

# the Good Confession



SUMMER 2022

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## The Future of the Uniting Church

with Dr Keith Suter



## IS “SECULAR WELFARE” NOW THE FUTURE OF THE UNITING CHURCH?

The largest group ever for a Confessing Christ (online) meeting heard Keith Suter's presentation on *'Is secular welfare now the future of the Uniting Church?'* on Saturday, 12 November 2022. Dr Suter is well-known in the Uniting Church for his extensive writings on the Uniting Church and its future and has a resource website on this area. Keith Suter – Church Futures – PhD thesis: Does the Uniting Church in Australia have a future?

Dr Suter's video is a key resource and we encourage congregational leaders to view and provide to your members. The presentation can be viewed on the Confessing School of Faith website via this link.

Dr Suter's notes from his presentation are included in this edition and also available to download (2 pages), or from the ACC office by request. Is “Secular Welfare” now the future of the Uniting Church? Dr Keith Suter ([confessingschooloffaith.com](http://confessingschooloffaith.com))

### 1. Introduction

- PhD: <https://www.churchfutures.com.au/>
- UC is one of Australia's largest “businesses”
- scenarios deal with what could happen; they are not predictions
- scenario planning encourages people to think about the unthinkable
- it provides clients with possibilities – and not action plans on what should be done

### 2. Three Ways of Thinking About the Future

- (i) prediction
  - “Moore's Law”: Gordon Moore of Intel
  - power of computers will double every 18 months-2 years; price of computers will halve every 18 months-2 years
- (ii) preferred futures:
  - role of vision
  - building a bridge back from the future eg 1962 JFK pledge to put a man on the moon
- (iii) possible
  - what could happen? What are the signs of change that are there, but we are not seeing them?

3. Futures of the Uniting Church

- scenario planning is a business technique for thinking about how the future could evolve
- reduces the risk of being taken by surprise by providing warning signs, and encourages creation of contingency plans
- can be controversial because it highlights matters that people, particularly at top of organizations, may prefer to ignore
- not a technique for the faint-hearted (which helps explain reluctance in many organizations to use it)

4. Outline of the Four Scenarios

- i. “Word and Deed”: UC could become a church of a small number of large parishes providing both spiritual activities and social welfare, like city and regional missions
- ii. “Secular Welfare”: UC could let the congregations just fade away and instead focus on provision of social welfare (albeit derived from a Christian tradition). Much of the work of the existing UC is already focussed on social welfare and this is growing, while the congregations are in decline. Most Australians who have contact with the existing UC do so via UC agencies (such as in aged or childcare) rather than congregations

- iii. “Return to the Early Church”: UC could reinvent itself along lines of first three centuries of the Christian church; scenario taps into the “emerging church movement” and sees a UC that is sick of the commercial corporate ethos that underpins much the government-financed social welfare work
- iv. “Recessional”: UC could be wound up and its assets dispersed; scenario examines how UC is trying to operate in an increasingly secular society; there is no hostility towards it; it is simply treated with disdain by a population who can see no relevance in its work for them; UC would devise an exit strategy for a wind up
- this part of the scenario planning process should not result in picking winners!

5. “Secular Welfare”

- UC provides services but without any congregations
- this simplifies governance, management arrangements and risk management
- one UC agency runs all community services
- parishes have been wound up or just allowed to fade away
- some chaplaincy services may still be provided
- theological training wound up, with training of chaplains done via the Internet and/ or outsourced to other organizations

- UC schools and colleges responsible for their own affairs
- UC social welfare work is professional via the “care economy”
- little popular interest in Christian spirituality
- “capitalism of mercy”, where each of the charities and for-profits compete against each other to obtain government contracts, public and corporation donations, and publicity
- UC appeals to secular organizations for funding
- UC operating in a secular society where people are more interested in quality of services rather than the motivation behind their delivery
- UC tenders for government contracts without risk of theological complications
- UC has specific properties for community services; no problems over disposal of surplus church buildings (which have all been sold off or repurposed)
- recruitment of staff is easier because there is no search for Christian workers; employment criteria eased up and a wider pool of labour available
- reduced prophetic role; UC speaks out less to avoid alienating potential government funders and private donors

6. Indicators

- continued decline in size and number of UC congregations
- continued aging/ funerals of UC members

- increased openness in official UC meetings and statements about declining state of UC congregations and search for alternatives
- increased UC concern about cost of maintaining congregations
- increased concern over cost of UC theological education institutions
- decline in number of people coming forward for ordination
- continued disposal of UC church buildings
- increased rental use of UC buildings for alternative purposes (such as self-help groups, meditation, yoga, non-UC religious services)
- increased recruitment of talented people to work in UC welfare agencies with a desire to assist humanity (but not necessarily with any deep-seated Christian convictions)

7. So What?

- next step: ACC could examine what this scenario means for its member churches: What are the implications? What contingency plans should be drawn up? Does ACC have a future? What (if any) are the applicable scenarios? Does ACC need its own exit strategy?

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Scan the QR code to access the podcast



Special  
Assembly of  
Confessing  
Congregations  
Inc. meeting

25 March 2023

As arranged by the 2022 AGM, a special meeting of the ACC will be held on Saturday 25th March 2023 by zoom (online). Zoom link and details will be provided to members closer to the time. Please see the note in this newsletter about financial membership.

Important  
communication from  
the ACC National  
Council

Please keep a look out for an important letter about the future of the ACC (and you may have received this by the time you read this newsletter). The National Council received responses from member congregations and clusters

to the decisions of the 2022 ACC AGM at a council meeting on 28 November 2022. These prayerful responses, as well as the previous reports from our consultant, feedback from many members and advice from the Board of Management has enabled the council to formulate a number of recommendations that will be considered at the special ACC Assembly meeting on 25 March 2023.

We encourage all members to join in weekly prayer for the special meeting and the ACC and the ACC National Council. You may like to join the Wednesday Prayer Group (8:00 am (AESDT) that meets for one hour to pray for the work of the ACC, or join with **ACC NOW (National Online Worship)** that meets online via zoom every Sunday afternoon

at 3pm (AESDT) to worship God in song, psalms, prayers, scripture, preaching, share Holy Communion and intercession, including prayers for the work of the ACC, the persecuted church and society. There is also opportunity for people to receive prayers for healing. Any people who would like to join us are very welcome and zoom details are in editions of the ACC email newsletter or are available from the ACC Office.

Advice about  
Financial Voting  
Memberships

According to the ACC constitution voting member representation is from the congregations, groups

and clusters and the National Council. Only financial members of the ACC are able to appoint a representative(s) who can vote.

*Please note: if a congregation has not paid their membership for 2022-2023 by the time of the special meeting, they will not be able to appoint a voting representative. It would be appreciated if congregations intending to renew (and have not presently done so) could contribute by January 15, 2023. This will also ensure that the mailings for the meeting are provided.*

If you have any change of contact details, particularly email addresses, please provide them as soon as possible to the ACC office.

Supporting  
Members of  
the ACC

The ACC is very appreciative of the wide support of all our individual and couple members and all members are very welcome to join and participate by speaking in ACC Assembly meetings.

Due to the last few years with Covid restrictions making it difficult for many to renew, some long-term supporting members who have not yet paid for the present financial year (1 July 2022 – 30 June 2023) have been kept on the membership list. If you are unsure whether you have paid you can contact the ACC office for information.



Facebook

See the ACC Facebook page for encouraging bible verses, quotes from well-known writers and preachers and links to helpful and topical articles and reference material

New ACC Website

See the new website for ACC info: [confessingcongregations.org.au](https://confessingcongregations.org.au)

Note: the (new) website now contains the collection of ACCatalyst magazines. [confessingcongregations.org.au/accatalyst-magazine/](https://confessingcongregations.org.au/accatalyst-magazine/)





## Change of (physical) Office Address

Please note: in this interim period the ACC office has moved from Newtown to a new location and is wonderfully hosted at Sydney Cheil at Concord. The postal address remains the same: PO Box 846, Newtown NSW 2042.

## Magazine Archive for ACCatalyst

Digital copies of all the editions of the ACC magazine are available on the ACC's archival website and also on the current website. The National Library of Australia also maintains a digital record of deposits.



## WHO WE ARE

For more about the ACC visit: [confessingcongregations.org.au](http://confessingcongregations.org.au)

Within the Uniting Church context of a very broad range of theology and practice, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc. is a nationwide body of congregations and individuals whose vision is:

- Confessing the Lord Jesus Christ
- Proclaiming the Truth
- Renewing the Church.

We do this by:

- Prayer, with our prayer network and regular (online) prayer meetings.
- 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, particularly within the ACC School of Faith.
- Providing resources through our websites, social media, newsletters and gatherings that build up believers, develop their gifts, and equip them for life, mission and works of service.