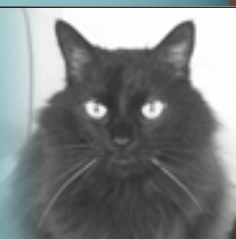


THE BENTLEY REPORT

Only Waving

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It has been a very concentrated few months for UCA ministers and members and the focus for many has been on simply ‘managing’ the local congregation, and in a real way, literally ‘just surviving’. There has also been innovation and new ways of serving and communicating in the overall context of the restrictions imposed by the response to COVID-19. The amount of Christian material now on YouTube, Facebook and other social media is amazing, and in hopefully most cases providing a blessing and wider witness as people searching for meaning come across sermons, talks, videos and material.

I have been reflecting on the institutional church, and soberly realised that if Australia had not introduced strict self-isolation arrangements, it is quite likely that the impact on worshipping congregations and preaching places would have been severe, with numerical impact high from death or illness due to the already vulnerable base of many congregations (small numbers and age). Due to the difficulty of holding funerals, this would have also had a significant pastoral impact and quite likely increased negative response from many moderate and evangelical members with the lack of pastoral connection especially from liberal progressive ministers who hold out little hope at funerals at the best of times. It is also likely that those members who were more loosely connected and/or have felt increasingly alienated from ill-equipped liberal progressive ministers will simply not bother to return, and instead seek fellowship in other ways. As thousands have left the UCA over the last two years, many more will drift away, and the compounding impact of this will hasten the demise of many congregations.

Financial factors have of course been a major concern, and this is not surprising given the economically rationalist approach of many institutions. In the UCA, Synods are financial managers and planners and thus worry about overall liquidity and financial viability for themselves and

other ‘institutions’ they serve like the base unit of operation, namely the congregation. Some congregations were well set up with online offerings, and the impact may have been minimal unless many of their members also had reduced income. Congregations are still reliant on physical offerings for overall budgets, but more importantly property income has been a key source of overall income. This sudden and dramatic change has been a reality check to those congregations who have been coasting along, able to pay for stipended ministry simply from property income.

All of these changes and challenges are happening in this new post 15th Assembly era for the Uniting Church as it faces consolidation of being a divided denomination (except for the hierarchy – that is displaying more uniformity than before, a natural response to a declining denomination). As I have mentioned before, there are now several Uniting Church denominations, depending on which Synod you are connected with and even which regional area, though the name Uniting is held high, anyone in the know understands the lip service that is paid to the once Uniting Church movement that has now become a brand to be interpreted as one desires under the banner of diversity.

In terms of personal belief, one increasing trend in liberal progressive circles is seemingly to not know what they don’t believe. This is a sign of the diversity mantra taking hold and making it difficult to comment on any beliefs to the exclusion of others (except when taking pot shots at evangelicals). This is different from the beliefs of ‘old school liberals’, as they knew what they didn’t believe.

As I have mentioned, it is a new era for the ACC in the midst of all this, and there will be new ways of continuing to witness as a confessing movement. The use of social media, gatherings and teaching online (the School of Faith), a new website, and hopefully many individual members coming together in their own congregations and regions to support each other and confess the faith once given to all the saints.