

UCA Where are You No 9

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

Gathering the Pieces.

The beauty of the Blue Mountains and a magnificent Sydney Harbour reflected the blessing of the church's earlier "Grace Abundant." theme. On 19 September, 2018 Wesley Chapel Sydney gave birth to a change in the stance of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations and its alignment to the Uniting Church.

In journeying to Sydney I had no assurance that the National Council of the ACC had any real new, forward looking directions on the table. Generally speaking rather than a strong revolt occurring or any anticipated strong support emerging; the trend appeared to be heading in the opposite direction. The ACC itself over the years had been largely ignored and given the silent treatment by the leaders of the Church. While as previously noted, many members in the ACC, seemed to belong to the older generation, the Uniting Church Assembly had a crafted approach. Organisers had appealed to the post-modern generation by organising 'before' and 'after' events so that the youth of the church could feel part of a dynamic, forward looking movement. In earlier years the ACC had given priority to raising a Young Leaders group in South Australia and the creation of the ACC 'Faith School' held future promise but young Evangelical leaders ready to pioneer new directions now seemed few on the ground.

The question was, 'How to best equip people of evangelical conviction to continue to participate? To me it seemed that if concerned members just continued to participate in a *business-as-usual* manner then they would slowly aqueous, merge and 'go- with-the-flow'. To me the question seemed to be, 'How do we resource people to be distinct, draw a line in the sand, stand apart and be prophetic?' While the ACC had always been a bold critic, did it have the momentum and energy to go beyond this and to provide a creative way forward?

Space to Think

As my train sped from the once early N.S.W settlement of Windsor to Sydney town I reflected on aspects of the ACC that I had struggled with over the years. As the name Assembly of Confessing Congregations indicates the ACC is structured towards recognising corporate Congregations rather than courting the vote of the individual. However I had never been able to overlook the fact that, like it or not, Congregations consist of individuals.

I was well aware that 1 Peter 2:9 reminds us of our new identity and that to be Christian is to belong to a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people rather than just existing as isolated individuals. This means we are called to bring our lives and our culture together to become a new community. In this way to be Christian is to be counter-cultural so that the corporate nature of the church is more about 'we' before it is about 'me'.

In a fast moving, diverse world, the process of corporate decision making can be frustratingly slow and awkward. As previously pointed out by Rev James Haire it is easier to revert to a model where a few people manage the church than to a process of mutual consultation. While my Bible College mentor always insisted on extending peoples thinking rather than talking down to them, never-the-less when we relate to the leadership of the church and by-pass the average rank and file attendee we perpetuate the old gap between the professional clergy and the ordinary laity, a priestly class of leaders/managers and a lower class, of pew-sitting consumers. This problem has always concerned me and of course is true of the whole church.

This gap reappears in the ACC when it targets and relates theologically to the leadership of the corporate Congregation, while tending to by-pass the importance of the ordinary member.

* I had always understood that one in-built reason for this corporate focus was that it was a self-protecting feature that safe-guarded the ACC from interfering 'outside' influences, but of course it also isolated it from grass-roots church members.

* I always enjoyed receiving my copy of the ACC Catalyst magazine but it clearly targeted and appealed to the theologically articulate leader rather than reaching and making sense to the average member.

* There was another difficulty at National ACC Conferences when single members suddenly discovered they could only be observers rather than authorised voters. Only appointed representatives of Congregations could vote.

* From my perspective in appealing theologically to the corporate leadership of the church the ACC had failed to educate and reach the average church member. The corporate mind of the church is made up of individual members and over the years a lucid communication that moved both heart and mind of ordinary members had always been elusive. A conservative theology had led too readily to a conservative practise in the way the ACC related to loyal church people who had a limited grasp of theology.

About 250 people would gathered in Sydney from across the nation. While this was significant, rather than representing the evangelical membership of the church, the gathering represented a much smaller proportion of Congregations. With the nation and the church divided by the national debate the likelihood of finding whole Congregations with a common mind, willing to act in solidarity with the ACC had been reduced. In fact the mood across the church had changed so much that the effectiveness of the 'modus-operandi' of the ACC now seemed questionable.

Isolated Members.

Many ACC members did not belong to Congregations supportive of the ACC and in their local Congregation they lived out their faith among those with very different priorities and convictions. In fact people of Evangelical conviction were often marginalised, isolated in their own Congregation. This was particularly the case in Victoria. This raised an interesting question, 'Could such people be commissioned to be missionaries to their own local churches?'

Sydney Decision

The Sydney gathering of people from across Australia started with a bang. 'How Great Thou Art' and 'Bless the Lord Oh my Soul.' A faithful contender from Tasmania Rev

Bob Imms read from Acts 2, 42-47, 32-35. Superintendent, of Wesley Mission Rev Keith Garner preached on '*Features of a Healthy Church.*' It was a good theme because the relationship with the Assembly of the Uniting Church had taken a turn for the worse and was looking rather unhealthy, even terminal. Some within the church were hostile towards to the conservative position and openly encouraged them to immediately leave the church. For others the question was simply, Do we 'dissent or desert'?

The danger of course was to over-react to the Assembly decisions of July and to provide the UCA with continuing fuel to isolate and punish the ACC. Owen Davis, a long time South Australia supporter was conscious of this vulnerability and during the time in Sydney he counselled caution. On the other hand while the mood was not reckless, the frustration of being ignored by the church left some with a passion to be heard, a readiness to confront, to provoke a response, to venture and to move quickly in a new directions.

Two Primary Groups were evident:

(1) Those saying the UC Assembly had moved away from the Basis of Union so we needed to be equally bold and just move on in practising mission.

(2) Others counselled caution against quick decisions that could produce more negative consequences. What about ownership and future use of property and ministers superannuation etc.? (These had been withdrawn from people by churches in the USA.) Indecision could mean the loss of those currently attending out of frustration. It was in fact openly anticipated that some attending the Conference would decide to leave the Uniting Church.

It was helpfully pointed out that the Reformation and the later renewal under John Wesley had occurred over a long period and that while some had concluded that the church was now beyond reform, patience was important. It was important to realise that this was the *new normal*. It was a work in progress and the National Council of the ACC was continuing to work with other networks seeking to pioneer Non-Geographical Presbyteries for those congregations that were not part of an orthodox presbytery.

Ethnic Church Presence.

The ACC had always been committed to seeking reform rather than to promote schism. There appeared to be few official, positive options on the table for discussion. I could only conclude that the gathering would need to be newly inspired and ready to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal the way forward.

The Confessing Movement in the Uniting Church is not without colour and vitality. A range of Islander Congregations and their children contributed in a major way to the worship, music and presentations during the ACC's Sydney Conference. Hedley, the Conference chairman led with a relaxed islander style and preached with conviction before celebrating the Communion service.

The Aboriginal Islander Christian Conference spoke of their isolation, division within the mob and their dependence upon UCA funding. The Korean Churches were represented and spoke with clarity. While very diverse and independent, these orthodox groups may yet be a long-term redeeming factor in the life of church as they share their culture and living faith with their diminished Anglo-European brothers and sisters.

Other Voices.

A number of significant decisions were made in Sydney. Rev Jonathon Button pointed out the ACC had not moved from upholding the Basis of Union and that it lived with the tension of difference while remaining loyal. However, publicly it was simply declared that the movement was **‘standing apart’** from the determining authority of the UCA Assembly on matters of doctrine that had varied its understanding on marriage to include same-gender relationships.

Chairman Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki made the point that while ACC members were in the Uniting Church they need not be OF IT. We were still members of the Uniting Church but standing apart from the Council/Assembly. Ann Hibbard pointed out that biologically we are made up of single cells but the Assembly had created a cell with two different nuclei. The ACC recognised the Church universal and local and in this sense the ACC was not schismatic in that it was not the ACC’s decision to divide but to go forward in Christ. Jesus Christ is head of the church and we should always be ready to restructure ourselves in light of that.

The seemingly small change to the description of the ACC from its existing, ‘WITHIN’ the Uniting Church to that of it being, ‘OF’ the Uniting Church, in fact marked a huge stepping apart and repositioning of the Confessing movement as a distinctive entity. Rather than being ‘progressive,’ the 15th Assembly of the UCA had represented a ‘regressive’ move backwards that fractured years of hard work and a unity of which the young church had been proud. By the engineered, adoption of the so called new doctrine of the **‘two integrities,’** -- it had now embraced a position that could more rightly be called not the doctrine of ‘two integrities’ but the position of ‘one tragedy’.

The New Life paper had described the UCA decision of Friday 13 July. *“This decision is grounded neither in Scripture, nor the Basis of Union, but on a secular understanding of ‘diversity’; a diversity that has now gone beyond the acceptance of a diversity of theologies on marriage to include a diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings with no boundaries regarding what is acceptable diversity.”*

As a result, the ACC September Conference concluded that it would, **“ offer to congregations the role of a replacement Assembly in the life of its Confessing Congregations.”** While this was not a declaration of the birth of a new denomination, it was a significant, largely symbolic act of protest that targeted the church’s prime decision making body, discussions about restructuring and adopting ‘non-geographic, regional presbyteries’ was now on-going.

Crosslight.
Dec 2018

Beyond belief

I WAS astounded to read the response from Bill Norquay (on behalf of the Glen Waverley Uniting Church Friday Discussion Group) in the October edition of *Crosslight*.

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge the importance to a right of opinion. However, that being said, Bill's assertions regarding the most fundamental issues of our Christian faith, indeed that which defines our Christian faith, seem to have been done away with to such a point that I have to question how his discussion group identifies with the church at all?

To claim that the creation, virgin birth, miracles and resurrection of Jesus Christ are myths is agnostic in the extreme and at complete odds with the Apostles' Creed from which UCA charter is drawn (amongst other sources).

This is an alarming stance from a group identifying with the UCA!

Shane Kew
Warragul, Vicw

The Haire Contribution.

“How do you face the challenges of our time and remain joyful, be missionary and confess the faith?” We need to hear the voice of God in the scriptures, in the Savoy Declaration, Creeds, Thirty Nine articles of the Faith, The Reformed and Evangelical revivals. We are to bear the marks of Christ and in humility listen to the God who is in solidarity with us as sinners. The God in Christ, who has entered our humanity to be one with us and who then in resurrection makes us to be a new creation so we are not controlled by the passing events of the day.

These introductory themes by the past President of the Uniting Church, Rev James Haire set a positive tone to his address. In an indirect reference to the national plebiscite and the social justice platform, James made the point that it is good and admirable to promote human rights but through Jesus Christ our Lord we are more than that, we are a divine society. This is who we are so its two cheers for democracy but three cheers for a theocracy through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Valuable Insights.

The Greek City States (400BC) and the Romans lived loosely to homosexual practise. The new revelation via Judaism prohibited the practise for reasons of the common good and to revert to the old way is not progressive but regressive and counter cultural. Since the Reformation many have been conscious of an arrogant spirit that has led the church into making all sorts of claims and projections. When people are anxious a sanctified self-delusion and claim to special knowledge seems to emerge. This can be similar to the first century heresy of Gnosticism that claimed to be a close friend of Christianity. The real concern today is that many church attenders are unable to tell what is Christian and what is pagan. The worship and service of the church can very easily take the place of the worship and service of God.

James Haire pointed to three shifts that had occurred since Church Union in 1977: \

1. Instead of Conciliar Councils listening to each other, our culture has added executives upon executives to lead the way.
2. This means we are vulnerable to hearing the voice of God in a distorted, weak way.
3. When priestly executives take over, the voice of God is replaced with human managerialism. This means the decisions of the corporate church end up representing culture over against the gospel. James Haire expressed amazement at the brash, over confident attitude of the 2018 National Assembly. The church through history had been much more cautious and discerning.

In his commentary on the Basis of Union Rev Davis McCaughey had said, *‘Down through history it has been the besetting sin of ecclesiastical bodies as of ecclesiastical persons to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. With Paul, the Basis of Union would have us think soberly, each preferring the other to self.’* (Basis of Union 1980 p 93) In many ways Haire’s address exposed much of the raw arrogance of the current generation of the church.

- (a) While today we seemingly seek light from any quarter, the historical church first exercised absolute humility in seeking God's will
- (b) The closed sessions and decision making of the 2018 Assembly was similar to a Catholic concave or magisterium. It assumed the Spirit of God would speak in a final, exclusive way to the Assembly gathering.
- (c) The idea of *'two integrities'* seemed to arise from the Anglican debate in New Zealand where weight was given to people (not God) to decide on **their own gender and integrity**.
- (d) Instead of marriage being a Divine institution it was now a matter of keeping everyone in the church happy.
- (e) If the church was to move forward according to its birth-vision, in humility it would learn to humbly respect and communicate on an ecumenical level.
- (f) Other concerns that seemed typical of a new abrasive arrogance were also evident in the church.

Those who disagreed with the majority were not asked, *'Do you think you may be wrong?'* Sadly, there was a more militant polarising, you/me approach that in a presumptuous way, assumed that those who disagreed with the Assembly decision now needed to adjust and required 'counselling'.

Following the Assembly decision about marriage the U.C. 'Crosslight' paper in Victoria carried a well-intended letter from the Moderator encouraging local leaders to pastorally visit those whom they knew were in disagreement with the decision about marriage. While this appeared to offer sensitive care it seemed to assume that this was just a matter of psychological adjustment and therapy rather than a true faith conviction. Some weeks later while watching a religious interview in the USA the host offered *'talkspace therapy'* to anyone who was depressed or wanted to improve their mental health. Again it seemed to confirm everything Haire was suggesting-- was the church offering Christian care or an American therapy, a method of management?

When we are controlled by popular culture, the Bible often confronts us with what we prefer **not** to hear. Instead of being regulated by the Basis of Union Para 3, and the science of hermeneutics, the Assembly Doctrine and Working group had been selective and shallow in exploring biblical passages. They had not spelt out the nature and function of biblical law or distinguished between Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws and moral law.

James Haire concluded that the church was anxious about its decline and the church had reverted to a self-deluding, management model. Haire confirmed the impression that a new Uniting Church management, similar to that in USA and New Zealand actually wanted evangelicals out of the church in order to progress, but at the same time he made it clear that he for one was not a 'deserter'. While we could not continue to be united with error we needed to press on seeking a broad coalition of likeminded people. He was not walking away from the scriptures or the church's rich evangelical heritage. It was in the interest of the Uniting Church that people stay amid hardship and continue to discern the voice of the people and the will of God.

The Champion Contribution.

While never officially recognised by the UCA as part of the church, the ACC although marginalised, had considered itself as existing and operating 'within' UCA bounds. Inaugurated in 2006 the ACC National Council had monitored the steady drift of the church away from its original Basis of Union. Similar to other international Confessing movements, Rev Max Champion had led the dissenting movement over 15 years and provided a sound theological foundation. In addressing the issues of belief and non belief the characteristics of the leadership itself had reflected something of the detached style of the movement. To me the style had always been more prophetic, and confrontational than relational or collaborative. For the ACC two diametrically opposite theological positions could not be negotiated without compromising the gospel itself. It was inevitable that the marriage resolution (No 64 July 2018) that advocated two opposite statements of belief (but at the same time supposedly 'equal') would become a decisive step too far.

The UCA had 'removed itself.'

The 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church had itself, instituted a clear contradictory division and removed itself from orthodoxy. This meant that by the UCA removing itself from the historic church universal it had removed itself/deserted its Basis of Union and that the ACC could no longer regard itself as being 'within' the church community. Through no choice of its own, the ACC now had no option but to understand itself as a distinct entity no longer 'within' the Uniting Church. Of course Prof. Rev Andrew Dutney and the UCA saw the marriage issue in different light completely. For some it was nothing more than just another variation of doctrine similar to the variations that exist over baptism or the sacraments. Max Champion reminded the gathering that the crisis on hand was not just an internal matter. It was much more serious than a single crisis over marriage.

The Long March.

There had been two main views of history, the Judeo-Christian and the Enlightenment view. Both had clashed with each other but now both were under attack and being replaced with a view where we look into ourselves to find truth. It is a view that says, 'Truth is what I say it is'! Our paganism is much worse than earlier styles of paganism because it is post-Christian. It was said that *'the undermining of our strong traditions was part of the subversion of Christianity.'* Some influential leaders of the UCA (perhaps unknowingly) seemed to be caught up with socio-political tactics that have been described as, 'the long march to freedom.' In some respects the cultural readjustments taking place were likened to the cultural revolution that took place in China. Change to the institution of marriage could be likened to the '**long-march to freedom.**' Degeneration and renormalization was a long-term process spread over several decades.

Clarity needed on marriage

SOMETIMES our church finds it hard to know what it believes or to say anything that puts it at odds with popular culture or values. I note that the Catholic Church of Australia, the Anglican Primate of Australia, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and many other Christian groups are not slow to publicly support traditional marriage. In fact 38 religious leaders sent a letter to the Prime Minister to that effect. Then there are Aboriginal, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh communities. What a pity that the Uniting Church 2015 Assembly was not prepared to publicly confirm the definition of marriage it clearly adopted in 1997 and 2012. The perception now is that the Uniting Church is not as ecumenical as it says it is and it is uncertain about what it really teaches and believes.

Rev Ted Curnow
Langwarrin, VIC

Nov 2015
CROSSBRIGHT.

Seen in reality it was more like a **‘broken, track to repression’**. The point was well made that currently this is the world in which we are called to confess Christ. As the church in Australia is being reshaped we must be bold to speak the truth and expose falsehoods. The tone of the ACC’s past-chairman’s address was more reflective of crisis than hopeful and visionary. The years of leadership provided by Rev Max Champion had been greatly valued but personally demanding. His valued leadership of the ACC was publicly acknowledged but it had seemingly run its course. Max would continue to make his valued theological contribution but I had always felt that the ACC needed to be more than just about what we oppose. It must also be about what we are for.

The Clouded Way Ahead

The history of multiple, independent Christian groups attempting to work together is well known and the challenge to bring such groups from across the church together has always been formidable. In order to respond, the consolidation of such groups as a critical mass was important and Chairman Hedley pointed out that the ACC alone, did not have the resources to formally separate from the Uniting Church. This was well beyond a possibility, even if it had wanted to do this.

The demise of the evangelical voice within the church had been occurring over many years. Multiple *coalitions* and *networks* such as **Pneuma** in Western Australia, **New Life** church on the Gold Coast, **CALD** cultural groups, **UAICC** aboriginal group, **3D** network, **Hopenet** in South Australia, and the **EL250** group which links large evangelical churches had all provided a degree of independence. Many have become possible safe havens for disenchanted Congregations and members. While the formation of alternative groups like these have often occurred through church history during times of unrest, they have also been notorious for their own fragmentation and single minded independence. The question is, *“Will the current crisis in the Uniting Church weld these groups into an enduring coalition to provide a momentum enabling a smaller, leaner, but authentic Uniting Church to survive into the future?”*

The Anglican Contribution and way Ahead.

The revolt in the Anglican Church that separated from the Archbishop of Canterbury and led to the emergence of GAFCON (Global Anglican Futures Conference) is worth noting. It was significant that in 2018, 200 Australian Anglicans had attended the orthodox GAFCON gathering in Jerusalem.

Quick comparisons with the Anglican and Uniting Church can be misleading. It was noted that the Anglicans have a ‘critical-mass’ that the Uniting Church does not have. In responding to the question, *‘What does this mean for the ACC as a dissenting group?’* it was said that previously people were encouraged to stay in the church and not to be dismayed at the weakness of the Confessing movement. It was recognised that within the universal and UCA today there are different beliefs, a different spirit and a different God, but while we can still preach and conduct the sacraments ACC members have stayed because they are ‘dissenters’, ‘not deserters’. However today, in the day of the ‘long-march,’ things have changed and the ‘horse has bolted’. Over many years negotiations have not worked and even if the Assembly was recalled there was little likelihood of the church being reformed. The formation of evangelical coalitions was

a possibility but it was pointed out that at present there were many different ideologies currently coursing through our culture and Christian groups at present.

Although time had passed since the National Assembly in July it appeared that only limited progress had been made by the ACC itself with regard to discerning and negotiating future directions. Creative dreaming or consultations had never been a strength of the ACC and with signs of fragmentation within the UAICC church and ethnic block no immediate, real or firm proposal for future direction seemed to be on the table. The future was very much a work in progress, however with the big picture of God's action through history and the Holy Spirit always being at work, progress could be guaranteed.

The Immediate, curt official response.

The tentative thought of an alternative structure for evangelical churches to band together soon met with a curt response and veiled threat from the UCA President, Dr Deidre Palmer stated, *"In recent days there has been some public commentary made about the possible creation of alternative conciliar and related structures within and outside the Uniting Church. These statements have suggested, among other things, a replacement Assembly, a separate College for the training of ministers, and the creation of alternative Presbyteries. I am concerned that members and those in specified ministry who adopt and/or subscribe to these statements, inadvertently or otherwise, will place themselves outside the church's formal governance structures."*

The threatening response acknowledged difficult conversations but firmly upheld the Assembly decision on marriage and the church as a Spirit-led community, centred in Christ, courageously living out God's hope and reconciliation in the world.

Over the years the persistent, claims of evangelical members within the Uniting Church that their church was moving away from the central message of the gospel and its rich heritage by now had become blazingly obvious. In fact the UCA Assembly decision gave a new legitimacy to claims that the Uniting Church had now broken rank with the churches of the Asia Pacific region to declare itself a sad casualty of a contemporary apostasy. It had adopted a stand outside of its biblical, reformed, revivalist heritage. This sad shift had come about through a prolonged struggle and a frustration fanned by sincere, but a range of politically aggressive, and at times militant lobby groups within the Uniting Church. At the time the church had provided for the ordination of those practising a homosexual life-style, some had boldly stated that the next goal in sight was the redefinition of marriage. Fifteen years later that arrogant, long-term goal had been engineered and had come to pass.

Instead of embracing the costly prophetic and remnant role in a secular society as salt and light,----with a sincere religious over-lay and an intention to advance social reform, to be seen as a *progressive trail blazer* to this generation, over the years the Uniting Church has gradually jettisoned its spiritual leadership for a form of secular engineering. In doing this, with a bumptious spirit the church has boldly attached itself to a range of popular ideological trends including neo-Marxism, and a form of Gnosticism. Adding this to a fragmented behavioural theology and feelings of compassion that aspire to inaugurating a new order of social equality, all the evidence now points to the authentic Christian gospel that has historically transformed people

and society now being relegated to an ageing, outdated church, to a vulnerable silent majority sadly being by-passed, led down a path to future extinction.

The silent attrition of members leaving the Uniting Church has also been true of people leaving the hope of reform behind. In an age that often seeks instant answers, this haemorrhaging of members still takes place, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations still calls for patience and persistence as it takes an emboldened stance of now understanding itself at a national level to be a more *authentic expression* of the Church's founding Basis of Union and statements of faith.

This series will be continued with paper Number 10. View this site or tedcurnow.wordpress.com

*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.*