



# *Establishing New Congregations*

**Editors:**

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## ***Summary & Conclusion*** ***Comments & Themes***

**Peter Bentley**

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**T**his conference brought together a broad group of people. All however, were committed to a vision of new life for Uniting Church congregations. This commitment was evident during reaction to the papers and discussion during the various breaks. The spirit of the conference did not stop at the end of each paper, but continued on late into the night and eventually rolled on into this report. As well as providing a forum for the papers, this report acts as a resource by providing other information, theme summaries and highlighting questions which need further consideration.

### ***Themes***

#### **1. To build or not to build?**

People from established congregations often focus on buildings and property. Of course, our church buildings play an important part in our lives. They can provide a structural foundation for the outworking or application of our faith. However, when we consider establishing new congregations, we can discern the beginnings of a move away from an emphasis on buildings to a focus on people. This move however, is really a recent phenomenon. The focus on structures is still an important concern in many denominations and within the life of people involved in the Uniting Church. For many, the focus for establishing a new congregation is often the acquisition of a land and or/the building of a worship centre and complex.

In the 1950s in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, this link between church building and congregation was totally connected, because a church on wheels (like moving a house) provided the foundation for a new congregation. After the congregation was able to build its own 'permanent' property, the moveable church went to the next mission location.

While buildings are useful and in many cases necessary, we need to be aware that a congregation is not just a group which happens in a fixed church building. This view could even give the impression that the a congregation is really only the building.

Of course not all new congregations will be started or indeed continue without a traditional centre. Some will become large worship centres with many buildings and diversified ministries, but we need to recognise that it may not be appropriate for all to develop the same established property structure. Indeed, some new congregations may remain without property.

#### **2. New Congregations can be established**

The Church has always established new congregations. We would not be in a congregation today if the Church had not continued to establish new congregations. We need to provide a picture for the whole Uniting Church of the continuing reality of new congregational life. New congregational life is part of the nature of the Church, it is not an oddity, but integral. The main question to address is how we go about establishing new congregations.

#### **3. Need for support**

As we establish new congregations we need to provide appropriate care and support for the people involved in establishing the congregations. We need to approach each situation with care and sensitivity.

#### **4. Use of small groups**

A major factor in establishing new congregations is the operation of small groups. We need to encourage the operation of small groups. These groups can:

- a) support the people who are establishing new congregations.
- b) provide a network for those people involved

- in this work.
- c) provide support and focus for the members of the new congregation and the people who involved in their establishment.

## **5. The Importance of Leadership**

Leadership is a crucial factor in this type of personal and relational work, but the leadership needs to be a liberating type, one that encourages development, rather than dependence. Since many of the new situations will be vulnerable and fragmented, the leadership will have the opportunity to provide support and a common focus. It is important to note that because this type of leadership will command some form of authority it could easily become a form of authoritarianism. Leaders and the wider church need to be conscious of the style which is developing within each new congregation. We also need to be aware of the danger of using disaffected leadership (people who have had conflicts with established churches).

Parameters and criteria need to be established for the selection and training of people to be involved in establishing new congregations. How do we go about contacting lay people who have a vision for establishing a new congregation?

## **6. The relationship of the new congregations to the wider church**

It has already been mentioned that small groups will be helpful, but the wider church will need to consider the initial, continuing and eventual relationship of the new congregation to the wider church and its councils. In particular we need to be wary of encouraging an independence which is unhealthy. The strength of the Uniting Church is its diversity, but sometimes that diversity can be so institutionalised that only certain types of people are accepted. Perhaps we need to explore ways of encouraging greater understanding of our diversity, by building bridges with new and established congregations.

The legal relationship of the new congregation to the wider church and its councils will need to be addressed. In particular;

What regulations are needed for new congregations?

What interim regulations will be needed to maintain a link rather than provide a break?

When does a new congregation cease to be a new congregation?

What about matters related to the celebration of

the sacraments and the conducting of other rites of the church?

## **7. The Nature of the Congregation**

Some theological reflection on the nature of the congregation in relation to the Basis of Union and our history would be helpful for the ongoing discussion. We need to consider what is a congregation? What are the elements which are necessary? What is the place of the congregation today in the Uniting Church?

## **8. Ecumenical Ventures**

New Congregations provide an opportunity for ecumenical endeavour. Rather than each denomination establishing a new congregation, our churches should consider the possibility of joint ventures.

Worship will be a focus of the new congregation. Coming together for times of worship will be a major part of a new congregation. The style of this worship will be important. What are the necessary features of worship for a new congregation? What flexibility should we allow, not only on a short-term basis? What styles of dress and patterns of worship should be encouraged for new congregations? Are these styles merely transitional (until the new congregations learn about the practice of liturgical dress)?

## **9. Mind Your Language**

Language will be a major indicator of the depth of commitment by individuals to a new congregation. Established language, especially jargon and acronyms have little place in new ventures, particularly among those people who have had little church contact.

## **10. Service as a Focus**

A new congregation can find value and encouragement in serving in some particular way appropriate to their situation.

## *Where to from here?*

National Mission and Evangelism brought people together in order to stimulate the wider church to look at this important issue. Rather than provide a book which said 'this is the way to go', the committee decided to involve people who were at the heart of this work as a way of encapsulating the spirit in order to share the vision. At this stage we have not set up a formal group, but decided to encourage an informal network of individuals, based around states or regional areas and also to bring people on an occasional basis for larger sharing times for support and encouragement.