

Uniting without Care?

A study in half truths and how the secular press misses the mark.

Peter
Bentley

ACC National Director



Some of our readers may have wondered when they saw the December ACCatalyst cover whether ACC was tapping into *The Daily Telegraph* story on Uniting. Their headlines read: “JESUS WIPED” (with the subhead proclaiming “Top Church Losing its Religion”. (2 December 2016), and in a Tim Blair blog post (2 December 2016): ‘UNITING CHURCH NOT SO CHURCHY THESE DAYS.’

Actually, our magazine had just gone to print, so the cover (designed by Wes Selwood of Selwood Media) was unrelated to this coverage (if you have not read the cover story check out the edition on the ACC website), but it has helped to promote the discussion about the nature of the change and the future of the UCA and its community services, especially in the move from UnitingCare to Uniting.

The Daily Telegraph story certainly stirred reaction. *The Moderator of the Uniting Church in Australia, (NSW and the ACT), The Rev. Myung Hwa Park* issued a press release on 2 December 2016, and among other points stated that:

“The Church is not removing any symbols or reference to Christ from its branding.

The Church does not seek to distance itself from survivors of child sex abuse. Such assertions are untrue, hurtful and disrespectful to survivors. ... About a year ago Uniting underwent a thoroughly researched and comprehensive rebrand and this was with the blessing of the Synod so that Uniting could have a brand that further enhances their services.”

The Moderator’s closing statement said: *“Never before have we been more united and blessed as a Church.”*

Personally, I think this comment could have been left out as it sounded like special pleading.

The National Assembly also issued its dismay in a much more strongly worded press release on the same day, with the President, Stuart McMillan, thanking “... the many Uniting Church members and supporters who have condemned the *Daily Telegraph* for its disgraceful coverage.”

Mr McMillan argued that: *“Uniting, the largest provider of social services in NSW/ACT, changed its brand name last year. This decision was taken to ensure that awareness of our services reaches more of the vulnerable and disadvantaged people we seek to serve. Preparation for moves towards the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the shift to self-managed care were important considerations in this decision. Other church agencies are considering adopting the Uniting brand.”*

Uniting Victoria and Tasmania Ltd was established on 3 October 2016, with the expected merger of the 21 Uniting Care agencies and Wesley Mission Victoria to be completed by the middle of 2017. Interestingly UnitingCare Australia remains the national body for the ‘UnitingCare Network’.

I am one among many members who fail to be convinced by the new design logo for Uniting. While the UCA logo is very much a 1960s-style design, the cross is very plain, and I am sure that few church members, let alone secular people perceive the ‘t’ in Uniting as a cross.

There is still however a theological statement and related UCA material on the Uniting website, though one does have to search a bit. There are also more direct connections as Uniting (NSW & ACT) states in their purpose and values statement that: *“We’re proud to be the community services and advocacy arm of the Uniting Church in NSW and ACT. Our foundation is Christ’s invitation to serve humanity by creating an inclusive, connected and just world.”*

And in Our Foundation: that *“Christ invites us to serve humanity by creating an inclusive, connected and just world.”*

In searching the website in mid-February, I found the following search results:

12 references for Christ, 17 for power, 17 for medically-



Main Image: The front page of The Daily Telegraph, 2nd December 2016 (image: assembly.uca.org.au). Inset Top: ACCCatalyst Cover at the same time. Inset Bottom: the 'controversial' new Uniting logo.

supervised-injecting-centre; 38 for church and 77 for love. There was also a good deal of focus (perhaps related to the time of the year) at having a Rainbow Tick accreditation (7 results).

From the Uniting (NSW&ACT) website under events: Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

"At Uniting, [we] celebrate diversity and welcome you exactly as you are. That's why we're proud to be standing with our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) friends at the 2017 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. This year we want to show the world that love is the most epic superpower there is. Love can amplify and spread as a force for good, helping individuals and communities overcome challenges enabling us to be our true selves. This LGBTI Sydney Mardi Gras, we want to show that love is power."

Why did *The Daily Telegraph* run with these stories at this time, especially when their prime reference were points raised in a letter to *Insights* (NSW & ACT Synod magazine) back in August? John Sandeman in *Eternity News* (2 December 2016) interestingly noted that secular newspapers do tend to run more religious stories in December, but also pointed to the newspaper's following of sexual abuse cases, including the tragic circumstances of the Girl X case at a 'Uniting Church' foster refuge.

What can we learn from *The Daily Telegraph* saga?

Firstly, it is never helpful to base your understanding about issues in the church or religion on what is reported in a secular newspaper. There are simply no experienced religious affairs reporters left in mainstream Australian papers, and other reporters

are less likely to understand the nuances, and provide a reasoned news report without sensationalism.

Secondly, often a secular organisation will raise issues that need to be addressed by a church, so take the opportunity to discuss and consider the underlying questions.

Thirdly, there is a need for a serious discussion about the future of the UCA. Many Christian organisations set out to do good, and they 'did good' very well, but eventually the Christian foundation became a mere footnote in their history.

June will witness a gathering in Adelaide of Uniting Church historians, theologians and interested members for a 40th anniversary celebration (and the launch of a National Historical Society). It will be illuminating to hear the message, content and overall theology presented. 