

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN: A STATISTICAL NOTE ON PRESIDENTS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

There have only been seven Presidents of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church:

1. Rev. Dr J. Davis McCaughey (1977-79)
2. Rev. Winston O'Reilly (1979-82)
3. Rev. Professor Rolland Busch (1982-85)
4. Rev. Ian B. Tanner (1985-88)
5. Sir Ronald Wilson (1988-91)
6. Rev. Dr H. D'Arcy Wood (1991-94)
7. Mrs Jill Tabart (1994-97)

While it is difficult to draw too many generalised conclusions from such a limited number, it is worth noting common characteristics and providing an outline of these prominent church people.

It should be noted that the first two Presidents were not elected in the way which has become standard, namely by ballot at an Assembly meeting. Davis McCaughey was nominated to become the First President through the moves toward union by the uniting churches and their Joint Commission. In many ways he was a significant and obvious choice, given his prominence in the Victorian Presbyterian Church, his strong ecumenical theology and "hands on

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endeavours”, and in particular his role in the drafting of reports leading to the union and the drafting of the Basis of Union.

The second President, Winston O'Reilly, was elected by a process of nomination (Synods and presbyteries) and the use of mailed ballot (to members of the first Assembly). Winston again was an excellent and perhaps logical choice. He had been a key figure on the Methodist side of the negotiations toward union and was the chief executive officer for the Joint Constitution Commission (1974-77). Winston had also been a significant Methodist leader in his own right, having been President-General of the Conference.

The next five Presidents were all declared President-elect at an Assembly after a ballot.

Gender

What is most obvious from the first glance is that only one of the seven is a woman, and a non-clergy person. Given that having been a Synod Moderator is a common characteristic of the last five Presidents, it could be a long while before a female minister becomes President. Only two female clergy have been installed as Synod Moderators up to this year (one in N.S.W. and one recently in S.A.).

Ordained and Age

Of the seven Presidents, five have been ordained clergy. The average age for all Presidents as well as for the ordained clergy is 60, with the age range being 66 - 53. For the ordained clergy, there is an average of 31 years from ordination to induction/installation as President (range: 41 - 25). The average age of the President-elect was 55.4, with the age range being 50 - 62 (this statistic is based on the five most recent Presidents).

Synod Background

In terms of Synod representation, all Synods/states, except for the Northern Synod have produced a President. South Australia has produced two Presidents,

though interestingly, both Ian Tanner and D'Arcy Wood were ordained in Victoria and not South Australia but both were former Moderators of the Synod of South Australia.

Moderatorial Links

Probably one of the most significant common features of the last five Presidents is that they have all been Moderators of a Synod. The first two Presidents of course did not have an opportunity to become a Synod Moderator.

Three Presidents were Moderators of a first Synod, namely:

Rev. Professor Rolland Busch (Queensland 1977 - 79)

Rev. Ian B. Tanner (South Australia 1977 - 79)

Sir Ronald Wilson (Western Australia 1977 - 79)

The other two Presidents were Moderators during the 1980s:

Rev. Dr H. D'Arcy Wood (South Australia 1981 - 83)

Mrs Jill Tabart (Tasmania 1984 - 85)

Antecedent Church

In terms of background, four Presidents came into union from the Presbyterian Church (McCaughey, Busch, Tanner, Wilson) and three from the Methodist Church (O'Reilly, Wood and Tabart). No person from an established Congregational background has been elected and given the time factor this is now most unlikely to happen.

Three Presidents were Moderators of State Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church: Busch (Qld: 1977); Tanner (S.A.: 1971 - 72); Ron Wilson (W.A.: 1964).

Winston O'Reilly, as already noted, was a former President-General and was also the last Secretary-General of the Methodist Church of Australasia (1972 - 77). All these people were significant figures in the move towards union in

1977. Davis and Winston in particular on a national level, with the others more at the state level. Interestingly, D'Arcy Wood had also been involved in the moves toward union as the Secretary to the Joint Commission on Church Union from 1969-1971.

Theological Focus

Of the ordained Presidents, it is striking to note how many have been involved with theological education. All ordained Presidents have in common a university education, coupled with theological training, with most going onto postgraduate theological study and then teaching at an academic institution:

Rev. Dr David McCaughey: Master of Ormond College (1959 - 79 and former Professor at the Theological Hall (1953 - 64;

Rev. Winston O'Reilly: Deputy Principal of Leigh College (1949 - 1960);

Rev. Professor Rollie Busch: Principal of Emmanuel College (New Testament Studies);

Rev. Ian Tanner: Director of Lay Education for S.A. Synod;

Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood: Lecturer in Theology at Parkin-Wesley Theological College.

Needless to say, all the above people also contributed greatly to the wider education of people in the church through the writing of articles and books, both popular and scholarly.

Non-ordained Presidents

Both of the two non-ordained Presidents have also been university-educated and both have had (and still have) professional careers.

Sir Ronald Wilson has had a high profile legal career. When appointed as the first Moderator of the W.A. Synod he was the Solicitor-General in W.A. When elected President-elect and installed as President he was a Justice of the High Court (1979 - 1989).

Mrs Jill Tabart has been a Medical Practitioner in general practice for over 25 years. She has also been actively involved in all the church councils, having been a lay preacher, an elder and both a Secretary and Chairperson of a Presbytery, and a member of a Synod Standing Committee.

Long standing involvement with the Assembly and/or Assembly Committees

While this is a difficult point to claim for the first three Presidents (due to the young nature of the church), it is certainly a key feature of later Presidents. The following list provides details of those Presidents who attended an Assembly, except as President, President-elect or ex-President. Interestingly, the last five Presidents all attended an Assembly during their Moderatorial term of office.

Attended First Assembly (Sydney: June 1977): Winston O'Reilly (Assembly secretary), Ian Tanner, D'Arcy Wood, Ron Wilson (all representatives of their antecedent denomination.)

President-elect: Winston O'Reilly.

Attended Second Assembly (Melbourne: June 1979): Rollie Busch (Queensland Moderator), Ian Tanner (S.A. Moderator), Ron Wilson (W.A. Moderator), D'Arcy Wood (S.A. Synod representative).

President-elect: Rollie Busch.

Attended Third Assembly (Adelaide: May 1982): Jill Tabart (Presbytery representative), Ian Tanner (S.A. Synod representative), D'Arcy Wood (S.A. Moderator).

President-elect: Ian Tanner.

Attended Fourth Assembly (Sydney: May 1985): Jill Tabart (Tasmanian Moderator), Ron Wilson (W.A. Synod representative), D'Arcy Wood (S.A. Synod representative).

President-elect: Ron Wilson.

Attended Fifth Assembly (Melbourne: July 1988): Jill Tabart (Presbytery representative), D'Arcy Wood (S.A. Synod representative).

President-elect: D’Arcy Wood.

Attended Sixth Assembly (Brisbane: (July 1991): Jill Tabart (Tasmanian Synod representative).

President-elect: Jill Tabart.

Other significant Assembly links have been with the National Commission for Mission or its predecessors (Ian Tanner), Commission on Ecumenical Affairs (Jill Tabart and D’Arcy Wood) 1977 - 87). D’Arcy has also been significantly involved with the Commission on Liturgy, as Chairperson (1977 - 1988) and also with the publication and promoting of *Uniting in Worship*. D’Arcy Wood and Jill Tabart have also been prominent in Ecumenical Councils. D’Arcy was President of the Australian Council of Churches (1984 - 1988) and Jill a member of the A.C.C. General Meetings (1983 - 1993) and President of the Tasmanian Council of Churches (1993 - 94).

Membership of the Standing Committee (not a President or President-elect)

Ron Wilson	1977 - 1982
Ian Tanner	1979 - 1982
Jill Tabart	1985 - 1991

Another common characteristic: the awarding of various honours

David McCaughey	AC (1987)
Winston O’Reilly	OBE (1977)
Rollie Busch	OBE (1978); AO (1984)
Ian Tanner	CMG (1983)
Ron Wilson	CMG (1978); KBE (1979)

Our Presidents seem to have a habit of making it into *Who’s Who in Australia*.

Only one President is deceased. Rollie Busch died shortly after his term of office finished (1982-1985), on the 19th July 1985.

Lastly, another common characteristic: all Presidents have been married. This has not been the case with Moderators, though of course, there are more Moderators than Presidents.

Conclusion

Based on this limited study several factors emerge as significant for the election of the President-elect of the Assembly.

1. Mature age and recognisable Christian character and leadership.
 2. Wide church experience, knowledge and background, particularly, though not exclusively, in terms of contributing to the life of the Assembly.
 3. Experience of church leadership, particularly within Uniting church councils and ecumenical organisations.
 4. Demonstrated Leadership as a Moderator of a State Synod.
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ENDNOTES

1. These comments follow on from my article about Synod Moderators in the Uniting Church, *CH*, 9, 1 (March 1995), pp. 19-32.