

# **Presbyteries: Not quite dead, but many on life support.**

**Peter Bentley**

## **Introduction**

A short while after union, UCA minister (and now a past Moderator – Queensland Synod, 1981-1982), Revd Doug Brandon, embarked on a study of Presbyteries in the Eastern states and South Australia for the Queensland Synod. His report was published as a book in 1981: *Presbyteries: Alive and Well*. (Brandon: 1981). This provided an interesting account of presbytery life during the early years of the denomination, as well as a discussion about the role of the presbytery in the life of the new denomination, and the then early moves to adopt personal forms of episcopate. At least one writer has suggested that Brandon's estimation of Presbyteries was somewhat premature or perhaps overly optimistic (Harrison: 2003, 116). I read Brandon's report in the context of providing a word of encouragement to continue with the task of being the presbytery, as well as providing a glimpse of what could be.

The basis for Presbyteries at the start of union was geographical, with clearly defined areas related to regions, especially rural and metropolitan. This followed the geographic arrangements of the antecedent churches. At the start of the Uniting Church there was also a strong base of experienced leaders, both ministerial and lay who were able to maintain the new presbytery structure. It is also evident from my discussions with former Presbyterians that some other members of the new Uniting Church may not have known what a presbytery was or how it related to the other councils. There was a need in particular for some to appreciate that the presbytery officers were not meant to be the equivalent of the District or Superintendent Minister.

While Presbyteries may have had a broad range of leaders and potential committee members, very few had substantial financial support, and if they did, it was usually related to historical or a special circumstances such as isolation. Control of property and most financial arrangements by the Synods, meant that right from the start Synods could effectively dictate how Presbyteries would develop.

Note: I am not questioning the existence of Synods. They perform many vital roles, and there are some tasks that need to be undertaken on a state basis, especially Synod administration, finance and property, and certain community services. See the comments in scenarios for further comment about Synods and Presbyteries.

Some twenty five years later, while some issues still remain, the situation has clearly changed in terms of membership and leadership.

The purpose of this paper is to;

- a) explore the present situation;
- b) comment on the role of the Presbytery and raise some issues that challenge our Presbytery model today
- c) highlight some areas of change that should be considered

I also comment on two specific issues:

- Resolution 84 and the role of the Presbytery
- The role of the Synod and Presbytery in the matter of a congregational application for an alcohol licence,

and finally, provide some scenarios for Presbyteries and Synods in the future.

## **1. The Basic Picture Today: Synods and Presbyteries**

### **1.1 New South Wales: Fourteen Presbyteries**

*Canberra Region; Central West; Far North Coast; Georges River; Illawarra; Ku-ring gai; Mid North Coast; New England North West; Parramatta-Nepean; Riverina; Sydney; Sydney North; The Darling; The Hunter*

The basic presbytery structure has continued since union, with the main occasional change in terms of congregational membership related to Presbyteries located near Victoria and Queensland.

A new development in 2003 arose from the decision to form a Korean Commission. The Commission is really a quasi-presbytery, as it has some of the responsibilities of a presbytery (under delegation from the geographic presbytery), but is non-geographical because it has membership from congregations throughout the whole Synod.

For some people it appears this is a presbytery in training, for others it is only a Commission, a helpful structure designed for a particular group for a certain period. Interested readers can follow the history of this development, and a discussion of theological issues in the article by Revd Yangrae Son in *Uniting Church Studies* (2004).

What is evident is that the congregations of the Korean Commission now have little contact with, or time for, their geographic presbytery. The NSW Synod even made a decision at its 2005 meeting to appoint two members of the Korean Commission (one lay and one ordained) to be part of its Assembly representation, thereby reducing the number of members the Synod could elect itself.

I should also highlight an anomaly that has always existed in the Presbytery of Sydney and the Synod of NSW. The Presbytery of Sydney is I understand unique in having congregations within other Presbytery areas (at one stage, over 20% of its congregations). Most of these congregations were member congregations of migrant-ethnic parish arrangements that over time established congregations in other Presbyteries than the 'mother' presbytery.

For example, before the change to congregational polity, the Tonga Parish had twenty congregations in seven of the fourteen NSW Presbyteries. Inter-presbytery relations have thus been an issue in terms of pastoral oversight and co-ordination in this Presbytery for at least fifteen years.

## **1.2 Northern Synod: Two Presbyteries**

The Northern Synod has changed from four Presbyteries at union (Kimberley; Arafura; Arnhem; The Centre). William and Susan Emilsen document the difficulties from before union of a Presbytery based polity, and the early moves to fewer Presbyteries and the development of a limited role for the Presbytery. (Emilsen: 2003, 73-75).

Today the two Presbytery arrangement reflects the recognition of self-determination for the Aboriginal communities and the conviction that a single Presbytery was reasonable and sustainable for the remaining churches. In 2005 the Synod website stated:

The Synod has two Presbyteries; The Northern Regional Council of Congress consists of the aboriginal community churches throughout the Northern Territory, the Kimberley region and Central Australia and the Pilgrim Presbytery of Northern Australia which consists of the churches existing in the main towns in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley. (<http://ns.uca.org.au/> )

## **1.3 Queensland: Eight Presbyteries**

*Central Queensland; Moreton Rivers; Mary Burnett; North Queensland; South Moreton; Brisbane Bremer; The Downs; and Calvary.*

Queensland now has eight Presbyteries following some restructuring and name changes (down from nine for the major part of the Synod history).

The Synod is unique because one of the Presbyteries, Calvary Presbytery is a non-geographical presbytery, serving Aboriginal and Islander congregations in the Queensland region.

In one sense, the Aboriginal and Islander regional councils in other Synods have a similar role to the Calvary Presbytery in Queensland, but they are still not Presbyteries, and have different roles and responsibilities, especially in relation to ordination.

The matter of ordination is significant, given that the Korean Commission in NSW was not granted this responsibility.

Interestingly, I am aware that the ordination records for NSW actually record the UAICC (NSW Congress) as the ordaining body in at least one case. One interesting example of the status or perhaps perceived place of Presbyteries was found on the Queensland Synod website, though as Rob Bos pointed out to me, this should not be seen as representative of [Queensland's] polity of ecclesiology (e-mail; 8.3.2006).

I am aware that this is a Synod website, but among points I had noted was one interesting reference to Presbyteries (presbyteries with websites, and there were only three), which was placed under 'Service Activities of the Queensland Synod'. The Presbyteries listed were: South Moreton, North Queensland and Mary Burnett. There was also no explanation of what a presbytery actually did or if there were other presbyteries.

This situation has now changed. Bruce Mullan, the new editor of Journey (Queensland Synod), sent the following kind response following my forwarding of an earlier draft of this material.

"I found the comments on our web site particularly helpful. You will notice there have been some resulting changes. Much appreciated." (e-mail: 9.3.2006)

The changes include the addition of presbyteries as a separate sub-group on the Queensland home page, and a full listing with a brief comment explaining the nature of a Presbytery, as well as links to all the Presbyteries which have websites.

I applaud Synods having websites, and it is even better if they are reasonably accessible and perhaps consistent in terms of a national approach. (I could digress and provide a critique of each of the Synod websites in terms of their functionality and even the theological underpinnings that are evident from their design, but ....)

Certainly, there are some Presbyteries in Queensland that have their own strongly defined character, especially as some people have pointed out to me, the Downs and North Queensland, but from my experience of the different Synods I have found the Queensland Synod to be the most focussed on the life of the Synod as an institution. This reflects the strong antecedent Methodist district and conference model which had been dominant, as well as the development of the life of the institution of the Synod over the decades of the Uniting Church.

Interestingly, the Queensland Synod also embraced the idea of full-time officers in Presbyteries, partly related to the issue of distance and co-ordination (Harrison: 2003, 116-120). It is important to note that even though support was provided by the Synod, it was the Synod which determined the funding. I also believe these early moves were related to a perception of the role of the chairperson as a type of 'bishop', perhaps related to the previous consideration of the 'bishop in presbytery'. One of the dangers of an institutional context in terms of paid officers is that the church can unwittingly become focussed on the officer as the presbytery or synod, rather than seeing the corporate nature of episcopate which is to be exercised in both the Presbytery and the Synod.

#### 1.4 South Australia: One Presbytery

At union, South Australia had seven Presbyteries: *Adelaide North West; Eyre; Fleurieu; Frome; Mt Lofty; South Eastern and Wakefield.*

In 2005 this was formally changed in favour of a combined presbytery and synod structure based around networks.

The Synod website reported that:

The Presbytery Synod Mission Network is a new structure for the Uniting Church in SA. This structure was approved, after extensive consultation, at the 2004 Synod meeting.

The new structure contains two key elements:

- (1) The disbanding of the seven existing presbyteries and the forming of one Presbytery
- (2) The development of mission networks to assist congregations to develop their life, witness, worship and evangelism.

Under the new structures, the Presbytery and Synod will recognise the particular needs, aspirations and ethos of individual congregations.

(<http://www.sa.uca.org.au/pages/psmn/>)

I believe that it is now evident that in South Australia the Synod, and the Networks have become the cornerstone for the Uniting Church, even though a presbytery still technically exists. Some features as reported by the last edition of the Presbytery Synod Mission Network Newsletter (Network News. February 2006, No. 10) make it clear that the Presbytery will have limited responsibilities. The Synod is responsible for all property and financial matters, and for example, congregations “no longer need to go through the Presbytery for approval of property matters.”

The news also notes that:

- The Chairperson of the Synod and the Presbytery are the same.
- The Secretary of the Synod and the Presbytery are the same.
- There is one church office.
- The Presbytery and the Synod have the same membership.

The first two points are where I have the most difficulty, as I do not believe this arrangement sufficiently recognises the different roles of each council, and the need for the exercise of different leadership and oversight, especially in certain areas such as the counselling and discipline regulations.

In South Australia the main issues related to the move to the 'One Presbytery and One Synod' model were outlined in *'The Report to the 2004 SA Synod: 'An Alternative Mission Structure Presbytery Mission Network'*. (No date)

These points were:

- addressing the confusion between Synod and Presbytery responsibilities.
- Stewardship
- Difficulty in having a strategic focus
- Membership decline
- Sexuality – (J1.1) - see below for the context of this point.

The Presbytery Mission Network is predicated on maintaining the unity of the church. It is the belief of those proposing it that it enables us to live with our diversity in a more positive manner than presently experienced. (J1.18)

Clearly the South Australia model is an attempt to address the basic issue confronting Presbyteries, namely the issue that Resolution 84 crystallised. How can individual non-homogeneous Presbyteries maintain unity and oversight?

However, one of the issues which is still to be determined, is how the Synod (and presumably the one Presbytery) will deal with controversial issues, and actually live with the diversity it has implicitly sanctioned. In a way, it could be argued that the potential problems of the presbytery model have simply been referred to what I perceive could be seen as the dominant council in this case, namely the Synod.

## 1.5 Victoria and Tasmania: Fourteen Presbyteries

At union, there were thirteen Presbyteries in Victoria: *Barwon; Bourke; Gippsland; Goulburn Valley; Grampians; Loddon-Campaspe; Mallee; Maribyrnong Valley; Maroondah; Mitchell; Nepean; Western Port; Yarra Valley*

### **Tasmania:** One Presbytery to One Synod

At union there were three Presbyteries: *Mersey/Lyall; Tamar Esk; Derwent*.

Over time it became clear that three Presbyteries were not sustainable, and eventually one Presbytery One Synod model was adopted. Today: **"The Church in Tasmania will be organised** - as a single Presbytery/Synod structure with a minimal level of administration." (<http://tas.uca.org.au/taschurch.php>).

Note: even though Tasmania is a single Presbytery, it was allowed to maintain its Assembly representation based on the previous three Presbytery status.

The presbytery structure in Victoria has been mostly stable, with the most significant change being the Victorian Synod amalgamation with Tasmania on 22 June 2002, and the addition of the Presbytery of Tasmania. The Synod has considered various options for Presbyteries during the last decade.

It is worth noting that the Victorian and Tasmanian Synod website has a defined area for Presbyteries and also a helpful and succinct account of Presbyteries and their role, as well as links to the Presbyteries that have websites. I offer a tentative comment that the greater awareness or consideration of Presbyteries reflects the influence of Presbyterianism in this Synod.

## **1.6 Western Australia: One Presbytery.**

At union, Western Australia had five Presbyteries; *North-West, Peel, Perth, Swan, Stirling*, with the non-metropolitan Presbyteries having wide-ranging geographic areas.

In 2005, the Uniting Church in Western Australia also moved to create one Presbytery. In WA, this was particularly related to the perceived and real difficulties that at least one presbytery had trying to fulfil their responsibilities.

In smaller Synods the maintenance of a Presbytery structure and in particular the cost of paid staff to help with the running of each presbytery would represent a significant part of the overall budget, and practically cannot be provided.

Western Australia has 168 congregations. Given the complexity of some Eastern Presbyteries which have between 80-100 congregations, I can well understand that one, or perhaps two Presbyteries may have been sufficient for Western Australia in any case, especially in terms of provision of support and funding. The church in W.A. drafted separate By-Laws for the Presbytery. Alongside the one presbytery (the first meeting of the Presbytery of WA was held on 11 February 2006), the Uniting Church in Western Australia also adopted a regional model to help facilitate the smooth running of the Presbytery. The one presbytery has ten regional areas and the regional contacts are called regional pastors. (*WA Synod News Update* No. 3, 23 December 2005). Regions are expected to have at least one regional gathering between each normal Presbytery meeting. The focus is noted below:

- 3.3.4 Regional Gatherings will provide for educational programs, mission support and networking, major celebrations, inspirational speakers, pastoral support and interaction with the Church Office and the wider Church. (W.A. Presbytery By-Laws)

The church in W.A. is also trying to change the popular concept of the 'head office' being the Synod office, and has adopted a combined church office for the Presbytery and Synod. To help this process and mindset change the church has appointed a distinct and dedicated church office contact for each region

Like South Australia, the Chairperson and Secretary of the Presbytery will be the same as the Moderator and General Secretary of the Synod.

## 1.7 The Present Situation: A brief overall reference.

2006 will see the real start to the significant changes in the non-Eastern Synods. Two of the Eastern Synods: Victoria and Tasmania, and NSW continue to explore possible changes to the presbytery system. While Synods have been aware of the reviews and changes initiated to date, there has been a singular approach, rather than a co-ordination and pooling of resources and information. This may reflect the significant differences between Synods, especially financial resources.

There is clearly significant difference in the geographical size and congregational membership of Presbyteries, especially with the move to one presbytery Synods. The smallest presbytery in terms of congregational numbers and placements is still The Darling (NSW), with South Australia now the largest presbytery.

The largest number of Presbyteries up to Assembly 2000 was 55.

**At the start of 2006, the number of Presbyteries will be 40**, though it is questionable if the South Australian Presbytery and perhaps the Western Australian presbytery could be regarded as active in the traditional understanding of a presbytery. Particularly in South Australia, I perceive the Synod has become the manager of the Presbytery, ensuring greater functional operation under certain conditions.

## 2. The Role of the Presbytery

For many Uniting Church members the Presbytery is still a curious beast, sometimes appearing like an unwanted visitor.

The key description is found in *The Basis of Union* Paragraph 15 part (c) (1992 version)

The Presbytery (the district council) consists of such ministers, elders/leaders and other Church members as are appointed thereto, the majority of elders/ leaders and Church members being appointed by Elders'/Leaders' Meetings and/or congregations, on a basis determined by the Synod. Its function is to perform all the acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area for which it is responsible, except for those agencies which are directly responsible to the Synod or Assembly. It will in particular exercise oversight over the congregations within its bounds, encouraging them to strengthen one another's faith, to bear one another's burdens, and exhorting them to fulfil their high calling in Christ Jesus. It will promote those wider aspects of the work of the Church committed to it by the Synod or Assembly.



It is also helpful to go back to the Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union: *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering* 1963. (Noted as JCCU: 1963, and then page numbers refer to the report).

(ii) *Presbytery* (The Diocesan Council):

One of the major strengths of the Reformed tradition lies in its recognition that the many aspects of the Church—personal and corporate episcopate, local expression and Catholic extension, edification of the Body and missionary outreach—are brought together in microcosm in an area that is small enough for Christian caring. The Presbytery, whose nature and function has been developed in the Presbyterian tradition and, for example, codified in the Westminster Assembly “Form of Church Government” is recognised by the Commission as a pivotal instrument of the Church’s day-to-day life, since it represents the wholeness of the Church at the point where the mission of the Church is localised. (JCCU: 1963, 62-63)

At the stage of the discussions about church union when this report was produced, it was proposed that episcopate be located personally, and while there was a minority report, the majority had affirmed the role of the bishop, albeit a reformed bishop. The concept of the bishop-in-presbytery was eventually removed from the proposed Basis, and the corporate episcopate that is presently a feature became part of the founding basis for the new Uniting Church.

Nevertheless the fundamental tasks remained the same, and episcopate is of course relevant to all members of a presbytery, but especially the ministers, so it is helpful to consider the comments of the drafters of the Second Report in relationship to the role of the bishop.

The main tasks of a bishop may be summarised under the threefold office which all ministry must fulfil, and for which the bishop with the presbyters has special oversight and responsibility.

The bishop therefore must have the freedom and initiative necessary to the fulfilment of his tasks, and at the same time be responsible for the fulfilment of those tasks to his fellow-presbyters within the bounds of the Church. The main tasks of a bishop may be summarised under the threefold office which all ministry must fulfil, and for which the bishop with the presbyters has special oversight and responsibility.

- (a) In the fulfilment of his *prophetic* office the bishop has primary responsibility for maintaining the true expression of the Christian faith in preaching, teaching and evangelism. In particular, therefore, he will be required to exercise responsibility in relation to the call, training and the continuing growth in Christian knowledge of the ministers to whom he must be a “father-in-God”.

- (b) In the fulfilment of his *priestly* office he has primary responsibility for maintaining and safeguarding the sacramental and liturgical life of the diocese. He must be responsible to see that the sacraments are duly administered, confirmation faithfully observed, and the ministries of oversight continuously maintained. He will intercede with God for the presbyters, deacons and people committed to his care.
- (c) In the fulfilment of his *kingly* office, he is the ‘pastor pastorum’ caring for the shepherds, fostering the unity of the people with each other and with the wider Church, and taking initiative and responsibility in relation to the discipline necessary to the continuing life of the Body. In all these matters the bishop must have freedom and initiative; in all of them he must also be responsible to the Councils of the Church.” (JCCU: 1963, 49-50)

Some of the central features of a Presbytery relate to the maintaining and safeguarding of the Christian faith. Just as a bishop is not free to do anything they desire or think good at the time, a Presbytery is not free to abandon its primary role and relationships. The Presbytery is part of the wider church, and under God provides the necessary leadership to hopefully develop and sustain the unity that the church community is called to.

In the Uniting Church the focus for the Presbytery has often been outlined in three parts. For example, Doug Brandon’s report on Presbyteries in 1981 considered three main areas for the Presbytery’s ministry: Pastoral Oversight; Mission; Administration.

These areas were confirmed by the Standing Committee re Church Structures (In future referred to as SCreCS), Report to the Ninth Assembly, 2000, which made the following comment:

Presbyteries need to be large enough to have the critical mass necessary to fulfil the functions of **pastoral oversight, mission strategy and administration** [bold not in original] envisaged in the Basis, but not so large that these functions become remote from the congregations which the Presbytery serves. Under-sized presbyteries simply cannot fulfil the functions designated to them. Over-sized presbyteries fulfil the functions, but in a manner which does not foster the sense of community, collegiality and mutual account- ability in the original vision of the UCA. Recognising the fine balance is a critical task for synods. (SCreCS: 5.1)

Following the lead of the Report, the Ninth Assembly defined some core roles for the presbytery. (Minute:00.24.02)

### **PRESBYTERY**

*(The Basis of Union 15c; Constitution 26)*

Distinctive Responsibilities

Pastoral and administrative oversight of Congregations, Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Deaconesses, Youth Workers, Lay Pastors and Community Ministers (Regulation 3.4.4)

Ordination of Ministers of the Word and Deacons (Regulation 2.3.1)

Recognition of lay preachers (Regulation 2.8.6),

Commissioning of Youth Workers (Reg. 2.9.19) community ministers (Regulation 2.12.13) and lay pastors (Regulation 2.7.22).

Lead Roles (Regulation 3.4.4.)

Oversight and support of Congregations

Promotion of the wider aspects of the work of the Church

Development and oversight of regional mission strategies

Instruction of Church members towards a better understanding and a fuller participation in witness and service

Placement and oversight, including discipline, of Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Deaconesses, Youth Workers, Lay Pastors and Community Ministers.

How does the Uniting Church help to maintain the Christian faith today through the ministry of oversight of the Presbytery? How does the Uniting Church maintain its identity in terms of unity today? I am aware that unity does not mean uniformity, but there needs to be an agreed basis on which unity is predicated. [For a wider comment on this point here see Peter Bentley (3)].

The Presbytery has a significant local role to play in the maintenance of the Christian faith today, especially in the oversight of its ministers. The relationship between the Presbytery and its ministers is a critical matter, and one worthy of fuller discussion than in this focussed paper.

I well remember a discussion I had with one minister who had the view that ministers should not be required to have any different standards of practice or behaviour than a lay member. I do not want to focus too much on the question of the representative nature of the ordained minister in relation to the Presbytery, except to postulate that as a lay person, I have long held a view that ministers have a special representative relationship in the context of the whole Church, and I believe this is related to the hopefully highly visible task of “...maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church.” (*The Basis of Union*, Para 14, part (a).

The Presbytery clearly has a key role in the fulfilment and development of the ministries of the church, and it is worth considering how this fits in with the specific issue of Resolution 84, which I will raise later.

### **3. Challenges for The Presbytery**

#### **3.1 The basic problems**

Three main factors are now having a major impact on a Presbytery's life and ability to properly handle responsibilities.

- Declining membership
- Declining congregational numbers
- Declining Placements.

The effect of each is to reduce the number of competent and theologically able people who are available to serve in the life of the Presbytery. The follow on report to the Discussion Paper *Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils* (1996), was the *Report of the Standing Committee re Church Structures* states on this point: "The reduction in the number of ministers in placement has in many instances reduced the level of skilled and visionary leadership available to presbyteries." (SCreCS. Point 5.7)

Also, anyone who has had intimate experience with Presbyteries over the last ten years would be aware of the increased number of responsibilities as a result of Assembly decisions. The Standing Committee Report on Church Structures stated:

It is clear that most presbyteries are seriously under-resourced to fulfil their core functions. This has been accentuated by the large range of additional responsibilities recently placed on presbyteries as a result of decisions taken by the Eighth Assembly concerning church structures, ministerial education and placements. (SCreCS. 5.8)

#### **3.2 The Issue of Trust**

As well as the factors noted above, the question of trust has arisen more significantly since the sexuality debate, and particularly since Resolution 84.

While I admit that the question of trust within councils has always been an issue in the church, I believe it is particularly heightened at present. Some Presbyteries are simply not able to undertake their primary roles because the level of episcopate has been so neutered by complications arising from Resolution 84.

In times of increasing individualism and congregationalism the role of oversight is a challenging task, especially when it is provided in what is often seen as a non-personal form (the committee). This may be why Presbyteries, especially in the wealthier Synods have moved to adopt a focus on a particular individual in the Presbytery (either Presbytery Minister or Pastor, or Chairperson – including full-time Chairperson as a placement) as a matter of priority.

### **3.3 Congregational Focus**

The change in polity within the Uniting Church (removal of the parish basis) has also fostered a growing congregational mentality, which has had an effect on the perception of the congregation's conciliar relationships. I will focus on the question of Resolution 84 and the role of the Presbytery later in this paper, but I need to also note here that Resolution 84 has also added to congregationalism by giving the somewhat bizarre impression that congregations have the same role of decision making in placements and candidature to that of the Presbytery.

Coupled with this is the fact that Resolution 84 was thrust on all members of congregations without reasonable reference, or the possibility of reasonable congregational input, and this thus increased the feeling of polarisation and an 'us and them' attitude.

If congregational members are increasingly distanced from the regional councils and national council due to decisions and ethos, then it stands to reason that fewer congregational members will be available to help in the closest regional council, the Presbytery. The largest evangelical and conservative congregations are in many ways self-contained and could simply concentrate on their own mission and ministry. The smaller congregations will be hard-pressed to maintain their own life and witness and administration and will simply not be able to 'afford' to have members who have multiple responsibilities outside of the local congregation. Already, at least anecdotally, it is well known that the position of Presbytery congregational representative is hardly a sought after position, and in some Presbyteries, some congregations are not able or never get around to appointing a lay member. The difficulty in maintaining Presbytery membership will have a flow-on effect to the Synods as well.

## **4. Some Areas of Change Needed**

### **4.1 Membership of Presbyteries**

Given the significant changes to the provision of ministry, especially through the congregationally based polity changes, and the impact in non-metropolitan area, there has been a significant failure of the church to address these changes. There needs to be a consistent approach to how ministers of other denominations who are not recognised, or cannot be recognised by the UCA (and thus seconded to a placement), and lay people who are placed as lay leaders, are accorded membership of the Presbytery. To have the situation where 'lay' people are placed in a position of responsibility as the effective minister of a congregation and yet have no relationship to the Presbytery is an increasingly significant matter. It also promotes increasing distance and the likelihood of these lay ministers neglecting the Uniting Church and even the wider church.

I am aware that some individual Presbyteries (mainly in rural areas) have addressed some of these issues, and some lay ministers have ‘contracts of employment’, which outline their responsibilities within the Uniting Church according to *The Basis of Union*, but the issue of membership of the councils of the church is still to be addressed by the whole church. At present there are too many inconsistencies, which reveal too little overall attention to detail and concern for the role of the Presbytery. I have been encouraged by the formulation of Guidelines in some Synods for the employment of lay workers, including the specification of categories of lay workers so that a consistent approach can be followed for those who are the primary person in a placement. It would be helpful for this approach to be confirmed nationally.

There are also other examples where further thought is needed as well. For example, the question of the involvement in the councils of the church by interns. Interns are members of the Presbytery in a lay category, and can be elected to the Assembly by the Presbytery or the Synod as a lay person, even though they could be a minister when the Assembly is convened. For example, does this mean the Presbytery can have two ministers as its representatives? Does an intern have a dual nature? This is a practical issue which needs a consistent approach from Presbyteries and Synods.

## **4.2 Representation to the Assembly**

The present system of appointing two members; one ordained and one confirmed lay member, is not sufficient for Presbyteries which have now suffered dramatic changes since union. It certainly keeps the Assembly focused on its institutional basis. What the church needs is broader representation. When there are only two members, Presbyteries become too focused on sending officers, and they may not be necessarily the best people for the task. Also, increasingly, Presbytery officers are paid officers, thus reinforcing the context of the institution as the Church.

Change is also needed in how Synods appoint Synod representatives to Assembly, and this should be examined in the context of changes to the Presbytery representation.

When I have suggested change in the whole area of representation in the past, several people in the institution I have discussed this with have greeted me with derision. One person however at least acknowledged the difficulty, namely that those in power would need to vote themselves out of power.

**Note:** I know that some people will get on their high horse and rave on about members of Assembly not being representatives. Well, apart from debating how this type of rhetoric can actually be used to undermine the ‘ideal’, one should actually look at the language of the regulations for the Synod and the fact that most Synods in their appointments and resolutions use the term ‘representatives’. I am not suggesting that members need to vote in the way they believe their appointing body would like them to, or has even determined, but after twenty years as a church member I have lost any naivety I once had - no-one is an island.

### **4.3 Better access to the Assembly for Proposals**

At present there appears to be a hierarchical approach in considering proposals. Allowing Synods and Assembly/agencies to present proposals before Presbyteries does not fully respect our system of government. I believe there needs to be consideration of the merit of each proposal, and more thought given to the business and facilitation procedures to determine the best arrangements for this triennial meeting. A Presbytery may have a small but significant proposal, but it may not be allocated appropriate time, or even any time at the Assembly. The proposal is then in danger of simply falling off the agenda because it no longer has an advocate. Perhaps working groups could also comment on the helpfulness of proposals, and the need for a decision, either at the Assembly, or as a matter of priority by the Assembly Standing Committee.

### **4.4 Referral of matters to Presbyteries**

There needs to be a way for Presbyteries to be more directly involved in matters of referral as outlined in Clause 39 of the Constitution.

It is very difficult for an Assembly which has just voted on a matter to then entrust this matter to other councils, even if it is considered “vital” during the debate.

*The Basis of Union* is much clearer on this point. “It is obligatory for it [The Assembly] to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.” (Para 15 part (c)).

Having been an active Presbytery member for over ten years, I was personally amazed and perplexed at how the Assembly could make a decision like Resolution 84 without reference to the very council which would be most affected. The Uniting Church cannot have its cake and eat it as well. There has to be a consistent approach to polity. If the church is simply a federation of regional councils, as it appears the Assembly sometimes believes, then Presbyteries and Synods should be involved in the final decision-making process to a greater extent, and at least have a chance to ratify those decisions which everyone really knows are significant.

### **4.5 Congregational size and area of oversight**

There needs to be a proper review of the basis and criteria for Presbyteries. The paper *Reforming Alliance (NSW Committee) - Formation of presbyteries in New South Wales*: May 2005 Version 1 considers this matter in its overall presentation, and even if one does not seriously consider the non-geographic issue, the points made about the need to examine the criteria for a Presbytery are worth considering.

While I am aware that there are practical issues arising from the geographic size of rural areas, there are also increasingly complexities in some Presbyteries in the metropolitan areas that require specialised help and resources as well.

[Functioning] Presbyteries can range in congregational numbers from less than twenty small congregations to more than eighty congregations, including congregations in which most members are NESB (non-English speaking background).

In those Synods in which Presbyteries are still functioning, a proper review will help Synods allocate resources based more on the responsibilities of the individual Presbytery, rather than a general one size fits all approach.

#### **4.6 Consultations on the life of Presbyteries**

When was the last time a serious consultation with a Presbytery was undertaken? Yes, there have been internal reviews, and also reviews in the context of the numbers of Presbyteries in certain Synods. Some Presbyteries have used paid consultants.

The Georges River Presbytery was presented with a report in early 2006 which is now receiving wider publicity due to its pessimistic findings ('Divided Uniting Church battling against extinction', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 3, 2006, p.3).

How have reviews affected the life of the Presbytery? How has the particular Synod fulfilled its role in terms of counsel and action?

Are Presbyteries able to undertake their present roles, and if some are not, are there particular roles and responsibilities which are the stumbling point?

Are Presbytery Pastoral Relations Committees functioning? Are discipline matters properly conducted? Do Presbyteries ensure that ordinands are properly ordained according to the regulations, or do the ordinands and chairperson decide what happens? These are just a few of the questions which need to be asked, and the answers may help Presbyteries and Synods develop a response before more Presbyteries simply indicate they are not able to adequately function as a council of the church.

#### **4.7 Discovering information about Presbyteries**

Given the ability of websites to serve wide areas and provide a vast amount of information and resources and serve as intranets, it is a pity that all Presbyteries (and congregations as well for that matter) do not have websites. I recognise that some Synods help in this area, and development is the start, but from my experience you need a keen local person who can advise on updating and regular maintenance. It may be difficult to find an appropriate person, or costly to have a local professional. Websites need to be fresh and relevant and responsive to the needs of the group concerned.

### **5. Two Particular Matters**

#### **5.1 Resolution 84 and the Presbytery**

Doug Brandon has an interesting paper on the Assembly website:

'Reverence for the Scriptures': October 13, 2003. (Referred to following as Brandon: 2003). While the title implies a discussion about Scripture, the article is mainly a sustained and sometimes passionate account from a minister who clearly feels very stirred by some of the reported comments and statements mainly from EMU members (especially in the context of the establishment of the Reforming Alliance).

It is important to refer to some of his comments, because they highlight a very public position that the Assembly has taken as well.

*From Doug Brandon's paper*



I believe much of the more stimulating debate concerns the role of the Presbytery. Some of the misunderstanding was due to poor drafting of the Proposal. In August, the Assembly Standing Committee re-worded the resolution to clarify its meaning and intent. This removed some of the sources of controversy, but there remains a strong belief that Resolution 84 has opened the door to the ordination of homosexual people. Another source of misunderstanding has been the belief that the Assembly has the power to prevent Presbyteries from accepting homosexual people as candidates for the ministry. The Assembly has never had this power. (Brandon: 2003, 1)

Those words [the words removed by the ASC] should not have been included in the proposal in the first place. They were intended to illustrate a point, but they took on a life of their own. Illustrations have no place in the wording of resolutions, and these words confused the issue. ... Some people might think we wanted the Assembly to issue a prohibition that it is not competent to issue. That might suggest to some people that our theology was about prohibitions. The nearest Biblical parallel to that is the Pharisees. They imagined that by controlling people's behaviour they could make them good. Some might suspect that we have the same motivation. And it was the Pharisees who engineered the crucifixion to silence Jesus. (Brandon: 2003, 6)

Doug Brandon also states that:

The Presbyteries will go on making the decisions as they have always done, without Assembly interference. (Brandon: 2003, 5)

Certainly the President of the Assembly (2003-2006) has a similar viewpoint:

The Assembly did not pass a proposal that the Uniting Church ordains homosexual people. It did acknowledge that it is and has been possible for a Presbytery, on a case by case basis, to accept that a homosexual person could be called by God to ministry, noting that it is appropriate for a Presbytery to take into account the way in which all applicants express their sexuality, and noting that Presbyteries may choose to take into account the expectation that its ministers will adhere to the standards of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. This is the tension that is acknowledged by Proposal 84. The responsibility for discernment remains with the Presbytery. (<http://nat.uca.org.au/ASC/presiletter08-03.htm>)

Doug Brandon clearly states that “The majority of church members believe that a homosexual lifestyle is contrary to the will of God.” (Brandon: 2003,1), but goes on to say:

While I understand the deep concern of many of our people, I am sure that we are not being deceived by our Assembly. Resolution 84 means just what it says, no more and no less. We are not about to be overrun by gay ministers, although there will be some.

However, the issues of sexuality and the Gospel will remain with us. Our world is in the midst of a massive change in cultural values, and these include radically changing sexual values. We will need to affirm and celebrate the blessing of Christian marriage. We will need to get beyond prohibitions when we encounter people for whom marriage is no longer a realistic option, and we will need to discern the mind of Christ about that.” (Brandon, 2003: 7)

Doug Brandon further argues that:

In the present case this applies specifically to Presbyteries. And the track record of Presbyteries in this matter is very good. Of the 2797 Uniting Church ministers in this nation, I challenge anyone to name even 0.2% who are active homosexuals. Some might think that we are knowingly using a falsehood to divide Christ’s church over a tiny minority of ministers. We must be careful! (Brandon: 2003, 3)

The National Consultant for the Assembly agency Theology and Discipleship, Revd Dr Robert Bos made similar comments in the context of a personal reflection on the subject of homosexuality and the Uniting Church.

It is not the Assembly’s role to interfere in the right of Presbyteries to undertake prayerful and responsible discernment about the selection of candidates and the placement of Ministers and others. There are many who would like the Assembly to interfere in the responsibilities of other Councils when it suits them. *The Basis of Union*, Constitution and Regulations are quite clear. We are committed to “inter-related Councils”. The Presbytery is a Council with its own rights and responsibilities through which we seek to discern the will of God. (Bos, Point 21, 2003)

While I know that these commentators are not in anyway suggesting that Presbyteries can do what they like, I am still left slightly perplexed about what I understand to be the basis of decision-making in a conciliar church. I am also left wondering about the place of doctrine in the Uniting Church today. I am aware that ‘doing theology’ has become the centre for some people in the Uniting Church, but where does doctrine fit in the Uniting Church today? Why are some issues seen as doctrinal and others not?

Why are some issues credited with a doctrinal foundation during some debates and in other debates relegated to the seemingly secondary category of ethics, without even considering the broader matter of doctrinal issues in ethics?

Many people in the past have explored the place of doctrine in the Uniting Church. Again I believe there are important issues here, which have been raised before by theologians such as Christiaan Mostert and Michael Owen.

Chris Mostert, in the article 'Is the Uniting Church Serious about Doctrine?', explores the significant implications of the move from having a Commission on Doctrine to a Working Group.

Michael Owen's reasoned practical consideration in the same volume provides the wider context for the Uniting Church (see Mostert and Owen: 1997).

I well remember a significant point during the debate regarding the proposed changes for the Commission on Doctrine in the 1990s. [Note: today the doctrine advisory group is The National Working Group on Doctrine].

One Assembly member informed me that doctrine was not determined by a group, it was the Assembly's responsibility. Certainly this is a technically true, but the way the point was made, seems to me to have unwittingly relegated the consideration of doctrine to the lowest of priorities. The Assembly meeting as a council every three years, cannot adequately address the issues which need to be addressed today.

Perhaps the status of doctrine as a working group today, provides a link to some of the reasoning behind a view that I have heard articulated elsewhere, namely that the issues related to sexuality are only ethical, and do not involve doctrine.

Certainly there are other papers which could be written on this important debate in the church, but in the Australian and New Zealand theological context I refer readers to the excellent publication: *More than a Single Issue* (Rae and Redding: 2000), and to the Reforming Alliance website for other considered reflections.

I am completing another article on the search for community, a personal reflection on the church today and the search for community, which many of you will be relieved to know is much shorter. This topic is however relevant in the discussion here as it could be perceived that the action of the Assembly is merely a confirmation of the important role of the community (in this case the Presbytery), in decision-making.

What is the role of the Presbytery with regard to ordination? What can a Presbytery do? Are there any restrictions? Has the Assembly 'interfered' with Presbyteries before?

I have elaborated before in my article: 'The Assembly Can and Must Make a Decision' (Bentley (2): 2005), that the Assembly has made many decisions related to sexuality, and other aspects of ministry, including mutuality of ministry (though the issue of the ordination of women was decided by the antecedent churches), ordination, and of course major [confirming] decisions on issues related to baptism. The Assembly can clearly give a guiding decision for Presbyteries, and in my opinion this is not meddling, but faithfully fulfilling its role as the National Council.

I remember one person, who in commenting on my presentation of the above paper at the RA meeting held at the Victorian and Tasmanian Synod in 2005, agreed that the Assembly could make a decision, but said it had simply chosen not to make a decision at this time. Did this person mean the Uniting Church had made a decision previously and now had agreed not to make a decision, or was the person saying the Uniting Church had always been in a “theological vacuum”, and that Resolution 84 merely confirmed this position?

There is another dimension to this debate and that is the personal and public nature of ministry. Some people I have spoken to have questioned the right of the church to interfere in what is seen as the private business of its ministers. Ministers are of course not free to do what they like. They are accountable, and many areas of sexuality are commonly assumed to be the church’s business, and there is usually no apology given in this regard, even if the church fails to follow its own regulations.

Revd Dr Rob Bos, provided a reasoned and yet passionate summary of the issues as he saw them following the 2003 Assembly, touching on some of the issues I am considering here as well. At one point he states:

I am hesitant about the Councils of the church laying down rules about issues which affect other Christians deeply, but with which we have not had to wrestle personally and about which the church (ecumenically) has not achieved a common mind. It is usually unhelpful to deal with matters of relationships by making rules. Such matters are best left in the area of pastoral conversation. In the case of those for whom it is appropriate, this is best left to Presbyteries and their Pastoral Relations Committees. (Bos, Point 19, 2003)

I believe it is clear even from a permissive reading of *The Basis of Union* that one should conclude that a Presbytery should not act unilaterally, even though Resolution 84 now allows a Presbytery to act unilaterally.

I also believe that a conservative viewpoint on the role of the Presbytery is confirmed by the Uniting Church Constitution, which links polity with the requirements and procedures for an ordination (Section 14), exercise of ministry and accordingly any discipline resulting (Section 15), and standards for the education, acceptance and oversight of ministers (Section 16), including ministers from other denominations (Section 17). **(See Appendix A for the references).**

The Assembly has determining authority for matters of doctrine, and there are doctrinal implications for each of the points outlined above. Section 17 also raises significant ecumenical questions, because they also touch on the doctrine of ministry and ordination in other denominations.

I believe it is important to note the foundational reference in *The Basis of Union*.

*The Basis of Union* Paragraph 14 (a)

... The Presbytery will ordain by prayer and the laying on of hands in the presence of a worshipping congregation. In this act of ordination the Church praises the ascended Christ for conferring gifts upon men and women. It recognises Christ's call of the individual to be his minister; it prays for the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to equip the minister for that service. By the participation in the act of ordination of those already ordained, the Church bears witness to God's faithfulness and declares the hope by which it lives. In company with other Christians the Uniting Church will seek for a renewed understanding of the way in which the congregation participates in ordination and of the significance of ordination in the life of the Church.

*The Basis of Union* makes it very clear that ordination is not an action which the Uniting Church undertakes in a vacuum, or for purely local circumstances, though the call to a local congregation or ministry is central. There is a wider reference to the Church, and in this context the Uniting Church.

While there is a wealth of material from Uniting Church and other church dialogues, there are also important Synod and local agreements which provide a foundation for co-operation in presbyteries and dioceses. One example, is an ecumenical document approved by the Victorian Synod, *The Trinity Declaration and Code of Practice*. This agreement for local co-operation clearly places the Uniting Church ordination in a broader context.

Ordination

**10.** Ordination by a bishop or by the presbytery is the respective sign by which in our two churches a person receives the gift of the Holy Spirit for his/her office and ministry, and a general authority to exercise it within that church. Authority for the particular exercise of ministry, lay and ordained, is given by the Diocesan Bishop or the Presbytery. (Synod of Victoria: 1999)

This also illustrates another reason why the decision known as Resolution 84 is so disturbing. I believe that our dialogue partners, dialogue documents and agreements were not given due consideration in the debate in 2003, and the implications of the decision for the Uniting Church's focus on unity appears to have also not been considered. I have stated several times now, this is so astounding for a 'uniting church', that one can only assume that ecumenical considerations in the Uniting Church have been sidelined.

I believe there is still more official agreement on matters of sexuality in the wider Church than on many other matters, and that the most reasonable approach for a Uniting Church would have been to maintain the status quo until there was at least substantial agreement to change.

A final note needs to be considered in all the discussions of the supposed power of Presbyteries with regard to decisions about sexual practice. As Owen Davis has asked; ‘when was the decision made to move away from the traditional understanding and basis of our antecedent churches and the adopted heritage of the Uniting Church’? Owen Davis has clearly explained many of the decisions of the Uniting Church and the context of the decision making and the permissive orientation to shift the original context of the decision concerning ‘orientation’ to include ‘practice’. (Davis: 2004)

On a practical level, I suggest it is unreasonable to suggest that Presbyteries could always ordain a practising homosexual person, because I do not believe that the Uniting Church would have knowingly allowed a Presbytery to oppose civil legal obligations of the time. South Australia was the only state to decriminalise homosexual relations before the time of union. Queensland for example was 1990. (Brash: 1995, 59)

From my reading, the discussions around the first report on homosexuality and the report on the responses clearly had the broader legal and conservative social context of the time in mind as well as biblical and theological issues (Dicker: 1985, 1988).

There are matters which are the responsibility of the Presbytery, but I believe the Presbytery needs authoritative guidance from the Assembly on the matter of the basis for sexual practice for its leaders. Without a foundation, different Presbyteries will indeed eventually make vastly different decisions. Some Presbyteries could ordain members who are in de facto relationships, or practising homosexual relationships and yet these ministers will not be welcome in other Presbyteries. This is where I believe that Resolution 84 undermines the polity and foundation of the whole church. As I have noted, a Presbytery can now act unilaterally. The Assembly has given the green light to a new polity without proper reference to the council of the church which will deal with the bumps, bings and fatal crashes.

The possibility of diverse responses from Presbyteries will make a mockery of the constant call for a commitment to unity in the church. Notwithstanding the level of theological discussions over twenty years on this matter, I believe that the level of argument at the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly actually reveals the paucity of the theological basis of the actual decision of the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

I believe that Resolution 84 has effectively broken the Uniting Church into quasi denominations. Denominations come into being when parts of the one denomination are unable to maintain a sufficient basis for being part of the one denomination, or increasingly where there is insufficient common identity to continue a common cause. I am not suggesting that the Uniting Church has necessarily reached this latter point, but when one removes the rhetoric what is revealed is an even greater difference of belief and practice than people had realised. This is very different to other denominations where the members understand what it means to belong to the denomination, and possibly even sympathise with its ethos and practice.

At this point I need to comment on the nature of decision making in the Uniting Church.

There are some who think the church should be a democracy and that controversial issues should be decided by plebiscite. The church is not a democracy and is not governed by majority votes. The church strives to be a theocracy (ruled by God) and is governed by Councils (Church Council, Presbytery, Synod and Assembly) who aim to discern the guidance of the Spirit. (Bos, Point 22, 2003)

I believe Rob Bos has raised an important area for discussion. While it is a contemporary issue, the matter should receive consideration in terms of the foundation of the Uniting Church – the historical framework provided by the antecedent denominations.

I agree with Rob Bos on the first point he makes. I have stated many times, that I do not believe the Uniting Church should decide issues by plebiscite. However, this should not stop the Uniting Church and its councils hearing the voice of its members through the much used practice of responding to reports, and then responding in reasonable ways. My question here has been why was there such a different response to the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality? (Bentley, 2004).

I am certainly aware that the Uniting Church is not a theocracy, but whether it strives to be a theocracy in the way Rob Bos has outlined is also a matter for serious discussion. I state, quite sadly from my experience, that while the church in many of its councils has the ideal of being ruled by God, the Uniting Church's dominant focus on society and an ironic development of oligarchy, unwittingly creates a context for decision-making that could become increasingly narrow, individualistic and even humanist.

I also do not believe the Uniting Church is a democracy, and its methods of electing people to the national council of the church should make it clear that there is little connection with classical democracy.

Lastly, when 'we' use the term 'we' and talk about councils discerning the Spirit, I believe it is also helpful to admit that councils can make mistakes, and call for an openness from the Assembly in considering that it could have made a mistake with Resolution 84. (Bentley (1): 2005)

## 5.2 Application for a Liquor on-Licence (Theatre)

The NSW Synod had previously made a decision about the use of beverage alcohol on church properties, reminding church councils (and other bodies responsible ... that the decision was theirs to make.” Paddington Uniting Church in Sydney had applied for a liquor licence and argued that the Synod resolution permitted this application [and approval]

The General Secretary of the NSW Synod has stated: “My view was that it was not clear and that it should be referred to Council of Synod for clarification. Since the crucial question depended on the interpretation of a Synod resolution, the Council of Synod was the appropriate body to determine what the Synod’s Resolution will allow. This is why Sydney Presbytery [the Presbytery to which Paddington Congregation belongs] was not singled out to speak to this issue. Representatives of any Presbytery were, of course, able to speak as they saw fit.” (*The Newsletter*, NSW Synod, December 2005)

At its meeting in November 2005, the Council made the following decision:

281/05C Resolved: That the Council of Synod

- (i) determine that part (i) of Resolution 204/04S be understood to include selling beverage alcohol with an appropriate liquor licence on church properties at functions approved by Church Councils and other Uniting Church bodies responsible for administering church property (eg. schools or aged care facilities) and applying for the requisite licence under authority of The Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust (NSW) and/or The Uniting Church (Australian Capital Territory) Property Trust for such situations
- (ii) determine that selling beverage alcohol is subject to
  - (a) missional assessment by Moderator/Council of Synod
  - (b) the Board of Finance and Property satisfying itself that appropriate risk management strategies have been put in place (formal majority)

I do not want to consider the merits of the Paddington initiative, or the many issues it raises. I wish to highlight what I believe to be the incredible action of this particular Council of Synod. Here is a case of blatant neglect of the role of the responsible Presbytery, and the effective by-passing and sidelining of the Presbytery’s proper role of pastoral oversight. The Presbytery not only has the pastoral issues related to the local congregation, but issues arising with other congregations. It is simply foundationally important for the Presbytery to provide a missional perspective, and to consider the effect on other congregations and the life of the Presbytery as a whole.

These two issues illustrate at the very least a somewhat erratic approach to how the role of the Presbytery is understood in the Uniting Church today.



## 6. Possible Scenarios for the Presbytery in the life of the Uniting Church

While many Presbyteries will be able to function adequately for the short-term (5-10 years), some Presbyteries will be in need of significant life-support; especially as long-term older and committed members die, or become unable to help to the same extent. The Presbyteries which are best placed for the short-term are those Presbyteries which are able to afford paid staff. These staff will take up more responsibilities and effectively manage the Presbytery and ensure major tasks are still undertaken.

Different regions will have different issues, with rural Presbyteries facing the most significant challenges in the short-term due to a more rapid decline in membership and an older membership overall.

I list below some possible scenarios which could come about either as a result of continuing legislated change or as a result of reaction to changes around the Presbytery model.

### **Scenario One: One Synod and One Presbytery**

*This would signal the formal end to the role of the geographic Presbytery as the Uniting Church has experienced to date.*

*Significant change if not total alteration has happened in the Northern Synod, Tasmania (and now of course Tasmania has been joined with Victoria in one Synod) and South Australia. Western Australia still has an implicit geographic basis with the new regions.*

There are many reasons why these changes have happened:

For at least one Synod, as I have noted, the public reasons for a reconsideration of the role of the Presbytery are mainly related to mission. There is a hope that congregations will be able to move forward on mission matters if they have a homogenous quasi-presbytery arrangement, such as the network model.

Whether this arrangement will achieve the outcomes intended remains to be seen.

For some Presbyteries in other Synods there is the difficulty of undertaking a polity that demands a large group of competent people, or income to pay people to undertake tasks.

The Assembly meeting in 2000 resolved to “to request Synods and Presbyteries to consider further which of their functions can be exercised in co-operation, or by one Synod/Presbytery on behalf of other Synods/Presbyteries, to achieve greater efficiencies and effectiveness in the use of human and financial resources;” (Minute: 00.24.05)

An example of this type of co-operation was included in the report to the Assembly, albeit between two Synods, but this would be the pre-cursor to the eventual amalgamation in 2002 of the two Synods.

Synods and presbyteries are encouraged to intentionally explore the possibilities of exercising some of their core functions in co-operation. The synods of Victoria and Tasmania have just one Placements Committee for the two Synods. A joint Placements Committee may not be appropriate for other synods, but there may be other possibilities worth exploring. (SCreCS. 6.5)

In some Synods, perhaps it is the ideal to have one functional arrangement, but many Presbyteries in the larger Synods have reasonable power and numbers to prevent their integration into a Synod based Presbytery.

In the larger Synods, there is substantial income generated from the resources of all the congregations, members and/or institutions, and this income is used to pay for the operations of the Synod offices, as well as used to help the poorer cousins, and the Assembly. It is worth noting that the Assembly is in a far more precarious position than most Synods as it is reliant on the generosity of the larger Synods in particular, and I believe that in the future if there is a need to drastically revise Synod budgets, then the Assembly office and operations will be severely affected, as the Synods (and particularly their Boards) will look after themselves first.

While many of the Synod boards are clearly doing good work, I believe that the resources of certain boards would be much better utilised within the council which is closest to the congregations, namely the Presbytery. At least two Synods (NSW and Victoria and Tasmania) are really quite upper middle class in terms of their income, location and facilities, and clearly able to support Presbyteries to a greater extent, but there is always a question about how much support one gives the poorer cousin, lest you give them more independence than you desire. There is a subtle balance of power, and certainly any substantial change to Presbytery numbers and greater resourcing as a practical result would need agreement from the larger Synods.

It is worth noting the comment of the Synod of Victoria's Resourcing Presbyteries Task Group in their second paper (2001):

The task group also considered the model of one presbytery for Victoria (thus combining the functions of presbytery and synod). This option would certainly reduce structure, in the elimination of one active council in the network of inter-related councils, with the possibility of sub-offices of synod/presbytery being located in selected regional centres. Ministry and Mission networks would still be part of this model. Nevertheless, no matter how regionally effective, this model would almost certainly result in a further centralisation of power and tend towards more bureaucratic styles of operation. Just how the sub-offices would differ from the current presbytery structure is also of concern. (18)

It is also worth considering the comment in the Standing Committee Report on Church Structures.

Some have suggested that even with the deletion of the parish we are still over- governed, and that there is a case for not retaining both the presbytery and the synod. However, it is not suggested that the Assembly undertake any consideration of that suggestion at this time. It is important to note in this regard that, unlike the deletion of the parish, deletion of the synod from our structure would be a departure from the structure outlined in *The Basis of Union*. (SCreCS. 6.6)

## **Scenario Two: Fewer Presbyteries**

*Presbyteries are reduced in numbers in the larger Synods, probably following the regional areas of Anglican or Catholic dioceses, but are also given more resources to help with their tasks.*

This scenario would most likely lead to a single non-functioning Presbytery in each of the smaller Synods, with a possible amalgamation of Presbyteries in the larger Synods. This would result in a reduced number of Presbyteries overall, and the role of the Presbytery as the council which relates directly to both the Synod and the Assembly would certainly need further clarification.

Certainly there has been a long-standing consideration of the possibility of reducing the number of Presbyteries in the two largest Synods. NSW and Victoria Synods have both undertaken reviews in the last five years with this point as a significant focus.

In NSW, one of the recommendations arising from a report to the June 2005 meeting of the NSW Council of Synod on a facilitated discussion of the Synod Board executive directors held on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2005 was “That the church review presbyteries with the view to reduce the number from say fourteen to five.”

There was little justification for this initial suggestion, but it should be noted this was not a prime recommendation, but a point arising from a much wider agenda. There was no indication of increased resources for each of the larger Presbyteries. If the change was undertaken, then on the present basis, it would certainly reduce costs to this Synod, as presently a new formula provides funding based to each Presbytery based on their size (the base is 1.5, up to a maximum of 2 positions – covering all basic placement costs). This example illustrates the difference between Presbytery and Synod/Assembly funding. In Presbytery terms in NSW, most Presbyteries are allocated funding that is actually that is less than the full cost of one executive staff person in either the Synod or Assembly. I am aware there are many Presbyteries to provide for, but the Presbyteries are at a critical stage, and need continuing support in administration, pastoral work, as well as the development of Presbytery based mission.

I note that in NSW, the Anglican Church has seven dioceses (one covering Sydney and Wollongong, though there are four distinct areas in the Sydney metropolitan area with local bishops), and the Catholic Church eleven dioceses (three dioceses in the Sydney metropolitan area, including the large Sydney Archdiocese which covers nearly two UCA Presbytery regions).

Two further comments in this report are relevant:

“The need for the church to review the inefficiencies and areas of duplication in regard to Presbyteries was supported by many participants.”

“A more strategic use and co-ordinated plan/rationalisation of properties was supported by many participants.”

When this matter was presented to the June 2005 meeting of the NSW Council of Synod and discussed, the issue was in essence coupled with the matter of non-geographic presbyteries which had been raised by the NSW committee of the Reforming Alliance, leading to the establishment of a new review of Presbyteries in NSW.

In terms of the point regarding the need for greater resources for Presbyteries if the numbers are reduced, the Assembly itself has considered this scenario, following on the review of the roles of the councils of the church. The Standing Committee Report on Church Structures recommended to the Synods “... that they review the number and size of their presbyteries with a view to ensuring that each Presbytery has the physical and human resources to be able to fulfil the many important pastoral administrative and missional functions now required of presbyteries.” (SCreCS. 5.8)

It is very important to highlight the latter point; Synods were requested to ensure that Presbyteries had the necessary resources. Given the different circumstances and finances of each Synod, it was not possible to dictate the type of review to the individual Synod, but the principle remains.

It is worth considering the comments of former Assembly General Secretary, Revd Gregor Henderson who states that there will be around thirty Presbyteries in 2020 (and five Synods) (Henderson, 5)

In the context of his comments on mission and a new focus on local missionary outreach, Gregor Henderson states:

“There will also be a strengthening of Presbyteries to enable them to fulfil their crucial function of oversight and of resourcing local congregations. This may lead to larger presbyteries on average than now. It is bound to lead to much more deliberate staffing of Presbyteries. One inevitable result of this, with a higher proportion of church resources going to congregations and Presbyteries, will be that synods and the Assembly will have to manage with less.” (Henderson, 4).

I am very interested in Gregor's comments, as I believe that they are more applicable in the context of smaller Synods, because to date I perceive the larger Synods are actually becoming larger and appear to believe they need more staff to maintain their operations.

One additional matter could be considered in this scenario.

**Possible greater flexibility in Presbytery boundaries**

Along with fewer Presbyteries there may be opportunity to have a flexible approach to boundaries. I have already mentioned that this occurs even now with regard to Synod and consequently Presbytery bounds near borders. If the Presbytery bounds are larger then negotiation may enable some congregations to even trial involvement in a closer Presbytery in another Synod.

**Scenario Three: A Presbytery/Synod based polity**

*Synods and Presbyteries are re-defined in favour of a Diocesan based structure, perhaps similar to present Anglican arrangements, though the smaller Synods would remain as one Synod.*

In Australia, it is helpful to consider possible numbers for UCA Presbyteries by comparison with the two largest denominations.

At present there are twenty three dioceses in the Anglican Church.

There are also twenty three dioceses in the Catholic Church (Note: there are also three specialised dioceses: Maronites, Melkites and the Military)

The number of dioceses could be similar in number to what the Uniting Church could allow, though there may need to be sub-regions in the Sydney metropolitan area.

A move to similar regional areas could mean the possibility of greater ecumenical co-ordination, which would be especially helpful in rural areas.

In the moves to church union, the size of the dioceses was actually one of the debates, and it was well known that this was particularly related at the time to the hoped for involvement at a later stage of the then Church of England. (Bentley: 1989, 87).

If this scenario happens, then Presbyteries would definitely become mini-Assemblies, and the Uniting Church would adopt a loose federal structure.

Presbyteries would probably still be primarily geographically based (apart from Aboriginal and Islander, and the quasi-presbytery arrangements for Koreans and perhaps eventually Pacific Islanders?).

Given the agreed structure in *The Basis of Union*, there may be further interesting conversations about the power of the Constitution, or perhaps practically all councils are kept, but some may be in name only?

#### **Scenario Four: Development of non-geographic presbyteries.**

*Synods are maintained, mainly as functional councils, with a system of Presbyteries, including some non-geographical Presbyteries. This is similar to Scenario Three, but allows a greater flexibility of Presbytery boundaries and possibilities.*

#### **The possibility of a non-geographic Presbytery?**

This matter was originally raised through the establishment of the provisional presbytery (Hope) by congregations in the South Australian Synod. The Synod did not agree to 'confirm' or establish the Presbytery, but instead this 'rebel' move was the main catalyst for the S.A. Synod review which led to the idea of networks.

Hope is now the largest network in South Australia in terms of congregational numbers (approximately sixty five), and probably the second largest in terms of membership. The second largest network in terms of congregational numbers, and largest in terms of numbers is an evangelical network (3D) which has a focus on youth and evangelism, and an established 'CISFM' policy.

In NSW in 2005, members of the Reforming Alliance presented a paper on the idea of the non-geographic presbytery to the June Council of Synod: *Formation of presbyteries in New South Wales*: May 2005 Version 1. This paper encouraged the Synod to consider a positive approach to non-geographic presbyteries based around common mission values. The paper raised the question - how can Presbyteries can fulfill their tasks properly? Examples were provided where the present divisive state of some Presbyteries was making the Presbytery dysfunctional or at least less functional than was needed for the difficult mission ahead.

Two points in this paper summarise the issues:

Furthermore presbyteries operating on their current standing orders often debate important issues in the life of the church but are unable to come to any decision due to the divergent opinions that are held. While this may be seen as an appropriate situation under consensus procedures it creates a situation where the Presbytery loses credibility with its congregations. It does this because it is not seen to be able to stand for anything on issues that the congregation regards as important from which it seeks leadership by its presbytery. Far from protecting the diversity of the church it creates a situation where congregations become deeply cynical about the value of all of the church structures and consequently unenthusiastic about providing support for them or participation in them. (Reforming Alliance-NSW Committee, extract Point 7, 2005)

We see the creation of presbyteries based on congregations with a common mission outlook as being positive for the church's unity and diversity. By creating communities bound together by more common values there will be a platform for enthusiastic nurture and also a willingness to hear from an oversight body when difficult decisions have to be made. The capacity to be in a community more closely aligned to ones mission view will also create an environment in which other congregations can pursue alternative mission views and be respected as belonging to a different community but still within the overall unity of the Uniting Church.

(Reforming Alliance - NSW Committee: Extract Point 8, 2005)

There was a somewhat interesting reaction to this report from my observance of members at the NSW Council of Synod, but it has certainly not been dismissed out of hand yet. It may be that people see significant issues in the report that need addressing, apart from the non-geographic issue, or perhaps some are also aware of the history of the union discussions?

It is illuminating to again consider the opinion of the drafters of the Second Report:

- (iii) Personal episcopacy must receive a form which will enable the bishops effectively to perform the essential functions of their office. For instance:
  - (a) The area in which the bishop operates must be such that he will be free to fulfil in a personal way his function as a representative of the mission of the church, pastor to pastors and guardian of the preaching, sacramental and pastoral life of the churches committed to his care. Areas may be defined not simply by geographical size but also by such factors as the number of people to be served, the number and types of congregations, and of social groupings.
  - (b) The possibility should be kept open that the regions for which bishops are given responsibility could include, as well as the traditional geographical region, sociological regions, such as industry, education, health institutions, or oversight of areas of work now carried on by departments of the church. It might be proper also, for the Church to adopt such new forms of oversight as team episcopacy, in which several bishops, each with responsibility for a group of presbyters working in contiguous areas of different geographical and sociological types, may co-ordinate their work and planning in order that the power of Christ may enable diverse groups to grow into unity in Him across their human divisions. The Constitution should leave the way open for considerable flexibility in this matter. (JCCU: 1963, 48-49)

and further:

### III. THE COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH

The Councils are here arranged on a geographical basis. At present this is the established procedure, and it seems premature to suggest any major departure. If the Church is to fulfil her mission in the world, however, she needs to find appropriate form not only within these localities, but also in the functional areas such as education, health institutions, industry, recreation. The Uniting Church must be free to develop such forms of Church life in these functional areas as it shall find necessary; the present geographical basis must not be considered sacrosanct. (JCCU: 1963, 60)

and in the draft proposed basis of union:

5. Concerning *the Councils of the Church*:  
While the Councils as here described are arranged on a geographical basis, it is recognised that to fulfil her mission in the world the Church needs to be formed not only in localities, but also in relation to functions, such as education, health, institutions, industry, recreation. The Uniting Church must be free to develop such forms of Christ life in these functional areas as it shall deem necessary, even to providing them with their own Councils. (JCCI, 1963, 84)

While there are questions about how this particular personal aspect of episcopate would have been instituted, and how it would have related to a congregational context, these comments do illustrate that an openness to exploring a change in the polity of the church if it was based on the mission of the church. I will not digress on the issue of the use of the term 'mission' in the church lest this paper double in size.

### **Scenario Five: A new form of denominational institution**

The polity of the Uniting Church completely breaks down. The church moves to formally become a social service organisation and congregations become part of an associated network within the Uniting Church, effectively using property for peppercorn rents or under an agreed arrangement of property management. In this model, the Uniting Church has no effective oversight or input into any arrangements, and each congregation does what it likes. Specialised networks or organisations are formed to provide a form of accountability around the country.

I realise this scenario raises significant issues for *The Basis of Union*.



**Scenario Six: A combination of the above.**

Each Synod may allow a different practice. This could allow for a range of Presbyteries, some in fellowship with a non-geographic Synod, or even membership of a different Synod.

**7. Conclusion**

Over the last five years there has been a concerted effort to change the polity of the Uniting Church. To date, it appears there has been little co-ordination of this, and different Synods have adopted different approaches. Certainly a Synod has the responsibility for the creation of a Presbytery, but some decisions can have implications for other Synods. Some Synods are in much better financial positions to adopt change than others. Given the perilous state of the Uniting Church in terms of its worship attendance, the commitment of members, and ability to sustain its present polity, further review and action is necessary. Our polity must be sustainable and able to help congregations in this time of uncertainty, but this is a big ask in the present environment.

I also highlight again the important article by Revd Yangrae Son (2004), which demonstrates the need for more adequate theological reflection on these important matters.

I personally believe unless the role of the Presbytery is properly addressed and considered, then most Presbyteries will eventually become totally dysfunctional, especially if no one 'side' has total power in a particular Presbytery.

Some well-resourced Presbyteries (paid staff) will be able to function well for many years, especially if they have fewer congregations and ministers in placements.

There needs to be a proper review of the whole functioning and nature of Presbyteries to ensure consistency in Uniting Church polity, co-operation between Synods, and a realistic basis for the future of the Uniting Church.

**Peter Bentley: 14 March, 2006**

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**APPENDIX A:** Relevant parts of the Constitution

**ORDINATION**

14. Ordination (being the setting apart of persons for ministry as Ministers of the Word or Deacons) shall be conducted by the Presbytery by prayer and laying on of hands, and in accordance with requirements and procedures determined by the Assembly.

**RESPONSIBILITY TO PRESBYTERY**

15. Ministers and Lay Pastors will be responsible to a Presbytery and Synod in matters of faith and discipline and to the Presbytery or other appointing body for the exercise of their ministry.

**REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES FOR ACCEPTANCE AND OVERSIGHT OF MINISTERS**

16. The Assembly shall determine the requirements, standards and procedures for:

- (a) acceptance and education of persons as Ministers;
- (b) acceptance and education of persons for other specified ministries;
- (c) appointment, maintenance, general direction, oversight and discipline of Ministers and of persons exercising other specified ministries.

**TRANSFERS FROM OTHER DENOMINATIONS**

17. The Assembly shall prescribe the conditions upon which a Minister of another denomination may be admitted as a Minister of the Word or Deacon in the Church, and the conditions upon which a Deaconess or other person recognised by another denomination for the exercise of another specific ministry may be admitted to exercise a ministry in the Church.