



This is the FIRST of a series of papers that reflect on the course of the Uniting Church. Tracing the personal journey and reflections of Rev Ted Curnow, the papers bring together a wide range of statements and insights related to the position of the Church and Christian marriage. The themes cover Cultural context, lead up stages, Assembly 2018, the aftermath and sorting out of substance and popular myth.

### **Introduction.**

The beauty and crowning glory of creation came with the climactic act of God in creating man and woman so that together they reflected the divine image.

The great Hebrew commentator Rashi, quoting Matthew 19:5-7 declared it to be the final commentary on the union of man and wife given by our Lord,--- ***“and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”***

However the sound of God’s voice soon penetrated the trees and stillness of the garden. It was a voice of alarm that emerged from the primal mists to address the human conscience, a voice that detected a fatal flaw in the sacred relationship and that still calls “Where are you?”

The birth of a national church in 1977 came with a dynamic vision derived from the rich heritage of three churches. It came with all the potential of a contemporary new birth. The potential to be innovative and relevant, while being rooted and loyal to Christ. Forty years on the Uniting Church has taken both bold steps and courted controversy. Facing pressures from within and without, the recent decision to embrace two contradictory views of marriage has revealed a young vulnerable church that in its attempt to be relevant has now taken one serious step beyond the recognised faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The pages that follow do not attempt a full summary of the Assembly agenda. This is not a series of papers or reflections meant for the light hearted. It is a lament and a call to repentance. It reflects the consequences of a compliant, vulnerable church struggling to be loving and compassionate but by-passing the responsibility of exercising tough love. Being certain about caring but unsure about being Christ centred. Rather than being a critical thesis, the picture being painted here consists of many splashes of colour from a wide range of sources. The paint is still wet on my own personal reflections and the gathered bits and pieces on an unfinished picture.

Here we push beyond the neat clichés and political correctness of a nurtured church culture. Here we will encompass the Uniting church on the broad canvas that will critique its fidelity to Christ and its Christian heritage, particularly in its understanding of marriage and its ability to stand apart and remain faithful, to be salt and light in an increasingly shallow hedonistic world. Thinking back now it seems rather amazing that during the course of my years I have been acquainted with two rather strategic National Presidents of the church. Rev Dean Drayton had served at my home church, Salisbury in South Australia during 1974-77 and visited during my early appointment at Streaky Bay. During those same years a young Deidre Palmer had joined us by participating in a visiting Beach Mission team. While South Australian Moderator in 2015, Deidre had also sent greetings at the time of my book launch about early Bible Christian Methodists. Rev. Dr Drayton was National President at the historic 2003 Assembly and Dr Palmer was President during the now notable Assembly of 2018. I attest to both being, sincere, gifted, people and both having been shaped by Church polity.

The year 2003 provided a door for Ministers of the Word to practise a homosexual lifestyle, while 2018 approved two forms of marriage as being Christian. Sadly these two controversial Assemblies have resulted in thousands of people leaving the church over

the years and have intensified the question of how I should continue to relate to the Uniting Church. They have certainly resulted in a redirected interest in the significance of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations.

### **The 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly**

The announcement of the theme of the 15<sup>th</sup> triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church came in early February 2018. “Abundant Grace, Liberating Hope” It was a positive theme calling us to recognise that we had been greatly blessed. It reflected God’s generous and overflowing love in a time of turbulence. Dr Deidre Palmer, the then President elect wrote, “*God has nurtured in us as a dis-ease with “business as usual” when that “business as usual” is unjust, diminishing or exploiting the life of our planet.*” The theme, ‘Abundant Grace, Liberating Hope’ was to highlight Christ’s call to be bearers of Christ’s hope and light in a dark world.

Reflecting on the historical journey of the Uniting Church, an opening paper by William W. Emilsen in the book, ‘*A Pilgrim People: Forty Years On*’ states, “***Forty years on is not a long track record. The history of the Uniting Church is equivalent to less than two minutes in the history of the human race and about a week in the history of the Christian church.***”

These striking opening words, help to paint the big-picture-background that I want to capture in this, the first of a series of reflections. Emilsen continues, “*If we are troubled by the loss of membership, cutbacks, constant restructuring, retrenchments, ecclesiastical mismanagement, unfulfilled dreams and disappointments, a loss of confidence in the ecumenical vision of the 1960s and 70s---we need to view recent developments with a more universal and critical understanding of our history.*” (1) He concludes by saying there is enormous upheaval in the church occurring with rapid social, political and cultural change, and when anxiety and decline have occurred in the past it has often resulted in a rediscovery, a rebirth and a renewed confidence. This comes close to explaining the period of my life time and ministry in the church. It has been a complex journey of personal discovery, learning and lament.

The providence of God outworked through history has always been dynamic. C. S. Lewis has said, “*Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations; being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort of way we still are.*” In a dynamic way life is a sovereign gift of God and how we experience it is largely shaped by the circumstances of our generation. Reflecting on the path of our life journey we capture a living process that provides us with significant mile-stones of exciting discoveries, grief bathed in lament and rich experiences of learning. Not only do we recall significant events but how we cope and respond to events often confronts us with a glimpse of ourselves. This self-discovery becomes clearer as we stand back and assess the shifting sands of the greater part of our lives.

I find that the big picture of a world caught in escalating cultural, social change needs to be painted, if not in detail or brilliant colour, then at least in draft form, in order to recognise where the Christian church and where we ourselves fit on the broad canvas.

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(1) *A Pilgrim People, 40 years on*, Uniting Church National Historical Society, 2017, p1.

### **Formative Influences.**

As a teenager converted in the late 1950s and while still a vulnerable youth I stumbled into the radical period of the 1960s. My life had been shaped by the impression of the institutional church being the most stable, enduring institution of society. Without trying to detail all the changes of that period, here I mention a few of the features behind the ferment and trends that would ultimately spread a range of colours across the background canvas of a lifetime. It was a period of outstanding technological advances with the first landing on the moon and heart transplants. It was also a time that the slogan, 'God is dead' hit the headlines. This statement was provocative and radical at the time because our social-culture and Christian values were so closely entwined. In reflection now it was hardly new because 100 years earlier in the 1850s Friedrich Nietzsche had developed an anti-Christian system way of thinking.

Even earlier than that, during the 18th century Biblical criticism had come into its own with the dawn of the age of reason. With the creative energy of the enlightenment came many fanciful theories and a good deal of confusion about the unique inspiration and status of the scriptures. It was the blurred distinction between the human knowledge that Paul describes as having the ability to "puff up" and the willingness to be subjected to the unique revelation of the inspired Scripture that became an open battle ground. The spectacular parade of new discovery and ways of thinking that came with the sciences flowed over, and were inseparable from how Christians thought about God's revelation.

In the 1870s Julian Wellhausen came up with the documentary hypothesis to explain the Old Testament. This theory of interpretation basically reigned supreme into the 1920s. In Melbourne, Rev Dr E. H. Sugden, MA, BSc, Litt.D (1854-1935) with his brilliant mind and Wesleyan heritage explored the new sciences with a cultural elitism in both the Wesleyan and Presbyterian churches. The higher critical approach to the Bible was advanced with the presupposition that supernatural intervention was impossible. This approach would later manifest in the strong liberal stance of the mainline churches and included those that formed the Uniting Church. It also led to the demise of an evangelical voice that insisted on respecting Divine inspiration.

By the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a basic distrust in the Bible as a reliable history increasingly led to treating the Scripture largely as a human-socio document. The Bible was subject to error and needed scholarly interpretation to sort out myth and legend in order to find the real truth! This opened the door to pure rationalism. The denial of the supernatural, the deity of Christ and the place of the resurrection was largely attributed to religious fervour and distortion. Then, in 1964 Joseph Fletcher and Bishop John Robinson joined forces in advocating a new morality and a Christian ethic where the pure statement was the command of love. A sharp escalation in the marriage between secular, social-culture and orthodox Christian values that had been a feature of the Christendom era was soon led into an advanced stage of disintegration.

Geoffrey Blainey pointed to a demise from a broad cultural perspective when he said, *"So many of those who reject Western civilisation are the cultural off spring of the 1960s. New teachings revealed weaknesses in Western civilisation, but many present day scholars exaggerate. They minimise the benefits of Western civilisation and forget the gains."* (2) In 2017 Patrick Sookhdeo, spelt out the consequences from a Christian perspective, *"Since the 1960s Christian leaders have progressively betrayed the Gospel. The starkest example of this is aping the culture to affirm, bless and engaged in pansexual lifestyles. This lamentably is merely one example of a wide ranging liberalism that readily bends the beliefs of historic Christianity to avoid confrontation*

*with secular society. Many ordinary Christian clergy and pastors struggle to remain faithful, but they are betrayed by the treachery of the hierarchy.”* (3) Christians no longer know who they are and so cannot withstand the multi pronged attacks on their faith. People have forgotten their past and have no hope of a future.

The birth of the Uniting Church in 1977 coincided with Malcolm Muggeridge’s prophetic vision that anticipated the demise of Western civilisation. By 2018 the Australian Government, National University, and the church were ready to formally adopt a secular pluralism that jettisoned the essential values of our Christian heritage.

### **The Muggeridge Vision.**

Delivering the third Olivier Beguin Memorial Lecture under the title, ‘The Authority and Relevance of the Bible in the Modern World,’ Muggeridge, a journalist and author of international fame spoke with prophetic boldness.

*“We are living in one of those periods when the only certainty is uncertainty and the only sure prospect, the absence of any sure prospect. It is quite possible, if not probable, that many today will live to see the final disintegration of our western civilisation; and as part of that process our religious institutions and their affiliates are likely to share the fate of secular institutions--our parliaments, our law courts, our universities, so that an Olivier Beguin of the future may find himself producing and circulating clandestine Bibles, perhaps written out by hand like my Ukrainian friends. There are many indications that this total dissolution of our present way of life is not something that is going to happen, but that is already happening. During the London Blitz I had a strong sense that the buildings on fire and collapsing were already in ruins before the bombs fell, as the walls of Jericho were already crumbling when Joshua’s trumpet sounded. In the same sort of way, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that there is a death-wish at work at the heart of our civilisation whereby our bankers promote the inflation which will ruin them, our educationalists seek to create the moral and intellectual chaos which will nullify their professional purposes, our physicians invent new and more terrible diseases to replace those they have abolished; our moralists cut away the roots of all morality and our theologians systematically dismantle the structure of belief they exist to expound and promote. Certainly, it is difficult to think of anything professional subversives, anarchists and atheists have attempted which is not being better done by the ostensible guardians of our laws, our constitutional liberties and our religious faith. Yet if this is the case that the Bible contains words of everlasting truth, then those words must stand whatever may happen to us and our world.”* (4)

### **The Blainey Case**

**The following accounts of 2018 that follow graphically confirm and illustrate the cultural shift Muggeridge anticipated.** The Ramsey Centre explains itself by saying that its purpose is to advance education by promoting studies and discussion of Western Civilisation. On 9 June the paper, ‘The Australian’, under the heading **‘Our Universities recoil at how the West was won!’** reported that the Australian National University had rejected a study and scholarship proposal from the Ramsay Centre for the study of Western civilisation on the grounds insisting on academic freedom.. Other faculties were also preparing to erect barricades.

This opened public debate at a time when the institution of the Church was also under attack. Amid a hot bed context both the ABC and SBS were accused of bias against the Catholic Church for protecting child abusers on the grounds of the private seal of the confessional.

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(2) Geoffrey Blainey, Weekend Australian, 23-24 June, 2018 p15

(3) Patrick Sookhdeo, *The Death of Western Christianity*, Isaac Publishing, 2017, p2-3.

(4) Malcolm Muggeridge, Lecture, ‘*The Authority & Relevance of the Bible in the Modern World*,’ Olivier Beguin Memorial Lecture 1976. Bible Society, Ambassador Press, N.S.W.

On 20 June, Robert Phiddian, a lecturer, had written , *“Only the if you believe that students are stupidly impressionable can you believe that studying a curriculum based on the Ramsay Centre’s plan will turn out robot warriors for Western civilisation.”* Ex Prime Minister Howard said, *“Western cultural tradition is not perfect, no tradition is but essentially its made us who we are, its where we came from.”* Yet it seemed in comprehensible that a suitable arrangement could not be reached. Under the heading **‘Children of the 60s turn their backs on Western Treasures’** Geoffrey Blainey went in to bat for our Aussie heritage. Blainey pointed out that Australia’s universities are themselves creatures of Western civilisation. He found it difficult to grasp that many of the universities leaders refused to teach or debate the history and essence of their own civilisation. When some replied that they were independent and could not possibly handicap themselves by accepting a big sum of Ramsay Centre money, it was said that maybe they should devise their own courses.

Blainey concluded that it appeared that in the name of academic autonomy our central places of learning seemed not to own their own civilisation. They were, --*“less interested in the vast sweep of our Western civilisation than in being king of their own impressive castle.”* Blainey suggested that had the National University vice-chancellor, Brian Schmidt, a brilliant scientist in astronomy—and astrophysics been offered a huge Chinese grant for research he would have accepted it. *“But when offered a new course in the humanities and social sciences, especially history he says no!”*

Blainey continued, *“Nothing has done so much to transform the world in the past 400 years as Western civilisation. It is a main cause of the rise of democracy, the spread of education, the dissemination of Christianity to new continents and the flowering of various fine arts. Yet another gift--thanks to Western medicine --is that billions of human lives are enhanced and prolonged. These gains are part of what we call Western civilisation that most Australian universities are ceasing to study in depth or, if they do study it, often reach hostile or unsympathetic conclusions.”*

The article says the decision was based mainly on academic autonomy but the ANU had received large sums of money from Turkey, Iran, and Dubai and much income had also come from Asian and Chinese families with invisible strings attached. In light of these facts the Ramsey Centre could not be seen as a unique threat.

Academics of the Sydney university called the course “Conservative’ and Eurocentric” but Western civilisation is not Eurocentric. *“Even in origins it owes a heavy debt to the Old and New Testaments—and they are Asian, not European books in origin. A Ramsay Centre course in Western civilisation could not be confined to Europe. Printing as an infant technology came from East Asia to Europe, where it was improved, with dynamic effects. The Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, one of the ultimate mainsprings of democracy, owed much to the printing press. The slow rise of democracy and the rise of mass education owed much to the printing press and cheap paper.”* Sydney academics had seen Western civilisation as simply a, *“European phenomenon or a woeful example of white supremacy!”*

The Blainey article continued, *“There are few grounds, in any case, for the idea that a Ramsey type course simply would be preaching the benefits of Western civilisation. It will gain legitimacy only if it weighs on the same scales the defects as well as merits of the changing civilisation in which we live.”*(5)

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(5) Geoffrey Blainey, *The Weekend Australian*, ‘Children of the 60s turn their backs on Western Treasures’ 23-24 June, p15.

## The Paul Monk article

Other indicators of radical social change confronted Australia in 2018. The headline produced by journalist Paul Monk in the same paper reviewed above read, ***“Keep Faith with the Future.”*** The Federal Government commissioned (Phillip Ruddock) to report on the principles that should govern religious freedom in this country.

Freedom of religion and other historic freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and academic freedom had increasingly been under threat and six months after the Government redefined marriage in law there had still been no protections to safeguard expressions of faith.

Specific protection by law also needed to include the freedom to give parental care to a child without a parent being required to affirm a particular world view or set of beliefs. While the Secretary of Uniting Church’s LGBTIQ Network, Warren Talbot said the Government’s change to the Marriage Act in early 2018 had not reduced religious freedom and that *“There was no threat to religious freedom in Australia”* The Uniting Church in its submission argued for a balance between the right to practice religion and freedom from discrimination. A number of evangelical church groups, including the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, Hillsong and the Anglican diocese of Sydney called for the establishment of a Religious freedom Act to codify and expand exemptions to anti-discrimination laws in their submission.

This all took place after record numbers of Australians had declared on census returns that they were ‘not religious’. It was also during a climate of social tension over the relationship between religious institutions, sexual morality and the definition of marriage. Paul Monk declared his position by saying he no longer lent credence to religious dogmas or claims of revelation but that he came from *“long cultural traditions that are cherished in often subtle, humanistic ways,”* but he did not want to see traditional values, *“ransacked or assaulted.”*

Here I simply add extractions from Monk’s article in order to capture and extend the backdrop of the escalating socio-cultural ethos of the time. Monk writes, *“While the debate about religious freedom seems to centre on several moral issues, such as the status of homosexuality, gender fluidity, birth control and abortion or genital mutilation and so forth, we need to remind ourselves that its roots lie far deeper and have profound implications for 21<sup>st</sup> century civilisation. There is far more at stake than the baking of wedding cakes, as the US Supreme Court tacitly acknowledged in its 7-2 decision overruling the Colorado Civil Rights Commission in the recent Jack Phillips case.*

*--Fanatical and violent conflict between religious sectarians and persecution of heretics, apostates or infidels go back right through the histories of the three famous Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)---The upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and widespread militancy in the Islamic world over the past few generations raise questions across a spectrum of concerns about freedom of religion; Its relationship with secular society, its subordination to civil law and its tractability with regard to textual or archaeological criticism or the findings of the rigorous sciences.”*

*--“Peter Sloterdijk argues in, *You must Change Your Life* (2013),---“ the religions have been wellsprings of metanoia—visionary and motivational thinking since ancient times and need to be understood in this complex psychological context, rather than on a simplistic propositional basis”.—Terry Eagleton, similarly in, *Radical Sacrifice* (2018) argues that our **religious tradition**, more than the secular philosophical one, has motivated many human beings to look beyond their own, private utilitarian calculus*

and to think with compassion of others and of the possibilities for social renovation. All this is at stake in our debate over religious freedom.

### **Monk's Five Commandments.**

Monk advanced five principles independent of any religious tradition that he hoped may constructively inform the debate. (1) Each and every religion, sect or cult will be encouraged to accept that it is based on a story that others do not share and that such stories are seen by others as fables or myths, not revelations or truths. (2) Dialogue across religious boundaries or between intra-religious sects will proceed on the basis of getting to understand the story that provides them to live according to certain rules, practise certain kinds of rituals or observances, or dissent from them. (3) Provided such rules, rituals or observances do not violate the civil law or infringe the ultimate freedom and dignity of individuals, there will be no restrictions or interference in the freedom of believers. (4) No dogmatic claim or 'sacred scripture' will be accorded immunity from criticism in society at large. (5) There will be active dialogue about the larger story of science and human civilisation. These principles are intended to generate workability, progress and civil peace. Monk concludes, -- "*Whatever our stories—if we can communicate in this spirit we will not have a problem with religion in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.*" (6)

Although Monk is well meaning, in producing his five principle rules, he does so on the assumption that Christianity and religion generally needs an updated set of rules, a make-over that is relevant for the times. Here he overestimates the values of rules and under estimates the moral capacity of people to live by them.

### **The Current Culture Wars.**

What have become known as ideological *culture wars* have intensified across the nation over recent years. While the **Festival of Light** in Adelaide, in the 1970s was an early leader in this respect, now a plethora of groups, often regarded as right wing extremes by the Uniting Church, now defend traditional values. Martyn Iles of the Australian Christian Lobby quotes Isaiah 59:14-15. "*Justice is turned back and righteousness stands far away: for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking and he who departs from evil makes himself prey.*"

The preamble to the Australian Constitution contains the words, "***Humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God.***" It is worth noting that a group that sets out to protect our Australian values, ***The Canberra Declaration***, on 3 August 2018, placed a submission signed by 70,000 citizens opposing a proposal to replace the Federal Parliamentary Prayer with an invitation to pray or reflect. The group claimed that, "*For centuries, to speak of Western civilisation was to speak of Christian civilisation.*"— It stated that,--- "*the values we have cherished and sought to strengthen are in large measure founded on the Judeo-Christian belief system. At the opening of the first Parliament in 1901 the Duke of Cornwall and York, who later became King George V invoked the blessing of God.—Many Australians take these things for granted. It is therefore not surprising that ideologies such as neo-Marxism have made such inroads into Australian society.*"

Currently the Australian Labour Party supports radical gay-sex and gender initiatives like the so called "Safe Schools" programme which attacks people of faith, parents rights. Like paint still wet on the canvas all of these features provide something of the big picture background that marks the present socio-cultural scene. Now we move on

to the point of identifying where the Uniting Church, with what it understands as its 'progressive' justice record stands and where those of a more traditional evangelical conviction like myself fit into this rather complex picture.

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(6) Paul Monk, *Keep Faith with the Future*, The Weekend Australian 23-24 June 2018, p20,21.

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**Further Reference:** On the above web sites, **The Story of Colliding Worlds**. *The Church is caught in a remarkable period of rapid cultural change. Many Christians grieve over the loss of the past. Others are passionate about moving ahead. This resource explains two very different world-views and ways of thinking, the colliding of two worlds. It calls the church to face change, to faithfully discern the truth and with courage to be loyal in following Christ into the future.*