these days to a large extent we can even choose how we look through hair style and colour, and if someone is wealthy enough, plastic surgery and various implants.

But there are some things we can never make choices about. My friend Bradley had not yet learned the saying, you can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives. We can't choose who our parents are, or where we come from, or how tough we've had it. We can't change the fact that there are seven days in a week and 24 hours in a day. We can't change the fact that our bodies are getting older every day.

And we cannot choose what God is like. God is as he always has been and as he always will be. We can wish he was different. We can be deceived about what he's like. But we can't make him different. And we can't choose whether or not we were created by him. We can't choose whether God loves us, whether Jesus died for our sins, or whether God wants us to know him personally. He does love us, he does want us to know him personally, and Jesus has died to deal with our sins.

But we have a choice. We can receive all of this from God, or we can say no. And that is the most important choice we will ever make!



# Questions & Answers

*in relation to the recent decisions of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc. (8 October 2018)*

Following the ACC National AGM in Sydney, ACC member congregations and individual supporting members have been learning about the decisions made at the conference and seeking to understand their practical consequences for the ongoing life of congregations. We have already reported on the decisions in the document ‘Standing Aside and Moving Forward’ (a rationale for the decisions taken at the recent AGM of the ACC Inc 21 September 2018.). The following should be understood in addition to that document.

The decisions of the ACC conference were made in response to an impossible situation that many have felt the 15th Assembly has put them in as a result of its decisions on marriage.

For their part, the Assembly and Synod leaders are maintaining that those concerned about the 15th Assembly’s decisions should realise that their concerns are unfounded, that the Assembly is right in the decisions it has made, and that everyone should calm down, accept what the Assembly has decided, and follow where the Assembly is leading. Furthermore, Assembly and Synod leaders are asserting that (as the South Australian Synod CEO/Secretary has written) ‘the recent decisions of the ACC place that organisation outside the polity of the Uniting Church’.

But as we have said in our statement, ‘we simply cannot allow ourselves to be forced, against our faith, integrity and freedom, to live and work within a state of contradiction whereby orthodoxy, as outlined in the Basis of Union, has now simply become a part of the ‘diversity of religious views and ethical practices’ within the Uniting Church’. To have two contrasting doctrines and practises (which is sometimes called the ‘two integrities’ solution) is acceptable to those with a liberal theology in which diversity is a higher value than biblical

truth. But to those who take the plain reading of Scripture as authoritative, that is unacceptable. We also believe that having freedom of choice at the individual and local level (as the 15th Assembly decisions allow) is unworkable, will create countless local and personal difficulties, and ultimately will lead to freedom of choice and belief being restricted.

Some will say that what the ACC has decided is impossible in relation to the polity of the Uniting Church. To this we reply that the 15th Assembly has put us in an impossible situation, and this impossibility needs to be borne in mind in understanding what the ACC is advocating.

## Questions & Answers in relation to the recent decisions of the ACC

**1** *By this decision has the ACC moved outside the UCA church polity, structures and processes?*

The Uniting Church has four levels of governance: the Congregation, the Presbytery, the Synod, and the Assembly. In the light of the impossible situation created by the 15th Assembly, the ACC conceives of its way forward in the following way:

At the **Congregation** level, a congregation is a member of the ACC and confesses Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union of the UCA. The congregation upholds the biblical view and practice of marriage. In all of this it is very much in the ethos and Christian tradition of the Uniting Church.

At the **Presbytery** level, the ACC is looking to steps being taken to seek the creation of non-geographic presbyteries to which ACC congregations can belong. Alternatively, they may continue to belong to those presbyteries that uphold the orthodox view of marriage.

Given that the Uniting Church already has non-geographic presbyteries for the UAICC and Korean congregations (in NSW), it would seem illogical and discriminatory for Synods or the Assembly to say that NGPs do not fit the polity of the UCA.

At the **Synod** level, the ACC and its member congregations have no problem in working with the Synods in as much as the Synod is primarily an administrative servant body according to the Basis of Union. We see no problem in dealing with the Synods in matters of property, finance, insurance, etc. (The question of ministry training is addressed in point 5 below)

It is at the **Assembly** level that ACC and its member congregations have the major difficulty. The Assembly, in its role of ‘determining responsibility for matters of doctrine’ has made decisions that we believe are unbiblical, divisive, and unworkable.

With its ‘two integrities’, which define Christian marriage in contradictory ways, the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church is speaking the word of God with a divided tongue. The ACC has spoken up and called out this duplicity and heresy. It has further declared that henceforth the Assembly of the Uniting Church will be unable to lead its people in the right path, but will, in the future, lead them further and deeper into error.

The ACC, therefore, ‘humbly, and in dependence upon God alone, offers to Congregations the role of a replacement Assembly in matters vital to the life of its Confessing Congregations’.

**2** *How can the ACC offer itself as an alternative assembly and still say we remain Uniting Church?*

We believe that Resolution 64 of the 15th Assembly goes against Paragraph 2 of the UCA Constitution in which the Uniting Church, affirming that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end, lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union. We also hold that the Assembly’s very selective reading of the Basis of Union – ignoring Paragraphs 5 and

11, as well as misreading Paragraph 3, makes their decision unconstitutional.

Believing that Resolution 64 is illegitimate, and noting that the 15th Assembly resolved not to consult with the other Councils of the Church about its decision, ACC has offered itself to congregations who simply cannot accept the nature and direction of the Assembly as reflected in the 15th Assembly's decisions on marriage.

This offer is as a national covering and leadership that holds fast to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union. This national covering and leadership should be understood primarily in theological, spiritual, and relational terms. That is, 'in matters vital to the life of these confessing congregations'.

This offer is until such time as the Assembly rescinds its decisions on marriage.

3

*But is such a situation possible?*

Some will argue that such a move is impossible, however it needs to be seen as an alternative to the impossibility of continuing under the leadership of the current Assembly. Assembly and Synod leaders may wish to interpret ACC's action in legal terms of contravening polity, etc, but the reality is that the Assembly is leading in a direction that our congregations will not, and cannot, follow. The question is, 'what will they do with us if we do not follow?' Is it realistic for Assembly and Synod leaders to try to threaten and coerce our consciences into submission? Or do they wish to drive us out of the Uniting Church, sell our properties and redirect the funds to other purposes?

4

*Is the idea of having non-geographic presbyteries really workable?*

While the Uniting Church already has non-geographic presbyteries for UAICC and Korean congregations, the Assembly and the Synods are maintaining that because doctrine is determined by the Assembly, a presbytery cannot have a specific

doctrine and practice, for example, in relation to marriage. However, South Australia has had Mission Networks (HopeNet, 3DNet, and others) for 15 years, and some of these have memorandums of understanding with the Synod that contain statements of specific doctrine and practice. It seems disingenuous for this to be the case for 15 years and then say it can't happen. We believe that NGPs can work and help to deal with the current impossible situation.

5

*What about training for ministry?*

The Synod has the responsibility for oversight of training for ministry leadership; however we see almost no possibility of reformed/evangelical people wanting to be trained at UC colleges that teach a double-minded theology and practice of Christian life and ministry. In time, this loss of candidates for ministry will create a critical shortage of suitable ministry leaders for our congregations. The unsatisfactory outcome would be congregations having to accept ministers whose teaching contradicts the beliefs of the congregation. This has proven disastrous for some congregations in the past with people leaving and congregations being decimated.

We will, therefore, need to explore alternative pathways whereby those called to ministry can be equipped in a manner consistent with the Basis of Union and an orthodox interpretation of Scripture. It is noteworthy that some of our partner churches overseas recognise a diverse range of seminaries for training of ministry leaders, and their approach may provide us with a possible model for the future.

6

*What will be the situation for ministers identifying with the ACC?*

The ACC recognises that all those engaged in Specified Ministries are bound by the Code of Ethics and therefore subject to discipline should Presbyteries of Synods take exception to their stance. It also recognises that Presbytery and Synod authorities deal more harshly with leaders

of small congregations than they do with leaders of the large congregations. The ACC will develop a support network for ACC ordained and lay leaders, and seek to provide support, encouragement and counsel to ministry agents, congregations, clusters and groups who are being coerced against their conscience.

7

*Are there groups or networks other than ACC suggesting a way forward, and is there a possibility of these different groups working together or amalgamating?*

There is broad dissatisfaction with the 15th Assembly's decisions on marriage and several groups and proposed networks are considering possible options for a way forward. ACC is having ongoing conversations with these other groups and is open to working with other groups in a coalition, or indeed joining with them, at a national level.

8

*How will all of this work out in the end?*

It is difficult to answer this question. The situation is unfolding every day. At present Assembly and Synod leaders are giving no ground. They are asserting (with slight variations in each Synod) that ACC is outside the polity of the Church, that presbyteries cannot have specific statements of doctrine and practice, that ministers must accept the twofold doctrine of marriage or face discipline, that congregations must have 'Uniting Church in Australia' and the UC logo on their signage, and that congregations that choose to leave the UCA will forfeit their property.

Only God knows how such an impossible situation will work out. ACC does not claim that it has a solution that covers all bases and answers all questions. At the present time we are standing aside and seeking to move forward as the Lord leads us. We are encouraged to remember that Jesus is Lord and loves his church, and we declare our 'readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church'; to 'remain

[cont page 37]





# PUBLIC SQUARE

*B Y P S E U D O - M A X I M U S*

## A New Dark Age



**B**ravado about living in a 'brave new world' (A Huxley) cannot hide the facts. Australia, like other Western nations, is being engulfed by totalitarian ideologies hostile to orthodox Christianity. We are suffering the 'eclipse of God' (M Buber) in a 'culture of death' (John Paul II) where 'nihilism with a happy face' (M Novak) masks a deep hatred of Christ-centred humanity.

Choice has become the untouchable creed of our 'post-Christian' society. Personal and group identity is now claimed, not by referring to our common God-given humanity inscribed in nature, but by declaring the sanctity of our varied preferences. Decisions about donor IVF, abortion, assisted suicide, sex, gender, marriage, family and spirituality are deemed right if they express

our desires, feelings, values and circumstances. Self-chosen identity, sometimes tempered by consent, is now the hallmark of religious, moral and social progress.

This fierce protest about what is now viewed as narrow, bigoted restrictions on individual freedom seems to be at odds with State- or church-imposed totalitarianism in, say, Nazism, Communism and the Inquisition. However, it fatally underestimates the determination of 'progressives' to dismantle sound traditions and impose a new subjective form of dogmatism. It also miscalculates the harmful social and cultural impact of Federal and State legislation that advances the nihilistic agenda to radically redefine sex, gender and life itself.

The dehumanising effect of these changes is disguised by clever marketing. Diversity, tolerance, and acceptance are rightly promoted as positive values. But, gradually and imperceptibly, the public is conditioned to believe that any form of consensual difference is good. We are programmed to think that men and women, fathers and mothers are not essential for life in the modern family; that choices once thought harmful to human flourishing are natural urges that must be satisfied for personal wellbeing; and that, while the religious quest for truth is a dangerous illusion, the spirituality within is the

true source of self-fulfilment. Night falls under cover of daylight!

## Ecclesiastical response: 'Counter-cultural' or compliant?

Since the Fifteenth Assembly much has been said about the UCA being 'counter-cultural'. But it masks the facts. The UCA is now the unofficial religious voice of State-sanctioned ideology. It treats the clear testimony of Scripture and apostolic tradition to God's purpose for marriage merely as one choice, the radical departure from Scripture being described as an 'additional statement of belief'.

Assembly and Synod leaders have been anxious to portray the decision on same-gender marriage as the result of open, honest listening and prayer. Correspondence and press reports by Assembly and Synod leaders give the impression that discussions went smoothly. However, the decision to hold proceedings in secret, thereby preventing international guests, visitors, church members and the media from hearing the debate, suggests otherwise. If these tactics had been used by a large corporation, Uniting Justice would have demanded to know what they had to hide. The hypocrisy!

## Doctrine: Unity in diversity

The Report to the Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine (WGD) said 'that definitions of marriage do not belong to the substance, or heart, of the Christian faith' (4.2 & 5.6.3). Afterwards, former President Rev Dr Andrew Dutney (pictured right) said that 'holding together two doctrines and practices of marriage within the one diverse Church is the kind of thing that the UCA was built for.'

Clearly, therefore, marriage is a matter of doctrine. And doctrine is meant to articulate the 'substance of the faith'. However, because 'unity in diversity' has become the UCA's overarching dogma, individuals are free to determine all doctrines according to their 'conscience.' This both misrepresents what the Basis of Union says about diverse gifts of ministry being exercised through our 'unity in Christ' and explains the UCA's failure to discipline those who flagrantly flout orthodox Christ-centred teaching.

Moreover, the comparison Dutney makes between differences over marriage and differences on female ordination, holy communion, and Calvinist and Arminian confessions, is false. In marriage, the issue is not about arguably contested readings from Scripture or secondary matters of church order, but about incompatible doctrines of creation, reconciliation and redemption for which there is no biblical mandate.

The underlying problem is a false understanding of reconciliation. In *'Mutual Affirmation: A Theological Refection on Marriage and Same Gender Relationships'*, Rev Dr Ji Zhang, Assembly Theologian in Residence, draws on the Taoist symbols Ying and Yang to argue that opposites must be reconciled if we are to live in harmony with each other and the cosmos. Astonishingly, he regards the Incarnation as the precursor of, and the justification for, supporting the Assembly decision. For him, the Church's acceptance of the two equal natures of Christ, human and divine, is the basis for accepting two distinct forms of marriage as one.

Dr Zhang's theology of marriage is stripped of its Christian roots and clothed in the Gnostic reconciliation of opposites. Thus, all differences essentially belong together in one overarching synthesis. This worldview, which believes that 'All is One,' doesn't recognise the absolute distinction between God's holiness and human sin that is overcome by God's

costly, reconciling grace in Christ.

It is a grave logical and theological error to equate the UCA's two doctrines of marriage with the two natures of Christ. The latter is unique to God's self-revelation, not a symbol to be applied to every form of diversity, no matter how contradictory. Besides, it equates two contradictory forms of sexual union, one of which is unambiguously forbidden in Scripture.

Sadly, UCA theologians and leaders, who claim to be guided by the 'Spirit', endorse the spirit of the age. 'Unity in diversity' has long been the dogma of happy nihilists, militant secularists, delusional atheists, smorgasbord spiritualists and progressive Christians in Western nations and churches. When 'choice-and-consent' become absolute, freedom and equality are uprooted from their God-given foundation. The new worldview, incompatible with Christ-centred humanity, is essentially subjective. No-thing (nihil) beyond the desires of consenting selves is considered ultimate. It is unconscionable that the UCA should collude in the dismantling of the Christian tradition.

## The Confessing future

The decision of the UCA Assembly makes it even more urgent for the confessing movement to be bold. There is no place for naivety about the prospect of working within the structures of the UCA to bring about spiritual renewal. Remember: In 1997, the Assembly Standing Committee's commissioned Bentley Report on the responses to The Interim Report on Sexuality (IRS) found that more than 82% of an estimated 30 000 people associated with the over 8000 responses opposed the recommendations. The IRS promoted more response than any other report in the history of the UCA and yet the report on the responses was sidelined at the 1997 Assembly.

After Resolution 84, over 27,000 members and adherents from 1459 Congregations responded to a Reforming Alliance survey sent to all Ministers and Church Secretaries in October 2003. This represented nearly a quarter of adult UC attendees spread over 58% of Congregations. Over 87% of responders held to an orthodox biblical view in relation to the three primary questions asked.

Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church (EMU), Reforming Alliance (RA), ACC and other

concerned groups, like EL250, the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and all Migrant-ethnic conferences (CALD) have faithfully attended consultations, Assemblies, Synods and Presbyteries, presented papers to the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine (WGD), and spoken at length with Presidents, General Secretaries and Presbytery ministers. At the Eleventh Assembly in 2006 an RA sponsored statement on Sexuality and Leadership, which was forwarded to Assembly by 7 Presbyteries and the Queensland Synod, was neatly side-stepped. In 25 years things have become much worse!

At this critical point in the life of the UCA, members of the confessing movement must not ask the authorities of a dysfunctional church for a 'safe place' to make their witness. To do so would mean tacit acceptance of the false doctrine of 'unity in diversity'. There is no place for introspection or self-preservation. Nor should they be content to preach the Word and administer the sacraments until they are ejected. Steadfast proclamation of the truth about the One who heals, redeems and humanises our life in the world requires clear and strategic rejection of falsehood.

## "Proclaiming Christ faithfully to the Nations"

The theme of the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON) held in Jerusalem in July 2018 reminds the confessing movement that it exists, not to adapt for survival in a hostile church, but to forge ways of speaking to a broken world. In Australia, this involves exposing ideologies that mock God and dehumanise citizens and compliant churches desperate to be 'on the right side of history'.

A Letter to Confessing Christians in North America puts it well:

*"In the absence of faithful Christian witness, society established false idols. The twentieth century is littered with the victims of secular ideology. ... The North American threat comes from a more benign form of atheism that banishes Christian witness from the public square. Consumerism, materialism, individualism and hedonism rush in to fill*

[cont over...]

# DEVOTION

## Seeds for Harvesting

Praise the Lord with song

Psalm 101:1

*“I will sing of your love and justice.  
I will praise you Lord with song.”*

The history of God’s people  
through the Old Testament  
and on into the early Church  
is filled with incidents of his people  
praising God through song.

For we who worship him in this age  
the singing of Christmas Carols  
and the Hallelujah Chorus  
enriches our rejoicing  
at the birth of the Saviour of the world.

Our churches, each Sunday,  
are filled with music  
as we “praise you Lord with song”.

Is there any better way  
to acknowledge God’s love  
than by singing  
“I will sing of your love”?

To remove music from our worship  
would rob us of  
so much that is glorious.

As the Psalmist says  
“My heart is confident in you, O God.  
No wonder I can sing your praises.”

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



### PUBLIC SQUARE

BY PSEUDO-MAXIMUS

*the void. Dogmatic atheism brutalizes and destroys the church. The more benign and civil atheism seduces and marginalizes the church. Disoriented by the ideology of moral relativism, some church leaders haphazardly champion fashionable causes. In each case, the saviour of the church and the light of Christ is lost.”*  
(Thomas C. Oden, *Turning Around the Mainline*, p 57)

The purpose of a confessing movement is to shine the light of Christ in the hope that the darkened world may be humanised. This will not be easy. Grace must be accompanied by steadfastness. It is not enough to understand and tolerate differences. The new nihilists, trumpeting the virtues of consensual choice, are hellbent on destroying Christianity’s grace-filled tradition of faith, hope and love. Their radical redefinition of sex and gender forges ahead leaving a trail of destruction, cleverly masking their true agenda to enlist the sympathy and endorsement of health and welfare agencies, businesses, sporting groups, schools, universities and churches.

The grievous failure of UCA theologians and leaders to recognise the depth of the crisis and unmask this dangerous ideology signifies the triumph in the church of ‘nihilism with a happy face’, behind which lurks fierce opposition to those who challenge the heretical dogma of ‘unity in diversity’.

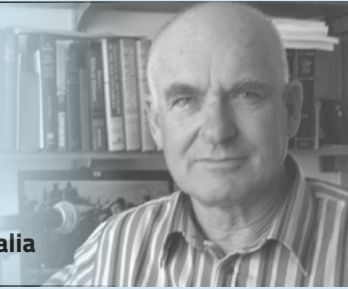
The situation requires members of the confessing movement to speak plainly, act boldly and pray fervently, unafraid to confess Christ crucified-and-risen by speaking boldly to ecclesiastical and civic authorities. The crucial question is whether they can continue to work in a church where key leaders ignore the plain meaning of Scripture and the Basis of Union (BU), misrepresent Assembly debates, silence orthodox voices, manipulate the good will of UAICC and CALD members, and support totalitarian State-sanctioned policies that are antagonistic to Christianity and human flourishing.



# Sustained Exhilaration

Ian  
Clarkson

UCA Minister - South Australia



Most people think exhilaration is produced by some stimulus outside of you. But, each one of us has a capacity for inner exhilaration; far, far different from the sugary highs of the 'instant' culture. To be in a crisis of right and wrong yet choosing the cultivated inner voice to actually do the right exhilarates our lives. 'The Kingdom of God', the power of God working in a believer's life, 'is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'.

Little and big opportunities come to us, mostly every day, to choose between right and wrong, or between what is just socially OK, and what is best. Between mediocre and the 'excellent way'. Not the bloodless conformity of self-righteousness, or basic instincts to be tamed and trained. Human

beings can walk with God, in the likeness of God's character.

When was the last time you were in such a crisis, or had opportunity for decision to choose right, because it was right? You may have had to turn against your flesh and lift your fist against indulgence, inconvenience, pleasure or acceptance by others, all the masks of contemporary idols.

You heard that gentle inner voice - the way of moving on. It is really the power of Christ, happening in your life, no matter how small the issue is. It is the doorway to opportunity.

Satan hates that. He wrote a bumper sticker for fools; "It's not right or wrong, it's fun or boring". This is believed by worldly intelligentsia who are ruled by emotion, and live by instinct, and are willing to trample their consciences. They will never climb higher or know sustained exhilaration.

Contemporary culture has little virtue; it presses no strain on moral muscle. Jesus was the most alive of any man, and he said he would take us in his steps. The old theologians called this sanctification. God working his ways in the child-like who listen to him.

Right now we hear about abuse. Abuse monsters the human soul. Restitution, recompense and retribution won't fix it. Neither will formulas; nor moral or psycho-spiritual help or sheer discipline. But receiving Christ into the soul will. Someone beautifully named it 'the explosive power of a new affection'. And it lasts. It regenerates because it is a living thing. It is Jesus.

***Preach Him, Lift Him up.***

***There is no and nothing other.***





# CONFESSING MOVEMENT | CONFERENCE 2018



## 2018 ACC National Conference Overview

With over 250 registered members (and up to 290 people at some sessions), the 2018 ACC AGM and Conference held in Sydney on 17-19 September was a gathering of vibrant and stirring fellowship. It was a poignant meeting for many members who had attended the inaugural ACC Conference held at Wesley Church, Wesley Mission in October 2006. The 2018 AGM and Conference provided a strong base for encouraging one another with the theme of "Living and Working Within the Faith and Unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." People have spoken of the joy of meeting with a common and united fellowship and hearing from the excellent and challenging speakers. A list of speakers and their presentations is below. During the Tuesday night rally (18 September) the offering toward Drought Aid raised \$2600.

A number of decisions were made during the AGM sessions and these were communicated to ACC members initially, with further information being provided at regular points and regional meetings.

### National Council for 2018-2019

- **Chair:** Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki (Qld)
- **Deputy Chair:** Rev. Rod James (SA)
- **Secretary:** Rev. Ian Weeks (NSW);
- **and Council Members**  
Rev. Walter Abetz (Tasmania); Rev. Anne Hibbard (NSW); Rev. Michael Fawcett (WA); Rev. Trevor Faggotter (SA); Matt Kang (NSW); Barry O'Ryan (Qld); Paul Francis (Qld); Dr David Pohlmann (Qld); Rev. Lulu Senituli (Qld).

ACC was blessed to be led by a wonderful group of Tongan and Samoan members in the singing, with some memorable and inspiring group items. The Wesley Church worship space enabled a prayerful focus and we extend our deep thanks to all the help from members of Wesley Congregational Life, the Wesley Conference Centre team and Upper Room Catering.

Papers and videos (*note: as made available*) will be provided on the ACC website and ACC YouTube site and members will be notified by email when this material is available.

**Rev. Dr Keith Garner AM:** Wesley Mission CEO and Superintendent - "Signs of a Healthy Church" (Sermon at the Opening Worship, Monday 17 September)

**Rev. Walter and Dr Katherine Abetz:** ACC Tasmanian leaders (Devotional Study: Tuesday morning 18 September) - "Swimming between the Flags" (A PowerPoint presentation) illustrating the marks of an orthodox church.

**Monica Doumit:** Commentator, writer and legal advisor, and prominent contributor to many Catholic publications, including *The Catholic Weekly*. (Keynote Speaker: Monday night 17 September) - "Challenges for the Church Post Plebiscite."

**Rev. Professor James Haire AC:** Ninth President of the UC Assembly. (Keynote Speaker: Tuesday morning 18 September) - "Facing the challenges of confessing the faith within the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church."

**Rev. Dr Max Champion:** ACC Theology and Ecumenical Relationships Convenor. (Keynote Speaker Tuesday 18 September) - Why do our churches need faithful confessors? Because "a church which is unable to confess its faith is a lame and withered church."

**Bishop Michael Stead:** Anglican Bishop of the Southern Region: Sydney. (Keynote Speaker. Rally Tuesday Night 18 September) - "Living and working within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church."

**Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki:** ACC Chair - "The Cost of Discipleship." (Sermon at the communion service Wednesday 19 September)

# Costly Discipleship

Hedley Fihaki

ACC National Chair



Sermon preached at the 2018 ACC Conference Holy Communion service 19th September.

## Bible reading: Mark 9: 30-37

<sup>30</sup> They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, <sup>31</sup> because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." <sup>32</sup> But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. <sup>33</sup> They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

<sup>35</sup> Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

<sup>36</sup> He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

**Discipleship is a costly affair. It cost God his Son.**

**D** Last week's reading Jesus taught his disciples that the Son of man 'must' suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he 'must' be killed and after three days rise again' (Mark 8: 31).

Keyword: 'must'. Not maybe, but 'must'.

Jesus 'must' suffer; he must be rejected, he must be killed.

And, if Jesus 'must' suffer, and must be rejected and must be killed, then, we as his disciples must not expect anything less.

To expect anything less is not Christian discipleship.

It is no wonder why Peter said to Jesus as recorded in Matthew's gospel, 'No way Lord. This must never happen to you'.

What Peter actually meant was 'No way Lord, this aint gonna happen to me'. Yes, it may happen to you, but it certainly ain't gonna happen to me'.

So, good luck with that.

And, so Jesus in his normal therapeutic, pastorally

caring and very sensitive way says:

"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

When ever we too try and remove costly discipleship or the cross from what it means to be a Christian, then, we too must be prepared to hear Christ's strong words of rebuke, 'Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

I'm sure we have all experienced being rejected and being marginalised and victimised within the Church.

Of course, we expect to be rejected and victimised in the 'world', but when it is coming from *within* our Church, that is a little harder to take and to accept.

It does highlight the fact that the church is no longer in the world as a counter cultural entity, but that the world is now fully in the church. There is now no longer any difference between the church and the world.

The Uniting Church has lost its saltiness; its effectiveness to proclaim the truth of the gospel.

If you are being rejected, marginalised and victimised within the church and in the world, please know and understand, that this is our normal (not abnormal) path of discipleship for those who confess sole loyalty to Jesus Christ as the living head of the Church.

1 Peter 4: 12-14, one of my favourite passages of scripture explains the situation well in this way:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

When we understand and appreciate all that Christ has done for us in terms of the way of the cross, then, we can truly feel the blessing that comes in participating in the sufferings of Christ.

If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed (not cursed), for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Quite a number of our ministers have been receiving formal complaints against them for posts on Facebook, for comments made at public ACC meetings, complaints for calling special meetings, and also complaints from congregational members because their congregations have joined the ACC. Some during congregational meetings have asked their minister 'when they are going to vacate their church manse?' and some have been reminded of who pays their stipend; some members have just been plain rude and offensive to their ministers.

## How should we respond?

What does Paul say? 'Suck it up you snow flake'!

[cont over...]



# Costly Discipleship [from 11]

No, Paul doesn't say that. But, I can imagine Paul saying that.

What does Paul does say is 'rejoice'!

Don't get angry or get grumpy, but 'rejoice'. Why? Because you are participating in the 'suffering of Christ'.

Yesterday we made a very significant decision to change our name and our status from 'Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia' to 'Assembly of Confessing Congregations OF the Uniting Church in Australia'.

What we decided was no small thing. We attempted to make a similar change a few years ago in Adelaide, but the time wasn't quite right. But, now we have made this significant change.

This is not just a matter of semantics. Words are very important, and how we use our words.

By making this seemingly 'small' change in 'status' from 'within' to 'OF' the Uniting Church in Australia, we are further strengthening our resolve and our commitment to be the distinct and proper Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

And, those congregations that align themselves with this Assembly shall be known as 'Confessing Congregations'; congregations that confess their sole loyalty to Jesus Christ as the living head of the Church.

And, we should prepare ourselves for more 'fiery ordeals', not less, but more. And, when these fiery ordeals come our way, 'don't be surprised as if something strange were happening to you.'

Instead, rejoice because we have been counted blessed to share in the blessing of the sufferings of Christ.

It is important to understand the decision that we have also just made is not simply a 'standing aside' as if it is simply a 'passive' action. We are not just standing aside, but we are making a commitment to 'move forward'.

And, we must now move forward, not just stand still.

Our motto: Confessing the Lord Jesus Christ, Proclaiming the truth, Renewing the Church.

## How do we renew the church?

Our reading this morning points to the importance of 'teaching' the gospel. It also highlights 'how' we are to teach the gospel.

Three things we learn from Jesus.

**1** First, find a quiet place to teach your disciples so that you are focused on your task of teaching. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were. Why? Because he was teaching his disciples.

There is a lot of noise in the world; many voices competing for our attention. Finding an appropriate place to teach is essential.

**2** Second, our posture for teaching is important. *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."* Mark 9: 35  
Key word: 'sitting down'.

Sometimes we bypass these seemingly unimportant words, but they highlight our method for teaching; 'how to be a servant of all'. Jesus who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings does not consider it too small a thing to 'sit down' so that we may be at his 'level'.

In our Tongan culture, if you are in the presence of the King of Tonga your head cannot be higher than the Kings head. That is why we must always be bowing or sitting down in the presence of our king so that our head is never higher than his.

Jesus, however, who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings sits down so that his head is on the same levels as ours. In this way he is not simply teaching his disciples about humility and what it means to be a servant of all, he is also putting his words into practice.

**3** Finally, as has been highlighted a number of times during our conference, the UCA is dying. We have lost many, many of our young families and our children.

The UCA has about 2075 congregations. Of those 2075 congregations, 50% have no children.

Another 25% have between 1-9 children. That is, 75% of all our congregations have been 0-9 children.

## How we do we get children back into our church?

Well what does Jesus do?

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." Mark 9: 36-37

*Key words: he took a little child; He (strategically) placed them among them; taking the child in his arms (embracing the child).*

That is our method. That is the how.

1. Find a quiet place to teach so that you are very focused on your task of teaching.
2. Sit down – be at the same level; don't speak down to your students.
3. Place children among you and teach them the good news about the Christ.

Noting, preaching the good news involves teaching the bad news as well.

The YES of the gospel goes together with the 'NO' of the gospel.

The love of God goes together with the judgements of God.

The sufferings and the rejections of Christ goes together with the resurrection of Christ. This is why in the Basis of Union, Jesus is referred to as the 'Risen Crucified one'.

We must always live within these two poles. Lesslie Newbigin put it in this way:

All true thinking about this, as about every matter, must be held within the magnetic field set up between these two poles; the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world.

To live in this magnetic field is to live in an atmosphere which is charged with power, tingling, as it were, with electricity. One is always in the (humanly speaking) impossible position of knowing that one is – along with all others – at the same time the enemy of God and the beloved child of God.

To live in this charged field of force is always at the same time supremely demanding and supremely affirming.

But we are always tempted to slacken the tension by drawing away from one or other of the two poles.<sup>1</sup>

Our temptation as we continue our journey as the Assembly of Confessing Congregations 'OF' the Uniting Church in Australia will be to slacken the tension by trying to draw away from the cross of Christ.

But, we must resist this temptation so that we can continue to 'live within this magnetic field' in this atmosphere that is charged with power, but not just any power, but in and through the power of the Holy Spirit the One who will renew His Church.

And, now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. (*Jude 24-25*)

1. Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: SPCK Classic (Kindle Location 3356). SPCK. Kindle Edition.



# Holding both Evangelism & Social Responsibility

Anne Hibbard

Co-ordinator of ACC Social Responsibility Commission



When the ACC was first formed in 2006 our confessing movement established both a commission for discipleship and evangelism as well as a commission for social responsibility. In 2009 this ACC Commission for Social Responsibility under Rev Dr Brian Edgar's excellent leadership issued a Statement, approved by the ACC, entitled "The Church's Social Responsibility". In this Statement the ACC affirms firstly the UCA Statement to the Nation by the Inaugural Assembly of the UCA in June 1977. This statement says, "A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church."<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the Statement affirms the ACC's "eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles" because "concern for the life of both church and society is a core factor".<sup>2</sup>

This important ACC Statement also names a concerning division in the Uniting Church and elsewhere between evangelism and social responsibility. It says:

*Unfortunately, the Gospel ('the good news' or 'the evangel') of the Lord Jesus Christ has commonly been divided into 'evangelism' (often connected with the language of 'conversion' and 'justification') and 'social action' (often using the language of 'transformation' and 'justice'). Their relationship has been understood variously with*

*some stressing evangelism (either asserting that 'evangelism' is the only real responsibility of the church, or that it has a logical priority with social action being an implication of conversion). Others have acted as though 'social justice' is either the only real responsibility of the church with 'evangelism' as unnecessary (or perhaps as the primary responsibility, with 'evangelism' as secondary or a mere possibility)*<sup>3</sup>

In this crucial time for our Confessing Movement when divisions in the UCA are becoming deeper, the current commission of social responsibility would like to remind the ACC and other evangelicals of this important statement entitled "the Church's social responsibility". The ACC has been and hopefully always will be concerned about both evangelism and social responsibility and their integration or partnership in mission.<sup>4</sup> Biblical social responsibility is in contrast with the counterfeit humanist social justice that has been a key player in the difficulties we find ourselves regarding marriage within the UCA. However, authentic Christian Social responsibility is a treasure that we must not throw away in reaction to all that has taken place at Assembly this year in regards to marriage.

As we continue to stand post Assembly, we are faced with the strong likelihood of further division between those who hold to orthodox, evangelical, reformed, charismatic worldviews and those within the UCA with liberal and pluralist worldviews. Whilst these divisions may be inevitable and even important at this time, it is vital that we remember our heritage and not split down the lines of evangelism and social responsibility. We may be tempted to hold tight to evangelism, whilst abandoning social responsibility to the liberals. We must leave behind humanist justice but not throw out "biblical justice" with the bath water.<sup>5</sup> As a confessing movement we have valued both evangelism and social responsibility for mission in our congregations in the past. Let us be conscious of holding them together as a pilgrim people as we journey into the future.

## References

1. Uniting Church in Australia, "Statement to the Nation: Inaugural Assembly, June 1977," [assembly.uca.org.au/Resources/Introduction/Item/134-Statement-to-the-Nation-Inaugural-Assembly-June-1977](http://assembly.uca.org.au/Resources/Introduction/Item/134-Statement-to-the-Nation-Inaugural-Assembly-June-1977)
2. Assembly of Confessing Congregations Social Responsibility Commission, "The Church's Social Responsibility" (2009), 1
3. "The Church's Social Responsibility" (2009), 6
4. *ibid*, 6-7
5. Edgar also calls this "Biblical Justice" [web.archive.org/web/20170102031251/http://brian-edgar.com/Theology/Ministry-and-Mission/Biblical-Justice/](http://web.archive.org/web/20170102031251/http://brian-edgar.com/Theology/Ministry-and-Mission/Biblical-Justice/) (2004)



## Features of a Healthy Church



### Keith Garner AM

CEO and Superintendent  
Wesley Mission (Sydney)



*Sermon preached at the Opening Worship Service of the 2018 ACC Conference - 17th September.*

Throughout my ministry, having headed up Christian communities which have known growth, visitors would sometimes ask “To what do you attribute the success of this church?”

- I remain uncomfortable with the word “success”.
- I, therefore, seek to reframe the question – “What makes for healthy churches?”

I refer you to the earliest church in the Acts of the Apostles, where we learn something of the inner-life in the early days, following Pentecost. These were exciting times of growth when the Christian community expressed its concern for all its members – and yet was sufficiently focused on the wider world to grow through the Holy Spirit.

From time to time, I hear people say, “What we need is a New Testament church.” I am sure I know what is meant, but equally sure it is not what we need. We wouldn’t want to be a church with huge internal divisions, as some in the New Testament were (even at Communion), that had widely different perspectives on money and even excluded people – let alone mentioning that the women had to be quiet!

However, we do need a church empowered by the same Spirit as the New Testament church, in a way that impacts upon the current situations and contexts in which we find ourselves – and this has never been more important.

A healthy church, like a good meal, requires the right ingredients to give it quality. One poor ingredient can make all the difference.

I recall being invited to preach at a city-wide mission in Scott City in Kansas in 1981. After a long flight from Manchester and a six hour car journey, I was greeted by a minister in his pyjamas. He was clearly ready for bed and he asked me if there was anything he could get me. I was up-front and said, “Some tea” and knowing Americans, I said, “A bowl of cereal would be great!” He sent me off to bed with a tray, milk and sugar. To cut a long story short, unfortunately he put salt in the bowl and not sugar. Both my cereal and tea were ruined. This was the wrong ingredient that did make the difference

I suggest to you six features of a healthy church.

### A church that is energised by faith

So much church life feels like survival, rather than growth. We need a sea change, bringing us back to essentials.

Some kinds of energy are unhealthy –

- The energy to keep a church building open at all costs – or to maintain an institution.
- Energy can flow unhelpfully from a desire to keep control and we may all be guilty of this.

Real dynamic spiritual energy is motivated by a living community where devotion matters greatly.

- The desire to serve God and one another.
- A proper engagement with the Word of God.
- A faith nurtured in Christ, enabling a natural sharing of faith.

I cannot over-emphasise the place of devotion, because it lies at the centre of all living faith communities. However, it is discovered and expressed in a wide variety of ways.

This feature of a healthy church stands at the head of the list – and out of which all the other features will properly flow. A lack of internal energy was caricatured by one church member who said, “Our church is like a wheelbarrow – nothing moves unless you push it.”

### A church pointing to the world

This really grows out of our priorities as a church. We are concerned about the struggle for justice and our identity with the hurt ... which must be deeply rooted in the local Christian community in its various settings.

- We must be prophetic about justice and peace. I can remember sitting in the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, held in Pretoria in 2001. They were discussing the issue of Aids and the need for specific drugs to be made available in a setting where many people were dying. The President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, had made a clear stand against this, based upon his own thinking. There was a vigorous debate and sitting not far away from me was Mrs Mbeki, supporting the church in its witness and call.
- Healthy intercessions in worship must get us beyond ourselves. I remember very clearly attending worship in what many would have called a very successful church – or even a mega-church – and during the intercessions there was no mention of a natural disaster which had taken thousands of lives that had occurred just a few days earlier.

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# Features of a Healthy Church

- Whilst a minister in Wales, we were caught up in a major building scheme and I chaired the meeting when we took the decision to build a large glass front entrance to the church. The entrance led onto a street where thousands passed by. One member suggested this was a good idea, for it let people see into the church. My own perspective remains the same as it was then - that the glass should allow the church to see out on the world.

Do we need to rediscover that foundational scriptural teaching of the Good Samaritan? The question "Who is my neighbour?" is still relevant today.

In the context of your conference, allow me to suggest that pointing to the world does not mean that we embrace willingly everything we see in the world around us. Our distinctive features still need to be retained and indeed are best retained if we are to be an effective, dynamic witness.

## A church discerning the Spirit of God

This really does question our vocation as a church. If we are to have a vision for our society and community, then it will naturally grow out of our seeking God for promptings as to where we might be.

- A vibrant spiritual life is not merely internal.
- A clear sense of being called as a community.

I would want to say something here not only about the vision we have, but also about how we communicate it to others.

- We are not primarily about mission statements – they can be simply hoops to jump through. I once found myself in a queue in a bank where the person serving was dressing down a customer and, when I reached the counter, I noticed a mis-

sion statement on the wall, which prioritised treating "everyone with dignity"!

- Consciously developing priorities, which grow from a confessional faith, standing in stark relief to some of the practical and doctrinal incoherence that has dominated our church life in recent years.
- Making sacrifice for the vision. We need to be not only a vigorous confessing church, but also one that is costly to us, as we remember God's eternal bias towards the poor and the marginalised, who are part of his vision for his church.

Our vision has to be placed into the total sum of things. In Colossians 3:1-14, we have a picture which raises questions about the sort of church God wants us to be. The difficulty is that much of the powerful teaching about dying and being raised to the new life in Christ has been so intensely personalised that we have forgotten that there is also a community and corporate dimension to this.

## A church that dares to do things differently

One of the reasons why we are not adventurous in our mission and ministry is because we fear failure. A feature of a healthy church is a willingness to face the cost of change and growth, rather than resisting and running from it.

- Embracing the past – but daring to do things differently.
- Admitting when things don't work and learning from our errors.
- Responding to opportunities as and when they arise.
- Taking positive steps to bring meaningful change.

A personal reflection would be that, in our own church, we are very often addressing change in terms of struc-

tures – and I am very pleased when we can discern developing priorities for the medium- and long-term relates to changing our church culture. Michael Fullan in a book written in 1993 entitled *Change Forces*, wrote, "Changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills, beliefs." Real change is about changing the atmosphere in which we operate.

David Ford, who is Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity at Selwyn College, Cambridge University, wrote: "Our calling is to improvise in ways which surprise and delight and yet ring true with the past."

How does that resonate with a vision of mission and our ministry at this point in time? When we think of the importance of the church plant movement, it must not be about transplanting a failing culture, but discovering a new one.

Our daring to do things differently requires us to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Mutual respect and unity must be present, even alongside those who may malign our motives and misunderstand our actions. It is very important at this point in our history.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:17-20, we find Jesus opening up this whole area of change. Verse 20 – "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

## A church that is inclusive - not exclusive

Healthy churches make room for all; newcomers soon become integrated.

- For many years I was minister of a holiday church which welcomed hundreds of visitors each summer Sunday. But the personal challenge for me was not welcoming visitors, but integrating them into the life of the church.
- A positive attitude to chil-



dren and young people needs to be a priority, as we ensure discipleship is at the centre of our life and witness.

- Enquirers and diverse people of all kinds must be the norm for any local church community.

I have observed the error that can be present in conversations about marriage in our church – and that is to make the assumption that holding to a traditional view of human relationships, such as I do, does not preclude us from including people in, irrespective of who they are. This lies at the heart of our mission culture here in Sydney.

When I look at the New Testament and try to get a picture of what the church was like in terms of its constituency, I always return to 1 Corinthians 1:26–28.

Christianity, in many ways, began

to lose some of its powerful vision and practice when it became institutionalised and, in the world's eyes, influential.

The question of welcome is vital. We also have to be bold enough to learn the lessons of those who have studied both church growth and Christian development. It is a well-regarded fact that people are most effective in their Christian discipleship and witness during the first year of their commitment to Christ.

Any serious study of the gospels leaves you asking the question – “What on earth did Jesus see in these people?” One of our Methodist evangelists of another age, Samuel Chadwick, used to talk about ‘looking for a Lazarus’.

Those of us who belong, and have done so for a considerable time, have to face the challenge of this aspect of a healthy church. It is too easy to move into ‘us and them’ language,

whoever we are talking about.

The vision of a new heaven and earth, such as in Isaiah 65:17-25, must sustain us as we look beyond church life in a hope that God has placed in our hearts. The vision of a new heaven and earth are expressed in Hebrew in just seven words. In reflecting upon this, Geoffrey Grogan concluded, “... yet its implications are staggering.”

## A church that is focused - not frenetic


This is such a defining feature of a healthy church. There is a misnomer around that healthy churches do almost everything in terms of activity after activity. One of the conclusions that people are coming to regarding growing and healthy churches is that

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# Features of a Healthy Church



[from 17]

they do the basic things well; they are good news as a community; and they are relaxed about what they don't do!

- Does not mean that they are very ordinary.
- Does mean public worship, leadership, pastoral care and administration are done well.
- Does mean the call to proclaim the good news and to live out the gospel is taken seriously.
- Does mean we enjoy what we do, relaxed in the fact we don't do everything, but there is a sense of joy at the heart of the community.

I am reluctant to appear to pass judgement on others in the church, but I sense that we have relegated the position of traditional ministry and values to the sidelines. I recall in the early 1980s a conversation with one of my former tutors, Rev Dr Arthur Skevington Wood, one of the great Methodist historians in the area of revival and renewal. One enthusiastic student asked him why he stayed in the denomination – and he simply said, “Because it's our church!”

Evangelical faith is not an option for a few, but an essential for all. There are three aspects of God's initiative which we must always keep in mind:-

- God revealing himself in Christ
- God redeeming the world through Christ
- God transforming the world through the Spirit

These truths lie at the heart of the biblical witness. We are not an eccentric deviation, but historic, mainline and Trinitarian in both our belief and practice.

To pull together these features of a healthy church, I would want to talk about real Christian community. The church is not only called to tell the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, but it is also called to embody the work of the kingdom here on earth.

The presence of God is often mediated through human agency, work-

ing, praying, supporting, encouraging, teaching and challenging.

- Interpreting the story of God's love for every community and every generation.
- Witnessing to what God can do in the lives of individuals and communities.
- Setting the claims of Jesus before people and challenging them to a response.
- Enabling a gracious encounter with God, whose redeeming love is for everyone.
- Creating and maintaining a welcoming community, where people can be nurtured in discipleship.

The greater part of the ministry of Jesus was spent in the small towns and communities around the Galilee. It was here that his public ministry began and it was in these communities that he told his stories. It would have been much easier to have begun that ministry in a place where he wasn't known. He set the pattern for us all.

Healthy churches take seriously that we need to be a gospel people in each and every setting; we are all engaged in mission, not just church. If we are to follow the pattern of Jesus, we must live out our discipleship where we are known, and where we can be held accountable to each other and to our neighbours for what we say and do.

Returning to the Acts of the Apostles, we notice that there was a sense of awe among the early believers. Authentic worship lifts us out of the ordinary and familiar into the mystery of God. The same passage indicates that the church of the Acts of the Apostles lived lives of integrity. Their life choices were determined by their faith.

These features of a healthy church have a powerful sense of attraction – and can make a difference in the world.

As you meet in this conference, you do so at a very significant time. My prayer is that God the Holy Spirit will grant you special measures of his grace. May we be given a new passion for Christ, a renewed vision for the

church and above all else a fresh focus upon God's call to Christian holiness.

Our constant challenge is to be contemporary and yet, at the same time, we must hold true to God's word as we hear it in scripture. Styles and methods do change, but truth? This is the timeless element of our mission.

If you were to journey to Scotland and visit our Nicholson Square Methodist Church, which is home for many Methodist students linked to Edinburgh University, you will find a portrait of John Wesley and underneath some words. If they were not penned by Wesley himself, then someone has surely captured his sentiments and sound judgement:

“The Methodists must take heed to their doctrine, their experience, their practice, and their discipline. If they attend to their doctrines only, they will make the people antinomians; if to the experimental part of religion only, they will make them enthusiasts; if to the practical part only, they will make them Pharisees; and if they do not attend to their discipline, they will be like persons who bestow much pains in cultivating their garden, and put no fence round it, to save it from the wild boar of the forest.”

We must be willing to leave the familiar in the adventure of mission and faith, without disturbing the essentials which hold us close to Christ? We affirm together the central nature of our conviction, confession and witness to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us remind each other that we are a church that must remain grounded in the kingdom of God. We acknowledge that “the time has come” (Mark 1:15) and “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). Jesus' challenge to his disciples was to “receive” or “enter” this kingdom (Mark 10:14-15).

Behind me here in the Wesley Church is a visual reminder of the importance of Jesus Christ as he took bread and wine and offered himself. We would have to unite that truth with the message of the cross that is intricately bound with our mission. When this happens, we are truly a healthy church.

## Facing the Challenges

James  
Haire AC

Ninth President of the  
Assembly of the United Church



*School of Faith Keynote Address at the  
2018 ACC Conference - 18th September.*

*“Facing the challenges of confessing the  
faith within the unity of the one holy  
catholic and apostolic church”*

**I**f we are to face the issues of the challenges of confessing the faith within the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, we need to begin by going back to basics.

How are we to confess the faith? We are to do so in both word and action. In the words used to form the ecumenical movement, we are to do so both by faith and order and by life and work. To do that we need something even more fundamental. We are to hear the very voice of God, for us Christians revealed in Jesus Christ. In his address to the inter-faith session of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre in 2006, Rowan Williams insisted that, in theological terms, it was not precise to speak of Christianity as if it were some sort of ideology competing with other ideologies in the marketplace of ideas. Rather, Christians are the ones who bear the mark of Christ upon themselves, symbolically on their foreheads, as it were. In Williams' words, “(w)e carry the name of Christ. We are the people who are known for their loyalty to, their affiliation with, the historical person who was given the title of ‘anointed monarch’ by his followers – Jesus, the Jew of Nazareth”. How do we listen to the voice of God? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to us.

Therefore, in looking at how we confess the faith in the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church in Australia today, let us take up this task theologically, as we must as Christians. Let us first go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church universal. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to

make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to the Triune God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder of God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son, who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the unity, harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace and love of Jesus Christ, as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation and salvation of humanity, then its life of unity is that which it receives from him, who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

Thus we are called to express our theology in ways that are relevant to our society and to our common calling. That will not simply be done in terms of words or semantics (faith and order), but also in the ways in which we live our lives individually and in community (life and work). Moreover, this will refer to individual faith and spirituality, communal faith and spirituality, individual Christian obedience and communal Christian action in the world. It will also be at the heart of Christian mission, our being taken up into the mission of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit into the whole world.

So, again, how are Christians, and the Christian community, that is, the church universal, to listen to the voice of God? It is not their task as Christians primarily to invoke God for their particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to them. Therefore, they need to take up this task of listening theologically, while also being very conscious of the need to discriminate between the voice of God on the one hand and their cultural and psychological impulses on the other. Thus the church has stressed the varying roles of scripture, tradition, experience of the Holy Spirit, and deliberations and decisions of assemblies, synods, presbyteries and congregations as ways in which the voice of God can be heard and confirmed. This is to guard against the danger of individual or small group projection, believing that they alone are able to express the will of God. It is intended to protect the church from self-delusion, which is most likely to occur at a time of individual or communal anxiety. Since the earliest days of the church sanctified self-delusion, or the symbiosis of mutually-attracting and mutually-attractive neuroses, have always been the

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# Facing the Challenges [from 19]

close, and dangerous, companions of the church. This is seen in the varied forms of Gnosticism. The problem with Gnosticism is not that it is far from Christianity, but that it is close, and at times appears to be Christianity's friend. There is also always a fine line between legitimate, and indeed necessary, contextual theology, on the one hand, and syncretism, on the other. For the church contextual theology is essential for evangelism and apologetics, but the danger of the church simply following the spirit of the age is always present.

In addition, one of the historical cultural traits of much of western cultures has been that of progress. Here the Christian theological distinction between the primary and the secondary is crucial. Here the scriptural witness comes to our aid. In general for Christianity the issues of the primary and the secondary are central to Christian self-understanding. The primary both in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament for Christians) and in the New Testament is the worship and service of God, known to us in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The secondary are all those arts and skills necessary for human life, both individual and communal, that is, the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, the engineer, the builder, the statesman, the artist, and so on. In and of themselves, these arts and skills are important, indeed essential, for human life, both individual and communal. However, these secondary abilities can never become primary in human life. Any attempt to make them so is idolatrous. This essential distinction underlies the Christian theological tradition, and needs to be constantly borne in mind. There may be frequent and sustained progress in the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, and so on. However, progress is an inappropriate category when dealing historically with the worship and service of God. For the ultimately inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to

be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world by itself.

While I was completing my PhD dissertation, I worked in the Selly Oak Colleges Library in England at the carrel next to that of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who at the time was writing his commentary on the Gospel according to John, *The Light Has Come*. Occasionally during breaks we would discuss our work. Bishop Newbigin had returned to the United Kingdom after many years overseas, particularly in India, and I was back in Britain on study leave from Indonesia. Newbigin was overwhelmed at the 'pagan Britain' to which he had returned, and at the need to begin a new evangelisation of the country. He went on to be very influential in this area of thought. We both felt that what made it so much easier to work as a missionary either in India or in Indonesia was that one could clearly see in both places where the lines of demarcation between the gospel and the varied cultures lay. Of course, it was not always easy. One also had the added challenge of trying to see where a legitimate contextualisation of the gospel could take place, on the one hand, and where an inappropriate syncretism had occurred, on the other. There would always be debate as to an appropriate contextualisation. However, for our experiences, both in India and in Indonesia, the issue between gospel and culture was relatively manageable. However, the issue in the United Kingdom and in the western world in general, was so much more difficult. During our discussions, Newbigin's insights in this area profoundly impacted me. Christianity in the west had so absorbed western culture, including the western understandings of the spirit of the age, that it was very hard to see where the gospel actually was. Even the churches, with their long history in the British Isles, expressed a Christianity which at times seemed so dependent on the varied British cultural norms that it now seemed almost alien to the gospel. These insights were given sharper focus for us by the thinking of Asian and African contextual

theologians, led by John Mbiti, who not only saw the need for contextual expressions of theology in their own societies, but who even more could see the blindness in western Christianity as it seemed to be incapable of wrestling with appropriate and inappropriate forms of contextualisation.

The issue then arises as to where the gospel begins and ends in relation to cultures, especially western cultures, although this issue is well-known and well-appreciated, for example, in the varied Pacific cultures. In these situations Christianity needs to engage in what recent Indonesian theologians have termed a 'double-wrestle' between gospel and culture, in order to define Christian existence in contemporary society.

In western Christianity, this is apparent especially when three factors occur. First, when executive bodies are created out of councils (and even more so out of existing executives of councils) and assume to themselves responsibilities of a permanent nature, then the conciliar nature of the responsibility of councils can be imperilled. Second, when councils (presbyteries and synods) are merged, it is almost impossible for the larger of the councils not simply in effect to take over the responsibilities of both. Third, when conciliar responsibilities are taken over by executive officers, however well-meaning, then again the conciliar responsibility of councils can be diminished. Moreover, the thrust towards centralisation is stimulated by western cultural anxiety that conciliar responsibility appears at times to be disorderly and uncontrollable.

Here is a real issue of theological existence today. Here recent decision-making in the Uniting Church in Australia in relation to same-gender relationships and marriage seems to me to raise a number of important questions.

**1** First, it seems to me that the recent decisions made by the Assembly in regards to these matters present a confidence that certainly was not apparent in the traditions of Reformed Christianity, particularly



in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The decisions made appear to present a confidence that Reformed Christians would have found unusual. What do I mean by this? The 2018 Assembly appeared to operate in private for much of its discussion on same-gender relationships and marriage. Thus the Assembly appeared to rely heavily on the action of the Holy Spirit within its discussions, and on Christian fellowship. There appears to have been little interaction with the rest of the church catholic, for example in terms of guidance and opinions given by ecumenical guests, both national and international. This is an unusual way for a church to operate, especially for a church committed to ecumenical fellowship. Moreover, in the history of Reformed Christianity there has always been an inclination towards being tentative as to knowing the will of God in any particular matter. Clearly this inclination to being tentative was influenced by fear of apparent certainties from the medieval church. The Reformed tradition always sought "light from any quarter" to test its assumptions. Thus, the certainty expressed in the resolutions on same-gender marriage at the 2018

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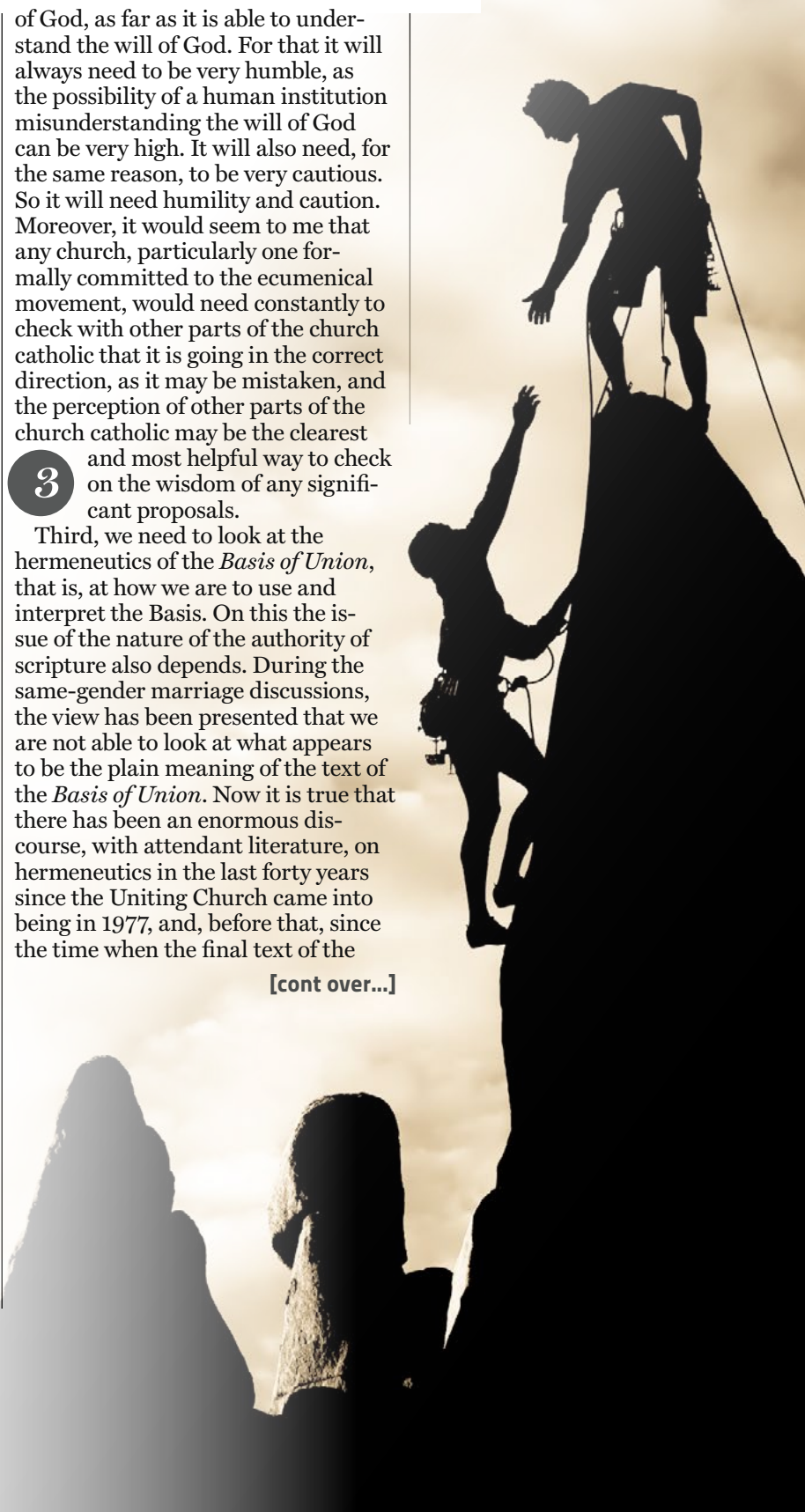
Assembly seem strange.

Second, an underlying understanding of the Assembly decisions, as presented in the reports from the Assembly after it was held, appears to give the impression that the Assembly was attempting to satisfy the human understandings of marriage. It thus appears that an aim of the Assembly in this matter was to attempt to honour the varied human understandings of marriage perceived within the membership of the Uniting Church in Australia. That aim may be totally legitimate for a parliament in a liberal democracy, as, for example, for the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, to seek to do. However, such a methodology would seem to me to be questionable within the church. This is so for a number of reasons. The primary purpose of an Assembly, in whatever it discusses, is to seek to fulfil the will

of God, as far as it is able to understand the will of God. For that it will always need to be very humble, as the possibility of a human institution misunderstanding the will of God can be very high. It will also need, for the same reason, to be very cautious. So it will need humility and caution. Moreover, it would seem to me that any church, particularly one formally committed to the ecumenical movement, would need constantly to check with other parts of the church catholic that it is going in the correct direction, as it may be mistaken, and the perception of other parts of the church catholic may be the clearest and most helpful way to check on the wisdom of any significant proposals.

Third, we need to look at the hermeneutics of the *Basis of Union*, that is, at how we are to use and interpret the Basis. On this the issue of the nature of the authority of scripture also depends. During the same-gender marriage discussions, the view has been presented that we are not able to look at what appears to be the plain meaning of the text of the *Basis of Union*. Now it is true that there has been an enormous discourse, with attendant literature, on hermeneutics in the last forty years since the Uniting Church came into being in 1977, and, before that, since the time when the final text of the

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# Facing the Challenges [from 21]

*Basis of Union* prior to the votes was created. This discourse has included many perspectives, among them a plethora of post-modern approaches. A number of perspectives may even then have been in the minds of some who drafted the *Basis of Union*, and certainly may have been, or are, in the minds of those who have sought to understand the Basis since then. However, the question must arise as to whether those individuals or councils who voted for church union had anything but the relatively plain meaning of the text in their minds when they voted. For example, when they read in Paragraph 5 that the church's 'faith and obedience' were to be 'regulated' by the books of the Old and New Testaments, did they assume, or did they not assume, that those words were to be understood by the lens of Paragraph 3? Was that clearly explained to every voting individual and every voting council in the three uniting churches? Or was that not the case? Thus, does the question need to be raised: is there only a small and elite group of people in the Uniting Church who are really able to understand and interpret the *Basis of Union*? And are the rest of us really dependent upon them and their insights? This is of great importance for this issue, as on it depends the matter of how we are to understand and use scripture, and therefore the matter on where authority lies for Christian faith and life. This also relates to the counter-cultural nature of much in the New Testament. In a significant part of the Greek world of the first century AD homosexuality, in outlook and in practice, was honoured and was at times seen as culturally superior. Nevertheless, from the beginning, Christianity, following Jewish traditions, stood out against such an outlook and such practice. Thus the resolution of the hermeneutical questions raised above is of considerable significance to the Uniting Church.

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Fourth, the issue of our ecumenical relations is also of importance. The vast majority of world Christianity has not gone along with

same-gender marriage within the Christian church. It is true that a number of Protestant (and Anglican) churches in Europe and North America have agreed to same-gender marriage. However, the only churches in our region which have gone along this way are the Methodist Church in New Zealand and the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia and New Zealand, in addition, I presume, to the Metropolitan Church in Australia and New Zealand. A charism to re-unite the churches, a central charism of the Uniting Church at its formation, of itself clearly means a degree of caution and of inbuilt conservatism (with a small "c"). This appears to have been demonstrated in the Uniting Church's ecumenical decision to drop the "*filioque*" from the Nicene Creed at the 1994 Assembly, to bring closer our relations with the Orthodox Churches. This caution and conservatism now seems less apparent.

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Fifth, it is necessary to deal with the issue of what constitutes "matters of vital importance to the life of the Church" (*Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15 (c)) or "a matter vital to the life of the Church" (Constitution, Clause 39 (b) (i)). It may well be that the institution of Christian marriage was not formalised in the early church. It may well be that teachings on Christian marriage have evolved in historically relatively recent times. Nevertheless, Christian marriage is a very significant institution in contemporary Christianity worldwide. In western societies it perhaps holds a less significant position in western cultures than it did, for example, thirty years ago. However, in world-wide Christianity Christian marriage is as influential as ever. As an institution, and particularly as a very public institution, in contemporary Christianity it is therefore significant. Behind it, and undergirding it, lie many central Christian theological beliefs, including, among others, the doctrine of revelation, including scripture, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, including human creation, and the doctrine of

reconciliation. Whatever may be said, these central theological concerns lie behind the presenting issue of same-gender marriage. For that reason they need careful consideration by the whole church, in all its councils. A similar theological concern arose in Germany behind the need to produce the Barmen Declaration in 1934. Its presenting concern was primarily the matter of the relationship between church and state. This issue is not directly dealt with in either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creeds of 325 AD and 381 AD. However, the theological issues behind it were central to Christian existence, including again the doctrine of revelation, the doctrine of God and the doctrine of reconciliation. Indeed, after the Second World War, no-one internationally would have taken German Christianity, especially German Protestantism, seriously if it had not been for the Barmen Declaration and the German Confessing Church.

Against such a background as these points raise, it seems to me that the most appropriate action is to seek for the invocation of Clause 39 (b) (i) of the Uniting Church in Australia Constitution. Such an invocation should be seen as a sincere service to the Uniting Church in Australia, and not in any negative way. If as a church the Uniting Church is *reformata et semper reformanda* ("reformed and always in need of being reformed"), the whole Church should rejoice at this opportunity to reconsider what the Assembly has recently decided. The church's long, historically hard-fought, traditions call some members at times to be, not deserters, but dissenters. The Uniting Church Assembly should rejoice in this opportunity to think again.







# Creation, Cross & Crown

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*Creation, Cross and Crown*  
- three visions of life in Christ

The realities of creation, cross and crown may seem somewhat unrelated, but as we shall see, they are intimately connected in the life of a Christian. (Parts 2 and 3 will be included in future editions of ACCatalyst).

## Part 1. CREATION God's Creation our home

What we see happening around us in the world today can easily lead us into a state of anxiety and uncertainty. To anchor us we have the witness of our Lord Jesus Christ and those who bear testimony to him. And there is another witness that agrees with that testimony, and that is the creation itself. These present days are a good time to tune in to, and be aware of, the testimony that the creation gives, and to see how attuned Jesus himself was to God's creation around him, and how he drew wisdom and insight from it.

## God's hidden settings for His creation

Many of the things the creation has to tell us we may not be aware of. Consider small children playing happily at home. They have no real understanding of the thousands of things that their parents have done to provide a safe and happy home for them to live in. The parents have bought or built a home and will be paying it off for years to come. They carefully provide food, vaccinations, clothing, education and a thousand other things for the good of their children. And the little ones, bless their hearts, are blissfully ignorant of the thoughtful love, careful planning, amazing provision, and enduring sacrifice of their parents.

In the very same way, there are a vast array of provisions that our Father, Creator God has made for us and of which we are largely unaware. Recent scientific

discoveries have shown us that what we see around us on planet earth can only exist as it does because thousands of different factors governing the creation are set exactly at the level that they are set. If they were to vary, even a little, the whole thing would disintegrate.

One scientist informs us that there are more than 30 different physical or cosmological parameters that require a precise setting in order to produce a life-sustaining universe. For example, the nuclear force that binds protons and neutrons together in the nucleus of atoms, the exact level of the force of gravity, the energy density of empty space, and more than 27 other such settings. Scientists say that the big bang was the start of everything, but before there could be a big bang there are conditions that needed to be set for a bang to work, and to produce the universe we have, and to make possible the life we have on earth. Like the children, oblivious to the provision by their parents, all of this is quite beyond us, but none-the-less vital to our existence and wellbeing.

Supposing you went for a hike in the mountains and you came across some rocks that had been arranged to form the words "Welcome to the mountains (your name)". You could conclude that these rocks had been arranged by chance, or you could think that someone who knows you has come to the mountains before you and arranged the rocks to welcome you. Most people would think that the first of these possible causes—chance—was impossible, and that the second, someone had gone before them and was welcoming them, was almost certain. Likewise, self-existent matter, let alone a self-existent universe and a self-existent habitable planet (earth), is an impossible nonsense.

## Tuning in to God's presence in the creation

As we turn to be more aware of God's creation, we realise that there are so many things in our culture that turn us away from the creation; things we humans have made: TV, computers, mobile phones, electronic games, material possessions, large comfortable homes, fast, luxury cars etc. These are all part of the creation, but they can keep us from it. We can easily spend little or no time communing with God's creation.

Most of us have heard of the term 'blue-tooth', which incidentally has nothing to do with the colour blue or with teeth. A blue-tooth connection enables two electronic devices to be connected and to talk to each other. For example, your mobile phone and the radio/media device in your car; all possible in God's amazing world. In a more natural sense we human beings can be blue-tooth connected, as it were, to one another, and to the creation around us. You can see what I mean by looking at the Lord Jesus who was very much at home in, and in tune with, his Father's creation:

[cont over...]

# Creation, Cross & Crown

He was born among the animals and laid in a stable feedbox.

After his temptation in the wilderness, he was with the wild animals and the angels were ministering to him.

So many of his teachings use illustrations and parables taken from the creation:

The birds of the air neither sow nor reap and yet their heavenly Father feeds them.

Consider the lilies of the field, they neither sow nor spin, yet even Solomon was not clothed like one of these.

The sparrow does not fall to the ground without your heavenly Father seeing it

A sower went out to sow...

The kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman places in the dough.

What man among you who has 100 sheep and loses one does not go...

I am the bread of life ... I am the light of the world.

Consider the fig tree ...

Before dawn Jesus went out to a desolate place to pray.

He was asleep in the boat during a storm...When awakened he said to the sea, "Be still".

He fed thousands with two loaves and a few small fish.

After feeding the five thousand he dismissed the crowd and went up on a mountain to pray.

The disciples were in the boat with a head wind and he came to them walking on the water.

He turned water into wine.

He had a down-to-earth affinity with marriage, children and the family home:

Therefore, shall a man leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

Let the children come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God.

Woe to anyone who causes one of these little ones to stumble.

Jesus was 'blue-tooth connected' to the people around him. He knew things about them, and what they were thinking. He connected easily and naturally with ordinary people. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, and was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds, because 'they were like sheep without a shepherd'.

He went to the Mount of Olives to sleep at night, and to the garden of Gethsemane to pray.

He took the basic elements of human sustenance to represent himself: this bread is my body...this cup is my blood'.

After the resurrection he met his disciples back in the midst of the creation:

'Cast your net on the other side of the boat.'

He was on the shore, having lit a fire. Bring some of the fish you have caught.

Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus was entirely at home in his Father's creation.

## Wonderful creation, crazy world

We are living in a time when the world seems to be going crazy! It can be hard to keep your bearings and know the will of God. The good thing, essentially, is that God's creation does not change. Though somewhat burdened by our presence, it is still the home God has made for us. The Holy Spirit fills the creation with the glory of God, and the believer, as at the beginning, finds the presence of God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. As the Scripture says,

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

*The whole earth is full of his glory.*

## The Creation, our healthy home

You see many programs on TV about how to stay healthy and happy. The second-best treatment for lasting health of body and mind is to stay deeply connected to God's creation. When we know our Heavenly Father (the best treatment), we can see a sign over His creation that says, "Enjoy!"

Take a walk in the garden; go hiking in the bush; watch the sun set down at the beach; go bird watching; start singing in the rain; watch the joy of children playing with water; climb a high hill and take in the view; smell the air after rain, or the mown hay as it wilts in the paddock; listen to the lambs calling to their mothers and the mothers replying; laugh raucously with the kookaburra; sit by a campfire, smell the smoke and watch the flames; take an early morning swim; make love under the stars; take a walk in the moonlight; feel the sun on your back; pick ripe fruit from the tree and eat it fresh; play ring-a-ring-a-rosy with little children; lie down in the tall grass; take a nap under a shady tree; go fishing; listen to the birds at first light; watch the seagulls by the sea; watch the bees collecting honey, or the ants rushing about; or a bird making a nest, or a lamb having a drink from its mother; have a chat with a dog; watch the sunlight glinting in the treetops; camp outdoors for the night, or just sit, beside a gurgling stream; if all else fails, watch nature programs on TV!

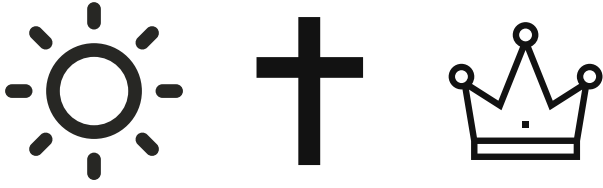
There is a program on TV called River Cottage where a young guy lives on the land and does 'hands on' things with animals, vegies, cooking and life-close-to-nature. It's kind of therapeutic and wholesome to watch him do it.

One of the saddest things in the modern world is seeing elderly people shut away from the creation in aged care homes. For some it may be unavoidable, but it can contribute to their decline.

## Creation, futility, redemption, new creation

Finally, for us to be one with creation and be ministered to by it, we need an accurate understanding of the world's





situation. Because of sin and evil, the creation has been 'subjected to futility', and is in 'bondage to decay'. Like us it lives with longing and hope.

*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

**Romans 8:19-23**

There is a bitter-sweet tone in the creation's worship of God, and like us, it rejoices over the coming into the world of our Lord, and it worships in expectant hope of his return to establish 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'. (2 Peter 3:13). This expectation and celebration are captured in Psalm 96.

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
let the field exult, and everything in it!  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
before the Lord, for he comes,  
for he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness,  
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*  
**Psalm 96:11-13**

In his song, *Creation Sings*, Stuart Townend lays out the unfolding themes of creation, futility, redemption, and new creation. The last verse expresses that longing which we share with the whole creation.

Creation longs for His return,  
When Christ shall reign upon the earth;  
The bitter wars that rage  
Are birth pains of a coming age.  
When He renews the land and sky,  
All heav'n will sing and earth reply  
With one resplendent theme:  
The glories of our God and King!

*Hallelujah!*

*Let all creation stand and sing, "Hallelujah!"  
Fill the earth with songs of worship;  
Tell the wonders of creation's King.*

Quotations are from the English Standard Version.

## MUSIC

Wayne from ACC member congregation Ulverstone UC (Tasmania) has written a song as he reflected recently on a verse following a bible study (Acts 3: 14) and gives praise to God for this inspiration.

# The Righteous One

*Holy and Righteous  
you came from heaven  
we are the sinners  
you came to save  
yours is the glory  
ours is the rapture  
bless us each day Lord  
bless us each day*

*Holy and Righteous  
slain on the cross  
you offer redemption  
paid for in blood  
creator of heaven  
born of the virgin  
we are your children  
bless us O Lord*

*Holy and Righteous  
redeemer of sinners  
laid in the tomb  
left all alone  
you are my saviour  
you are my Lord  
bless us each day Lord  
bless us each day*



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# Swimming Between the Flags



**I**f you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

*What does Joshua 24:15 have to do with swimming between the flags?*

Put it this way. If you don't want to swim between the flags, choose where you are going to swim. There is room on both sides if that is what you want.

*But some people want to move the flags outwards. They say there is a whole ocean out there. So let's be more inclusive.*

And who told them they could do that?

They say it's not a matter of life and death.

Maybe they don't know much about the ocean!

**T**he Apostle Paul gives another picture of "serving the Lord" to the Church at Corinth:

*I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough.*

This is a picture of intimate relationship: a betrothal to Christ. That's why the *Basis of Union* (1971) uses the language of "she" for the Church. *The Basis of Union* warns against preaching another Jesus. Paragraph 5 says, *When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled*

**A word of encouragement:** *Obedience is not mindless. Serving God engages our whole being and requires initiative (under God's direction), as in the Parable of the Talents. Servants have delegated authority. That is something we tend to forget.*





by the biblical witnesses. Biblically, human marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church. What does that say about the marriage question?

### Freedom TO obey

*Mystery  
Acknowledged;  
Reality  
Received;  
Image-bearing  
Analogy;  
Gender-balance  
Enacted.*

### Freedom FROM obeying

*Mock-matrimony;  
Artificially  
Re-imagined;  
Reductionist  
Imitation  
Attempted;  
Gender-balance  
Eliminated.*

Ancient Israel had **three** options: local gods – blending in with surrounding society or the gods of the ancestors – going back to their roots, for security. This sounds like a Progressive mentality and a Fortress mentality.

We are created in the image of God to be able to have dominion. Dominion is delegated authority. We need revelation – God’s instruction – to know how to have dominion. So where **do** we put the flags? Where do we want to swim?

**We** are the Assembly of Confessing Congregations!  
We are the **Assembly** of Confessing Congregations!  
We are the Assembly of **Confessing** Congregations!

What are we emphasising? Are we trying to make a name for **ourselves**? Do we swim **grumpily** on the Fortress Mentality side? Are we being unnecessarily divisive by suggesting we are an Assembly? Are we arrogant in our claim to be an Assembly? Do we relish our obedience/ delegated authority as we set up the flags and proceed to swim between the flags?

We are an Assembly of Confessing Congregations. According to the *Basis of Union*, an Assembly has *determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church’s mission, ...*

The Assembly is supposed to set up the flags, and the congregations are meant to enjoy the swimming.

Where do our flags go? What do our Basis of Union, the constitution, our statements, and most of all, our actions proclaim? As an Assembly we have claimed authority to set up the flags, so congregations will know where to swim, “to do church properly” if you like. This is a delegated authority from the Lord of the Church, not a matter of self-definition, nor taking on the col-

# Swimming Between the Flags

ours of our society. Do we respect the lines in the sand, already drawn by God or do we put our flags elsewhere?

## Scenario 1



The markers are shifted to make room for diversity and greater inclusion.

The argument goes like this:

The Apostles disrupted the Jewish religion – changed some rules. We walk in the Apostles' footsteps, so we can change a few rules too.

*The argument overlooks the fact that the Apostles had Jesus' resurrection to cope with, and prophecies which Jesus fulfilled.*

*We need to ask: "What new prophecies or signs from God give you permission to do a rule change?" The Apostle Paul would say, "Sounds like another Jesus, another Spirit, another Gospel."*

## Scenario 2



Are we partly resigning the scope of our delegated authority? – Are we making God out to be a hard taskmaster, like the one-talent man? Are we grumpy, uptight, over-protective, because we don't trust God to keep us safe in the other part of the waters he has declared to be safe? Paul might call this another Jesus, another Spirit, another Gospel!

## Checklist: 'Swimming between the flags'

- How do we to love our neighbour? Do we avoid conflict, like Eli towards his sons?

Lev 19:17-18:

*You shall not hate your kin in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.*

- How do we promote social justice God's way? Moses was an activist at age 40. As a prince of Egypt he killed a slave driver who ill-treated an Israelite. He had to flee.

Micah 6:8:

*He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*

- How do we exercise delegated authority? Moses tried to shirk leadership of Israel at 80, after his murderous outburst at 40.

Hebrews 12:12-13:

*Lift your drooping hands, and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

- How can we be inclusive? Solomon expanded his empire by marriage alliances with foreign princesses. He was obliged to provide for their kinds of worship. Can we make marriage alliances with the spirit of the age, in the empire of relativism?

Rev 21 and 22 describe how God is inclusive. Our marriage is with Jesus. Rev 22: 16-17:

*It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The Spirit and the bride say "Come" and let everyone who hears say, "Come". And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift.*

- With rancour or gladness? Do we give some people the cold shoulder, like the elder son did to the prodigal younger son? Especially if they were wasting our time and diminishing the church?

Hebrews 12:14-15:

*Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.*

**Rev Walter and Dr Katherine Abetz  
ACC Tasmania Movement**





# Compromise, cataracts & our loss of vision in the Uniting Church

Robert  
Griffith

Minister of the Word  
Far North Coast Presbytery NSW



*“What one generation  
tolerates, the next  
generation embraces.”*

*John Wesley*

I returned home from my last eye test quite depressed. I had just been told I had cataracts and that my vision would now continue to deteriorate over time. I was also told that this condition usually develops in people much older than me. That made it even worse. They gave me a brochure which explained the condition and sent me home saying that surgery was not an option this early, but in time it would be the only way to restore my sight. So I went home, made a cup of coffee and read my brochure. Here is how it described my condition:

*A cataract is a clouding of the lens in the eye which leads to a decrease in vision. Cataracts often develop slowly over many years. Symptoms may include faded colours,*

*blurry vision, trouble with bright light, and trouble seeing in the darkness. This may also result in trouble seeing the road and obstacles when driving. Poor vision caused by cataracts may also result in an increased risk of falling and depression. Cataracts cause half of all cases of total blindness.*

Another source of my depression that same day came from reading a report from the Uniting Church Working Group on Doctrine on same-gender marriage and the recommendation that our next Assembly should change our doctrine on marriage so as to accommodate this trend which is now sweeping the world. When I finished reading the report, I remember asking God out loud, “*How did we get here?*” John Wesley’s words above immediately came to mind as I reflected on the many little compromises our Church has made in so many areas over the past four decades and how it was about to make the biggest compromise of all thus far. I wondered where this would end. I glanced down on my desk and read again the words in my cataract brochure, but this time not thinking about my vision but the vision of my Church. The cataract metaphor was very confronting:

*A cataract is a clouding of the lens in the eye which leads to a decrease in vision ...*

The lens of the Uniting Church has been getting more and more clouded over decades. As I sat there pondering the report I had just read, I could not believe that our vision had been impacted so much in a relatively short space in time. I then recalled *Proverbs 29:18*. “*Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint.*” (NIV) I felt sick as I reflected on how much restraint my Church



# Compromise, Cataracts & our Loss of Vision

## *in the Uniting Church*

had cast off over time and how cloudy our vision had become. I believe Eugene Petersen's translation of this verse really nails its true meaning and becomes a warning to the modern Church. *"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what God reveals, they are most blessed."* As our Church's 'lens' has become more and more cloudy through compromise, we have not been able to see what God is doing and we have stumbled very badly.

*Cataracts often develop slowly over many years ...*

At our second Assembly in 1979, one of our founding fathers, Davis McCaughey, delivered a stinging rebuke to the Church which he helped birth only two years before. Even at that early stage, our spiritual cataracts had begun to grow and blur our vision as we wandered away from *The Basis of Union* and the Scriptures in pursuit of some unique 'ethos' which distinguished us from other parts of the Body of Christ. At the time of McCaughey's death in 2005, President Dean Drayton publicly declared that Davis McCaughey had, *"... provided much of the vision, wisdom and intellectual strength behind Church union."* What our President neglected to point out was how quickly that vision and wisdom was discarded.

*Symptoms may include faded colours, blurry vision ...*

I was part of the birth of the Uniting Church. I served on the first State Youth Council in NSW. I had almost memorised *The Basis of Union*. Our

vision was crystal clear: evangelism and discipleship. That's all we seemed to talk about – leading people to Christ and making disciples.

In 2018, **evangelism** is a dirty word in many parts of our Church and **discipleship** is a term very few people even understand anymore; much less see it as our highest priority. The Great Commission has become a quaint anecdote from a bygone era, rather than the defining purpose of the Church Jesus promised to build. The 'bright colours' of the early Church and the 1977 version of our own Church have faded significantly as our vision has continued to blur.

*... trouble with bright light*

The One who said, *"I am the light of the world,"* is no longer central in the life of our Church. He is no longer proclaimed as the Lord of all creation and the only way to God. If we dare quote Jesus when He said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me,"* in many parts of our Church we are now met with the same question which came from the mouth of Satan in the Garden of Eden, *"Is that really what God said?"* The bright light of Christ, His atonement, sovereignty and Lordship ... seems too bright for the cataract-burdened eyes of our Church.

*... and trouble seeing in the darkness ...*

Like a Trojan Horse, darkness can often hide in plain sight until one day its full force is unleashed from within and people cry out, *"Where did that come from?"* As our vision continues to blur, fewer and fewer people can

see through the darkness and recognise the threats which have been growing for decades.

*This may also result in trouble seeing the road and obstacles when driving ...*

A week after I returned from this latest Assembly meeting, I spoke with a dear old couple who have been faithful servants of God in our Church all their lives and champions of the new and wonderful Uniting Church in 1977. They were both crushed by the news that our Assembly would change such an important doctrine in our Church with so little engagement with the whole membership. This dear old brother fought back the tears and asked, *"Why didn't we see where we were headed years ago and stop this?"* The only answer I had was contained in my cataract brochure. When your vision is impaired, sometimes you don't even see which road you are on, much less how fast you are travelling or what lies ahead. Our spiritual cataracts are no longer chronic, they are acute.

*Poor vision caused by cataracts may also result in an increased risk of falling and depression ...*

There are some members of our Church who are rejoicing and celebrating right now. They believe this is a great step forward and are really proud to be part of the Uniting Church at present.

However, they are few and far between in many parts of our Church. Depression and disillusionment have gripped so many of our people and I

have tried to encourage them to press on and stay with us as we trust God to lead us through this rough patch in our journey. For many, there is nothing I can say which helps them. The very first comment I received from one of the most respected and Godly elders I have known was, “Does anyone see just how far we have now fallen?”

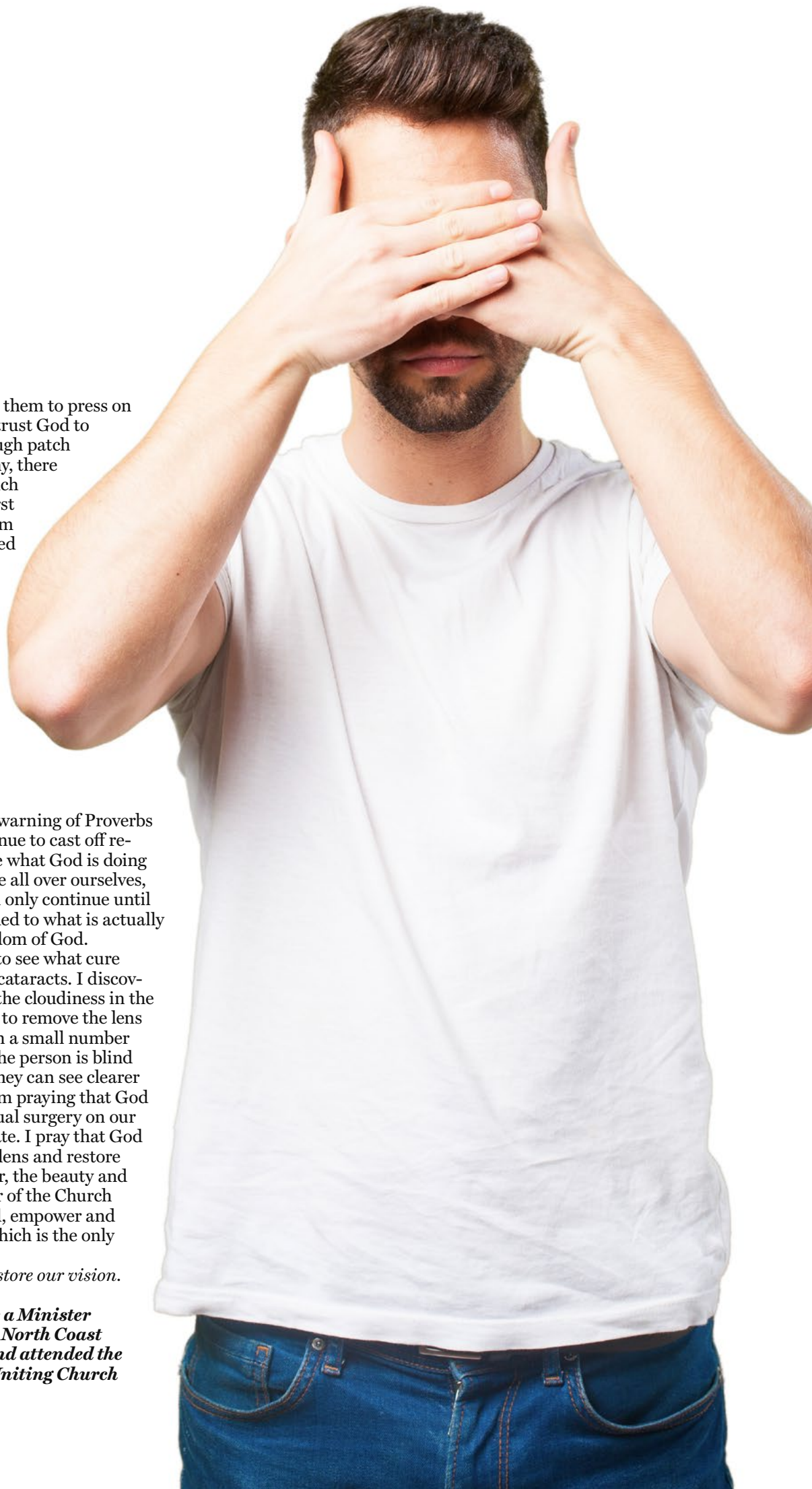
*Cataracts  
cause half of  
all cases of total  
blindness.*

In light of the strong warning of Proverbs 29:18 above, if we continue to cast off restraint; if we cannot see what God is doing and continue to stumble all over ourselves, then our vision loss will only continue until we are completely blinded to what is actually happening in the Kingdom of God.

So I turned the page to see what cure might await me for my cataracts. I discovered they can't remove the cloudiness in the lens; they actually have to remove the lens and put in a new one. In a small number of cases, this fails and the person is blind forever. In most cases they can see clearer than ever before. So I am praying that God will perform this spiritual surgery on our Church before it's too late. I pray that God will remove our cloudy lens and restore our vision of the wonder, the beauty and the transforming power of the Church Jesus promised to build, empower and lead in His mission – which is the only mission we have.

*Come, Holy Spirit, restore our vision.*

***Rev. Robert Griffith is a Minister of the Word in the Far North Coast Presbytery in NSW and attended the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia***



# It always was going to be Yes

**T**he Uniting Church had to say Yes to same sex marriage. After four decades of fawning to Christianity's cultured despisers there was no other option.

Alone among Australia's churches the Uniting Church boasts two opinions about marriage. Opinions are king in the UCA; traditions are expendable. Church members, like hungry diners at a cafeteria, may now choose whichever dish suits their taste without cancelling their membership as reformed yet progressive Christians. Welcome to the age of pain-free discipleship.

From its inception the Church's leaders were seduced by the promise of public applause for its ecclesial support of the prevailing appetite for change. Accordingly, they surrendered Christianity's rigorous understanding of sexuality to join the seismic shift in sexual ethics across the western world. This year most Assembly officials were recruits in the cause of 'progress'; a cause that has transformed the denomination, by political fiat as well as stealth, making possible two conclusions about the state of the Uniting Church.

First, as President Dr Deirdre Palmer said when the Assembly was over, the church is proud of having avoided the threat of schism. Proud also of its achievement in inventing two equally valid and contradictory marriage liturgies, allowing celebrants to marry or refuse to marry same sex couples according to their conscience.

The church, says Dr Palmer, now harmoniously accommodates diverse ethical and theological points of view. She does not say how far the church can travel in its quest for relevance, or whether in some future time the church will go the whole hog and offer its imprimatur to more advanced points of view, sexual or

otherwise. But for the time being, Uniting members have the luxury of no longer wrestling with the inexorable truth that apart from the Word of God there is no church.

Second, by endorsing the state's redefinition of marriage, the Uniting Church has surrendered the right to contradict whatever secular conventions might emerge in the future.

The Assembly argues that marriage is "not of the substance of faith" because marriage is not defined in scripture. Ergo, Christians may create their own definitions. The UCA has opened the door (the horse having bolted) for further retreat when new controversies arise, as they will in the worsening cultural contest now unleashed on Australian Christianity.

An unasked question is why? Why has the Uniting Church been steered into policies that owe more to secularist idealism than biblical realism, making it difficult to disagree that the Uniting Church has squandered its right to claim descent from the Reformed tradition.

To be sure, many faithful, serious and well-informed Uniting ministers and lay people will deny this. With heart and soul they are dedicated to making Christianity attractive to a society in which doing is more highly esteemed than thinking, and good works than goodness. Nevertheless, by barracking for causes inimical equally to the tradition of faith and the well-being of the nation, the UCA no longer presents itself as an authentic Australian church. A welfare movement perhaps, but not a church.

A church addicted to fantasies of diversity, tolerance and non-discrimination can admit whoever may come without compulsion or accountability. The rainbow umbrella of love - a merger of vague sentiment and sentimental idealism proudly displayed as proof of religious correctness - bears no relation to the sign that verified the promise to Noah (and human-

kind) that "when the bow is in the clouds I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature."

How then may we trace the genesis of the UCA's defection? It springs from the Assembly's failure to embrace Christianity's iconoclastic vocation to oppose idolatry in all its forms. Instead it has promoted denominational pride (spurning the prophetic witness) and the goals of 'progressive' secularism, creating the not unreasonable suspicion that Uniting Christianity is the religious form of the political and cultural denigration of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

By endorsing same sex marriage the Uniting Church has claimed a niche of its own within the ecumenicity of churches, endorsing new readings of Scripture and the spring-cleaning of traditions. It is ironic that without actually claiming to possess the truth, the Assembly declares itself without error, which stance bears out the truth that the history of denominations shows a tendency to fall away from their orthodox foundations.

That it should have taken no more than four decades is a singular achievement for a denomination politically astute but lacking theological candour, robust faith and self-confidence against the secularist assault. Self-congratulation that followed this year's Assembly meeting may be the most conspicuous demonstration of a denomination's fall from grace.

This is not the end of the Uniting Church story. Nor of resistance by those who, like the seven thousand, as Elijah was told, "have not bowed to Baal". If not the end, perhaps a new beginning?

***Rev. Warren Clarnette was the editor of Church and Nation (Victorian Synod) from the start of the Uniting Church to 1987, and helped establish ACCatalyst in 2007.***



# In Christ alone

Anne Hibbard

ACC National Prayer Network Co-ordinator  
and ACC National Council Member



*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* Ephesians 5:25-27 (NIV)

We now have two ‘integrities’ in the UCA for marriage, and the idea that each congregation can decide which one they will ‘use’. However, it is not as simple as that from a spiritual and doctrinal perspective. In 2003, the UCA’s Assembly would not make a stand preventing the ordination of people in practising same-gender relationships. In our congregation at the time (Liverpool, NSW), we thought we could just make our own statement along biblical lines and that would give us good covering. But the Lord showed me otherwise. He showed me that although the Assembly is not a hierarchy, it is responsible for the doctrinal oversight for the whole of the Uniting Church. Doctrine is an important and vital aspect of the spiritual life of the UCA, so an individual congregation is therefore significantly impacted by the Assembly’s decisions.

So what now is the doctrine of the Assembly? It is now primarily extreme “diversity” or radical religious pluralism. There is a healthy diversity, but when it becomes central to faith with Jesus on the margins it kills the church.

Without understanding this dynamic, even evangelical and reformed congregations may accept the Assembly’s decision of two integrities on marriage without understanding that in effect they are choosing a different gospel and a different Lord than what is expressed in scripture and the Basis of Union. They are choosing the gospel of diversity and the idol of radical religious pluralism instead of the Christian gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ. In affect by requiring congregations to accept the diversity of something vital to the Christian faith, the Assembly is expecting conversion to pluralism as now necessary to being part of the UCA.

So what is radical religious pluralism? Newbigin’s (1989) definition is still relevant today.<sup>1</sup> Rather than seeing differences between religions as between “truth and falsehood”, pluralism tells us they are all different ways of pointing to

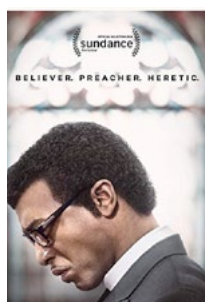
the “the one truth”.<sup>2</sup> Everything is allowed, except if you say that something is “true or false”.<sup>3</sup> Some would even say that, in effect, if you push pluralism to its extreme, it ceases to be pluralist and becomes dictatorial, demanding everyone conform to the same way of thinking.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, we have been experiencing more and more of this within the UCA. Dr Brian Edgar referred to this in a 2001 paper as “pluralist orthodoxy”.<sup>5</sup>

Edgar explains how at the time of union there was a broad “spectrum” of theologies in the UCA.<sup>6</sup> However people were willing “to cooperate”. Liberalism or pluralism was moderate and still encouraged inclusion of orthodox/ reformed/ evangelicals who had a more “exclusivist” worldview.<sup>7</sup> In other words, these liberals still respected those who held that there could be one truth about matters of vital importance to faith. Even in 2001, whilst warning signs were there, Edgar says that “pluralist orthodoxy” wasn’t the central way the UCA operated.<sup>8</sup> However in the last 20 years pluralism has pushed to the extremes more and more. With the passing of the same-gender resolution on marriage, radical pluralism has now moved to central stage and has become the identity of the UCA Assembly. Orthodox reformed evangelicals who speak of falsehood and truth will no longer be tolerated and encouraged to convert to pluralism or leave. There seems to be little attempt at understanding or having compassion for the many UCA members that cannot live with the decision made by the Assembly.

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations does not want to do what it has had to do in offering to be a ‘replacement Assembly’ for congregations and presbyteries and even Synods. The dubious doctrinal covering of the Assembly will permeate and compromise the spiritual health of any congregation, presbytery, synod or agency that does not disassociate itself from the decision of the 15th Assembly at this time. However, many still feel a call to the Uniting Church, and property and finance is only a minor reason for staying. We have a godly heritage and still unfulfilled Godly vision in the Basis of Union that has the potential of bringing Christ’s life to the church and nation of Australia. The ACC’s offer of a temporary ‘replacement Assembly’ provides congregations with a doctrinal and hence partly spiritual covering in keeping with Scripture and the Basis of Union.

We ask the Lord to teach us humility for pride will destroy it all. We seek to point not to ourselves, but to Christ as testified to in Scripture and secondly the Basis of Union. This covering is only temporary. We pray for the day when the Assembly will repent, and we are no longer needed. We will be ready to rejoice as Christ removes the veil from the Assembly, and the intimacy and life of Christ can slowly return. It is Christ alone who can wash us tenderly with his water and word and transform us into a pure bride without spot or blemish. It is Christ alone, who can come, assess and deal with us so that we might be able to “live and endure” “through the changes of history” “through the news of his completed work”.<sup>9</sup>

**Rev Anne Hibbard**



## Come Sunday (2018) M

**Starring:** Chiwetel Ejiofor,  
Gerard Catus, Allie McCulloch

**Written by:** Marcus Hinchey  
based on a radio story from  
WBEZ's This American Life

**Directed by:** Joshua Marston

This is a fascinating and well-made film about the challenging and sobering story of Bishop Carlton Pearson (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor - the lead in *12 Years a Slave*). Pearson established and grew a large church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and was one of the leading African-American preachers in the 'fundamentalist' tradition established by Oral Roberts, having been mentored by Roberts during his ministry training. Oral Roberts is convincingly played by Martin Sheen.

The film follows the basic story of Pearson's ministry and influence and the dramatic (almost overnight) change of belief where Pearson basically explained to his congregation one Sunday that he had had an 'epiphany' and woken up no longer believing he could reconcile judgment with a loving God. Leaders and members of the church tried to explain, rationalise and wrestle with his thoughts, but it was soon evident he was promoting a form of universalist reconciliation, and soon there was a large exit of members. Pearson was declared a heretic by his colleagues in the Joint College of Africa-American Pentecostal Bishops in 2004, and moved onto different churches and arrangements, including Unitarianism and New Thought faiths.

The film is in need of some editing for length and repetition, especially as it is a bit didactic in the sense that the director is trying to make Carlton Pearson into more of a martyr for the liberal cause than he patently deserves. I leave you with some of Pearson's words.

"I'm an atheist who is a theist," he chuckles. "I still believe in God but not 'a' God or 'the' God. Just God."

**Peter Bentley**



## I'm in Love with a Church Girl (2013) PG

**Starring:** Stephen Baldwin,  
Zahn McClarnon, Michael Madsen,  
Ja Rule, Martin Kove

**Written by:** Galley Molina

**Directed by:** Steve Race

I admit I was intrigued to see this film (available on Netflix) mainly because of the title. It is a professionally produced new style of Christian film in that it is aimed at a broader audience than the typical church group, namely the wider US nominal Christian audience.

Miles Montego is a former drug dealer, and now wealthy investor and event organiser, though still with strong 'street' connections. At a party held by his stockbroker and the stockbroker's wife, he meets a group from the wife's bible study, including Vanessa Leon. Miles is interested in Vanessa and soon they are seeing each other as friends and this leads to questions about where the relationship is heading. Vanessa clearly outlines the importance of having a husband who has a relationship with God. Miles is so keen on Vanessa he starts to attend church, read the bible and talk with other Christians. He meets Vanessa's parents, and there are some strong scenes with her mother who is clearly not as keen on Miles.

Stephen Baldwin plays a DEA agent who has been trying to catch Miles out, but is also intrigued at the change in lifestyle and then his connection with the church. The film is based on the director's own story (Galley Molina), who actually wrote the material as a book in prison. Molina was keen to also have well-known American Christians like Adrienne Bailon (who plays Vanessa) and Stephen Baldwin to bring a strong sense of authenticity to the Christian roles.

While there may be a few 'twee' moments, this is an encouraging and faithful story, and illustrates how someone's life can be transformed by the gospel, and the role that ordinary people play in sharing the gospel.



# Wholesome romance



## Snowy Summer

Novella Distribution  
2018

Written by  
Patricia Weerakoon

Reviewed by  
Anne Weeks

What would a novel by a Christian sexologist be like? How many sex scenes would there be and how would they be described? I had read Patricia Weerakoon's previous novel, *Empire's Children*, and enjoyed it as a gentle romance between a wealthy British plantation owner and the daughter of the tea-maker. It was set in Sri Lanka, the country of the author's birth and in a tea plantation much like her own father's.

*Snowy Summer* reflects much more of Australia, the country that is now her home, and is strengthened by a more complex plot with more suspense. Patricia has crafted a story about Annie, a young Australian girl who had emigrated from Sri Lanka. Annie is engaged to a Sri Lankan man that she and her family expect her

to marry. Within the first chapter, doubts are cast over this marriage and the story moves swiftly to include much unravelling of secrets and exploration of the main characters' lives. The setting is mainly around Jindabyne in the Snowy Mountains, which is accurately and charmingly described, due to her frequent visits there and her husband's passion for bushwalking in the national park. Her detailed research into both the landscape and the communities give the story an authenticity which even Snowy locals may find difficult to fault.

The wholesome romance – without lurid or unnecessary sexual descriptions – delighted me and it had enough twists to make the ending less predictable than *Empire's Children*. The intrigue gradually unfolded and kept my interest to the last page. It is not an overtly Christian novel, but has some positive references to church and Christian radio and Annie's commitment to reserve sexual intimacy for marriage is respected.

Patricia is more well-known in academic and Christian circles as a woman who has researched, published and continues to present on many aspects of sexuality, including 23 years as lecturer at the University of Sydney. She is not afraid to speak frankly and yet beautifully about God's gift to married couples, and to address many of the pressures facing children and young people in today's sex-obsessed world. She has written books for several age groups and a recent resource for parents *Birds and the Bees* by the Book was reviewed by Lisa Yew in the March 2018 ACCatalyst.

If you are looking for a wholesome romance/mystery novel that would suit teenage to mature-age readers, I recommend *Snowy Summer*.

*Anne Weeks is a secretary of the NSW ACC Movement and is married to Rev. Ian Weeks, minister at Belrose UC.*

# In Christ alone References

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# Public Policy Fail

Peter  
Bentley

ACC National Director



*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2: 3-4)*

## The Failure of Public Policy

How has our society arrived the point where wide-spread abortion is tolerated, and a beneficial view of euthanasia is promoted in parliamentary bills? Why was a romantic view of same-sex marriage given media endorsement and such a prominent focus in politics? Why is sexual experimentation promoted, often in the context of unwittingly promoting violence against women through the implicit endorsement of pornography?

To contrast though, there is a common abhorrence about sexual trafficking of women overseas, and often at least a public concern about the plight of refugees.

While there are many reasons, a key is the valuing, and now enshrinement, of personal experience over community and public good.

Distant 'causes' foster an intellectually based public good approach, simply because they rarely impact personally. In contrast, those 'causes' closer to our personal experience, while usually a private matter, are now deemed public because experience dictates that if it is valid for me, it is valid for all.

The campaign for same-sex marriage was based around the desire of some individuals to make recognition of their relationship equal to what had been the normal understanding of marriage. The Uniting Church Assembly's agreement with this change is one that was based on and now enhances

individual beliefs and actions. It allows a situational theology dependent on the policy of the minister or church council of the day and illustrates well the issues arising for any group that jumps on the bandwagon of the wider sexual libertarian agenda. What happens when a minister and church council disagree? What will happen when different congregations on the same property have different views? What happens when the neighbouring church in a parish arrangement comes to a different view? There is no real 'unity in diversity' when the diversity is so distinct that it is contradictory.

This individual and situational focus is now very evident in politics. Over the last few decades there has been an increasing failure of political leaders to put aside their personal views when considering matters of public policy. This has been vividly illustrated by the never-ending litany of bills to introduce euthanasia. Pro-speeches are fundamentally based around personal story and personal experience that pushes public policy to situational ethics and individual views, rather than public debate about what is best for the whole country.

Of course, personal experience will always be a part of debate and argument in terms of the law and often new laws arise from a particular personal event or situation. How can a nation develop public policy based on different and conflicting personal experiences?

For example, euthanasia proponents promote individual cases, rather than looking at the overall picture and the sad implications of state endorsement of sanctioned suicide or even 'helpful murder'. In reality it leaves the focus and decision with the individual, and the individual is given leave for action. This is an irony in Australia as the state moves to sanction what it had previously given up as not being in the best interest of public policy, namely capital punishment.

While Australia is not of course a theocracy, Christian virtues underpin our law and practice, and these virtues help to oppose the libertarian orientation, and maintain a focus on the public good, rather than individual desire.

I encourage our political leaders to put aside their own desires and interests and again seek the public good – to consider what is the good for the country, rather than the individual.

Simply, a nation ignores its history and heritage at its peril. If Australia increasingly distorts, rejects and blurs its common base for developing public policy, citizens could end up being judge, jury and executioner.



# Questions & Answers [from 5]

open to constant reform under his Word'; and to 'seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit'.

**9** *Is there any chance of the Assembly being forced to reconsider its decision?*

Some have been speaking of asking the Assembly to seek the concurrence (i.e. agreement) of the other councils of the Church. However, some years ago the Assembly changed the UCA Constitution, removing the need to do this. Clause 39 (b) (i) now says that if half of the Presbyteries in half of the Synods, or half of the Synods, notify the President that they believe 'a decision includes a matter vital to the life of the Church and that there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision', the President will suspend the decision while the Assembly undertakes further consultation. Following this consultation, the Assembly shall determine whether to affirm, vary or revoke the original decision.

At the time of writing, 3 Presbyteries (out of 8) in Queensland have invoked Clause 39 (b) (i). There are two others that may do so. Proposals to enact Clause 39 (b) (i) are also being considered in presbyteries in the Northern Synod, SA and NSW. However, in the end the decision still rests with the Assembly.

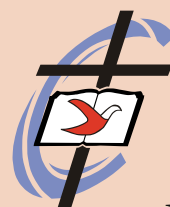
**10** *What can congregations and individuals do to assist the ACC in finding a way forward?*

The greatest assistance is believing prayer. That is, prayer that believes that God will give to us a way forward that enables us, in good conscience, to hold fast to the faith once delivered, and to continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Please pray for all those who are seeking a way forward in this impossible situation, and especially pray for our ACC leaders: Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki (national chair) and Peter Bentley (national director), and the members of the National Council. Pray also for congregational leaders and ministers, especially those who are being pressured by Synod and Presbytery leaders because they belong to the ACC.

Another way to assist is by providing financial support for the ACC so that its leaders and staff can continue their work.

*Here we stand, we can do no other, so help us God.*

# The Officers and Members of the ACC National Council



8 October 2018

*Extract of the decisions made at the AGM of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc. on the future of the ACC: 18 September 2018*

## **5.1 Resolved: That the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc:**

- a) receive the Discussion Paper on the Future of the ACC dated 23 August 2018, and;
- b) change the words "within the Uniting Church in Australia" to "of the Uniting Church in Australia", and that the Constitution be changed accordingly.
- c) determine that, until such time as the Assembly of the UCA repents of its apostate decisions and returns to the faith of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations humbly, and independence upon God alone, offers to Congregations the role of a replacement Assembly in matters vital to the life of its Confessing Congregations.
- d) encourage ACC member congregations and clusters to join an existing orthodox Presbytery that has rejected the UCA Assembly decision, and invite those presbyteries to realign themselves with the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, and;
- e) affirm the ACC National Council working with other networks seeking to establish orthodox non-geographical presbyteries for those congregations that are not part of an orthodox presbytery, and;
- f) affirm that the make-up of the ACC National Council be broadened, where the National Council considers it appropriate, to include up to three (3) members from those Presbyteries, groups and networks who have a similar purpose to the ACC regarding the direction of the UCA, and;
- g) encourage the ACC School of Faith to negotiate with like-minded evangelical theological and bible colleges in order to develop an alternative pathway for the teaching and training of candidates for ministry, ministry leaders and ministers, and;
- h) authorise the National Council to develop a support network for ACC ministers and leaders; and commit the ACC to provide support, encouragement and counsel to ministry agents, Congregations, clusters and groups who find it difficult to pursue evangelical, reformed and orthodox ministry; and ,
- i) amend the ACC Constitution to accommodate Resolution 5.1 (b) along with the Amendment to Section 25.3 as outlined in Appendix A of the AGM Papers.
- j) in light of Resolutions 5.1 (b) & (c), the ACC accepts the responsibility for the spiritual and doctrinal oversight of its member Congregations; and encourages its member Congregations to advise the UCA Assembly of their Congregation's support for this action.tical arrangements.

ACC would like to acknowledge the generosity of members who provided the financial support for the meals, and all other expenses associated with providing a support team at the Assembly event. The prayer foundation, through the leadership of Rev Anne Hibbard was very evident, with many members highlighting how they were strengthened and refreshed to continue to witness during the very difficult circumstances.

**Praise be to God.**

# Musings of A New Grandmother

*I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.*

*2 Timothy 1:5 (NIV)*

Here I am in the hospital room. My daughter Bella lies asleep in her bed. Next to her in his crib lies my first grandchild Gabriel. She fed him about half an hour ago, but he wouldn't settle following. Bella was exhausted needing sleep so I took on my grandmotherly duties and rocked him and held him until he finally dropped off to sleep. As I held him in my arms my prayers and love covered him. I've been praying that he would grow throughout his life in stature and grace with the Lord. During the last couple of months I've been making him a crocheted quilt. As I crocheted I prayed for him even though I hadn't yet met him. That quilt will cover him as will also my prayers.

I want to encourage every grandparent and great-grandparent. Our prayers for our grandchildren, our great grandchildren are very important. They cover them in their lives in ways we may not ever fully understand. Paul reminded Timothy of the faith he first saw in his grandmother Lois and then in Eunice his mother and now also in Timothy. My prayer as I sit here with Bella is that one-day someone can say that to Gabriel.

**Anne Hibbard**

*Bella Easterbrook's mum and Gabriel Easterbrook's Granny*



## REFLECTION

# A Word for Today

***"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."* (Ephesians 1:17-18).**

In this passage Paul prays for the church in Ephesus. This prayer gives us understanding about how we might pray for other Christians. He prays that the Father would give the Spirit of revelation and wisdom so that they would know him better.

Knowing God is the most important, the most wonderful, the most central and normal part of human life. To know him better is the desire of the redeemed human heart. And Paul prays that the Spirit would reveal more of the Father,

that the Spirit would show us new truths about his glorious character, about His works, about the hope we have, and about our inheritance as his beloved children.

We cannot know him more without the revelation that the Spirit brings each day. So let us pray for this revelation of the Spirit for others today and each day.

### Prayer

*Dear Heavenly Father, please bring your revelation to us daily, that through your Holy Spirit and your word our relationship with you would be so alive and consuming. As we pray, help us to desire you more and more and to actively pray for others to experience your love, peace and grace. Father, reveal your incredible life changing power and remind us that you have made it possible through Jesus and that we have a hope that is real. Amen*

Devotionals are provided by Rev. Derek Schiller (Minister of the Word at St George Uniting Church, Qld), 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 or ACC Website.





# Luke 2:1-14

**2** In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And all went to be registered, each to his own town. **4** And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed who was with child. **6** And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

**8** And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. **10** And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. **11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. **12** And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

**14** "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased !



## THIS IS THE ACC

### 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:

- a) To confess Christ according to the catholic, reformed and evangelical heritage in the Basis of Union, by:
  - i) upholding the Scriptures' prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ as the final authority for the Uniting

Church's faith and life;

- ii) 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;

- iii) calling the councils and congregations of the Uniting Church to uphold the Basis of Union and Constitution:

- iv) providing biblically-grounded leadership in partnership with other confessing movements;

- v) developing ecumenical partnerships for the more effective proclamation of the Gospel in our pluralist nation; and

- vi) 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](mailto:accoffice@confessingcongregations.com)

✉ Post: PO Box 968 Newtown NSW 2042





# CONFERENCE 2018



**Rev Keith Garner AM (Wesley Mission) presenting at the ACC National Conference in Sydney.**

Conference report starts page 10



**Worship Leading**



**Rev Bob Imms with Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki**



Photos: With acknowledgement to Paul Francis'