

# WHERE ARE WE NOW? REFLECTIONS ON THE UCA BY A TEMPORARY RESIDENT

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## My story

During my first nineteen years I attended a Baptist Church in suburban Adelaide, South Australia. As a boy of ten, I decided to trust in Jesus and to follow him all the days of my life. At the age of fourteen, I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, with the sign of glossolalia, and five years later, was encouraged to join the CRC Churches. At 21, trained as a secondary teacher, I established several small country CRC churches. Four years later I joined the staff of Crusade Bible College, and took on the part-time pastorate of a suburban congregation. In 1979, I initiated the founding of Tabor College, a non-denominational charismatic teaching centre in Adelaide, and assisted in ministry at the Austral-Asian Christian Church. Ultimately Tabor campuses were established in five States with up to 2000 enrolled students. My wife and I and our son Michael established the Sydney campus in 1992. In Sydney, Wesley International Congregation became our home congregation. In 2003, I became interim Senior Pastor, a position I was to hold for nearly eight years.

As a guest in the Uniting Church, I am reluctant to express any observations on the Church, as I have been kindly received by almost everyone. Nevertheless, this is what I have been requested – nay, urged – to do. So for better or worse, here are some reflections of a ‘temporary resident’.

## Common heritage

Both the Uniting Church and Pentecostalism share a common heritage – the Wesleyan concept of holiness. The story is well known of Wesley’s conversion at Aldersgate Street on 24 May 1738, when his heart was ‘strangely warmed’ and he felt, for the first time, that he did trust in Christ. Equally important was his experience at a meeting in Fetter Lane the following January when there was an effusion of the Holy Spirit and people prayed into the small hours of the morning. Wesley recorded –

The power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His Majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be Lord.’<sup>1</sup>

Later Wesley began to develop his teaching of Christian Perfection. He was not always clear about exactly what this meant, but some things were plain. Holiness was an essential part of Christian living. It was attained through an experience, discrete from conversion, that Wesley called Entire Sanctification. This was a baptism of love, ‘pure love expelling sin’; it was received by faith,

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, I have not included specific references to the quotations used here. They can generally be found in my *The Spirit of Pentecost*, currently available for perusal at [www.barrychant.com](http://www.barrychant.com) and shortly to be published by Emeth Press.

‘instantaneously, in one moment’ and resulted in a life free from deliberate sin. This sounds, at least in part, not unlike a description of the Fetter Lane experience.

A century and a half later, Methodists all over the world were crying out to God for such an experience and many found themselves not only filled with love and joy, but also speaking in tongues. The Los Angeles Azusa Street story (1906) is the best known example of this. But it is a model that was replicated in many nations – including Australia.

However, the Methodist Church as a whole did not follow the Wesleyan direction, which some saw as an indication of a dangerous decline. At the 1912 Methodist Conference, W G Taylor, first Superintendent of Wesley Mission declared, ‘Back to Wesley Back to the upper room! Rekindle the waning fires of the Church’s inner life!’ And on another occasion, ‘Apostolic methods will still produce apostolic results... I tremble as I think of the bare possibility of this work ever being shifted from its old moorings. Disaster would be bound to follow.’ It was a prophetic word.

## **BASIS OF UNION**

The 1977 Basis of Union is a profound document in many ways. In fact, there are those in the UC who seem to regard it more highly than Scripture! It was carefully crafted and generally sound.

However, given its background, the merging of three significant denominations, each with a different heritage, it is not surprising that there is a lack of clarity and definition in some areas. Paragraph One’s statement on the return of Christ, for example, is broad enough to encompass a wide range of views—from a literal physical return to a spiritual or even symbolic parousia.

The third paragraph, although hailed by many as perhaps the most profound in the document, does not address clearly the question of personal repentance and conversion to Christ. While stating plainly that the Church confesses Christ as Lord and that all people are called to faith in him, the need for a Wesleyan-type encounter with God through Christ is not to be found.

The description of the Scriptures as ‘a unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it [the Church] hears the Word of God’ proved controversial from the beginning. It was this clause as much as any which prevented some ministers and churches from participating in Union.<sup>2</sup> While its intention was evidently to allow for people to distinguish between passages referring to localised and cultural practices from those that were universally applicable, it was also seen by some evangelicals as allowing readers to choose for themselves which parts were to be regarded as the Word of God. To them, believing as they do (and as I do) that all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), this was too subjective and hence unacceptable.

## **THE GREAT COMMAND**

The strength of the UC lies in its adherence to the Great Command (John 13:34). The very name ‘Uniting’ implies both a desire and a willingness to work with others and to continue the process of Union rather than seeing it as a *fait accompli*.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of Union, some evangelical Presbyterians and Congregationalists formed ‘continuing’ denominations. There were also some Methodists who did not participate, but continued as independent congregations or joined another movement.

The Church is known for its care and concern for the poor and underprivileged. This is demonstrated, for example, in the work of UnitingCare and UnitingWorld. It is also seen in the Church's advocacy for the cause of refugees, of indigenous people, of social justice for the work force, and so on.

The Exodus Foundation is an example of dedicated and compassionate work for the needy. Under the leadership of Bill Crews,

The Exodus Foundation Support Services team strives to create a sense of belonging and self worth – something everyone hopes for and deserves. The team is committed to affirming and validating all individuals, developing and nurturing trust and respect between staff and clients, providing a professional and confidential service, and identifying and responding promptly to emerging issues and needs. Nearly one thousand requests for assistance are received each month by the Foundation.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Wesley Mission is in the forefront of welfare work and concern, with its huge budget and its staff of 2,500 people. Wesley ministers to the sick, the elderly, the homeless, the poor, the young, the victims of substance abuse, the abandoned, the lonely and the abused.

There is little doubt that those who are engaged in areas like these have a genuine concern for people in need and see their ministry as truly reflecting the compassion of Christ. The Basis of Union affirms, 'The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity...' (#17).

The Basis of Union expresses the desire to provide an environment where there is provision for 'difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith' (#14). The result is that, although the term is not specifically spelled out in the Basis of Union, 'inclusiveness' has become a watchword in the UC. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the UC is its willingness to accept anyone, regardless of who they are. I myself am an example of this – a Pentecostal preacher being accepted as senior pastor of Wesley International Congregation, the largest UC congregation in the State.

## **THE GREAT COMMISSION**

The Basis of Union talks in general terms about the need to 'hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations' (#1). Ironically, on *this* question, the Basis of Union is often conveniently overlooked. In practice, evidence of the Great Commission (Mark 16:15, 16) being implemented is sometimes not easy to find. The Board of Mission in NSW is one of the bright spots in the Church and individual congregations are attempting evangelism, but they are clearly a minority.

Certainly, the UC is in decline. A recent promotion of a one day symposium refers unashamedly to 'our ageing and declining membership'.<sup>4</sup> While the Australian population increases by around 7% every five years, the Uniting Church has decreased steadily since its inception. In 1976,

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.billcrews.com.au/htm/exodus.htm?our\\_services/our\\_services](http://www.billcrews.com.au/htm/exodus.htm?our_services/our_services)

<sup>4</sup> 'Are we United or Uniting? A one day symposium'. UTC promotional leaflet, October 2010.

Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians represented 19.4% of the population; in 1981, the Uniting Church represented 15.2%; in 1986, 13.1%; in 1991, 8.2%; in 2001, 6.6%.

Plainly, union is not in itself a cause of growth. While I am sure it pleases the Father for his children to work together, it must be in a spirit of faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Tying two sinking ships together will not stop them sinking.

In a Sydney Presbytery meeting a few years back, one speaker told how a Muslim family were attending his church and he actually tried to talk them out of being baptized (presumably so they would feel accepted as they were). As it happened, they insisted on baptism and he went ahead.

More recently, there has been the debate on the proposed new Preamble to the Constitution. The syncretism implied in this document seems to be seen as a virtue by many people. Yet it clearly flies in the face of the Great Commission.

In a statement prepared by Wesley Mission, we read –

1. All things, all cultures, all traditions and customs, all people(s), are fallen and broken through the grip of sin (Romans 3: 23, 8: 18-21) and are *transformed* in Christ (Acts 17: 30, Colossians 1: 19-20, Revelation 21: 5). In this regard there is no distinction between particular groups along the lines of culture, social status, gender, age, sexuality etc (Gal. 3: 28). It is misleading to suggest that any culturally identified pre-Christian group had 'particular insights into God's ways' (Clause 3). The only possible exception would be the Hebrew people whose particular story explicitly paved the way for the Messiah to come.
2. Clause three shows Aboriginal and Islander religious beliefs as almost on a continuum with Christian belief. This is inconsistent with the gospel that requires all people(s) to repent of their old ways and turn to the new (Mark 1: 15; Act 2: 38; 3: 19; 2 Cor 3: 17).
3. Repentance and faith, expressed through baptism, still represent the only way to come to God (Act 9: 18; 10: 47-48; 18: 8; 19: 5; Romans 6: 3-4).

Synod and Presbytery meetings I have attended rarely devote much time to evangelism or outreach. Given the declining nature of the Church, I find this astonishing. Surely it should be our first priority?

The other day, I was initially heartened to receive a copy of an Assembly document called *Towards a Theology Relating to Mission*.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, it appears positive and encouraging. On closer inspection, however, worrying omissions are seen. The document talks plainly of reconciliation and declares that the power of sin and death were defeated (#6) but does not say how. While the Scripture declares that Christ died for our sins, and that this is of 'first importance' (1 Corinthians 15:3), the document does not. Nor is there any mention of the concept of atonement or of Christ becoming sin for us or bearing our sins in his own body on the tree (Isaiah 53:4, 5; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

*Mission* speaks much of us entering a new creation, but little of us becoming a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:4). It does tell us that through baptism we celebrate dying to sin and

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<sup>5</sup> C.Walker et al, *Towards a Theology Relating to Mission*, Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia Standing Committee, March 2010.

being raised to new life in Christ in the fellowship of the Church, but appears to overlook the need for personal repentance (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38, 39) prior to this.

Under the heading 'Forms of Mission', I expected the first item would be, 'Preach the gospel'. Not so – other activities are given greater prominence. And sadly, there is rarely even a mention of the cross, which is the heart of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18; Galatians 6:14).

Perhaps I am being too severe in my judgement and maybe some of these points are hidden away in phrases where I did not identify them. If so, why so? Should not the heart of the gospel be the heart of mission?

Recently I attended the International Convention of the CRC Churches Int. For three days, except for one business meeting that lasted one hour, every session was devoted to outreach. In one morning session, over half a million dollars was pledged by just seventy congregations, to build a mission centre in Sri Lanka. The movement itself currently has only 130 congregations in Australia but some 700 in the South Pacific and South East Asia. The goal is to double the number of Australian churches in the next decade and ultimately to have a CRC presence in every nation of the world by the time of the movement's centenary in 2045. I came away from the conference enthused and inspired.

Can this happen in the UC? Yes, it can. Wesley International Congregation currently supports 20 overseas missionaries and has an annual overseas mission budget of over \$200,000.

## THE GREAT COMPROMISE

A previous President of the Uniting Church wrote, 'We are a church within which there are differing opinions... and where councils, ministers and members are able to give voice to those different opinions and make decisions about what it means for ministry in their place.'<sup>6</sup> The Assembly Standing Committee said something similar – 'We will continue to work together in our diversity as servants of the living God.'<sup>7</sup>

I noted above that the best thing about the UC is that it will accept anyone – including me. Ironically, the worst thing about the UC is also that it will accept anyone. The debate over ordination of homosexuals highlights the dilemma faced by a Church which is so open to a variety of voices.

I will not go into the issues here – they have been debated *ad nauseam*. For me the surprising thing is that the debate ever occurred in the first place! How can it be that the Church of Jesus Christ can so readily depart from Scripture? It is here that the language in the Basis of Union that the Scriptures are a 'unique prophetic and apostolic testimony *in which* it hears the Word of God' has proven inadequate.

In my denomination, for instance, it would be unthinkable for such an issue even to be raised. This is not be lacking in compassion, but it is to realise that the Great Command is incomplete without the Great Commission. 'Neither do I condemn you' must be balanced by 'Go and sin no more'.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Letter to Ministers, Members and Councils of the Uniting Church,' 25 August, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> 'Ministry and Membership in the Uniting Church,' 24 August 2003, paragraph 1, c.

Like all UC ministers, the pastors at WIC are all required to attend Sexual Misconduct Awareness seminars. I was supposed to attend one this year, but I opted out on several grounds. First, I have personally written and taught on this subject for years; second, I have had to deal with ministers concerning this issue more than once in the course of my ministry; third, I am about to step down from leadership at the end of the year anyway; but, fourth, I would not undertake the course on principle. How can a Church that allows parishes and Presbyteries to approve homosexual practice among ministers have credibility on the subject of sexual misconduct?

It is of interest, for example, to examine the definition of sexual misconduct in the Uniting Church Regulations (7.7.4) where it is defined as behaviour including sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual conduct prohibited by criminal law, sexualisation of a pastoral relationship and 'grave sexual misconduct unworthy of a Minister'. Neither adultery nor homosexual behaviour are mentioned, although both are specifically named in Scripture as being sinful (Matthew 5:27-30; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).<sup>8</sup>

The phrase 'grave sexual conduct unworthy of a minister' may be seen to cover these, but it does not do so sufficiently. In the absence of any clear statement that homosexual behaviour is wrong, arguments have been mounted that it is in fact acceptable. So Mary Jo Osterman argues that Christian freedom permits such a view.<sup>9</sup> She goes on to suggest that Paul's reference to homosexual practice in Romans 1:26-27 had nothing to do with non-exploitative, committed and monogamous same-sex relationships, of which he had no understanding.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this argument can be readily challenged. The writings of Plato, for example, talk openly of exactly this kind of homosexual behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

One further example. At a Presbytery meeting three or four years ago, one of the members turned up blind drunk. He could hardly stand and could not walk without assistance. Perhaps the Church cannot be blamed for this. But to my knowledge, on subsequent occasions, the same man continued to attend Presbytery. I still find this an incredible set of circumstances. I wonder how John Wesley might have dealt with it.

The Basis of Union refers to governance in the Church through inter-related councils (#15) – an approach of which the Church is justly proud. An outcome of this – and of the general 'uniting' approach of the Church – has been decision-making by consensus. While this as an ideal can only be admired, in practice, it can easily hand over leadership to vocal minorities. Some 95% of people might approve a certain action, but the 5% may be given a disproportionate amount of time to plead their cause and if they do not choose to go along with the majority, the whole process may be brought to a halt and nothing happens. The result? Minority rule. I have listened in vain for any suggestion of apostolic or prophetic leadership.

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<sup>8</sup> It is fair to say that other documents of the Church are more specific on these issues, but these comments are correct as applied to the definition of sexual misconduct in the Regulations.

<sup>9</sup> M.J.Osterman, *Claiming the Promise* Chicago: Reconciling Congregation Program 1997:14. Although this is not a UC publication, it was available for sale at the NSW UC Synod in 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Osterman, 1997:18, 24.

<sup>11</sup> B.Jowett (tr), Plato, *Phaedrus* Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1952:117; B.Jowett (tr), *Symposium* Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1952:149-173.

Further, governance is built on the premise of small local congregations. For a local church like Wesley International Congregation, with a regular constituency of 1200, the UC regulations are sometimes less than helpful. For instance, this particularly applies to staff management and especially to hiring and firing, where the Senior Pastor's hands are tied by the system. In any other setting, I would sit down with the person concerned, work through the issues and if necessary suggest it might be time for him or her to consider other options. This would be better for everyone, especially the minister concerned. As it is, the matter has to go a group of elders and then to the congregation (a large number of people in my case), which means that the minister is seriously embarrassed. Alternately, the truth is not told or nothing is done and situation is allowed to continue.

Similarly, to disallow the incumbent pastor to have any involvement in the appointment of his successor obviously has merit. But in a larger congregation, it would make more sense to set up a succession plan, to train a new person for the task, to have a transition period and so on.

## THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Over fifty years ago, Martyn Lloyd-Jones published a small book entitled *Authority*. In the Introduction he argued that both Catholicism and Pentecostalism were growing and expanding for the same reason – both spoke with a voice of authority. To me, this is what is lacking in the UC today. There are so many voices. Everyone has a say. Consensus offers leadership from the bottom rather than the top.

The authority of Scripture is too often compromised. There is no place for apostolic or prophetic voices to be heard.

With many congregations having less than 50 people and most of the members being in their sixties, the future of the Church is in jeopardy to say the least.

Whether this trend can be reversed is a big question. Church history suggests it is a difficult task. Will the liberals die out and the evangelicals remain, as one writer suggests?<sup>12</sup> Only time will tell.

I thank God for my time at Wesley. I love the people at WIC with deep affection and I am sad to be finishing. Wesley Mission *is* committed to the Scriptures and WIC is a biblical, lively, congregation, with a great heart for mission. But, beyond that, and I say it reluctantly, I am looking forward to working once again in a fellowship of ministers and churches where I don't have to apologize for believing in the Word and power of God.

Barry Chant  
16 October 2010.

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Weeks, 'Why a smaller UCA has more potential', *ACCatalyst* Volume 4, Number 5, October, 2010, p.6.