

CHURCH IN A CHANGING WORLD

(Major Strategic Review report to June 2016 Synod)

The context in which the UCA finds itself has changed dramatically since 1977. 'Every census tells the story of the changing Australian population and the changing nature of religious faith in Australia'.¹ This change results from a range of factors, including increased scepticism about the existence of God, unfavourable perceptions of the institutional church, and the unwillingness of many spiritually inclined people seeking answers to align themselves with any one group. Other factors such as immigration across Australia; emerging technology and the increased access to information; the growing acceptance of the range of human sexuality and the emergence of a broad range of expressions of family unit; the renewed pursuit of gender equality in culture and society – to name a few – have changed the way faith, spirituality and Church is seen and explored in contemporary society.

Philip Hughes² has written of the importance of reflecting on thinking about Christianity and the paradigm shifts that have occurred for over 2000 years, seen for example in the developments of the 'Early Church' through to the 'Reformation' and the rise of the 'Industrial Era' – the age of John Wesley. We are now in the midst of another major paradigm shift, wherein each individual has the potential capacity to create their own meaning and way of life, not bound by traditions of gender, ethnicity, nor social status, and where there are significant pressures on children being raised as individuals in a globalised world.

The Uniting Church is caught up in this paradigm shift because by its very nature in Christ, the Church seeks to incarnate the gospel in the context in which it exists. Philip Hughes suggests that the future for church lies in offering a spiritual emphasis through the:

- Provision of a wider range of resources that nurture spiritual development and opportunities to contribute to the lives of others.
- Encouragement of many different forms of involvement; such as music, drama, discussion groups, educational courses, counselling, book and film clubs, meditation sessions.

He also argues that it may mean that the Church of the future will;

- offer a variety of resources for many people;
- not rely on voluntary giving;
- be multi-cultural and cross generational;
- be institutionally 'light-weight' and agile enough to respond to changing contexts; and
- offer a diversity of ways for worship to be explored and undertaken, which nurtures the spiritual life.

The MSR Team considers that the ongoing work of the Church, as described in the *Basis of Union*, including being a fellowship of reconciliation, confessing Jesus as Lord over our own life, being a pilgrim people and using our worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory, needs to be continued. As David Gill, former Assembly General Secretary observed, 'the *Basis of Union* conceives the church in terms that are dynamic not static, charismatic not institutional. It speaks of movement, promise and hope. It is a travel document for a pilgrim people'.³ This is to say, there is a

¹ Hughes P., Fraser M., Reid S., (2012) Australia's Religious Communities: Facts and Figures from the 2011 Australian Census and other sources. Christian Research Association

² Hughes P., (August 2015) Church and the Changing Australian Context (Presentation delivered to the MSR team)

³ Joint Commission on Church Union: The Church – Its Nature, Function and Ordering (reprinted, 1984), p.1.

renewed need to cultivate a missional culture across the Church characterised by a 'yes we can' approach, rather than a 'no, we cannot' approach; in essence, a culture of 'permission-giving' rather than 'permission-seeking' as a core priority. Our objective is to grow healthy communities of healthy disciples, committed to joining in the mission of God in Australia today. That entails reading the constantly changing context, learning from the best of our history and practices, and experimenting with new ways to invite generations and cultures into worship, witness and service.⁴

As we listen to this call and seek ways to respond, it is natural for people to ask 'where will this lead us? What will the church of the future look like?' Of course, it is impossible for us to know exactly where the Spirit will lead us in the future; however, this doesn't diminish the desire to know or the need to express wise stewardship and creative discernment of where the Spirit is leading.

We cannot be certain what the Church will look like in ten years' time, however we can see glimpses of it emerging. We have seen the variety of expressions of church, such as café churches, ecumenical op shops, strategically located Uniting Church sites offering worship, pastoral care, hospitality, and community services, and a variety of community engagement programs. We know that modern society is seeking an openness to allow people to explore, question, think, learn, act and reflect, in order to find meaning.

In the future we believe that we will see these new expressions of church continue to grow and to flourish, and numerous other forms, not yet seen, emerge. We will see more congregations and gathered communities working closely in partnership and clusters. We will see a greater sharing of stories of hope and joy to enrich and inspire people. We will continue to change, and be changed, through our interactions with each other and the world around us.

Keith Suter proposed four possible scenarios for the future of the Uniting Church: Word and Deed; Secular welfare; Return to early Church; and Recessional.⁵ We see a sustainable future for the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania will include many elements of the Word and Deed scenario. That is, *"the Uniting Church... has a heart that loves and hands that care. "Word and Deed" is a balanced ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and providing welfare services"*. However, the way in which the Synod approaches this will look different to the traditional forms we are used to. That does not mean that we will let go of everything we have done in the past. We must not! However, we must encourage new forms of church to emerge and be valued alongside traditional forms of being church.

As we have listened to the various voices of the Church, seen the good works being undertaken and observed the changing context, we believe the Church of the future will be described in a diversity of ways, which will include:

1. Deeper, regular spiritual discernment and theological reflection leading to a strong focus on engaging in God's mission in ways appropriate to our place and times;
2. Fewer traditional congregations but more diverse gathered communities gathering in a range of settings;
3. More commitment to intentional faith development; which potentially include more experiential and less structured approaches;

⁴ Scott Guyatt (August 2015), Signposts for the Future Church, Exploring context and issues related to the UCA Synod of Victoria & Tasmania's current reality and potential future for congregations and presbyteries (A discussion paper prepared for the MSR). Available from www.listeningpost.victas.uca.org.au/MSR/documents

⁵ Suter, K (2013). The Future of the Uniting Church in Australia: The application of scenario planning to the creation of four "futures" for the Uniting Church in Australia (PhD thesis, University of Sydney)

4. An awareness of, concern for, and enhanced stewardship towards, all of creation;
5. Fewer resources tied up in assets (particularly property) and more resources devoted toward missional activities;
6. A greater diversity of age, theological viewpoint and culture;
7. Stronger advocacy for the least, last and lost coupled with compassionate Christian community service; and
8. Robust organisational and financial disciplines grounded in Christian principles and the Uniting Church ethos.

Philip Hughes⁶ summed this up as follows:

The new models of nurturing the spirit are not likely to lead to more people into traditional church services on a Sunday morning. But that is not the aim. The mission of the church lies in engagement with people of all ages, all ethnic and religious backgrounds, taking them seriously as people, and seeking with them to experience and to express love for God and for neighbour, and such experiences and expressions can take many forms. As the Uniting Church seeks to be faithful to its calling, it must seek to nurture the spirit of the people of Australia wherever and whenever it has the opportunity, and to do so in communal and incarnational ways. While there must be experimentation, there must also be carefully planned forms of evaluation and accountability. Theologically, it is inconceivable that there is a diminishing of God's activity among human beings, even among those who no longer believe in God. Rather, the challenge is finding how we can better work with God, especially in the lives of people in Victoria and Tasmania.

It is our sense that we are being called to this new way of being and are invited to respond to that call.

⁶ Hughes, P. (June 2014) A Review of the Environmental Context of the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and some Implications for the Development of Ministry, (p. 50-51). Available from www.listeningpost.victas.uca.org.au/MSR/documents