

## UCA Where are you? No 4

*This is the **fourth** of a series of papers 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 the sorting out of substance and myth.*

*Here the pace quickens as the mood of the church in many ways matches the mood of the nation. A personal attempt to talk with leaders of the UCA is met with a clear blanket of silence. An aggressive tone spills over into the church as the Assembly Standing Committee strategically reveals its proposal to change the Church's historic doctrine of marriage.*

### **Hostile World, confused Church.**

In writing about 'The Big Shift, 'in the 'Eternity' paper, John Sandeman had noted a new-style conversation between Christianity and the wider Australian community had already begun. Sandeman divided his life time into three periods marking the status of Christianity in the norms of society. **The Positive World** (Pre 1994). **The Neutral World** (1994-2014). **The Negative World** (2014+)

In viewing the broad canvas Sandeman suggested that Christians were actually returning to their origins so that 1 Peter and the book of Revelation was becoming alive in a new way "*Whether you accept the precise dates, many will agree that a **'profound shift has occurred in The Land of the Free.'** So, just maybe, the postal survey results marks **Australia's shift** ---or draws attention to something that has already happened. And it seems to me whether you voted yes or no, or even abstained, the shift in attitude to Christianity is something we can all see.*" (Eternity 17 Dec, 2017).

### **National Mood Shift**

The March edition of 'The Melbourne Anglican,' 2018, described the trend as an '*unsettling dark cloud*'. From where I was standing, a few months later it was this cloud that seemingly cast its shadow across the Uniting Church Assembly. The 'View Point' section in the TMA was headed, "**Moral Authority depends on authentic witness.**" "*Australian Christian Churches will live with the fallout of the sexual abuse scandal not for years, but decades.*" Christianity in Australia was certainly at a low ebb. While the Uniting Church was not as guilty as some, the 'Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse' had shed light on a sad saga that shamed Christianity. In addition to this, **in a sad way the same-sex marriage debate set Christians against non-Christians and Christians against Christians as public discourse became more fragmented.**

Neil Ormerod, Professor of Theology at the Australian Catholic University said, "*I believe the abuse has not only been 'a major de-evangelising moment' for the Roman Catholic Church---but for the entire Australian church---it has done a huge amount of damage to the credibility of Christianity around the nation.*"

While Christianity has been an overwhelming personal and social force for good, some said there was a '*cultural amnesia abroad in the West*' and that we were busily

forgetting our Christian roots. In fact a headline, *‘Christianity faces Intolerance’* and several articles in TMA March 2018 were closer to the mark in identifying an *increasing hostility* of the secular community towards religion in general, and towards the Christian church. It was noted that Christians in Australia were in retreat and under attack with declining attendances and vanishing social authority. Barney Zwartz, noted in the article that *“The narrative increasingly taking shape under modern secularism is that Christianity played only a minimal or even malign influence in Australia’s development, but this flows almost entirely from prejudice.* (Barney Zwartz, a senior fellow with the Centre for Public Christianity)

In the same March TMA, Parish Consultant and Archdeacon Dr Craig Dalton reported on this trend when he wrote, *“No longer are parishioners so much concerned that their church might be ignored by their local community; they are concerned that it might be targeted. The major reasons for this state of affairs are obvious: sexual abuse, the failure of the churches to support marriage equality, and a widespread perception that the churches are privileged, self-interested and excluding of difference. Whether we think this is fair or not is beside the point. Many in the community have made up their mind, and the task of rehabilitating our reputation is not going to be an easy one. For churches seeking to grow, rejection by their community can be hurtful or even baffling. Discerning how to grow our churches in an environment that is increasingly indifferent, or even hostile, is a challenge for which few in the church—including the clergy—are well equipped. No wonder parishes and incumbency committees are worried.”*

A visiting Swedish evangelical leader, Stefan Gustavsson is quoted in the same TMA edition. *“If you live in a secular culture, you feel the pressure from everywhere—and Christians just become silenced. Even if they maintain the faith themselves and go to church, they don’t talk about it because they don’t really have confidence that it’s true.”*

### **Religious Freedom in Society and Church**

Numerous other sources were describing alarming social trends. Political correctness had been described as the great ideological disease of this century. Bill Muehlenberg from *‘Culture Watch’* had said that if you want to understand why things are the way they are today you have to know something about the past. *‘Marxists have been downsizing and re writing history, singling out marriage, family and morality for a century now.’* He claims that political correctness is cultural-Marxism and that political correctness is Marxism translated from economic into cultural terms.

In Peter Kurti’s book, *‘The Tyranny of Tolerance,’* John Howard seemed to describe the contradiction now being felt within the church itself, especially by many evangelicals. *“Freedom of religion and expression, both assumed as givens in our society, are under increasing assault by those who proclaim themselves as warriors for tolerance and inclusion.”*

Following the result of the marriage plebiscite the Federal Parliament set up an expert panel led by former Attorney General Phillip Ruddock to assess whether Australian law adequately protected religious freedom. Suddenly religion in Australia was being perceived as an ideology that was hostile to so-called values of tolerance and pluralism. While the legacy of Christianity had not always been perfect and there had been clear damaging abuses, **the disturbing social trend towards hostility was also evident**

**within the church itself. Those of evangelical conviction were increasingly perceived as inflexible, dogmatic, intolerant, and stubbornly resistant to change.**

While more than half of the Australian population still identified themselves as Christians there were strong voices within sections of the media and the Uniting Church intent on manipulating change. **It was hard to distinguish between those of sound intent and those ready to exploit the moment This strong emotional imperative and supposed rebuilding of credibility became a pseudo-healing for some who saw social engineering and reconstruction as the key to the meaning of Christian mission, rather than a personal transformation of life through Christ.**

After some years described by the church as a time of spiritual reflection and discernment and following the gathered momentum of public opinion generated by the national plebiscite, I found myself asking a number of important questions. Was the big plunge to venture where no others had dared to tread; the recommending of same-sex marriage the result of special, long-term grooming by parties of influence within the church? Was the April announcement of the radical proposal to change the definition of Christian marriage timed to actually limit discussion of the Report? Was this exercise more about a period of quiet social conditioning *or* strategic political manoeuvring than prayerful discernment and respectful, open consultation?

### **Hostile Church.**

Before the Government had decided on the concept of a national plebiscite, the Uniting Church had previously decided to address the question of the re-definition of marriage at its 2018 Assembly. The governments political move however became the green light for *socio-political progressives* within the church to mount the government's galloping steed and to ride to victory. Over the years however many aging congregations within the Uniting Church had been nurtured on a nominal, liberal theology and they were just not equipped to distinguish the difference between marriage as a civil rite and marriage from a Christian or biblical perspective. Many wanted their church to continue just as it had for the major part of their lives.

The frightening social power-plays during the public debate and the Governments redefinition of marriage took many by surprise. Many who were uncomfortable about the radical prospect of daring to change an age long institution both within and outside the church were swept along by an emboldened popular ground swell. Again, in a scary way, many bewildered members within the Church were vulnerable to the pressure of a compelling crusade centred around moving stories of felt attraction, compassion, love, struggle and felt exclusion..

**The public change of mood across the Australian community meant that much of the underlying steam behind the issue and the decision of the Uniting Church Assembly to change the theology marriage had already been discharged.** The National Assembly would later determine that the matter of marriage was not '*vital to the life of the church*' and therefore it did not seek concurrence with the other councils of the church! While this was quite legal it was also convenient and not consultative. This sort of seeming political manoeuvring had happened in previous years and it had only fuelled discontent.

Numerous congregations, presbyteries, networks, groups and members would later individually reject the decision and the ACC National Council would understand it to be a clear departure and withdrawal from the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church to which the Uniting Church was committed under its foundational document, 'The Basis of Union.'

Sadly something of a new aggressiveness fanned by the national debate seemed to spill over into the life of the church. On a personal level some life-long friendships and family relationships became strained. In some places even threatening stories of proposed actions and the consequences of church properties possibly being sold were exchanged.

The emotions of individuals and groups were moderated to some degree by a number of the Presidents pastoral letters. **Sadly however after all the drafted letters, fine words and efforts that encouraged mutual respect, the Church's Official Report released in the public domain gave approval to an offensive, belittling aspect that defamed conservative Christians.** The report directly and simplistically implied that those of evangelical conviction personally supported domestic violence. (Report para 4.3.1.6)

Rob Brennan in the June Catalyst 2018 asked, "*What in the structure of the Uniting Church could have allowed the church to make such a remark without someone questioning it?*" He pointed out that this same style of argument used by the Standing committee and the Working Group on Doctrine had often been used by the atheist Richard Dawkin. He went on to say, "*There is no doubt that the LGBTI community has been terribly abused in the past*" - but he continued, "*I have been genuinely surprised at the strength of my emotional reaction to this report. Surprised? Certainly not by the recommendation. It has been fully expected. No, the strength of my emotional reaction has been the realisation that I am no longer safe within my church and that the beliefs that I share with many friends and colleagues have never ever been shown respect or accurately summarised in any official Assembly report in all the debates over the years.*"

While different theologies have always existed in the church, this difference has sadly become more aggressive with overtones of rejection and exclusion typical of religious persecution. North America provides a scary example of endless debate among Anglicans about false teaching not being corrected and of orthodox ministers being stripped of their churches that in many cases had originally nurtured them and helped in the formation of their own spiritual journey.

Through a seeming strategy of collectively ignoring and marginalising the minority voice that called for reform, and with the support of an aggressive LGBTI lobby, even the mood of advocating *unity in diversity* had degenerated into a reckless attitude and stance that advocated '*divestment for the sake of progress.*' Some within the church were now ready to release and divest the church and themselves of the seeming burden of older generations and those who shared orthodox convictions. Where had the wonderful concept of 'Uniting' gone? **Over a long period numerous official charges were sadly being brought against some Ministers and those who advocated reform and adherence to the Church's Basis of Union. Stories about those who advocated a homosexual life-style being a persecuted minority were now clearly reversed and**

**those who advocated the church's orthodox belief were now marginalised as an extreme minority.**

### **Release of the Report on Marriage and Proposals to Assembly**

The proposal put to the Assembly was to adopt the following 'policy statement' on marriage.

*(Note: What is really a **new doctrine** is described as a 'policy statement.'* (The full original proposal is not presented here.) (The numbering and brackets on the paragraphs below are as shown on the original document so they appear as irregular here)

#### **Part Extract:**

(b) Marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family. For Christians, marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful life-long union of two people expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage two people seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship, experience the fruitfulness of family, contribute to the well-being of society and strengthen the mission of the church.

(c) (1) To affirm that Ministers and celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church in Australia may exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages, including same-gender marriages, according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.

(2) To request the Assembly Officers to direct the appropriate Assembly body to prepare an authorised Marriage Liturgy suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples for approval by the Standing Committee at its August 2018 meeting.

(3) To note that Church Councils:

\*have the authority under Regulation 4.4.1 to permit or refuse the use of property held for the use of the Congregation for same-gender weddings;

\*do not have the authority to require a Minister in placement in their congregation to, or prevent a Minister in their Congregation from celebrating same-gender marriages.

### **Passion replaces Revelation**

In addressing the above proposal Rev Jonathon Button had made an impact in South Australia by explaining the issue well. *"The Report used the language of **two valid doctrines of marriage** to create the illusion that people in the one church can hold either exclusive male-female marriage, or same-sex marriage with integrity. However these two doctrines are mutually exclusive; exclusive male-female marriage rejects the validity of same- sex marriage, and vice versa. Officially adopting same-sex marriage actually means that this has replaced the doctrine of exclusive male-female marriage. Moving away from Biblical and Christian orthodoxy in this way has profound implications for the church's relationship with the entirety of the Revelation and Gospel of Jesus Christ."*

## **Early April from the National Council of the ACC.**

The letter followed the release of the Report on Marriage and pointed out that we were approaching, 'one of the most important periods of time in our history as the Uniting Church in Australia. The Assembly was planned for 8-14 July 2018. While this was some time away, all members were encouraged to write to Assembly calling on it to maintain the 1997 Biblical position on marriage between man and woman. In listing prayer points the letter offered somewhat early advice and noted that speaking out during the Assembly meeting could be daunting.

*It continued, "Pray for boldness, courage for Assembly delegates. Be prepared, know what and why you believe. Be bold, courageous---not just your personal opinion but what is received in the Old and New Testaments in which we hear the Word of God who is the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. (Basis of Union Para3&4) through whom our faith and obedience are nourished and regulated (Basis of UnionPara5).*

*Post- Assembly, stand firm: do not make hasty decisions: do not act alone.*

*Note that should the Assembly make any decisions to redefine marriage or adopt liturgies for the blessing of same-sex couples, it will be Assembly itself that will have departed from the Basis of Union that commits us to live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. That is, it will be the Assembly that will be promoting schism, not the ACC." The letter concluded by saying, "We call on all our members and congregations to make a stand and say, 'We are not permitted to do this. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise,-- so help me God.'"*

## **Early May 2018 : ---"Is anyone listening?"**

Over three months had past since Rev Rod James had sent his circulated letter and instead of constructive conversation he had been enveloped in silence. None of the leaders of the Church had engaged with him. What he would not have the opportunity of saying on the floor of the Assembly he said now through a second open letter pointing out that were proposals surrounding marriage passed, anyone conducting marriage under the Marriage Act, "*according to the rites of the Uniting Church,*" *would have to state. That for Christians, "marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life."* For Rod the genderless definition screamed against everything that Jesus said about marriage and everything he believed about it." (Mark 10:6-9) "*While the proposals allow that a Uniting Church marriage may exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages,—including same-sex, gender marriages, such celebrants would be legally vulnerable if taken to an equal-opportunity tribunal by an aggrieved same-gender couple."* Rod James concluded each of his assessments with the words, '**Definitely not a safe place.**'

Perhaps like earlier historical prohibitions on dancing or alcohol on church property, it was anticipated that the freedom of conscience clause for celebrants and congregations would be temporary with the passage of time.

Rod James observed that the Church was in the hands of '*powerful planners and controllers*' who had even more changes to unveil. Recalling 2003 and the Synod 2017, it was anticipated that seeking concurrence of other councils would be strongly resisted.

If Congregations wish to leave the UC, experience showed the UCA was usually unwilling to release church property to local people. One such request in SA had been met by their Synod saying their property would be put on the market and the funds would benefit the mission of the church. James concluded, *“Given the above realities, The Moderator’s appeal to us to just be quiet and love one another shows either a lack of understanding of the situation we would be in if these proposals were passed, or a strong protective bias towards the proposals. We know how zealous UC leaders are to provide a safe place for those on the other side of this debate, and how swift they are to silence anyone who says anything that may possibly be ‘hurtful’ to them. But Reformed/Evangelical ministers and congregations stand ultimately to lose everything in their Uniting Church home.”*

### **May 21 2018 Knocking on Doors**

Rod James plea for a hearing had been ignored although most leaders would have already known what the Assembly Standing Committee was proposing.

The Moderator in South Australia did arrange for Rev Phil Gardner the Executive Officer for Pastoral relations to engage with James on her behalf. Rev Andrew Dutney, (an ex-National UC President) had also granted a requested meeting and had taken a very cautious neutral approach. This was seemingly consistent with a strategy of silence and continuing dis-engagement. It was no surprise though that Dutney was a prime architect and presenter behind the church’s position. Later, Dutney also seemed to project himself into being a key post-Assembly advocate for the new Uniting Church position on an ecumenical scale among other churches in Australia. Phil Gardner asserted that there was misinformation and errors of fact in the letter James had circulated and that it had heightened anxiety rather than respectfully informed others. These concerns centred around ministers possibly being required to use a genderless form of **Declaration of Purpose and Affirmation on marriage**.

There would be clear intent that the ‘authorised marriage liturgy for marriages solemnised according to the rites of the UCA would be suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples. Andrew Dutney’s personal opinion was that, *“No, the intention was not to require a genderless Declaration of Purpose. The intention was to respect liberty of opinion, including the opinion that marriage can only be between a man and a woman.”* For James this personal opinion was totally unhelpful and unsatisfactory. James had pointed out that same-gender marriage was also part of a larger socio re-shaping of human gender, sexuality and relationships. This was not ‘hyperbole’ or exaggerated as far as James was concerned.

What was at stake was:

- (1) The credibility of the Uniting Church as holding to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as that faith is expressed in the Basis of Union.
- (2) The ability of the Uniting Church to retain its membership without a massive exodus of people to other churches.
- (3) The place in the Uniting Church of members and ministers would become untenable should the proposals be passed by the Assembly.

To me it appeared that those representing the orthodox position were again ignored, side-lined and relegated to being observers rather than welcomed participants in what was happening. The church leadership resembled the lion tamer cracking the whip. The

contender was the angry loin roaring an eloquent disapproval but it was threatening noise with little effect.

This series of reflections on events during 2018 will continue with paper No5.

**Further Reference:** On the web sites, [www.confessingcongregations.com](http://www.confessingcongregations.com) and [www.tedcurnow.wordpress.com](http://www.tedcurnow.wordpress.com) you can read *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.