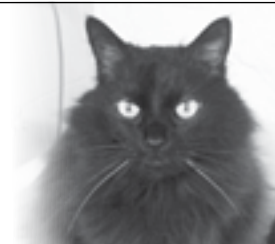


What's happening in the UCA?

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If one went by the PR news and letters, it seems the main idea is to continue on without considering the implications of the 15th Assembly decision to revise marriage. The failure to suspend the Assembly decision was not unexpected as Clause 39 (b) (ii) was hardly designed to actually allow a review. In any case, what was needed from union was a separate independent body that would review decisions, rather than a system that placed any review back with the actual body that made the decision.

It has been a tumultuous few months, though the feedback to UCA publications and hierarchy has probably been more minimal simply because most members would now not even bother. My anecdotal feedback from contact with ACC and other evangelical congregations is that at least 3000 people have left since the 15th Assembly. Sadly, many members have just drifted away in hundreds of congregations, one, two, three or four at a time, perhaps some not even noticed, or worried about by ministers and leaders. I am quite amazed now how this happens when often people have been members of the same local church for 50, 60 or 70 years. I have also been intrigued at the number of phone calls and contact ACC has had from non-ACC members who have left or are trying to work through their future, especially in increasingly divided congregations (our social media and website has prompted extensive contact since the 15th Assembly as individuals seek out others who are considering what is happening).

The disappearance of often key lay leaders is not insignificant at this critical time of the UCA in terms of the ageing of members and viability of congregations, especially in terms of offerings and people resources. What will this mean for the UC in those areas that are not propped up by property income (especially property income that can support stipend ministry)? Simply, 50-60% of UC 'congregations' will become non-viable in the next 5-10 years. Many are now more a preaching place (and perhaps occasional at that). The average age of members is such now that in the medium future there will not be the people able to support stipended-ministry and/or undertake many of the normal tasks associated with a functioning congregation (and assets from sales

will mainly go to supporting the institutional life of the UCA and not the grass roots – the congregations).

And yes, the evangelical cause has been weakened (not just ACC as the majority of evangelicals are not in ACC member congregations); but, and here is the fundamental point, the UCA is catastrophically weakened as evangelical congregations are the central ones engaged in consistent evangelistic outreach and discipleship based on orthodox beliefs that provides a foundation for the future.

Why do some leaders have no real empathy or understanding of what is happening?

Some have a very different idea of ecclesiology. For them there is simply no distinction between the church and the world. The church is everyone, even if you are not aware you are part – this is the post-modern idea of the village church.

It is also where the context of 'Uniting' comes in – the UCA will be a social and community service, providing 'good works'. The growth of 'Uniting' and its increasing secular visibility is clearly evident in its advertising campaigns and branding. (For a comprehensive overview of the 'Secular Welfare' scenario, see Dr Keith Suter's work on possible scenarios for the future of the Uniting Church: www.churchfutures.com.au)

Others though want a new church, which actually means a new 'faith' and they believe the present church needs to be cleared out of those who are preventing this new 'faith'. Some don't care about congregations and the local witness over many years even if they say they want to keep property for the continuing witness of the local Uniting members. Some are suffering a delusion that people will flock into a truly liberal church, basically one that has no orthodox belief, denying especially the resurrection of Christ, because after all they believe they are more intelligent now and believe Christ was only a simple deluded peasant. It is an ideological orientation towards a utopian life on earth now, and they believe that evangelicals are the deluded ones! Never mind the fact that there is no evidence to support a growing liberal denomination and where there may be the occasional slightly larger liberal church in a city of several million people, this has more to do with it providing a niche-market to often disaffected members and ministers. It is no wonder that one of the main concerns of some leaders is to maintain the larger evangelical and CALD congregations in the UC fold, because if they left, overnight the UC would become a worshipping community with fewer followers than those who now say they are a Jedi.