

Overview of the Uniting Church Today...

Peter Bentley

Today I want to comment briefly on a few areas which I consider to be critical for further research and ultimately response. My comments should be considered as my personal reflections and are not connected in any way to my work for any other group.

1. Numerical strength and vitality

Considerable attention has been given to the future of the Uniting Church in the last ten years, particularly through the work of the Christian Research Association on material from the government Census and the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) attenders survey. Both statistical resources outline our slow but steady decline in numbers, though there was a technical increase in the 1991 Census figures. The 1996 Census witnessed a decrease in affiliation from 8.24% in 1991 to 7.52% (numerical decrease of 52 729 or 8.7% in overall terms). The Presbyterian church was the only other mainstream group to suffer a more significant fall in affiliation.

According to the NCLS material, NSW now has the largest estimated attendance, though Victoria still has the largest recorded membership. It is likely that Queensland attendance numbers will overtake Victoria in the next five years (unless Queensland suffers from a large exodus of people/congregations) and South Australia in the next ten years. The age profile of the denomination is the critical factor, with some states like Queensland better placed than others such as Victoria and Western Australia. The challenges of the aging church population are already with us, particularly in terms of resources and finances, but the impact will be felt more in the next

10 - 15 years. Two factors are important:

◆ Our older members are providing much of the ongoing services and finances for the majority of our parishes at the present time. They will of course become older and as their numbers decrease in the local congregation due to death and incapacity more pressure will be placed on the remaining active members of this key group at a time when they are least placed to cope.

◆ Smaller congregations have become far less viable in the overall parish picture and are more likely to close because core members (who are usually older long standing faithful members) are not being replaced. Congregational decline in the last ten years has been about 14%, mainly reflecting property amalgamation and rationalisation due to small numbers attending certain local churches, but this number could increase significantly in the future. Some of the forthcoming flexible parish options agreed to by the 1997 Assembly may help but it is likely that many congregations will not be able to organise themselves in time. If the current decline accelerates by the year 2015 the Uniting Church will have between 2/3 and 1/2 the present number of congregations and attenders. Many of these congregations will be evangelically oriented, with also a number of other groups including some 'niche' strong liberal oriented churches and older wealthy or well endowed 'middle of the road' congregations. Evangelicals will have significant local strength because they are the theological group most concerned about local evangelism and church growth.

2. Finances

Declining numbers, particularly among our older and more generous

long term givers is having a severe impact on the institutional church. There is likely to be a temporary respite due to the continued decrease in active congregational locations and the generation of funds through sales and rent, but the pressure on our institutions will increase over the long-term. It is worth considering that unless our ministerial numbers decline substantially, and there is evidence to point to increased early retirement and decreasing candidates in certain Synods, it is possible that ministers in the future will never have a parish appointment. The numbers employed within the institutional framework may increase dramatically in the short-term utilising property and investment income, thus enabling most ministers to continue in church based employment.

3. Homosexuality and Theological Polarisation

3.1 Established Polarisation

People familiar with the development of issues in the wider church would realise that matters arising from the growing public nature, influence and position of homosexual people in society would eventually mean that homosexuality would become a major focus for our contemporarily oriented church. It has been the issue for this decade and shows no sign of waning, unlike the ordination of women which has become a non-issue in most Protestant circles. In the Uniting Church, the appointment of openly homosexual staff in church offices, the candidature of homosexual ministers, the use of church facilities by gay groups, and the blessing of same-sex relationships have privately and publicly escalated the issues over the last ten years, particularly within South Australia. Concerned groups like EMU have

...and Issues for Tomorrow

been formally established and are expanding along with the Uniting Network, the group for gay and lesbian members and their supporters. The Interim Report on Sexuality (IRS) helped to focus and strengthen theological polarisation within the Uniting Church. Coupled with the growing number of openly homosexual clergy the whole question of the place of homosexual people within the church has become a public debate with personal dimensions and a significant impact on the whole church. To take one example, the events at the Victorian Synod in 1996, namely the nomination of a homosexual minister Jenny Byrnes as Moderator-elect had an impact on responses not only in Victoria, but also in other States. This event appeared to further polarise opinion and was also linked with the work of the Task Group on Sexuality because the majority of its members were Victorians and/or were known to be keen advocates for homosexual people in the life of the church. While I admit that attitudes to the acceptance of homosexuality is only one issue, it has now seemingly become a primary test question for perceived 'orthodoxy' for different groups. In several Synods, especially South Australia, NSW, W.A. and Queensland there are reports that settlements committees and parishes are becoming more concerned about the theology of a possible minister, particularly their attitude to the ordination of active homosexuals.

3.2 Regional Differences:

It is worth considering that there are also important differences between Synods and Presbyteries. Different theological emphases appear to be consolidating or developing, particularly between rural and city presbyteries and Synods. For example the different public positions and ethos of the synods of Queensland

and Victoria. More study needs to be undertaken here, but these differences reflect the history, antecedent church background and the leadership provided. It is worth noting that Victoria was the only state to have more Presbyterians enter union than Methodists as it is usually assumed that those entering union had a less conservative theological position than those who remained behind.

3.3 Gender Polarisation among Ministers:

The responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality point to a growing difference in theological positions between male and female ministers, with the responses from female ministers showing they were four times more likely to affirm the direction of the report with regard to homosexuality. It appears that gender is more important than age in terms of ministerial theological position, and this could well raise significant issues in the church in the short-term.

3.4 Beliefs and Attitudes

In general Uniting Church members have similar beliefs to other mainline Protestants in most common areas of morality and opinion, but are slightly more liberal in terms of attitudes to euthanasia, abortion and pre-marital sexuality, though certainly not homosexuality. The main point to note is that there are usually significant differences between regular church attenders and non-attenders. A more detailed example of this is provided in my short piece on homosexuality in the August 1997 issue of Uniting Church Studies.

4. Identity issues

The UCA is still struggling to find an identity. I believe it is fair to say that the people who work within the institutional framework of the church have a firmer picture of what they believe to be the identity of the UCA,

while many members would struggle to answer a question related to our identity. Given the fact that the UCA is only 20 years and that for most members, their formative experience was in one of the former denominations which had distinct identities it should not surprise us that many struggle with the identity question. In a way, that common harkening back to one of our former churches (mainly Methodist) is an indication of the lack of confidence and trust among our older membership. This of course is not a factor for our young members who generally do not relate to denominationalism, but this is another significant fact which I am sure you are all aware of. Lastly to finish with a comment related to the United Church of Canada. I am still puzzled as to why the UCA is often assumed to be the equivalent of the UCC. Various myths have arisen about the UCA/UCC link and it is well past the time to encourage the undertaking of research particularly to examine the view that one only has to look at the UCC to see the UCA of the future. This view completely negates the difference between a church of 20 years and one of 70. The historical and theological roots of the former denominations, particularly the evangelicalism of parts of the Methodist Church has provided a greater organisational focus for a part of the UCA today and thus a future for evangelical theology tomorrow. O

(Peter Bentley is a researcher and writer based in Erskineville, Sydney. He completed an analysis of the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality for the Assembly Standing Committee. This paper was presented to a meeting of members at the December 1997 meeting of E.M.U. in NSW).