

# CROSS Purposes

*UCA 30<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary  
Special  
Part II:*

*where to  
from here  
for the  
Uniting  
Church?*

*in service*

**Issue 10**  
**September 2007**

**JENNY  
TYMMS**

**ALISTAIR  
MACRAE**

**ANDREW  
DUTNEY**

**ROB GOTCH**

*...and more!*

# CROSS Purposes

Issue 9  
July 2007  
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*A forum for theological dialogue*

WELCOME to the first issue of a two-part special edition of *Cross Purposes*, dedicated to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia. This issue is a retrospective on our first 30 years; issue 10, to be published in September, will be a prospective look at where we are heading. In this issue, we asked five writers give their impressions of the Uniting Church as it is and has been.

Anneke Oppewal reflects on her experience as newcomer to the Uniting Church. Trained and ordained in the Netherlands, Anneke found the Uniting Church a culture shock in many ways, and is still "intrigued, puzzled and fascinated" by many of its quirks. But there is much she has come to love in it, not least the *Basis of Union*, a "revelation" that has helped her understand and find her place in a church very different from what she has been used to.

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In a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary sermon, Pam Kerr invites us to remember all the “blessings and curses” God has set before us, and turn again to God. Looking back to the great enthusiasm and hope in which the Uniting Church was founded, she asks how we can live today in that same hope, but as a “mature” church. We must keep before our eyes the vision of Christians united so that the world might believe.

For this issue’s “Areopagus Hill”, we have invited three retired ministers, who were actively involved at the time of union, to look retrospectively at where the Uniting Church has come since then, and how far we have lived up to the promises of that time.

Ian Breward gives a sober assessment of changes in our church and

wider society since 1977. He sees both strengths and weaknesses emerging from the implementation of the founders’ plans for the Uniting Church; there were many difficult adjustments for the uniting churches to make, but the path was made smoother by much goodwill and excitement. The second generation of Uniting Church members has had to confront a widespread decline in church attendance, and in public esteem for the church. We are still changing in response to this, with varying degrees of success!

David Beswick reflects on his own experience of the Uniting Church’s first 30 years, acknowledging that this demands a “dominant tone of grief”. He is deeply troubled by the turns our church has taken since about 1990, and believes the roots of more recent



*Here for the first time we include some prompts for your theological reflection and discussion...*

➤ **Ian Breward** observes that many who embarked upon the process of forming the UCA believed that they were “engaged in the creation of an Australian Church”. **D’Arcy Wood** remarks that his hopes for interaction with Australian society have largely been met. What is your assessment of the relationship between the UCA and Australian society?

➤ **David Beswick** suggests that in the life of the UCA “social and political sentiment and ideology [has] triumphed, and that the leadership of the church [has been] seriously weakened”. Does this ring true? In what ways so, or what ways not?

➤ One rationale for forming the UCA was to rationalize resources so that “synods would be able to minister more effectively to emerging needs and proclaim the gospel more effectively” (Breward). Has this worked? Is it true that working on structures can be “an easy alternative to engaging the wider community in ‘fresh words and deeds’” (Wood)?

➤ Beswick reports that the initial report on church structure was more

controversial than that on the faith of the church. Why does church order seem harder to resolve than faith statements? Do disagreements about structure result from significant differences of belief? Is the UCA truly a community of common confession?

➤ **Anneke Oppewal** remarks several times on the significance, for her, of the *Basis of Union*. What part has the *Basis* played in your own experience of faith, and of the UCA? Beswick suggests that, through the process of negotiation toward union, the *Basis* came to lose some of its “original catholic strength and openness to new possibilities in ministry”. To what extent are contemporary weaknesses, and strengths, of the UCA and its mission the consequence of its *Basis*?

➤ **Pam Kerr** casts the first 30 years of the UCA as a collection of blessings and curses. What, in your assessment, has been the most significant achievement or blessing of the UCA in its first 30 years? What has been its most significant failure, or curse?

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# CROSS Purposes

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*The Age* on Good Friday 2007, a Melbourne critic, Peter Craven, wrote about “a culture of forgetting” and a “loss of knowledge of the icons of Christianity”. So it isn’t just the Uniting Church which forgets—we are part of a trend. The Church depends on tradition, which means, after all, simply “handing on” the faith. In the Uniting Church tradition is not only neglected, it is sometimes scorned. Why, for example, do we think we have to re-invent the wheel in our forms of worship? Liturgical reform is always a need, I agree, but that does not require a constant re-setting of the foundations. We are not the first generation to discover the freshness and power of the New Testament message. We belong to the communion of saints, past and present.

Fifthly, I am puzzled by the constant tinkering with structures. How many times have the various synods re-structured? Even the Assembly mounted a major exercise of re-structuring in the 1990s, and after paying good money to consultants and eating up many, many person-hours, the results were minimal in terms of money saved or efficiency gained.

There are probably good reasons why there is now one presbytery for Tasmania, one for SA and one for WA. Perhaps the inter-conciliar structure provided in the *Basis* is now unsustainable, in the wake of declining membership, but I still wonder whether working on structures is in

some way an easy alternative to engaging the wider community in “fresh words and deeds” (*Basis*, §11).

In the past few weeks I have had conversations with three of my closest friends in the ranks of the ordained ministry. In each case I sensed them rather disheartened—with the church and with the impact of their own ministries. I have been pondering whether there is a sign here, a sign of a church unsure about ministry, a church that is rather tired, and a church that is crumbling a bit under the weight of its missionary responsibilities. I am told it is difficult to find people to join presbytery committees and to take office. On the other hand, as I move among local churches (the privilege of a retired preacher) I encounter people with strong faith, abundant skills and a range of spiritual gifts. I hope that, as forms of church life change, we shall be able to find ways of honoring that faith and skill and those gifts.

Unlike some commentators, inside and outside the churches, I don’t fear for the Church’s future. As Frank Hambly, a member of the Joint Commission on Church Union, said about 40 years ago, “God looks after his Church”. Another way of saying that would be that the Church is the fellowship of the Spirit. And as St. Paul said, “You are the Body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), and Christ is all in all.

D’ARCY WOOD is a retired minister and former President of the Uniting Church.

failures lie in the compromises made in the adopted *Basis of Union*. In particular, there has been a reluctance to think more radically and ecumenically about new forms of ministry. Despite many regrets, David sees some signs of hope for the next generation of the Uniting Church.

Finally, D’Arcy Wood catalogues a number of his original hopes for the Uniting Church, some of which have been fulfilled, while others have not. The union has survived, which could never have been taken for granted, and it has engaged constructively with Australian society and more widely in our region. On the other hand, our enduring unclarity around matters of ministry and polity, and the shortage of further ecumenical progress, are cause for concern. But D’Arcy does not fear for the future of the church, which is after all in the hands of God.

It will be clear that there is much common ground among our contributors. Unsurprisingly, they all find a mix of “blessings and curses” in our history, and although their emphases are different, each finds some grounds to be hopeful about our future.

The purpose of this issue is to help Uniting Church members take a step back, and look with broader perspective over our first 30 years. In assessing how far we have come, and where we have fallen short, one question persistently arises: have we lived up to the hopes of our founders? Have we justified the great energy and

enthusiasm that was in the air at union? The echoes of that enthusiasm resound very loudly in the memories of our contributors, and yet taken as a whole, the articles gathered here reflect considerable concern about the position of our church today.

One area which is frequently mentioned is the Uniting Church’s practice of ministry and ordination. It is well known that this is one of the biggest barriers to further church union, both in Australia and elsewhere. In our view, it is time for the Uniting Church to reclaim a more ecumenically recognizable structure of orders and specified ministries. As David Beswick points out in his article, “new possibilities in ministry” are actually *more* possible within a structure that is vigorously catholic, apostolic and evangelical.

In this issue, we include for the first time a few questions arising from the articles (page 27). We hope that these might help to make *Cross Purposes* more suitable for use in study groups, or might simply stimulate interesting reflection for our readers. Please feel free to engage with these questions, or with anything else that strikes you, by writing a letter to the editors (details on the previous page). *Cross Purposes* is after all “a forum for theological dialogue”, which means we are always glad when our readers take up and carry further the conversations begun in these pages.

# Impressions of a Newcomer

First encounters with the Uniting Church

Anneke Oppewal

MY FIRST encounter with the Uniting Church was in 1997 in Sydney's inner-West. My family and I had freshly arrived from the Netherlands, for a stay that was initially planned to last only one year. I had been a minister for over ten years, serving different congregations, and wished to use the opportunity of a year's leave to find time for study and mothering. We lived in Newtown at the time, around the corner from King Street where Wesley Mission gave shape to the social justice leaning of the Uniting Church through the provision of meals, worship and various forms of support—mainly for the colorful community that inhabited King Street at the time, a profile that did not really appeal to the young family we were at the time. So we attended St. Stephens Anglican instead, a lovely, liberal congregation with an interesting group of like-minded and similarly-aged young families.

A more in depth first encounter with the Uniting Church came in 1999 when we moved to another

suburb. The church closest to our new home was a small and intimate middle-class Uniting Church. When the minister and I got talking after I attended the morning service he was deeply shocked when he heard that I, as an ordained minister, had not led worship for more than a year. He immediately invited me to preach and the next Sunday I made my debut in an Australian pulpit. Up till then I had enjoyed studying and being part of a congregation without the responsibilities of ordained ministry weighing on me. Leading worship in Maroubra after what basically had been a two year retreat had a huge impact on me. It brought home that my calling was in the congregation, preaching, and in the church, teaching. That's where the Uniting Church gained itself a soft spot in my heart.

Shortly after, we moved back to Europe, to Surrey in the UK. Guildford United Reformed Church became our home church. This time I



addressed the Assembly in 1994, on my retirement as President, I spoke of the growing openness of parliamentarians and public servants to discussion with the churches. I could not say the same today. Present governments, especially federal, are not talking with us as much as in the 1990s. Interestingly, religion in general is a growing area of public discussion, but that is a different matter. The influence of Islam, the conflicts in the Middle East and the sometimes bizarre manifestations of religion receive plenty of comment in the media. But we should not assume this "airing of religion" to be a prelude to a developing faith. Religiosity, as well as religious discussion, is quite different from faith, which involves placing oneself in the hands of God.

A second problem, in my opinion, is our unclarity about ministry. Historians assessing the 1977 to 2007 period will, I am sure, remark on the huge efforts expended, in the Uniting Church, on reports and debates about ordination and the variety of ministries. In my 1994 report to the Assembly I said, "I long for the day when the church will reach a consensus on ordination and will speak with one voice". I am still in a state of longing! I confess to being puzzled why the clear statements in the *Basis* (not forgetting Appendix II, which is often omitted from reprints), together with such landmark statements as the World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* of 1982, do

not suffice as guidance for our doctrine and practice. The Anglicans and Lutherans regard some of our ministerial practice as "irregular" and I don't blame them. An example is recognizing graduates from theological college as "interns" who then perform all the normal functions of ordained ministers but are not (for the time being) ordained.

Thirdly, I am disappointed that we have not made more progress on the ecumenical front (despite what I said above). Not that I blame the Uniting Church entirely for that. It "takes two to tango", as they say. Our national dialogues with Roman Catholics and Lutherans, especially, have been fruitful, but the hopes expressed in the *Basis* have yet to be realized. The Anglican Church and the Churches of Christ were observers in much of the pre-union negotiations from the late 1960s onward, and these churches are clearly implied in the *Basis* as potential partners in a wider union (§§1, 2, 18). Yet there is no sign, 36 years after the 1971 *Basis*, that we are close to union with these churches.

Ecumenism is not only organic union, of course, and on some fronts such as local co-operation we are making progress. But the churches generally in Australia do not seem in any hurry to act on such agreements as the National Council of Churches' "Covenanting" document of 2001.

Fourthly, I am nonplussed by the Uniting Church's lack of memory. In

# Hopes for the Uniting Church

## Fulfilled and Otherwise

*D'Arcy Wood*

ON THE 20<sup>TH</sup> anniversary of the Uniting Church, a large conference was held in Sydney. Papers by 42 authors were subsequently published under the title *Marking 20 Years*, edited by William Emilsen and Susan Emilsen. I suspect that many people have either never heard of this book or have forgotten about it. Yet there is much wisdom in it. One of our problems is the loss of collective memory. I shall return to that theme.

Some of my hopes from the time of union in 1977 have been fulfilled. First, the union has held together. I have almost never heard anyone say the union was a mistake, or that we should return to the previous denominational separation. Given the long history of Protestant divisiveness, this union can be counted a success.

The Uniting Church is also a sort of flagship for Christian unity. Our *Basis of Union* states the intention to seek unions with other churches, and although no such union has happened, some steps have been taken, such as a limited mutual recognition with Anglicans and Lutherans. Beyond that, the Uniting Church takes a leading

role in many ecumenical organizations, and is admired for that.

My hopes for inter-action with Australian society have also largely been fulfilled. The *Basis* says: "Within that fellowship (of churches) she also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help her to understand her own nature and mission" (§11). The Uniting Church stands strongly for social justice and for the rights of indigenous peoples. It is both admired and criticized for these things. From my point of view, engagement with political and social issues and the huge involvement in caring agencies are both characteristic of and necessary for the life of the Church.

My last "fulfillment" (I could have mentioned others) is our engagement with Asia and the Pacific. The Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches were of course already very active in our region, but the promise of the *Basis* in §2 has been followed through. While not neglecting our relationships with Europe, North America, the Middle East and Africa, the Uniting Church has rightly placed emphasis on our region. The relationships have changed since the 1970s—we now think of partnerships rather than "mission outreach" (or similar language)—but our recent work with Christians in East Timor, to take but one example, is significant.

Some of my hopes for the Uniting Church have not been fulfilled. When I

did not wait long to make myself known to the appropriate church authorities and spent many a Sunday leading worship in and around Guildford. I also became a tutor for the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme of the three mainline protestant denominations in England based in Sarum College, Salisbury.

After three years in England we moved back to Australia, this time on the basis of the permanent university position that my husband had acquired. It took quite a while to find my way into the process that would allow me to become a Uniting Church minister. The information I managed to obtain in England boiled down to two things: it would be a long process, and there was no guarantee of a positive outcome. For me the move to Australia was in that respect a leap of faith; I came trusting that if God wanted me in a congregation he would find me one.

Three months after my arrival in Australia, while I found myself in the maze of committees, rules and regulations, Toorak Uniting found me, and offered me employment as supply minister. This offered me a great opportunity to find my way into my new church in a more practical way while I was dealing with the red tape.

I think it was after about 6 months that I stumbled upon the *Basis of Union*. Only gradually, and sometimes almost by accident I compiled

information about the basics of Uniting Church life and its theological backbone and framework. The funeral, wedding and baptism booklets I was given gave me a first theological clue as to what I was dealing with; some of it entirely different to my culture and background. I loved the proclamation of marriage, which I found in the wedding booklet, but knew that in my culture, in the Netherlands, the church would never have been so outspoken as to what it considered marriage to be. I rewrote some of the prayers for the funeral service, with a guilty mind and not sure if there would be any repercussions if someone found out, but feeling the ones that were in the booklet were not capturing what I felt should be said. The baptism service was more interactive than what I'd been used to, with the various responses, but, as it seemed to me, especially in those first months, also more fragmented and with less focus on the teaching of the church around baptism. So I added my own bits and pieces, if not for the benefit of the congregation or the baptismal parents, then for my own sake to make me feel more comfortable and at home.

The *Basis of Union* was a revelation. It resonated with my theology and spirituality in a way no other church document had ever done before and made me proud and excited at the prospect of becoming part of this church. The way it sets out

its theology, its ecumenical outlook and its deep awareness of the church as a pilgrim people appealed to me and brought a deep sense of belonging in what often was (and still is) a bewilderingly different place to where I have trained and served before.

The other significant event was my first assembly in September 2004. Coming from a church that still largely functions on a conflict model, the orderliness and structure the consensus model offers made a deep impression on me. The unity of Spirit and the opportunities to exchange views around the table impressed me no end. Even where there were difficult issues to be addressed it seemed everybody was given room to give their opinion and be heard. The lack of extremes, right or left, was different and very refreshing too. I now feel it may at times take away from the depth some debates may reach if the discussions are fiercer and can be spun out more than the few minutes each speaker is allowed on the floor, but at the time it seemed a haven of peace compared to the often tumultuous and passionate debate I had been used to in my church of origin.

The committee for the acceptance of Ministers accepted me into the Uniting Church in December 2004. I was called to Toorak not much later. In the process I encountered another characteristic of the Uniting Church. Everything seems to be ruled by fixed

time schedules of committees and due process. The whole process of being admitted to the Uniting Church as an ordained minister takes months and there is no way it can be changed, speeded up, or (I imagine) slowed down. At the same time: sometimes (and I have not yet discovered how or why) suddenly all the rules and regulations seemed to be abandoned for some higher reason/goal and things are able to move breathtakingly swiftly. It is an aspect of the Uniting Church culture I've come to love, although it is difficult to understand its mechanics for a newcomer like me.

It took me 2 years before I ventured into "Hall" for my first encounter with academic theology in Melbourne. Intimidated by the complex structure and confusing variety of theological education that seemed to be on offer I had joined in with conferences and retreats but never dared to venture into the actual hallowed grounds of Melbourne Uni. England, and in particular Sarum College, and my contacts in the Netherlands determined mostly what I read for study in those first two years.

Even after 4 years the (seeming?) density of acronyms, committees and "bodies" still puzzles me. One of my great discoveries is the General Secretary's office and the people staffing the phones in Little Collins Street and at the CTM, who are always prepared to explain, help and direct. Coming

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H. Hawes 9/06

1991 Assembly when the commitments to catholicity in the *Basis of Union* were abandoned, and from about that time I wrote a good deal in defense of the *Basis* against pressure to conform to the dominant culture.

Elsewhere I expressed stronger feelings: The attempt to appeal to the modern mind with an outdated leftist ideology presented as the gospel has been a disaster. Around 1990 many congregations were growing and we had more candidates for ordination than we could easily place. Under the tenure of those who think of themselves as progressive there have been massive losses. Sectarian sentiment has gained greater strength than I would ever have imagined as sectional interests and personal ideological preferences have been pursued in the church at the expense of the welfare of the body as a whole. I had thought fifty years ago that the old struggle between liberalism and fundamentalism was a thing of the past, and now I have seen it revived in more divisive and destructive terms than ever before. It is very sad—so the old one-time radical has come to look like a conservative to those who think such labels still mean something. But I am not without hope. There are now a number of very capable young theologians, both men and women, who are quite different in their thinking from those of us who began the journey fifty years ago, but they are able to see through, understand, and move beyond the confusing conformity

of an intermediate generation who were so deeply misled by the cultural revolution.

These sentiments remain with me. It was very hurtful to be excluded and treated as ignorant, afraid, foolish and prejudiced because I dared to differ from the dominant group at a time when the mainstream was marginalized. Closer to the heart was the keenly felt loss of the catholic and apostolic vision with which the Uniting Church had been conceived. But, there was no crystalline purity in that vision and it was never properly realized, as must always be the case when we have our treasures in earthen vessels.

DAVID BESWICK is a retired minister and Emeritus Professor and Principal Fellow in the Faculty of Education, Melbourne University.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Some reflections from which I have taken extracts here were published elsewhere: in *Joy Pain: Belonging in the Uniting Church*, ed. Hugh McGinlay (Melbourne: Uniting Education, 2000); and in two collections of personal statements or stories of our lives in ministry, edited by Norman Marshall, entitled “Forty Years On” and “Fifty Years On”, by those of us who were candidates for the ministry in the Methodist Church accepted at the Conference of 1953 and still surviving in 1992 and 2003.

<sup>2</sup>Calvert Barber, “My Forty Years in Ministry”, *The Spectator*, 20 August 1958.

from a much more hierarchical church in the Netherlands with a bureaucracy that was far more removed from the coal face of congregational ministry this was one of the more pleasant surprises. In the Netherlands the General Secretary’s office would be the last place someone would look for such information!

What really excites me is the multicultural situation of the Uniting Church in Australia and the enormous potential and wonderful opportunities this offers for the future church, not only in Australia but in the world. I don’t think there are many places across the globe where such an opportunity for dialogue and cultural exchange exists in such diversity and openness towards each other. The possibilities for equal partnership in new ways of being church and opportunities for renewing theological education and academia are enormous in a place where the old “anglo” order is losing its numerical dominance and large groups of new Australians from other ethnic and denominational backgrounds have come in from abroad with their own heritage and (church) culture.

What I enjoy is the seeker’s mentality of lay people especially in the church: open minded and ready

for new ideas. My experience is limited of course, but what I have seen of it, both in Toorak and beyond, has been a wonderful preparedness to look further than the traditional and the familiar to something new.

The liturgical freedom and room for experimentation I see as part of that: becoming a new church for a new time is part of the life of God’s people calling them to find new ways to worship and express their faith.

The rural situation puzzles me, but I am very aware I probably don’t understand half of the issues and the barriers that prevent a more open interchange of resources between “city” and “country”.

There are many other issues like that which intrigue, puzzle and fascinate me. And I am sure it will take me many more years before I can fully understand the inner workings of the Uniting Church and its theology—a journey I hope to undertake in the spirit of what the *Basis of Union* spells out: as a pilgrim, on the way, fed by Christ in word and sacrament, gifted with the Spirit so I will not lose my way.

ANNEKE OPPEWAL is minister of Toorak Uniting Church.

## Blessings and Curses

a sermon for the Uniting Church's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary

*Pam Kerr*

Deuteronomy 30:1-10, Psalm 100,  
1 Corinthians 3:10-17, John 15:1-8

I REMEMBER as a young woman in my twenties, thinking that 30 was rather a daunting age: you couldn't think of yourself as young anymore! And I hear young adults now who have similar feelings. What will it mean for us to be a mature church? Now that the novelty of being a new church has worn off, and we've suffered our growing pains, what do we stand for—or more important, what is God calling us to do with our life as a church?

Remember all the things that God has set before you—the blessings and the curses—and turn again to God.

I remember the excitement and anticipation leading up to the birth of the Uniting Church—and the apprehension and even anger that some people felt at the prospect of “losing their denomination.” But in the struggle, there was a real sense of vision: we were coming together “that the world might believe”. We recognized that our disunity made it harder for people to see the love of Christ. Andrew Dutney, talking of the *Basis*

of *Union*, said, “It was like they had a vision.” I remember the passion with which leaders of the church travelled tirelessly to hundreds of congregations, sharing that vision. At the opening service, there was such a sense of hope. These are some of the challenging and inspiring words from that service: “There is a moment in the response of our lives to God's greatness and boundless love seen in Jesus Christ, when one must march forth in triumphant affirmation against all that is irrational, senseless and dark in the world. Then to say: ‘This I believe ... Here I stand’, becomes a moment of abandonment and trust in the God of Christ and the Christ of God. This is such a moment.”

Those at the service—and many of us watching at home—dedicated ourselves to the mission of the church in Australia and beyond; to costly witness, to exploratory ministries, not in cautious places of easy retreat, but at the busy intersections of life. Wow!

The thirty years since have been years of upheaval. The world we live in has changed radically. We in Australia are part of the global scene,



*through  
a glass  
darkly*

was subsequently challenged, the President ruled that the Assembly was not bound to act in conformity with the *Basis*, and that caused much concern. The following Assembly in 1994 reversed the “one ordination” decision, and later the need to be “guided by” the *Basis* was put into the Constitution in 1997.

The point is that social and political sentiment and ideology triumphed, and the leadership of the church was seriously weakened. My belief now is that a properly reformed personal episcopate would have gone some way

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**“The final form of the *Basis of Union* had lost some of its original catholic strength and openness to new possibilities in ministry.”**

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towards overcoming some of our more recent losses and threats of division, just as more adaptive and varied, and at the same time better disciplined, forms of ministry in general would have been more effective in the circumstances of recent years. Some of the fault then lay not only in submission to the dominant culture which has marked the Uniting Church increasingly, but also in the failure of the original conception of the church to preserve, reform and recognize catholic and apostolic forms of ministry at the time of union. This applies to the ministry of bishops, and

to the need for a high doctrine of ordination to the specific ministries of presbyter and deacon without which exploration of new forms of service cannot be sustained.

So if I now repeat some of my previous concerns, it is with a perspective that goes back with sensitivity to some of the unresolved issues in the formation of the union. First, it has not all been gloom and doom. A few years ago I was pleased to say that some of our hopes were being fulfilled. The role of elders and the presbytery were definite improvements, as were the greater pastoral skills of recently trained ministers. The increased emphasis on the sacraments was very welcome, but the degree of freedom in forms of worship was not matched by the ability of ministers to create their own liturgies, while the quality of preaching had declined. Better lay leadership at all levels was beneficial, but ordained ministers lacked assurance in their essential tasks and I became concerned with the amount of stress to which ministers were subject. The presence of women as colleagues in ministry was a great improvement. Sadly, there was an intrusion of a secular ideology which had grown out of the cultural revolution of the sixties without the faith commitment and theological depth which had guided the work for union in that period. It had a damaging impact on the church at the



new possibilities in that regard, but they were closed off and the final forms of ministry were a step backwards from some of the more adventurous endeavors then under way in the Methodist Church, ventures in which I participated in seeking to combine my ministry with academic work. By 1979 when I presented a report to the Synod on ministers without settlement there were over 50 ministers in Victoria working in what many regarded as marginal positions outside of the regular discipline of parish work, and it was a great sadness to me that most of them were eventually lost to active ministry in the church. Some of the changes that needed to be made in discipline and pastoral care, and which had been recommended in various reviews and inquiries, were not put into the Regulations until 1998, after I had retired. It was one of my greatest disappointments. The Uniting Church turned out to be much less open to new possibilities in ministry than I had hoped and expected.

The same applies to personal episcopate. We even had to give up the step towards it that had been taken in the Methodist Church with separated chairmen of districts; but it was a great privilege and very satisfying ministry to serve in later years as a presbytery minister and I found that my servant-leader role within the corporate episcopate of the presbytery worked well. In Gippsland I worked

closely with the Anglican bishop whose diocese covered the same area and we had many co-operative causes. Much of what we did on the ground was very similar, and I did not envy the points of additional authority that he had as an individual, real but severely limited as they were, but the regular recognition of a ministry of oversight and pastoral care gave a strength we did not have in the Uniting Church. Some of us brought recommendations to the Assembly of 1991 for the ministry of presbytery minister to be recognized in the Regulations. No time was found for consideration of these proposals. The same Assembly rejected a proposal which had been developed over a number of years, but without widespread support, to introduce a bishops-in-presbytery form of ministry. At the same time the Assembly revived the ministry of Deacon and introduced the specified ministry of youth worker. The temper of the times was evident in the equalitarian sentiments that were expressed in the report on ministry that the Assembly received and in the cheering and applause that greeted speeches in support of it. The model of one ordination and two forms of commissioning to specific ministries of Deacon and Minister of the Word, which was advanced mainly on status considerations, violated a commitment in the *Basis* to ordain people to the ministry of the Word. When this

with all its competing values. International companies determine markets and working conditions, affecting rural and city dwellers alike. Sunday is no longer a “Sabbath” day. Many religions compete for allegiance. The respect for institutions—government, church and other big organizations—has gone. It is no longer “the done thing” to go to church.

So, like other traditional churches, we have struggled to stay afloat. In this struggle, we have often focussed on changes to our structures; merging congregations or fighting to keep “our” congregation open; trying to get our organization right: changes have been made to elders, church councils, presbyteries and synods. We have been caught up in corporate demands: risk management and health and safety issues. So time and energy have been deflected from our main purpose. Often change brings with it grief. So we are tired.

There have been curses!

But there have been blessings, too. We can listen to the negative things people might say about our church. But listen too, to the positives. People outside the church often comment that they admire the Uniting Church because we roll up our sleeves and “put our money where our mouth is”, trying to respond to what is happening in the world around us, having a strong passion for justice. People in other denominations envy us because we have seen women as equals. The

World Council of Churches and churches around the world have looked to us to show them how consensus decision-making works. We have given lay people more responsibility and are learning to value their ministry, whether that is in leadership within the church or recognizing the ministry they perform in their daily lives. And there is a great interest among our members in learning more about their faith.

We are blessed to be living in times when faith is very much on the agenda. People may not want to listen to official church pronouncements, but there are numerous articles in newspapers and programs on television exploring what faith means in this new world. People are interested in the big questions: how do we find meaning in life, when we have experienced the emptiness that comes when we have achieved material success? How have we got the environment in such a mess that we are threatening life on earth? How do we respond to ethical questions about euthanasia, genetic engineering, cloning, human rights, war ... the big issues? How do we respond if we don't have some basic values by which to judge the issues? How do we as a church prepare ourselves to enter the conversation, without giving black and white answers that cause people to tune out? When people are asking questions, how do we develop the confidence and skill to share our faith in a way

that lets our love of Christ and neighbour become part of the options under consideration? When people are looking for answers, we need to unashamedly put it out there that we believe Jesus' way makes sense of life. But we need to speak from the heart; to say what Jesus means in everyday language because, out there, people no longer know the Christian jargon, the Christian stories. One of the things that pains and disturbs me most in the work I do is that when I invite groups of elders or church councillors to spend time talking about their faith with each other, they are delighted. That's not what disturbs me! But they say they are delighted because they never have opportunity to spend time this way. If we do not practice speaking about our faith with each other, how can we share it outside the church? And we need to listen to each other's faith stories respectfully, rather than judgmentally, because I believe many of our church members have been silenced for fear that their stories might be seen as "wrong" or even heretical.

As we celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> and seek to be mature, how can we face the challenges before us, with the enthusiasm that matches the enthusiasm of those who founded this church? St. Paul reminds us that we stand on the foundation built by the fathers and mothers of the church, but that ultimately, we stand on Christ. And St. John tells us that we can do nothing

apart from Jesus. Just before John's account of Jesus saying, "I am the vine and you are the branches", he tells us that Jesus said to the disciples: "Arise, let us be on our way". On our way to where? To the cross. So these are hard and challenging words: a call to costly discipleship, lives radically transformed so that they can transform the world. Not a call to settle down comfortably, but to look forward and go with Jesus.

John was writing to a community in danger of splitting, in danger of division. We know something about that, too. And so John reminded his fragile little community that they needed to remain united—first and foremost to Jesus, but also to each other.

This 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a good time to remember the vision that brought the Uniting Church into being: the vision that we would be one so that the world might believe. In this soul-hungry, searching world, our roots need to be deep, our branches growing firmly out of the life of Jesus. We need to submit ourselves to all those things which need pruning away so that we have the energy we need to focus on Jesus and to tell his story. Then maybe people will be drawn to our message when they look at us and say, "It is like they have a vision!"

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pleased to see the renewed and more challenging conception of the church in its catholic and apostolic character that was coming out of the union negotiations.

There was naturally also much anxiety. On one occasion Harold Wood, a strong supporter of church union and a greatly respected leader in the Methodist tradition, wrote to the church paper lamenting some of the changes underway in the church and saying, "Methodism is dying". I wrote back to say, "The physician has told us the terrible truth, Methodism is dying, let us therefore take out our little black books and prepare for the funeral service: it begins, 'I am the resurrection, and the life, says the Lord.'" We really expected new life to be born of the struggles then underway.

It is significant that the first report on the faith of the church did not generate anything like the heat of controversy that followed the second report on the structure of the church. It was a time when new forms of ministry were being investigated in service beyond the congregation, and in personal episcopate. The introduction of bishops was a live option especially favored by those of us who were keen to be in a position to move into a wider union. (A survey of Methodist theological students in that period found that about two-thirds would have preferred union with the Anglicans.) At the same time, we did not support a peculiar means of intro-

ducing bishops through the proposed Concordat with the Church of South India. I moved an amendment, seconded, surprisingly, by Harold Wood, which was recommended by the Conference of 1965, to delete the concordat and include a covenant with other Australian churches to seek a wider union. It did not proceed further as far as a formal covenant was concerned, although there is in Article 2 of the *Basis* a commitment to seek a wider union in our region. Many compromises followed over the next ten years, some of the initial enthusiasm was lost, and I was not very happy with the final form of the *Basis of Union* because it had lost some of its original catholic strength and openness to new possibilities in ministry. It might seem strange to say this now in the light of the strong defense I have made of the *Basis* since its place in the church was brought into question by the Assembly of 1991 and in other actions since. But I had originally hoped for more radical change in a renewed church than turned out to be acceptable.

I was interested in recognition of new forms of outreach in ministry beyond the congregation and presented a report on the nature of the ordained ministry and related matters on behalf of the Conference Faith and Order Committee in 1964. Some similar points were under discussion in relation to the proposed union which initially seemed to promise

Church, had written in 1958, of “a period of really exciting spiritual and theological awakening”. He went on to recite the faith as it was held amongst the best informed and most committed:

What great changes have we have seen. Out of the turmoil of the world God has been speaking His word to the generations of the past 40 years. Let none say, “The Church does not know what it believes!” It has heard a word of recall and renewal; a word of hope and of ultimate victory. It has been a recall to the great objective truths of the Gospel; of God’s mighty acts in history; and especially of His redemptive deed in Christ. It has been a time of recovery of the essential meaning of the Kingdom as a gift and not primarily as man’s achievement. It has been a recovery of belief in the victory of the Resurrection; of Christ’s ascension to power; of the gift of the Holy Spirit; of the creation of the Church, both as the sphere of salvation for the individual, and as the instrument of Christ’s redemptive work in the world; of forward looking to the final coming of Christ alike in judgment and mercy, and in triumph. It has been a time of recovery of an understanding of the Bible as the bearer of God’s revelation. And so one could go on in what could well be a crescendo of exultation. God who once loved the world still loves it and is active in it as Sovereign and Redeemer.<sup>1</sup>

So what is wrong with that? Nothing, in a sense; it was the faith soon expressed in the first report and later in the *Basis of Union*. It was the renewed faith in which we were called into the union, but it was a bold challenge to make when he wrote, “Let none say, ‘The Church does not know what it believes!’” It was soon apparent that there were issues we do not yet understand in our lack of capacity to meet the coming situation. The post war boom in church attendance, enormous Sunday School enrolments, large youth groups, new church buildings, and the number of candidates for the ministry, was reaching its peak in the early sixties. By the time the second report of the Joint Commission appeared in 1962, on ministry and government, with a draft *Basis of Union*, we were into a period of excitement of a different kind. It was the time of Robinson’s “Honest to God”, Harvey Cox’s “Secular City”, and the proclamation that “God is dead”. There appeared to be no limit to “The New Reformation”. I was certainly excited by it, although I was critical of its skepticism. Debates on the form of the proposed union were closely tied up with radical discussion of reform in the church. We voted gladly for the ordination of women, and brought recommendations for new forms of ministry. We younger ministers were not to be satisfied with a cozy practical amalgamation, and we were

## After Thirty Years

*Ian Breward*

THOUGH MOST congregations had a spectrum of hopes for reunion, many believed that they were engaged in the creation of an Australian Church. It would draw on the heritage of the three uniting denominations, but would reflect Australian concerns and dreams. With larger membership the Uniting Church would speak more effectively to state and federal governments about Christian convictions on national issues. Rationalization of resources and positions would mean that synods would be able to minister more effectively to emerging needs and proclaim the gospel more effectively.

Locally, the formation of parishes would create a more effective regional partnership in ministry, enhance evangelism and service to the community. Some parishes were richly resourced, but there was some awareness that some congregations might need to amalgamate and that some buildings would be redundant. Deciding which should go was frequently a painful task, for many congregations had deep attachment to their buildings. Nevertheless, the inaugural services for the Uniting Church celebrated the optimism about the rightness of reunion and the fresh

opportunities it would offer, even though some Presbyterians were wounded by the pain of leaving their congregation, where a decision had been made to remain Presbyterian.

The publication of authorized services for baptism, marriage, confirmation and the Lord’s Supper, as well as for Sunday services gave many congregations an opportunity to enhance their worship. The publication of the *Australian Hymnbook* in 1977 also gave valuable musical resources, though the publication of *Uniting in Worship* in 1988 did not have the same wide sales. The most immediate task was developing partnership between congregations and their ministerial teams within the framework of an unfamiliar parish council. The size of some of these sizeable conglomerates made chairing and decision-making quite a challenge, given that each tradition had different practice and assumptions.

## On Areopagus Hill



Many congregations did not need to change their patterns significantly, especially in rural areas where there was no influx of members from another tradition, creating a situation where some change was unavoidable. A great deal of mutual goodwill smoothed the path of change. A significant group of congregations had already chosen to unite with their neighbours and welcomed the inauguration of the Uniting Church as a confirmation of their earlier commitment to local unity. At synod and national level there was a significant network of leaders who had worked together for many years in the planning for the new organization and who were able to infuse life and energy into new structures for governance, comparable to what had occurred where congregations had grown together—sometimes for a decade. Inevitably, congregations which had not taken that step of faith were slower to adapt to the new style of governance.

The Uniting Church's planners had hoped to achieve a fresh balance between local, regional and national responsibilities. That was most clearly seen in the social service institutions of the church, especially to the provision of aged care and ministry to groups with special needs. Involving local congregations in such issues was a splendid idea, but too often there was insufficient attention given to preparing people for the management challenges imposed by such responsi-

bilities. Nor did the size of synods make it easy to give attention to scrutiny of and reporting from institutions, even though the Uniting Church had a large number of lay leaders who gave gladly of their talents to innumerable committees, as well as to the organizations of their own congregations.

The next generations did not have the same commitment to institutional loyalty. Post-war prosperity, more opportunities and choices for leisure time and a growing individualism were beginning to erode the numbers attending worship. That was especially obvious in the decline in youth work and Sunday Schools and associated organizations, such as Christian Endeavour. Despite the educational changes in curriculum materials produced by the Joint Board of Christian Education, sales steadily declined and staff had to be cut. Similar attrition occurred in the work of women's organizations and in the numbers involved in staffing and support of overseas missions, once a major source of energy and identity. Political changes and developments in partnership with indigenous churches underlined the importance of local leadership rather than that provided by expatriate missionaries. Substantial sums of money were still provided to Pacific and Asian churches, but the personal relationships created by missionary deputation steadily thinned out to the point that thirty years later many congregations no longer have overseas visitors nurturing partnership.

## The Uniting Church 1977-2007

### Some personal reflections

*David Beswick*

WRITING THIS PIECE puts me in danger of breaking a commitment I made to myself several years ago to withdraw from public debate on matters of controversy in the church, partly as a retirement indulgence, having regard to my health, and partly because, after many years of struggle, it seemed that there was nothing much left that I could say without being seriously misunderstood. I do have something a little different to say now after reviewing some of the strongly felt criticisms and expressions of disappointment I have made in the past decade or so.<sup>1</sup> I do not resile from those honest reports of sadness and a sense of betrayal, and I have no doubt that things went seriously wrong from about 1990, but in looking back on those reflections in the light of my earlier memory of the debates which took place prior to the union and the hopes and fears that we held then, I think some of the difficulties we have faced in recent times, while in many respects culpable failures in leadership, discipline and faithfulness, can also be traced to deficiencies in the conception of the Church which came out of the negotiations for union.

The dominant tone in my retrospective views has been one of grief for the loss of the ecumenical vision, understood in catholic and apostolic terms, which many of us had welcomed in the union proposals early in my ministry. I look back now in the week when the lectionary theme for the third Sunday of Easter points us to the call of the apostles Paul and Peter, and it reminds me of the evangelical and catholic traditions which we have received, the recovery of which inspired us in the early conceptions of the Uniting Church during the discussions which extended over some twenty years before the new church was inaugurated. As the first report of the Joint Commission on Church Union made clear, it was never intended to establish a liberal protestant church, nor another mere denomination. We looked for a real life embodiment of the ecumenical hope, a step along the way to organic union of all Christian fellowships.

That first report on the faith we held was a good reformed and evangelical expression of catholic and apostolic principles, but I have an uneasy feeling it came at the end of a period of relative certainty and unfounded confidence. It failed to address the roots of a crisis in faith that was soon to appear. The year before that first report was published, Calvert Barber, professor of theology at Queen's College and former President General of the Methodist

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other world religions in our land, especially in relation to the two other Abrahamic religions—Judaism and Islam. Nor could they have foreseen the erosion of a relatively egalitarian society by the enormous rewards awarded to directors and senior executives of major companies which have the potential to polarize rich and poor in a new way, when patterns of employment are changing rapidly.

The Uniting Church has made significant decisions about the patterns of Assembly and Synod governance, partly as a result of financial constraints, partly because the original structures have not worked as founders hoped. The abolition of presbyteries in the Northern Synod, Tasmania and Western Australia, a new pattern of polity in South Australia and the modifications about to come into being in Victoria offer a mixture of new opportunities and risks of centralized decision-making which alienate congregations and members. Hopes for the parish structure as an aid to mission soon came under threat as congregations decided to withdraw from what seemed unduly cumbersome structures. Assembly rules for a new pattern of church councils have also been an important change.

Hopes of partnership between migrant congregations and Anglo-Celtic congregations have been significantly fulfilled, with important concessions in polity being granted to

Korean congregations and to the Congress. Impressive work in disaster relief has been an important ministry in a continent where the elemental forces of nature may well become more frequently destructive if the prognoses of consequences of climate change are even partly correct.

Demographic changes which mean that the under-30s are seriously absent from congregations and a steadily aging membership will reduce the resource base for influencing public policy, since we appear to be moving inexorably to being a much smaller national church. With cultural forces pushing for a privatized role for religion, the Uniting Church will need to plan carefully if it is to continue its commitment to a public role, set out so ambitiously in the statement of the First Assembly. Engaging credibly with critics of religion will be strategically vital if the hopes of the Uniting Church's founders are to be translated into the significantly different context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Being an authentic Australian Church will tax our energies and wisdom. The resources are there. Can we use them as effectively as our forebears in faith and sustain our proclamation with appropriate governance for a new era?

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In addition, the commitment to reunion as a theological imperative which inspired the creation of the Uniting Church has declined worldwide, even though there have been important developments in ecumenism in Australia because of the involvement of many Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Some combined ministries with Anglicans, the Churches of Christ and the Lutherans have hinted at what might have been, but the intractable issues of ministry, sacraments and differing approaches to Scripture are no nearer resolution. The hope that others might join the Uniting Church has receded, replaced by an emphasis on the importance of denominational identity by other Australian churches. Cooperation is still an important reality, but a good deal of Protestant energy has gone into the unity model fostered by Evangelicals, Charismatics and Pentecostals. *Together in Song* suggests this partnership is still well.

Indeed, unity within the Uniting Church itself has been threatened by theological changes, disagreement over political engagement in social justice activities and division over the ordination of homosexuals in committed relationships. Yet there have also been important achievements to celebrate, not least the creation of the Congress, the provision of social services in partnership with government, the notable ministry of Frontier Services and the new methods of making

decision by consensus. Women's gifts are much more widely used in leadership, though not as obviously at Presidential level. It would be interesting to see what would happen if a regulation was enacted to alternate male and female leadership at Synod and Assembly level, as a way of enhancing the hope of equal partnership which was embodied in the quota system for committees set up at Union.

Major changes in Australian society have posed challenges to the patterns which were taken for granted in 1977. Finding the balance between sensitivity to context and deepening insight into the verities of our faith and the priorities that demands will push the Uniting Church into some risky situations. Ecological responsibility, the ramping up of government demands for accountability on public grants to social services and various forms of education, demands for improved observance of health and safety requirements among the elderly and the young all impose administrative costs which limit the money available for new initiatives. Aging buildings and declining congregations raise immensely important questions about the stewardship of inherited property at a time when our capacity to influence state and federal governments seems to be weakening.

The planners of the Uniting Church did not foresee the challenges that would develop in relationships with

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# Double Take

by Hilary Howes

