

'The Gospel' in the Uniting Church

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In his inflammatory address to the 1979 Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, Rev. Davis McCaughey issued a passionate warning against what he identified as a tendency to adopt a form of incestuous Church patriotism, which would obscure and ultimately destroy the Church's only vocation, which is to carry on the mission of Christ. Look carefully at what our first President and the architect of much of *The Basis of Union* declared only two years after union:

"At all events the cry for a sense of identity in the Uniting Church cannot be answered by the offer of a new kind of Church patriotism. In an important sense, we in the Uniting Church in Australia have no identity, no distinctive marks - other than belonging with the people of God brought into being by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on their way to the consummation of all things in Him. We have embarked on a course in which we ask men and women to forget who they are, and chiefly to remember Whose they are."

Throughout this prophetic address, McCaughey pleaded for a return to *The Basis of Union* as a source of correction and renewal of the already deteriorating Church - a renewal, he emphasized, that must begin with the congregations themselves. Hence, for McCaughey, any suggestion that *The Basis of Union* is merely an aspirational document or some transitional text that brought the uniting churches together, must be rejected out of hand.

Forty years later, I believe McCaughey's prophetic warning should be the most important item on all our leadership agendas. In so many ways I believe we have traded our sacred birthright for a sloppy mixture of quasi-pagan sentimentality, soft-left political correctness and social acceptability. For decades now there has been this insatiable search for our 'identity' as the Uniting Church - the very thing McCaughey warned against. The term 'ethos' has been tossed around a lot in recent years and we are even asked to affirm the 'ethos of the Uniting Church' before being inducted as Ministers, Pastors or leaders.

This passion for a distinctive UCA identity or 'ethos' has become the focus for too many of our leaders. Some are even bold enough to now refer to it as 'the gospel' of the Uniting Church, like there is more than one Gospel. Let's be clear: There is only one mission - the Mission of Christ and that mission has only one Church - the Church which Jesus promised to build. There is only one Gospel - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel is Christ and so the Gospel for the Uniting Church is Christ in our midst just as we affirmed in Paragraph 3 of *The Basis of Union*, when we declared boldly that UCA is, "... an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself."

When God dragged me out of a comfortable sabbatical a number of years ago, He very clearly led me back to the church of my youth and back to *The Basis of Union* which so powerfully impacted my early Christian years. I responded to that call in spite of the fact that the Uniting Church I was part of in 1977 no longer exists. Tens of thousands of people with whom I celebrated in June 1977 are no longer with us. They walked away from the very church I walked back into six years ago.

They could no longer embrace what the Uniting Church has become and I completely understand why. But I really wish they hadn't left. I believe you can't change the game from the grandstand, no matter how loud you shout. You have to be on the field of play, as part of the team. Only there, can you make a difference. That's why I am still here today. So what do I think God is saying to us at this critical juncture in our shared journey? Pardon me for appearing simplistic, but God's call to us as disciples has not changed since the Church was born.

As Karl Vaters reminds us in his article entitled 'Becoming a Great Church,' we simply need to "... *do the basics, wholeheartedly and consistently for a long time.*" For some reason many modern, 'enlightened' believers want to find some 'new' expression of Church and in so doing, we depart from the foundation of our faith. You know the basics: worship, prayer, fellowship, Bible teaching, discipleship, evangelism and bringing people into the presence of Christ. How we do the basics can certainly be packaged to suit the 21st century and our particular community, but the content of that package must never change!

Vaters says, "*However you break it down, it's all about the Great Commandment and the Great Commission: Love God, love others and make disciples.*" Unhealthy churches put a lot of resources into the 'extras'. Healthy churches drill down to the basics and never, ever depart from them. The Uniting Church in Australia enshrined those 'basics' in *The Basis of Union*, but then began moving away from them almost immediately in pursuit of some separate identity other than just living in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. Why was that not enough? Too many of our decisions and regulation changes over time have pushed us further and further away from *The Basis of Union*, the New Testament Church and the basics of all God-initiated, Christ-centred, Spirit-led ministry.

In my opinion the only relevant 'distinctive' of the Uniting Church in terms of the mission of Christ is that three previously separate parts of the Body of Christ decided to come together as one over 40 years ago. Whilst the importance of that historic event should never be understated, the mission of Christ the day after Church Union was no different to the mission of Christ the day before! It is arrogant to imply that the formation of the Uniting Church somehow redefined or reshaped the only mission we have: the mission of Christ. When the Uniting Church was born, we simply created a wonderful opportunity to consolidate our resources and our hearts for that mission and the Uniting Church in Australia should have then exploded with life, growth and vibrant ministry.

However, as Davis McCaughey lamented, as soon as this new 'pilgrim people' found their feet, we began to intentionally walk away from the basics of our faith in this relentless pursuit of an 'identity' other than just being disciples committed to making more disciples – in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. I ask again: Why was that not enough? Why is that still not enough forty years later?

Do we no longer believe what Paul wrote in Romans 1:16 – that the power of God to change lives and the whole world is already embodied in the gospel itself? Do we no longer understand why Paul's calling was so simple: "*We preach Christ crucified ...*" and how his entire ministry and all his missionary journeys were nothing more or less than doing the basics, wholeheartedly and consistently for a long time? And it worked! The early church had a huge growth rate for decades and that was not some cultural phenomenon which is irrelevant today - it was the natural outcome of a healthy church which refused to depart from the foundations of their faith and never dreamed of taking the reigns of the Church away from the Holy Spirit Who directed their every move.

We have wandered far from our roots, and yet God's promise to redeem our lost years, grant us the gift of repentance and renew our passion for the mission of Christ is as strong as ever. I believe this is the most important time for the Uniting Church since our inception. Now is the time when we must make some hard choices and return to the basics of our faith and stop ignoring or apologizing for Whose we are. If we don't turn back now, then I believe this will be the time when we pass the point of return and set the final chapter of UCA in motion. I am ready to fight for what God birthed over 40 years ago and not see it disappear. Are you?

Of course, the greatest battles we will face in our journey back to our roots will occur within our own ranks. I am afraid we have taken 'diversity' and 'tolerance' to such an extreme now that even the most basic of Christian truths have become negotiable or have already been replaced by a new 'gospel,' which is really no gospel at all. (See Galatians 1:6-8).

I thank God for our Colleges and for the blessing they been to so many like me. I hope we see them thrive for years to come. However, what is taught within the walls of these great centres of learning must not be quarantined in our commitment to get back to the basics and see the Gospel of Jesus Christ re-emerge as the heart and soul of all that we do in Jesus' name. We must examine afresh what is taught and what is no longer taught in our Colleges and be brave enough to make some changes so as to ensure we do not stray from our basic calling as Jesus' disciples.

This battle will not be easy friends – we have lost a lot of ground (and people) and we may have left our run too late to recover from our current free-fall - but I ask you this question: what alternative do we have? If the current trajectory is not altered soon, the Uniting Church in Australia will fade into history far sooner than most of us want to accept.

What saddens me most as I ponder the road ahead is when I hear those among us who are boldly and loudly declaring our distinctives and proclaiming that the Uniting Church is leading the way for the other Churches to follow. In some areas that may be true but I would never declare that. However, we have to face the facts: Some of the decisions which have led to the departure of many thousands of people from our ranks, are still being celebrated as the Uniting Church 'ethos' and some brave souls refer to these distinctives as 'the Gospel of the Uniting Church.'

Was it God's plan to bring about this miracle in 1977, only to see it diminish and implode? That doesn't sound like the God I worship and I will continue to do all I can within the limitations I face to see the Church which is embodied in *The Basis of Union* and anchored in the New Testament, brought back to life as the presence and authority of the living, reigning Christ once again explodes within our congregations and communities.

May it be so, Lord.

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