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Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing and challenging time. That makes it even more imperative to reflect on who we are and what we do as a community of faith in Jesus Christ. This collection of papers is written from a particular perspective, that of the Uniting Church in Australia.

We are a church that comes out of the Reformed and Evangelical/Methodist tradition yet have developed our own understandings and ways of functioning as church. We are a broad church that theologically embraces conservatives to progressive Christians. Worship varies from traditional to Charismatic in style though the vast majority are in between. Our approach to worship is described as ‘ordered liberty’. We seek to be a church for Australians and in Australia and are especially known for our caring agencies and advocacy for people and causes across the political spectrum. We are especially concerned for the poor and marginalised. We have the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress as an important part of our church. Our church is committed to being multicultural. We affirm the gifts and role of all people, men and women, in the life of the church. We are also a very ecumenical church that endeavours to have positive relationships with other churches and to work co-operatively wherever possible. We are involved in the National Council of Churches in Australia and Heads of Churches. We value our wider links with the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist Council, the Christian Conference of Asia and the Pacific Conference of Churches. We are committed to partnerships with churches around the world, especially in the Pacific, Asia and Africa. We seek to foster positive interfaith relationships.

As the National Consultant for Christian Unity, Doctrine and Worship, I have the privilege of participating in three national working groups: Christian Unity, Doctrine and Worship. Some of the papers in this collection come from each of these groups. The majority of the papers were written by me. In doing so, I seek to be faithful to our Uniting Church approaches and ecumenical theology while offering my own thoughts in relation to a number of subjects.

This collection is in three parts. The first is a series of discussion papers on the church. These began as discussion papers for the Assembly Standing Committee to reflect on our church. The first two papers went to the Assembly Standing Committee but due to the demands of the agenda with particular issues requiring a great deal of attention, this did not continue. So the third paper was sent to others. A shorter version was published in Ruminations magazine. The last two papers were then written to complete the series. Some people within the Uniting Church have seen some of the papers, in particular the national Mission and Evangelism network and the Lay and Leadership Educators network. The final paper in the first section on Resource Ministry is one that has been given on a few occasions as part of training that was provided in the NSW/ACT synod.
for those interested in Resource Ministry, an important development in the Uniting Church. Each of these papers has integrity of its own and while grouped the later papers do not depend on knowledge of the earlier ones. They do cover some of the main issues in the Uniting Church at this time and invite people to consider and discuss them.

The second part has a range of papers written by various people linked to the Christian Unity, Doctrine, Worship and Relations with Other Faiths working groups. The authors are indicated at the end of the papers. Some of the papers were written by me. In each case the paper was scrutinised by members of the relevant working group and usually the Doctrine working group as well. So in that sense these papers represent not just the author’s ideas but have been reviewed and improved in the light of comments by colleagues. They are therefore papers that convey the collaborative views of the working groups.

The third part comprises a collection of shorter papers that have been on the Uniting Church Assembly website. Transit Lounge was an Assembly initiative seeking to contact younger people in particular. I was asked to write a few times for it and have included two articles. I have had my own blog linked to the Assembly website since July, 2011. I have sought to write thoughtful articles every 3-4 weeks. The selection here is deliberately not chronological. Instead I have sought to put them into something of a sequence that has some coherence, starting with a reflection on the church and ending with what we want to be remembered for. Many of the articles have appeared also in the Korean weekly newspaper *The Christian Life Australia*.

I trust these papers will be stimulating for people to read. The discussion papers include questions to reflect on and discuss which can be done individually or in groups. The paper “Living Traditions in the Uniting Church” and the “Marriage Discussion Paper” also include questions for consideration. The latter paper in fact was widely discussed across the Uniting Church.

*Christopher C. Walker,*  
*National Consultant Christian Unity, Doctrine and Worship, March 2015*
Discussion Papers on the Church

A Church for Australia in the 21st Century

Challenges and Opportunities

1. Church not Denomination – March 2013

Context

Some of the key features of the current Australian context are that it is a secular, individualistic and consumer society that is postmodern, post-Christendom, multicultural and multi-faith.

Australia has in fact been secular from the beginning of its recent history since settlement in 1788. Begun as a convict settlement neither the convicts nor the soldiers were strongly religious though Christianity was regarded as the received religion. The first chaplains found it difficult to get much response from people but were expected to perform various services, especially funerals given the high number of deaths. When free settlers came in greater numbers the goal was material advancement and this was especially the case with the gold rushes. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that saw the churches grow significantly as people wanted their communities to have the churches they were familiar with in the UK, namely Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist churches. In the 20th century there was the devastation of the First World War. Another period of church growth followed the Second World War but this was then replaced by decline in mainstream churches. In contrast Pentecostal and smaller denominations have increased though often by people transferring membership to them. Post WW2 migration has seen a change in the mix of Christian denominations and ethnic diversity within churches increase. Roman Catholics have overtaken Anglicans as the largest denomination though attendance at worship has mostly seen a decline in both. Non-Irish Catholics and Orthodox are more evident. It has also made other faiths more visible in society. Those openly expressing no religion have increased greatly.

Self-styled individualism was always valued but mateship was important in a harsh environment. More recent affluence has enhanced the emphasis on the individual and consumerism. While family and friends are highly valued there are an increasing number of single person households and individual freedom is strongly held. Material advancement has always been sought and Australians are known for their ready adoption of new technologies, most recently mobile phones and computers.
Coming from a convict heritage, Australians have characteristically viewed authorities with scepticism though also with recognition of their power. Postmodern attitudes that emphasise a relativistic approach to life that questions absolutes fit Australians well without being ideologically committed to such a position. Cases of child abuse for example create a strong reaction especially. So while a more relativistic attitude to religion may be expressed, such as religion being regarded as a personal choice for those who want it, an absolute moral value comes to the fore at times.

While Christianity was the received religion, Australia was never really Christendom and is much less so now. Religion gained its place and came to be recognised in Australian society especially for its welfare work. Universities, however, were set up as secular institutions. Only more recently have schools of theology gained a place in universities alongside the other faculties and are still mostly on the margins. Churches’ leading spokespeople do get some attention in the media and politics but are not given a privileged position. The churches are not seen as central but peripheral in public debate and are given credence only when they are able to speak from a position of knowledge and experience. In a postmodern context other faiths are often given an equal voice now despite representing a much smaller constituency. Sunday is a day people use in different ways with worship only one option that fewer people participate in. The Church’s reputation has been tarnished by sexual abuse scandals in particular. Australian culture is currently largely resistant rather than receptive to the Christian message.

Australia has a British heritage and for a long time a “white Australia” policy was practised. There was prejudice by most people against other races, especially indigenous people, with the view that Australia needed to be white to be a cohesive society. British institutions and values were held to be superior. Chinese came in numbers during the gold rushes but were made to feel unwelcome. Not until the post WW2 period when increasing the population was regarded as imperative was the range of immigrants expanded beyond the British who were still favoured: first to include Europeans, notably Italians and Greeks, then also Middle Eastern people, and later to include Pacific Islanders and Asians. Now Australia is very multicultural and despite some instances of racial tension there has been mostly acceptance of this development. It has enriched Australia’s life not least in the range of foods now available. Second generation people largely take on the values of the dominant culture stemming from our British Western heritage. We are a Western nation situated below the Asia – Pacific region with ties to Britain and the USA but now increasingly trading with China.

In the 21st century then Australia is a secular, multicultural society. People value individual freedom and are affluent so they can enjoy or aspire to the benefits of a consumer society. The churches have their place but it is newer migrants who more readily relate to the life of the church.1 People longer in Australia are more likely to be resistant or indifferent to the churches as they pursue their goals and pleasures. Nevertheless the churches are appreciated for their welfare work and for what they
provide in times of national tragedy. Being in a multi-faith society is not new for Christianity which began in such a context and it is not unfamiliar for some of the newer immigrants to Australia such as Indians.

The challenge for the churches, especially the Uniting Church, is to relate to this context in a way that engages people with the gospel and makes a contribution to the mission of God which is larger than church growth. The Uniting Church was not simply the merger of three previous denominations but came about in response to what was believed to be God’s will for them. They came together “seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ’s gift and will for the Church” (Basis of Union par 1). They looked for “a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people” (BU par 1). In entering into union the three Churches were mindful that “the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died” (BU par 1). The Uniting Church is well situated to be a church for Australians as it is a newer church open to reform and wanting to serve God’s mission of “reconciliation and renewal … for the whole creation” (BU par 3). There is an openness to do so and opportunities to be taken in relation to both new ministries and renewed ministries across the nation.

Question: What comments do you have in relation to the Australian context?

A movement not a denomination

The Uniting Church in Australia is a Church that is meant to be more of a movement than a denomination. It is ecumenical for it came about as a result of the coming together of three Churches and is open to further union with other Churches. Nevertheless, while it is very ecumenical, even more so than the three previous traditions, the goal is not simply organic union as Churches, a bigger and better denomination, but to serve God’s missional purposes. It seeks to be in line with the movement begun by Jesus of ushering in the reign of God and living by its values as a witness to God. It is to be a sign and instrument through which Christ may continue to work. It is given the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way (BU par 3).

The Uniting Church is consciously part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. It is a section of the universal Church stemming from Jesus Christ and the apostles. It wants to be unified in purpose and set apart to serve God’s will. In doing so it particularly is influenced by the Reformed and Evangelical traditions of the Christian movement. The Reformed tradition emphasises the need for continual reform under the leading of God’s Spirit. The Evangelical tradition gives attention to the importance of looking beyond current membership to engage others with the good news of Jesus Christ. Both hold together word and deed, the gospel preached and lived.

In terms of polity, the Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils (BU par 15). It is not episcopal in structure and so is unlike the Catholics and Anglicans.
with their hierarchy and bishops. Nor is it like those churches with a congregational emphasis with minimal structural connections, such as the Pentecostals and Baptists. This means the Uniting Church has its particular strengths and weaknesses. It trusts in the Spirit working in the different councils of the Church, each of which has its particular responsibilities, rather than emphasising the role of bishops or putting all the authority on the local congregation. So it has presidents and moderators rather than archbishops and bishops and uses a consensus decision making approach seeking to discern God’s will.

As a broad Church, the Uniting Church holds together people with different theological positions and approaches to Church: from conservatives to progressives, from charismatics to those who prefer a more formal style, the majority being in the middle. Many people join the Uniting Church from other traditions and inevitably bring their understanding of church with them from those traditions. All this means that introductory processes are especially required in the Uniting Church in its congregations and agencies if people are to understand, appreciate and participate appropriately in the Uniting Church. Yet such introductory processes are often lacking or insufficient to enable people to grasp how and why the Uniting Church functions as it does.

The Church is both a community and an organisation. Community life necessarily has structures and procedures for its good ordering. Inevitably the Uniting Church looks like a denomination for structure is important for any organisation especially one with many agencies. However, the Uniting Church, if it is to be true to its founding documents and people, needs to resist the pull to denominationalism. At this point in history some other denominations, such as the Roman Catholics and continuing Presbyterians, are tending to focus on themselves as particular denominations. The Uniting Church is called to be itself but in doing so be more of a movement than a denomination in its approach. It is to be a Church that is open to change and looks more outward than inward, which seeks to serve God’s purposes rather than focus on itself. The Uniting Church is to be true to its Lord not bound to social or governmental expectations. It is to be about God’s reconciling and renewing mission.

Questions: What introductory processes are you aware of in your church or agency? How can we resist the pull to denominationalism?

Features of the movement called Church

A movement is large group of people concerned with goals and ideals being achieved rather than focusing on its own structural needs and maintenance. As Church the Christian movement is primarily the people of God, the body of Christ, a community of the Holy Spirit rather than an institution. Its mission is the reign of God which Jesus inaugurated. It seeks to embody and continue his ministry. So it is to look outward and forward rather than primarily inward and backward. God’s reign is ever before it and
there is always the challenge to be true to God’s calling. It serves the risen Christ and is led by the missionary Spirit of God.

As a movement the Church is to be a sign and instrument of the reign of God. The kingdom of God is made up of people of all nations and languages (Luke 13:29-30, Rev 7:9). For the Uniting Church this means it is not only a multicultural church because of historical factors but because it is necessarily a multicultural church as it has rightly declared itself to be. Priority is appropriately given to the first peoples of Australia given their long existence on this continent, the dispossession of their land and the mistreatment they have experienced. It also means recognising that the second peoples are not the Anglos but all subsequent people. In the reign of God all people are equal and all belong. There is no place for racial and cultural superiority in the commonwealth of God and the church is called to prefigure this in its life. For the Uniting Church the importance of indigenous people and migrant ethnic people is that they are not only to be welcomed in the church but in fact are essential if the church is to represent the kingdom of God and be the movement God wants the church to be. As the church moves into the future its leadership will necessarily become more multicultural if it is to represent God’s multicultural rule.

As a movement the Church is about God’s large mission in which it is called to participate. It does so in the name of Christ and seeking to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit. In doing so it is helpful to appreciate the five marks or faces of mission that have been recognised by different churches ecumenically. These five faces of mission of a Church are as follows. Jesus Christ is made known:

1. in proclaiming the gospel,
2. in nurturing and teaching,
3. in loving service,
4. in transforming society,
5. in caring for creation.

For the Church to be a movement these marks of mission, rather than internal and excessive concerns about finances and membership for example, need to be given priority. Let me expand a little on these five marks in relation to the Uniting Church.

1. The Uniting Church is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God;
2. It is called to nurture and teach those becoming and continuing as disciples;
3. It is to respond to human need by loving service;
4. It seeks to transform society into the compassionate, just and peaceful society God desires;

5. It is to care for creation recognising its integrity and seeking to sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The Uniting Church is to be a Church of the people and for the people, a movement of Christ's people. This does not make it a democracy for Jesus Christ is head of the Church and it is the Spirit who provides its unity and is meant to lead its mission. Nevertheless, the Uniting Church emphasises the role of every member in confessing and serving Christ (BU par 13). It holds that the Spirit has endowed the members with a diversity of gifts and that there is no gift without its corresponding service. All are to serve the ongoing ministry of Christ. This includes men and women equally who are called to exercise the gifts God bestows on them. The intention is to serve God's mission.

The basic unit of the Church, though not the only one, is the congregation. It is described as the embodiment in one place of the universal church “worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ” (BU par 15a). These four qualities are central to the life of the church, namely: worship, witness, service and fellowship (or community). The fullness of the church requires that these four qualities be evident. It is not sufficient to have only one of these qualities to really be the church. So a group that only worships is not the church; people who just come together for fellowship are not the church; a service activity alone does not constitute the church. They may be a worshipping group, a home group or a service agency but without the other elements of church they are not fully the church but only an aspect of it - valuable though it might well be. In order to be the church there is the need to have some component of each of the four elements or to be connected to other aspects of church where these are expressed. This is a challenge to the Uniting Church especially in relation to its agencies and chaplains. It is also an opportunity to see how to enable the fullness of church to be available to people. One of the strengths of the “fresh expressions” movement is the intention to develop new expressions of church that are not just missional activities but build church, the fullness of church, around them.

Question: Discuss the five marks of mission. What do you think concerning the four criteria for being fully a church?

Challenges and Opportunities

The Uniting Church has a vast network of ministry across Australia: more than 2,000 congregations and faith communities - from small congregations often lay led now, to many congregations in every city and region including some larger ones. The Uniting Church is the largest non-government provider of community services in Australia providing services to more than two million Australians each year and employing 35,000
staff and 24,000 volunteers nationally through UnitingCare and Frontier Services with their agencies, chaplains and patrol padres.

Partnering with indigenous communities is important to the Uniting Church and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress is a vital part of the Uniting Church. Overseas partnerships are also a priority for the Uniting Church, especially in the Pacific, Asia and Africa. Numbers of these people migrate to Australia and become part of the Uniting Church’s diversity. On any given Sunday worship will be held using more than 40 different languages including more than a dozen indigenous languages and many others using more than one language.

All congregations and agencies are called self-consciously to be about God’s mission to their communities whatever their size. The Uniting Church knows that it serves not itself but God’s purposes and so congregations and agencies are to do so in specific ways, not simply in a humanitarian manner but consciously as part of Christ’s ministry. Congregations do well to identify the specific missional activity or activities they believe God would have them focus on. In doing so, congregations can think of mission locally, regionally and internationally and have some connection to each of these. Agencies need to be aware that they are part of the mission of the Church and therefore carry out their service unapologetically as part of the Uniting Church serving God’s purposes.

Presbyteries can encourage new initiatives in their area of oversight. They can utilize the stronger congregations in particular to be involved in this or foster regional cooperation so as to have the capacity to do so. Larger congregations are best able to be involved in the planting of new congregations or the replanting of struggling ones. People can be set aside to start new faith communities or to reinvigorate struggling congregations from the base of a larger effective congregation. Regional groupings can conduct specific missional activities beyond the capacity of individual congregations.

Many church buildings are now used by more than one group. We have yet to really integrate multicultural people and congregations. Yet the future will often lie with the new groups as they have younger people with energy to develop the life of the church in the area.

Unfortunately the Uniting Church, despite its Evangelical heritage, is not good at evangelism – naming Christ, sharing the faith and inviting people to respond to Jesus’ call to discipleship. Yet we are called to share the riches of Christ with others (Eph. 3:8). There is the need to regain confidence in the gospel to change people’s lives and find appropriate ways of enabling people to hear and respond to the gospel. All congregations can offer opportunities that fit local circumstances. They can draw upon a prospects list of people with some connection to the church who can be invited to appropriate events of interest. They need to be churches worth belonging to because they demonstrate community, utilize people’s gifts and passions, and have a team approach seeking to make a positive difference in their communities. Fresh expressions of church can be
started. Church planting and replanting can be practised. Evangelism is an important part of the whole discipleship process in which people are enabled to become, grow and serve as followers of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Ways and means for this to happen should be central not peripheral to the life of congregations.

Technological developments such as social media are creating new forms of relating and community. The internet provides ready access to information and connections across distances. Nevertheless real connections between people are still important. Younger people will no doubt lead the way in how this kind of ministry can develop.

Questions: What would it take for every congregation and agency to be self-consciously about God’s mission of reconciliation and renewal? Why do you think the UCA is not good at evangelism and how might this change?

Notes

1. *Pointers* Vol. 22, No. 4 December 2012
3. “Living and Believing within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” in *Building on the Basis*
4. “On Being an Apostolic Church” in *Building on the Basis*
7. “The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church” in Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (ed.s) Theology for Pilgrims (Adelaide: Uniting Church Press, 2008)
8. “Discerning the Work of the Holy Spirit” in *Building on the Basis*
9. “What does it mean to be Church?” in *Building on the Basis*
10. Steve Taylor on “Fresh Expressions” in *Australian Leadership* (May/June, 2012). See also “Being Church Differently” in *Building on the Basis*