

UCA Where are you? No 7

This is part 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 sorting out substance and myth.

The Over-Managed Assembly

My Prayer for the 15th Assembly

Lord God, who has faithfully led the Church through the ages, who has spoken to us in these last days through the Living Word—Jesus Christ, who speaks through the scriptures, the Holy Spirit and the age long Councils of the Church.

Lord, who corrects the Church when it fails to listen; when it is seduced by the pressures of the world; when it loses its way and is distracted from the urgency of its mission.

Lord who chastens the Church of the Western world, in your love and mercy reach out to us and renew the Uniting Church in Australia.

As national representatives of the church meet in Assembly to decide on complex issues, as reports are presented, and issues ranging over care agencies, bio-ethics, social justice, child abuse, gender-marriage and Frontier Services are reviewed, help members of the Assembly and us to discern your guidance and to be good stewards of the faith and resources entrusted to us.

As the Commissions and Assembly decide on the church's policies; save us from the world setting the agenda and save the church from twisting your word in the name of progress. Save us from responses determined by popular trends and appeals to emotion. Save us from being a mere hand-maid to government policies and funding.

Lord, we thank you for bringing your truth alive, for the social reforms of the past that have emerged from the Gospel and that have honored you. We thank you for people like Wilberforce, Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Billy Graham.

Save us from activist's and ideologies that demean Christian values and those intent on exploiting the church as a platform for change. We thank you today for the creative initiatives of 'church-planters' and that we are learning to affirm the ministry gifts of women. Yet Lord, we see the church decline and its strength dissipating.

We cry out to you as we see churches fragmenting over moral issues; Please save us from cynical attitudes, quick judgments and discouragement. Renew our humble trust

in you before we trust our programmes. Remind us that our mission and response to human need stems from the dynamic of the gospel that restores the lost.

Renew us in the integrity of sound doctrine and teaching. Raise up solid, and strong leadership throughout the church, to honor Christ and the Bible as the source of our authority. Renew the Assembly and us with a new sense of your calling upon our lives so we clearly know what it means to be your people.

Enlighten members of the Assembly to seek the way forward. Equip us with compassion and a desire to be holy as you are holy. Revive your Church and grass-root members with life and power to bring wholeness, justice and peace to the lives of many in our time. In Jesus Name, Amen. E.A, Curnow 7 June 2018

Thursday 12 July.

The evening before the marriage debate and final vote was taken provided space for the well-worn delegates and those of like mind with the ACC to re-group in the Box hill Lutheran Church Hall. Someone in Sydney had made a generous donation to provide refreshments., Peter Bentley (ACC Director) had made the appropriate arrangements and he was keen to promote the anticipated ACC Sydney Conference that would pick up, the consequences and the left-over pieces of the Assembly decision.

Any intense mass gathering like a National Assembly can be physically and emotionally taxing. As the delegates trickled in that night it was obvious that the demands of the wide-ranging agenda were taking their toll. Some were strangers to each other but they all shared a common faith-conviction. As people exchanged notes the early hushed tone of the evening indicated that the felt opposition over the past few days had been formidable, even overwhelming. Rev Max Champion, past Chairman of the National ACC Council, and theologian in his own right addressed the gathering presenting points typical of his last article in the June Catalyst.

Rev. Professor James Haire, past President of the Church (2000-2003) was on hand to encourage those who would, like gladiators of old, dare to enter the speakers arena before the final vote was taken next day. James spoke with clarity and conviction like a general in battle speaking to troops patiently awaiting the conflict. “ *Silence means agreement. Appeal to the swinging voter. Hold your blue cards without withdrawing them. Say on the grounds of freedom of conscience I am compelled to disagree. Go for a vote or secret ballot.*”

I sat with Walter Abetz from Tasmania and we encountered the stages of the ‘slippery slide’ over the years. Since 2003 Presbyteries could approve of practising homosexual ministers. By 2006 Presbyteries could not refuse to appoint same-gender couples to ministry positions. Now in 2018 the redefining of the historic understanding of Christian marriage would lead to an inevitable implosion; some would say, a hi-jacking of the church by those supporting the Uniting Network group. In many ways those advocating a liberal life-style across society had been discouraged and marginalised for years but now the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. The fine distinction of ‘loving the person, rejecting the lifestyle’ had been blurred. Those of evangelical

conviction were not just outnumbered but they clearly felt intimidated, exposed to the negative feelings of haughty disdain to the point that sadly some felt as if they were in an un-safe place.

Take Heart Brothers and Sisters!!!

James Haire walked the floor that evening like the coach of a football team. He recalled how between 1933-45 the German Confessing Movement was made up of Karl Barth, the Lutheran and reformed faithful.

* James described it as a period when the biggest ever con-job took place as 95% of the churches in Germany aligned themselves with the Nazi movement. Only after the war were the Confessing Churches taken seriously.

* The ACC position was not opposed to people if they want same-gender marriage. The Kingdom of God was not a Christianised society. We could be sympathetic and people could go to the State, but as Christians James insisted we are not allowed or permitted to adopt that view. Para.5 of the Basis of Union says we are not just nourished but we are **regulated** by the Scriptures.

* We may interpret the scriptures through the prism of justice etc and that can be helpful but that cannot be the final word. We cannot claim to love our neighbour if we are concerned for only one aspect of their well being. We are body and soul so social justice and sexuality cannot be the whole story. James said the Gentiles coming to Christ or the ordination of women could not be used as a precedent or analogy for marriage.

* Conversations had not taken place with the Anglicans, Lutherans or the Church of Christ on the marriage issue.

* While the church makes diversity itself a virtue, the biblical richness is about male, female complementarity.

* The Korean Church had spoken and had wanted to hear from Church Partners in the Pacific but their response was not even mentioned in the Report.

* We are not a hierarchical Episcopal church. In the Uniting Church we discern God's will through Councils but this is hard to defend if we refuse to talk to various Councils.

* The Gay community does not have equality in churches because churches are not part of the State. We cannot assume that because the Government and Canberra adopts gay marriage that the church must follow the State.

*** John Stott reminds us in his book, 'Authentic Christianity,' IVP 1995, that in a general way the following principles are always important for the Christian people.**

* Christianity must not be reduced to a dualism between body and soul. They always belong together.

* It is true that we cannot claim to love our neighbour if we are concerned for only one aspect of their life whether it be their body soul, or community.

* Heterosexual monogamy was established by creation not culture.

* The Kingdom of God is not a matter of ruling society. It is the divine rule in the lives of those who acknowledge Christ,---it has to be received by humble, penitent faith.

* As much as the issue before us is a justice issue, it is a **crisis of faith**. Whom shall we believe? Do we submit to the Lordship of Christ or succumb to the pressure of prevailing culture?

* Sexual experience is not essential to human fulfilment.

* The true orientation of the Christian is not what we are by constitution (hormones) but what we are by choice, heart, mind and will.

Those attending that evening were left with plenty to chew upon but the issue before the Assembly was not so much a matter of the mind and theology, this was a post-modern world, it had always been a matter of passion and the heart.

Friday 13 July, The Decision made Known

The direct facebook from Lulu, / then Email from Rev Anne Hibbard. *“Dear everyone, Just got 4:13 pm, “we are going in now, please pray!!”-----*

Then later:

“The 15th Assembly is overwhelmingly supportive to change the doctrine of the church on marriage. Already there are tears shed by some evangelical, reformed member. We are trying to hold back tears as it seems despite all that has been debated the 15th Assembly maybe ready now to move to a new future with a new gospel.

At 4pm we will reconvene and they will push to formal majority—we will continue to stand with blue cards to protest to action the clause from our Constitution for concurrence-(to refer back to synods presbytery and congregations to deliberate) but the majority will take the decision now.

Preparing for a very, very sad day if the Assembly accepts this new proposal to hold two doctrines on marriage and allow same gender marriage. How can you hold the Truth of God together with a false teaching on the doctrine of the church?

If this happens we will all be saying our last farewell to the UCA Assembly today. Come Lord Jesus Come.”

Earlier that day in anticipation I had contacted ‘Hopenet’and said, *“The natural reaction is to want to respond in some way immediately. Don’t encourage that. Think ACC Conference Sydney, September 17-19. Regardless of how it goes I believe the Assembly standing Committee proposal itself is enough to say things can never be the same. Instead of leaving—and without acquiescing, let’s enter into talking about what options we have.”*

Peter Bentley also reported:

“After another closed session tonight (Friday13th July), an official tweet emerged at approximately 8.44 pm, announcing:

"The 15th Assembly meeting of the Uniting Church in Australia has resolved to allow its ministers the freedom to conduct or refuse to conduct same-gender marriages."

Various verses came to my mind when hearing the result, though John 11: 35 was the most prominent. The ACC will provide a statement for members and congregations for Sunday 15th July.

**** Stand Firm:** please stand firm; do not make any hasty decisions; do not act alone. 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”.

**** Wait:** Please wait for an ACC pastoral letter and encourage others to wait and to stand firm. Noting that the ACC is committed to maintaining our current course: remaining faithful and committed to our confession that Jesus Christ alone is the living head of the Church, and adherence to the Basis of Union that commits us to the authority of Scripture.

**** Commit:** We encourage you to commit to attending the 2018 ACC National Conference to be held at Wesley Mission in Sydney 17-19 September 2018. At this conference we will make clear from the Basis of Union and our ecumenical partners what it means to live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

Peter Bentley

Wednesday 25 July: The ACC National Council stands Aside

Later the Chairman of the National ACC Council, Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki responded to Assembly decision by officially up-dating members across the nation on the outcome of the debate on marriage.]

Dear ACC Members

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ,

On Friday 13th July 2018, the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia exercised its determining authority on matters of doctrine to ‘vary its policy on marriage’ to include same-gender relationships. 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 to include a ‘diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings’.

Key points:

- (1) The lack of opportunity to debate the Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships made the Assembly process extremely difficult.
- (2) Because of the process, many orthodox and evangelical members did not feel the Assembly was a ‘safe space’.

(3) The failure to seek concurrence on such a matter of vital importance should be highlighted in every congregation.

(4) Despite stating in 1985 that we are a multicultural church, the Assembly did not allow its 12 Migrant-Ethnic National Conferences to participate fully in the decision-making processes.

(5) Ecumenical relationships have been placed in a low order of priority and this will have a significant impact on local congregations.

In our view the Uniting Church in Australia has removed itself from the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

On behalf of the National Council of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, we therefore say in the strongest terms possible, that we reject not only this decision, but the authority of the National Assembly and therefore stand aside from this Council of the Church. We continue to stand firmly in the 'Assembly' of Confessing Congregations as a 'distinct' Assembly through which we can continue to **Confess** our sole loyalty to Jesus Christ the living head of the Church and as a way of continuing to express our adherence to the Basis of Union.

Please be encouraged to know that though we were a minority in the Assembly, we did not compromise our stance in anyway. I am very proud of the Assembly members who spoke with grace and truth, including several second-generation leaders who stood their ground well even in the face of distinct opposition.

Friday 27 July. The Dust had cleared but not Settled.

With few local people on hand to talk too I turned again to a trusted colleague Rev Ian Clarkson. The question was, "What now? How do we respond?"

In an Email to Ian headed, '**The Way Ahead,**' I wrote, "*Sometime back you mentioned the danger of **acquiescence**. Since that time, strangely, the word has confronted me on a number of occasions. This morning in our daily devotion it was suggested that science encourages control, while religion encourages **acquiescence**. I am aware that as time passes and as I am more and more exposed to the rhetoric that justifies the two-marriage doctrine position, the more I am tempted to just move on. A quick reactive response is not always helpful but the danger of a delayed response is that you lose focus. The ACC will make a delayed response at its Sydney Conference. Perhaps we could list practical ways that churches/ people could respond. What helpful ways, approaches could we encourage /adopt to guard against acquiescence?"*

Sunday 29 Chewing the Fat Together.

How do you respond when the church that has nurtured you, affirmed your gifts and calling through ordination; then entrusted you over a life time to Shepherd the People of God then loses its own way? What do you do when the church you belong to contradicts core elements of the office and message the church has inherited through the ages and that have always been regarded as part of a unique revelation?

In fact the Assembly decision had been a long time in the making and I had long pondered the question by realising that such a change would in fact change the way I understood my continuing relationship to the Uniting Church. I had already undergone a renewed calling to remain, but to remain meant that like a true protestant I would need to publicly hold my orthodox conviction.

While the National President sent official pastoral letters bathed in the flowing words of love, grace and stern, mutual respect it would be naïve to think that the Assembly Officers had not anticipated the serious consequences of the proposal it had put to the National Assembly. Although the church had been in general decline for years, regardless of possible further losses, the official Report had still clearly, and willingly, been presented to the church. This sort of aggressive readiness to absorb loss and for some people to informally suggest that the church would benefit from possible property sales just seemed sad. There was no doubt that the presented proposal and decision tore at the very fabric of the unity and integrity that the church intended to portray. A unity of broken fellowship that undermined the provision of collective decision making on matters of importance could only be a false unity. The pain was felt. There was a very significant distance between those who claimed to follow the Apostles teaching and discipline and those who were ready to depart from it. The conflict not only seemed to trash the Uniting church but also its ecumenical relationship with most other churches.

The ACC had always committed itself to the Basis of Union and had never advocated withdrawal. It had always rejected suggestions of schism. It had consistently expressed its desire to preserve the faith and unity of the church. It was now ready to identify itself as the authentic Uniting Church and to regard the Assembly as a diverse schismatic group that had lost its way.

Long-term Acquiescence

The danger over time of course was to gradually merge into a ‘business as usual mode’ I had talked to Ian Clarkson about settling into a long-term acquiescence. Ian had shared some concise responses related to the network of Congregations he was involved with. Like an old man dreaming dreams I had shared my cathartic points. and Ian had listed possible distinctive actions.

Redirect local funding, Remove UCA signage and replace it with *Confessing Uniting Church*. Take more control of ministerial placements. Engage local ecumenical folk,. Alternative training for local Pastors. Draft suitable code of Ethics. According to the Basis of Union, baptism means seeking a deeper commitment to faith and service---to the faith and mission of the church via *new expressions*.

I felt that the ACC had always maintained that its position would be compromised if it seriously negotiated with the position of those with influence at Assembly level. This need to remain apart from the stance of the Assembly, had now resulted in the ACC being politically placed in a “back-foot” position. However, the Assembly decision now required a marked, visible differentiation, a necessary component of biblical faithfulness.

A Marked, visible Differentiation

Learning from the various Orders that have evolved under the Catholic and Anglican traditions, the Uniting Church has yet to learn how to cope with historic differences as new expressions of faith. In its quest for renewal the Uniting Church is committed to listen to the scriptures and the preaching of the Word in order to know the will of God. While the Catholic and Anglican church have had long experience in this, our UC tends to listen to culture and to depreciate its Reformed, Evangelical, Revivalist heritage. It too quickly moves towards divesting itself of a voice in the church that has always embodied the important growth dynamic of its message.

The Basis of Union always stresses the need for flexibility and this is particularly so in relation to church government. The form of government is clearly intended to be flexible and open to change. A visitor to the Uniting Church in South Australia in 2007, Tom Bandy had suggested the same. He said there was great interest in any organisation that would help people discern their gifts and hear a call and become equipped to do whatever it is they're called to do. He claimed, *'there's a great interest in the organisation of the church, which has a huge history of many different ways of building Christian Community.'* He believed that there was interest in Christ and there was hope for the future of the church but it would take a different kind of church and a different kind of leadership. He was talking about moving from the most common visible , establishment kind of church, with sacred property and sacred people, organised around sacred time that do worship in certain predictable patterns.

The church that is emerging is very different. It is very contextual, very pragmatic. It will worship in a wide variety of ways, do mission and organise itself also in a wide variety of ways. The future of the church, especially in Australia lies more in micro churches than in macro churches. The macro churches are beginning to fracture into ever smaller highly adaptable micro units. They have 'multi-sites', church planting and so on. Bandy believed that a different kind of leadership, not necessarily a new kind of leadership was necessary and that a clue could be found in church history in the early monastic movement.

While in South Australia a non geographical Presbytery has been proposed to accommodate those of biblical convictions I had concluded a long time ago that a new model (expression of faith) needed to be explored. My dreaming of the church in a secular context has taken the form of birthing a recognised, independent **Christian Confessional Order** typical of a new mission body, shaped by sound doctrine and rule of life principles drawn from the Scripture and Basis of Union. (an inspiring new national/local missional monasticism)

This bold dream with a semi-detached link to the Uniting Church may look like the shared relationship of the Church to that of the United Aboriginal Christian Congress. With a Faith School training resource and a digital interface for national nurture and encouragement such a new Order could seek to develop a more radical, penetrating strategy both within churches and the public space. By presenting dynamic faith stories that challenge people in a secular world to come to faith it could also affirm, encourages and nurtures people in their Christian journey.

Emerging Church

Around 2006/7, a group called Cowethas Peran Sans attempted to consider how best to rediscover Cornwall's Celtic spiritual heritage. It was a quest that resonated with my own Cornish roots and Christian convictions. While Cornwall was never the site of a major monastic centre of learning I became aware of a new interest in an emerging model of Christian community. In our time, like the rise of Methodist spirituality in eighteenth century Cornwall, a new wide range of Christian expressions beyond the traditional structures of the church as we have known it have emerged. One new model that has held my interest is that of neo-monasticism.

Rod Dreher, along with many others who are reflecting on the post-Christian era is convinced that the West, cut off from its Christian roots, is falling into a new Dark Age. **The bad news** is that the roots of religious decline run deeper than most Australians realise and a large part of the church continues to live in complete denial to this fact. This means that what is about to be suggested here may seem like an extreme exaggeration. **The good news** is that the blueprint for a time tested Christian response to this decline is older than we are. In the book the '**Benedict Option**' Dreher calls on us to learn from examples of St Benedict of Nursia, a sixth century monk who turned from the chaos and collapse of the Roman Empire to keep faith alive.

In the current context I have personally come to the conclusion that there is no quick fix but what is clear is that we are fast tracking to a different world. I find myself closely aligned with Dreher as he outlines the future. Basically he says in the 21 century when the future of religious freedom is in serious doubt Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christian must learn to read the signs, abandon hope for a political solution and turn their attention to creating resilient spiritual centres that can survive the coming storm. Christians who are brave enough to face both the complacency of contemporary Christianity and religious decline in this country, who reject trendy methodologies and solutions and return to ancient traditions (*and the scriptures*) will build the resistance and resilience to face a hostile modern world.

This series will be continued with paper Number 8. 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 grieved over the loss of the past. Other 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.