

This is the SECOND 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.

UCA Where are You?

Number 02

Having spread the broad canvas from the early statement of Malcolm Muggeridge in the 1970s to the '*Cultural Wars*' of the new millennium, the focus here moves towards the lead up to the **15th Assembly of the Uniting Church, 2018.**

A Creeping margin

With a personal interest in history that began before the birth of the Uniting Church in 1977 and that has extended over years, to my surprise I found myself gradually unearthing a largely ignored, lost part of our Methodist heritage. This journey of discovery involved the Bible Christian Methodist movement in South Australia (*Also ref. Paper 'The Churches Lost Coin.'*) While knowledge of this part of the Methodist Church was not entirely new, to my amazement I realised this was largely an untold story of mission growth that my generation had never heard about. Like finding a precious, rare, lost coin it gradually dawned on me that I had discovered a buried treasure that was extremely important.

In 2015 the book *Bible Christian Methodism in South Australia 1850-1900* was published. By the time I completed the project I concluded that perhaps the most serious oversight or mistake of past generations was their neglect to take this evangelical part of our Christian heritage seriously. By this I mean not just the neglect of past events but a failure to discern the importance of recounting the depth of faith that motivated our pioneer missionaries. The burning question became, why had it taken 160 years and a good part of my life time to rediscover this effective part of our Christian heritage and of the church I belonged to?

Although the passionate Bible Christians Methodists became the fastest growing church in South Australia, they supported Methodist church union in 1900 only to be marginalised, indeed almost forgotten, by the much larger liberal Wesleyan church. The thought was arresting. Could history be repeating itself? In by-passing much of the evangelical history and heritage of the church during my life time was the church now by-passing the Holy Spirit who had given it birth?

In the book '*A Pilgrim People, 40 years on*' that celebrates the anniversary of the Uniting Church, Julia Pitman makes a similar point and challenges people to think more deeply about the church's history and message. Julia packs a solid punch, a stinging analysis by believing in the importance of *critical history* for the well-being and future direction of the church.¹ She charged the Assembly of the Uniting Church with promoting a casual 40th Anniversary that was more like a shallow idolatry than a meaningful Christian celebration. Julia pointed out that idolatry arises from a lack of a supportive church history to reflect on in contemporary debates. She stated that if the fortieth anniversary had kept the church focused on Christ and how Christ was

¹ Julia Pitman, *A Pilgrim People, 40 years on*, Uniting Church National Historical Society 2018. (For her penetrating diagnosis of issues distorting the Uniting Church)

directly relevant to society, it deserved a methodology that provided pastoral experience. (Christian witness/testimony) Julia believed ministers and scholars of the church were responsible to provide theological reflection on the life of the church beyond a mere 'happy-time celebration' (*my expression*). Indeed it seems that the church has gradually manufactured a distinct way of looking at itself with a single 'progressive' theology and a selective culture of its own making.

Like the frog that is unbecomingly cooked to death in slowly boiled water there can be an insidious creeping distortion that robs the church of its essential life. **While the Uniting Church prides itself in being an advocate for social reform and justice it is selective and more socially-singular in the causes it advocates rather than being a bold interpreter of the broader cultural canvas.** In this regard the Uniting Church seems entrapped by its own narrow ethos and mind-set. It prefers to focus on selective social change to the exclusion of personal conversion and transformation. In fact evangelism, (proclaiming the evangel) has become a negative word within much of the church and cultural issues laced with anti-Christian feeling such as the Victorian Labour Governments 'Safe Schools' programme, with its radical gay sex and gender promotion has largely been ignored. Rather than contesting these hot issues, in a nominal way the Uniting Church often chooses to be silent. Para-church groups are left to contest the anti-Christian rhetoric and to bring a clearer Christian response. For instance the *Australian Christian Lobby* launched a \$1 million legal defence fund to resource a team of human-right lawyers to advocate for concerned ordinary Australians, while the Uniting Church prefers to ignore the broad cultural canvas and issues that may appear to be interpreted as conservative or 'politically incorrect.'

To some degree all churches and institutions work within an ethos of their own making but a church that narrows its vision to selected social issues and by-passes a gospel of personal transformation has lost the plot. It has traded the Apostolic faith for social/political activism.

In the 1930s the mainline Protestant churches in Germany fell in line with the social trend of the day. They came out in support of Hitler and the Third Reich. Basically they held a position that said, "*Jesus is Lord and Hitler is OK.*" Immediately a bold minority **Confessing Church** sprang up confessing '*Jesus as Lord.*' which meant that Hitler was not! Protestant church leaders were tolerated, but the Confessing Church leaders were arrested and some like Dietrich Bonhoeffer were hanged for making a stand. Today in our own country the growing power of social media, the power of the corporate sector and a shallow compliant church can no longer be underestimated.

The slippery slope.

The term the 'slippery slope' describes the way one thing leads to another. The debate that first approved the death of an aborted foetus on certain conditions has now been expanded to the debate surrounding euthanasia, and the cost of supporting the frail in old age. When it comes to sexual ethics Pastor Peter Barnes of the Reformed tradition points to the slippery slope. "*After capitulating to the homosexual and lesbian communities, we are now subject to the demands of an aggressive transgender lobby.*" Today we have moved on to gender theory, an ideology that is creating unprecedented confusion in our future generations and undermining the love and care of parents.

To my memory the slippery slope in the church involving sexual values began in the youth/student movement. The National Christian Youth Convention provided a venue for debating the trend towards sex before marriage. Then later, in 1975 with the push provided by Senator Lionel Murphy the Bill providing *fast-track divorce* was passed. Marriage vows became secondary to personal feelings and greater freedom. Then with advances in genetic studies clouded with complexity came the false assumption that sexuality was a genetic in-born condition. Distorted truth became convenient. The public were told and conveniently came to believe that people with a same-sex attraction were actually born that way. (*To this day there is still no genetic evidence to confirm this*) Fuelled by a felt injustice, despair and anger the fight for equal social freedoms took off and a powerful, technical untruth was promoted and adopted as truth. Although legal equalities for homosexual people were attained in 2008, with attitudes largely socially engineered by ‘political correctness,’ the public were soon regarded as fully informed and enlightened. (*being the suppression of truth referred to later*) Socially discouraged practises that once marginalised people and were regarded as anti-social were quickly discarded. The matter was no longer a technical issue of inequality. On the slippery slope, the new issue for reform became the redefinition of marriage.

The debate surrounding homosexual practise and the integrity of the church has raged for years within the Uniting Church. Chosen abstinence, celibacy, or sexual restraint have increasingly been regarded as repressive and hurtful, left over attitudes of an old judgemental Christian attitude. With the church seemingly represented in the annual Sydney mardi-gras, not just a change, but a reversal of public values within the church was taking place. Like the frog intoxicated by warm water, values within the Christian community slowly continued to take place until a provision for practising homosexual Ministers of the Word was made by the Uniting Church in 2003. Later in 2006, Uniting Church Presbyteries could not refuse to place ordained Ministers practising a homosexual life-style. With the homosexual lobby within the church then combining with those who recognised a diverse range of sexual orientations and chosen life-styles, the corporate LGBTIQ lobby became powerful and politically very influential. With the biding of time and an appeal for more justice, compassion and inclusion, plus the momentum of the popular National Plebiscite vote, the direction was set for the inevitable redefinition of Christian marriage within the church by the Uniting Church Assembly of 2018.

It is true that the church has often been more judgemental than helpful. It has failed to bring Gods love to the sexually marginalised, but it is also true to say that the church has done more than any other part of society for the rejected. It is also true to say that the church represents God’s love for the well being of all aspects of society and for the whole person, not just those with a driven individual sexual preference.

During the plebiscite debate, moving heart-felt appeals and with the help of big finance from large public corporations it became commendable and courageous to speak against so called ignorant heterosexual ‘homophobia’ and the traditional Christian position.

It was also expected that if a person was really an informed, compassionate Christian, they would crusade against social injustice and orthodoxy in order to advocate normalisation of same-gender marriage. Rather than interpreting popular culture, and humbly being guided by scripture, the history and wisdom of the whole church, or a range of compassionate pastoral options. Sadly much of the church yielded to the pressure of secular opinion and largely became compliant. It was not difficult to

understand why the Lausanne International ‘Consultation on Nominalism’ as early as 1998 had made an important statement related to the ‘slippery slope’ when it pointed out, **“Churches should be encouraged to help Christians discern and resist the relentless pressures of the modern world, consumer cultures, mass media and self-centred values.”**

Culturally Evolved or Genetically Determined.

At the same time a public loss of confidence in the Christian church generally occurred through revelations of sexual abuse. The damage was beyond measure. The now, ex President of the Uniting Church, issued a pastoral letter on 15 December 2017 following the final report of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Abuse*, saying, **“We are and I am, deeply sorry that we did not protect and care in accordance with our Christian values for those children. Our prayers and a determined focus will be required if we are to build a robust culture of child safety.”** With the church, (the once moral guardian of the nation) now struggling to define Christian values, it was hard to see how a *National Child Safety Policy Framework* could realistically be implemented in the future. The President of the church urged all church members to be vigilant in churches, agencies and schools. Around the same time, as an act of compassion towards the marginalised and with no clear distinctions, the President Rev Stuart McMillian publicly welcomed all LGBTIQ people as members of the Uniting Church. However the more discerning knew that words of warm welcome and protective legal regulations, in themselves, would not change sexual preferences or hearts, correct confused values, redirect exploitive passions or deliberate life-style choices.

On the broad canvas we cannot ignore that different attitudes have led to questions about sexual identity, to gender theory and to unprecedented confusion all of which have lead to the complex undermining of the love and care of parents. While as early as the 1970s the Festival of Light (today’s Family Voice) based in Adelaide was a leader in reading the signs of the times, today the ‘culture wars’ have intensified across the nation, and a plethora of various Christian groups now attempt to defend and speak up for traditional Christian values. While Biblical/ theological reflections will be gathered later in this series of papers, a brief dip into the underlying scientific/medical evidence seemingly quickly bypassed by the Uniting Church for social/cultural priorities are now touched on here.

My Genes Made me do It.

It is not a crime to be same-sex attracted or to be confused about gender. Christians cannot be detached from the reality of these issues or dare to think of them as belonging to odd people ‘out there’ who simply need to get their act together. It may even be right to commend the Uniting Church for its care of others in going where others fear to tread. **For Christian people and the church however it is totally another thing to adopt a secular lifestyle or to redefine marriage in a way that regards a God-given, created reality as now irrelevant when it comes to same-sex attraction and gender.** *(In theological terms what we are talking about here is the corporate denial or suppression of ontological truth. Ontological truth is a truth embedded in the core essence of things)*

More than offering just what we think is *social equality* and *compassion*, the Christian church is absolutely compelled to offer the unique and holistic- truth that comes in the person of Jesus Christ.

It has been pointed out that while homosexuality and trans-gender-ism are distinct issues—(one is primarily about **external sexual attraction**, the other about **internal self-identification**) —they do have one thing in common. For those who advocate change, the physical genital reality has nothing to do with what it means to be male or female. The LGBTQ movement teach that same-sex attraction is absolute, genetic and normative, while gender is infinitely fluid and can be chosen.

Neil Whitehead, a research scientist in bio-chemistry in the book, *“My Genes made me do it,”* takes a mainstream scientific position and concludes that evidence does not support the popular view among many Christians that homosexuality is **genetically fixed**. Whitehead points out that Dr Homer of the USA National Institute of Health set out to find a gene determining homosexuality in mid 1993. Homer concluded, *“There will never be a test that will say for certain whether a child will be gay. We know that for certain.”*² Whitehead says, most of us don’t have time or the ability to check these things but, ---*“we capitulate to what seems fair, decent, compassionate and the intelligent thing to do under the circumstances. We find we are under pressure to adopt the line that homosexual people are being discriminated against for sexual orientation they didn’t ask to have. Proponents of this line may quote the latest press report linking biology and homosexuality,--- legislation from ‘enlightened’ legislatures all over the Western world---or the shifting position of the church..”*

Whitehead pointed out that we are left to believe that if we are compassionate we must support change. *“Not true,”* says Whitehead. So much of what people in the West now believe about homosexuality is not the truth. (p 9) Most young people are emotionally vulnerable in that period of their lives and same-sex feelings are a passing phase typical of normal hormonal change. Two different studies—one in Vanderbilt University and one at Portman Clinic London concluded that 70 to 80 percent of children who reported transgender feelings *‘spontaneously lost those feelings’*. Youths who identify as same-sex attracted at 16 mostly identify as opposite-sex-attracted at age 21. For most it is a passing phase, a normal hormonal change. Three specialists in this area, Dr Kenneth Zucker, Dr Susan Bradley and Dr Richard P. Fitzgibbon agree that if treated early this disorder will fully resolve.³

Same-Sex Attraction

Homosexuality cannot be traced back to a single psychological or social root. Heterosexuality is overwhelmingly learned, the result of response to the environment. Whiteheads says negative relationships with the person of the same sex, childhood gender conformity, adolescent homosexual arousal and activity, or sexual abuse can also be a factor in the development of homosexuality.-- So if heterosexuality results from a **learning process** that involves a relationship with parents and peers groups, puberty, sexual encounters, highly individual experiences and repeated behaviours, so does homosexuality. (p 70)-- Homosexuals frequently show a breakdown in several developmental stages leading to heterosexuality, particularly attachment to gender identification with the same sex parent and adequate connection with same sex peers leading to the needs for same sex affection and affirmation that becomes eroticised.

² Neil Whitehead, *My Genes Made me do It*, Huntington House 1999, p146.

³ Vox Brief November 2015.

(p72) This is not to contradict or underestimate the personal pain and struggle the same-sex attracted person may experience. This needs expanding and further comment but it is enough to establish that we cannot simplistically trust popular trends or the opinion that claims a form of genetic compulsion.

Gender Fluidity

LGBTQ activists say we are the sex we feel we are. If that is different from our genitals, they say we should have hormones and surgery to make us appear to be the opposite sex. Transgender people experience *gender dysphoria* (an unhappiness with their birth sex). Paul McHugh writes that “*the transgender suffer a disorder of assumption like--- other disorders familiar to psychiatrists.*”⁴ For instance, those who suffer from anorexia are convinced that they are overweight, even when they are unhealthily skinny. Again studies involving twins indicate they are not born that way. Possible causes include family dynamics, bullying or childhood misperceptions.

A common treatment in the process of gender modification includes giving children drugs to block puberty, or hormones to begin changing their outward appearance. After adjusting however these people still have the same sexual chromosomes they had at their birth.

Another rebuff to the popular notion that our lives (and therefore our values) are largely genetically pre-determined appeared in the Australian, 15 August 2018. It announced the national tour of paediatric professor Dr Quentin Van Meter, an endocrinologist and president of the American College of Paediatricians. Two telling aspects emerged. (1) Dr Van Meter’s professional research had concluded that the transgender movement was based on political ideology rather than science. He said that using puberty blockers for children with gender dysphoria was akin to child abuse. (2) In the academic setting of a university Van Meter’s presentation was not assessed on academic credibility but his claims about ideology were in fact confirmed by a student protest petition of 6,000 signatures before Van Meter had even put his case. The University of Western Australia had flown a rainbow flag for some months at the front of its campus as a militant sign of respect for LGBTIQ+ people. Dr Van Meter, was regarded as being disrespectful to transgender people and the university’s values of respect for human dignity and diversity. Conclusions reached in this area, (a) There is no convincing evidence that children are genetically born that way. (b) Evidence indicates that most will lose trans-gender feelings over time. (c) Confidence in masculinity and femininity grows over a period.

Deeper than a Justice Issue.

The above pointers are hardly adequate explanations in themselves when it comes to understanding the complexities of same-sex attraction or transgenderism but other factors will emerge later. The biological and social aspects of the areas we are considering may be personal, emotional and complex but I’m convinced that if the guidance of biblical principles are taken seriously there can be a way of responding that does not trash Christian integrity or the church. Unfortunately it seems that over years the Uniting Church has been pressured, frustrated and overwhelmed by claims of special knowledge and expertise. In wanting to remove the negative social stigma linked with sex and gender the church has approached these issues largely as a matter

⁴ Perspective, *Gender confusion is there an answer?* Vox Link, Victoria, June 2015.

of social justice. Because these are personal, intimate areas of life we have concluded that personal acceptance, welcoming people and sympathizing must also mean we are compelled to normalise a lifestyle. This means that in rightly celebrating the dignity and worth of people **we mistakenly also celebrate and normalise a flawed practise and life style choice that the Bible seriously defines as sin.**

In 1993 Rev Geoffrey Bingham published a small book by Marjorie Wellby, a pathologist from Adelaide entitled, *Alcoholism, medically documented sin.*⁵ It is a radical title and statement but its analysis and application can be extended to a range of aberrations and addictions. Wellby concluded that alcoholism was not a medical condition *per se*, but a choice, that fits the biblical description of sin..

While she respected that research and therapies may be helpful, she pondered why , after many years alcoholism could not be, *“added to the list of medically conquests.”* Calling alcohol a disease she concluded, we have encouraged people to avoid facing up to the truth. We have socially normalised alcoholism and the alcohol industry While not claiming to prove scientifically that alcoholism and homosexuality are one and the same, Wellby drew some remarkable parallels between the development of addiction and with what the Bible calls sin. **Wellby concluded that we have socially normalised the alcohol industry and in responding to homosexual practice we have gone through a similar process.**

Reading the first chapter of Romans where Paul outlines the unchecked progress of sin and its inbuilt deception, Wellby found “the parallels arresting”. From verse 18 she read what was described as the visible ‘wrath of God’ being out worked because of the **suppression of the truth** and the futile, distorted thinking that followed it. While we need to avoid a simple literalism, the mass distortion of the truth for the sake of social convenience increasingly fit the consequences described in Romans chapter one. They come close to the social nihilism and emptiness of our age.

In Conclusion

While these themes will be touched on later, from my reading I conclude while we all have various genetic pre-dispositions, when it comes to sexuality and gender the genetic content is limited and *never a single compulsion* in itself.

It is very important not to confuse a predisposition, an attraction or tendency with an actual response or life-style choice. Confusion at this point can lead to the assumption that a strong feeling or attraction in itself, leaves a person as a miserable victim compelled by circumstance and with no hope.

Without underestimating the distress that can develop from being a single person in a sexualized society, it is ultimately choice and recurrent choices that promise sexual satisfaction and pleasure that gradually becomes a fixed life style, a lifestyle of necessity that we are addressing here. Scientific practitioners, social engineers and theologians can rationalise and appeal to genetic, environmental or psychological factors but signs of our human inability to save ourselves confront us with God’s plan for our salvation through Jesus Christ and the cross. It is clear that the general quality of community life and the stability and health of marriage and family relationships are of vital importance. We are all seriously flawed people but in advocating the dignity and worth of people, rather than focusing just on social justice the church would do

⁵ Marjorie Wellby, *Alcoholism, medically documented sin*, New Creation Pub. 1984,1993.

well to point to Christ and to lead in areas of adolescent evangelism, marriage preparation, communication skills, child nurture and family function. It is also clear that people who struggle with same-sex attraction and gender confusion deserve our love and compassion. Indeed, we need to point all people beyond our human weakness and brokenness to the only one who establishes human dignity and value.

The Jesus Factor.

It was said of Zacchaeus that he could not see Jesus because of the crowd. Selwyn Hughes suggests “*The herd instinct prevents many people from seeing Jesus---many are afraid of getting out of step, of being different.—Society demands conformity.*”⁶

Jesus the Bread of life, the Living water crossed social barriers and spoke to the tax collector Zacchaeus of *salvation coming to his house*, Jesus was not approving of his chosen life-style or business practise. Jesus was recognising that all of his life Zacchaeus had longed to say ‘yes,’ to give himself completely to some Ultimate Someone or Something, -- indeed something in him was searching for an ultimate surrender. Typical of our own narcissism, Zacchaeus’s way of life had taught him to say ‘no’ rather than ‘yes,’ to determine his own destiny rather than give himself. These feelings describe every human heart. Our Lord focused on the same desire when he spoke to the Samaritan women and the intellectual Nicodemus. Salvation came to Zacchaeus when he said ‘Yes’ to Jesus. It was that surrender that resulted in a salvation that introduced him to a new way of life.

⁶ Selwyn Hughes. *Every Day with Jesus* ,13 January 2000