

# Blowing Hot and Cold on Bishops in the Uniting Church

**Debate over whether to introduce an episcopal form of government into the Uniting Church is coming to a climax, reports our writer on Australian church affairs, PETER BENTLEY.**

**W**hen the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in Australia began union negotiations in the 1950s, they were aiming at something more than simply amalgamation.

Instead, they said, they wanted an entirely fresh start, a new perspective, which, they ambitiously claimed, would re-examine the faith, nature, action, ordering and ministry of the Church.

We want to look at "the church for today", declared the members of the Joint Commission of Church Union (JCCU). And indeed, the initial period of negotiation, lasting from 1957 to 1962, brought to light an encouraging breadth of vision and a wealth of ecumenical theology.

None the less, even at that stage, there were indications of difficulties to come. Thus, the JCCU's first report, *The Faith of the Church* (1959), while acknowledging that the faith of the people is found and guarded in the Church, also highlighted the value of a "personal episcopacy," which placed the care and oversight of the faithful flock under the hand of a bishop rather than in the hands of an Assembly, Synod, or, as in the Presbyterian Church, a "presbytery," a regional grouping of parishes.

The period 1959-1962 was a time of great ecumenical focus and hope. In particular, the influence of the "par excellence" example of organic church

unity, the Church of South India, was significant. Its bishops were very influential in ecumenical circles.

J.D. McCaughey, the present Governor of Victoria, was one of the Presbyterian representatives on the JCCU. He and several other members came to believe that it was the will of God to introduce a form of personal episcopacy. McCaughey also noted that there would be no possibility of union with the Anglicans if the Uniting Church had no bishops. Episcopacy was a central feature of the nature of the Church-in-the-World and also of the majority of the mainline denominations.

In 1963 the JCCU produced the second report, *The Church - Its Nature, Function and Ordering* and a proposed *Basis of Union*. By now, personal episcopacy was established in the report and Basis of Union. It was proposed that the Uniting Church would have different orders within the one order of ministry. Through a link with the Church of South India, the Uniting Church would create bishops, who would exercise a personal ministry, but within a corporate ministry of the regional presbytery. Hence the term 'Bishop-in-Presbytery' was coined.

The proposal to introduce bishops met with strong opposition. From 1963 to 1966 pamphlets were produced, groups formed and there was much lobbying. While the JCCU report referred to earlier could not be

revised, the basis on which the three denominations were to unite was open to detailed criticism. It was the task of the JCCU to revise the Basis of Union after the denominations had indicated their positions on various issues, including that of bishops.

Of the three denominations, the Presbyterian Church was the most opposed to bishops. The dark history of episcopacy in Scotland prevented an exploration of suggestions of even a reformed bishop. Presbyterian opposition was powerful enough to point the uniting churches away from personal episcopacy.

The Congregationalists were also opposed to the title, tenure and authority of the office, even though the concept was acknowledged to have some merit. Generally, it was thought that the proposal for the introduction of bishops should be left until after union.

The Methodist Church, which had never placed great stress on theological niceties, had no strong feelings on the matter and it took the easy option of deciding to abide by the decisions of the other churches. If any church was opposed and indicated that it was a stumbling block to union, then the Methodists were quite amenable to the dropping of the proposal. This, of course, was ultimately the decision of the JCCU.

Still, the concept of personal episcopacy was stamped in the minds of many people. An indication of this was the reference in Paragraph 16 of the Basis of Union to the nature of pastoral care and the implications of its being exercised personally within the context of the conciliar structure of the Uniting Church.

Thus the issue had by no means

been permanently put to rest, and was bound to surface again in time. It did at the 1985 Uniting Church Assembly. The Victorian Synod had requested the Assembly to start a process of re-examination of the proposal. A group from the Assembly Standing Committee subsequently produced a discussion paper *Bishops in the Uniting Church?*. Individuals and church councils were invited to respond to the paper between 1988 and 1989. The group is now putting together a submission and recommendation for the Uniting Church Assembly to consider in July 1991.

Over 250 responses have been received, ranging from very short sharp statements to detailed critiques and comments. The overwhelming majority rejected at least the title of bishop, although there was significant support for the concept of a "pastor to the pastors".

The need for adequate pastoral oversight and leadership was continually mentioned. In particular, the office of "Presbytery Officer" was mentioned as being preferable to that of bishop. The Presbytery Officer is a regionally based position, open to lay and ordained people. In many ways, the Presbytery Officer has as much power as any bishop.

Interestingly, the Queensland Uniting Church, which provided a disproportionate number of responses, has a strong tradition of Presbytery Officers.

Essentially the problem with bishops was the name. Generally people in the Uniting Church resist the name because of historical connotations. Many respondents stressed that the title indicated an authoritarian model based on hierarchy. There was even a suggestion that the move was designed to create "jobs for the boys", rather inappropriate given that women will also be eligible to be bishops. Perhaps the suggestion arose from a recognition of the still uncertain treatment of women ministers in the UCA?

Few respondents seemed aware that there were non-hierarchical models extant in episcopal churches in the USA, and also excellent examples of "servant bishops" in churches with which the UCA has links. (The Former General Secretary of the NSW UCA Synod, Rev Frank Butler, was a bishop in the United Church of Papua New Guinea).

Instead, a frequent comment was that the idea of a bishop was Anglican or Roman Catholic (even "popish"). Such statements seemed to reflect a hidden, but real agenda of anti-ecumenism. Others thought that creating bishops would mean pandering to the episcopal tradition at the risk of neglecting non-episcopal churches.

Some respondents felt that the title was not in keeping with the Australian character. It was commonly asserted that Australians do not like institutional leadership and tall poppies.

Well, certainly in the Uniting Church, there is a general lack of trust in our bureaucracy, while the system of councils and committees which diffuses responsibility, militates against the emergence of a clearly recognisable leadership. Is there a suitably neutral term for bishop which stresses our Australian egalitarianism? Perhaps "pastor's mate"?

More serious opposition centred on the problem of financing the office. It may not be a concern for regional Presbyteries which already support Presbytery Officers, but for less wealthy areas, the burden may be too great. The possibility of sharing a bishop and the associated costs of ministry may have some advantages, but the obvious disadvantage is that such a shared bishop would be overburdened with duties.

Another serious question concerned the involvement of the laity. If the bishop continued in the ordained tradition, then the office would be closed to lay people. At present the position of Presbytery Officer is open to all members who demonstrate the gifts. Would some gifted lay leaders be excluded from an active ministry?

On a more humorous note, the Assembly publication *Assembly Update* included the "startling information" that one respondent had found "that the word 'episcopal' is an anagram for 'Pepsicola'". The item continued: "In seeking to interpret this revelation, the Assembly staff are wondering:

- Does this mean bishops would bring more sparkle and fizz to the church? or
- Does this mean bishops, although sweet, would soon become flat and tasteless?

Another working group of the Assembly Standing Committee now has the difficult task of interpreting all the responses to the discussion paper. The overwhelming opposition to the use of the term 'Bishop will almost certainly mean that the group will not recommend that 'Bishops be introduced.

However the question remains: When is a bishop not a bishop? Well in the Uniting Church of the 1990s, it seems that the answer is when they are an advisor, chaplain, counsellor, dean, overseer, pastor, presbytery officer, presbytery minister, protector, superintendent and superperson.

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