

Faithfulness in Babylon

Many faithful people in the Uniting Church increasingly find themselves serving as strangers in a foreign environment, in a church that seems to have deserted them and that no longer really represents their beliefs or values.

Reading Chapter 1 of the book of Daniel and considering how Daniel the Israelite served King Nebuchadnezzar provides some insights that are helpful. Daniel and his friends found themselves exiled in Babylon. Notice that Daniel was not alone. He was part of a little group of like-minded brothers. Knowing the gift of God's presence, instead of causing a fuss and openly rebelling, Daniel and his friends were vulnerable in that they fitted in with their surrounds. They were given a Babylonian name and re-educated in Babylonian culture. While they enjoyed many benefits, the danger was that they would acquiesce, lose their identity as people of God and become idol worshippers. There was no easy way. Nonconformity was dangerous unless they could somehow stand apart.

In verse 8 Daniel chose to draw a line in the sand and he refused to accept food from the King's table. It was not the food or the wine itself that was the real problem **but rather from where it came from**, ---'the King's table.' To engage in table fellowship was to ally himself with that person---to accept his invitation to come into his circle, his fellowship, his agenda. Daniel could not do that, so he decided to make a courageous stand. Rather than being seduced by Babylonian ways and drifting away from God he drew a line. With courage and discernment, he gave his unqualified allegiance to God. Daniel responded with integrity and in verse 9 the Official showed understanding.

When it seems God is absent and powerless, the reality is very different. God's hand controls all events and by verses 19-20 God has his own people in places of high influence in Nebuchadnezzar's court. The Babylonian Empire was eventually toppled by the Persian Empire. The point of verse 21 is---as you look back---it's clear who has been in charge all along! God.

We must be engaged in the world. Living for Christ in the world he died for. We need discernment to draw our boundaries and to keep them in the workplace, in romance and the church. We need peer support, ongoing Christian in-put and fellowship. God is always on his throne, always faithful, always at work and will always prevail.

How do we Then Live?

The Uniting Church, as an advocate of compassion and 'progress' claims to be inclusive of all people. In light of this, it is fair to say that those of evangelical conviction and heritage will probably never officially be asked to leave the church **but in practice the church's radical theological plurality and practice** increasingly isolates and marginalises those who dare to hold a more evangelical position. Without elaboration here, it means we are under increasing pressure to rethink our continuing place in the Uniting Church. As a way of better understanding the position of many within the Church, I set out various options as I see them enveloping many within the church today.

Response and Calling

1. The complex issues of our time appear to overwhelm many of our ageing Congregations, so some people choose to respond by not responding. It can be easier to step back and ‘let the ball pass to others’ without getting too involved or upset over controversy. With respect for those comfortable with this position, I detect that this choice is adding to a growing gap between general attenders and others involved in the decision-making directions of the church.
2. Others in good conscience increasingly feel isolated and called to make the painful choice of leaving their church in order to adopt another fellowship that is faithful to the Scriptures and the Christian heritage. This calling-out may be important for continuing loyalty to the Lordship of Christ, Christian nourishment and mission.
3. Some feel that things have now reached a point in the UC where a specific **call to remain** aligned to the Uniting Church is required. Rather than walking away and surrendering their investment in the Church they love. Where this call to remain in the UC exists, they realize **it can no longer be ‘business as usual’**.

Those in position 3 live in the tension of often disagreeing with the church they belong to. This means being willing to stand firm as honest advocates of the Christian position and as a prophetic voice within the church. With compassion towards the socially marginalised it means also being called to be humble witnesses to new life in Christ and to following the Uniting Church Basis of Union. While every church situation is different, some practical tips follow here.

Being Practical and Pastoral

1. In many ways the focus of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations is structured towards Congregations rather than individual members so sometimes people who align with the ACC can feel isolated. Yet a conscious sense of being called to confess Christ remains important.
2. Instead of walking away, surrendering the rich heritage of the Uniting Church and the Basis of Union if your calling is to serve Christ by remaining in the Uniting Church we need to clearly draw a clear distinction between being IN the church without being OF it.
3. It is healthy and liberating to recognise the reality that you are in a minority and to have a strategic awareness.
Like all other compulsions, we all struggle and are not in a position to judge others. Same-sex attraction is not uncommon. We all fall short of the glory of God. Be clear about loving the *person* while refusing non-Christian *lifestyle* choices. For Christians to modify Christian marriage is to go against God’s plan.
4. The culture within the Uniting Church is becoming more hostile towards those of evangelical conviction. Anticipate the cost of following Christ. Jesus reminds us that we will be “despised” for his sake. This does not mean the world will be marginally un-sympathetic. Where deciding to *stand apart* from the recent decision on marriage means being different, it can also be a lonely place, especially if you are marginalised in your own Congregation.

5. Rather than being a ‘sleeper-undercover’ Christian it is a good thing to be transparent. Own up to your spiritual convictions. Declare your position, join others and write to your Parish Council.
6. You will be distressed less if you understand that it is likely you will be confronted, by people from both inside and outside of the church.
7. Be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves about expressing your convictions before others. Freedom of religion and expression, especially in the UC means, tolerance, inclusion **and that diversity includes you.**
8. Don’t be bullied or intimidated. The Uniting Church is the party that has moved, not the other way around. The Basis of Union Para 1 calls us to give sole loyalty to Jesus Christ.
9. Don’t be over-reactionary, obsessed or frantic about your concern for the church. It is God’s Church not yours. Without being ‘pushy’ pass on ACC material to those who show interest or concern. Be ready to be bold and to report on helpful articles or activities.
10. Being in solidarity with people of like conviction and mind is a Christian obligation. Don’t go it alone. Take the initiative to engage and keep contact with others for mutual encouragement. Align yourself with an ACC Congregation by enquiring about becoming a Member in Association with them.
11. To steel your calling, identity and resolve to continue to serve people and friends in the Uniting Church, ask a Bible Study group or a gathered, sympathetic Congregation (even from a different church) to pray over you and affirm you in your confessing role.
12. Stay informed by visiting the ACC website. Read yourself rich, practise your daily devotions and pray for the renewal of the church and its witness in the world. Supplement your spiritual intake with para-church ministries. Explore encouraging resources and Belgrave Heights speakers. www.bhc.org.au

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