

The DNA of the UCA

Peter Bentley reflected on the Uniting Church at the Queensland ACC Regional meeting held in March. Note: the specific Queensland comments have been mostly deleted, but they helped to provide a significant time of question and comment after the presentation. It is hoped to follow-up this presentation with another meeting later in the year in Queensland and at other locations. Comments and questions are welcome.

Peter Bentley
ACC National Director



A good deal is being made of the 40th Anniversary of the Uniting Church this year - 40 years. There are other significant 40 year times.

The people of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, and for those of orthodox, reformed and evangelical faith it has perhaps been increasingly like this in the UCA.

In a biblical context 40 years is often taken as a generation, though not in modern circumstances, but the context in the biblical era was that after 40 years a new generation had taken over. Are we at that stage of the UCA? Certainly, there were signs at the last UCA Assembly in 2015, with an older theological liberal element moving on, and a new more voracious liberal social-justice clientele coming to the fore.

I want to comment on the Uniting Church in this 40th anniversary year by considering our past - the denominations that came into union, the present context and our future.

One of the dangers of this contemporary era is that the past can be rendered obsolete - the idea that it has nothing to teach sophisticated people of today, but for people of the book and pilgrim people we need to be reminded of our history, our heritage and our foundation.

While the Uniting Church was inaugurated in 1977, the official formation of the Union committees occurred in 1957, and that was built upon the previous attempts at union. Uniting three major traditions, different church

structures, and practices of worship necessitated a new approach, and the focus for uniting was the faith of the church as reflected by the first report. Rather than simply illustrating a pragmatic institutional union, the resultant Basis of Union was founded on the faith given to us, and how that was related to our structures and governance. It is still a remarkable document, even though it has been increasingly marginalised and in some circles bizarrely treated as a museum item, rather than as an authoritative foundational document for contemporary guidance and understanding.



What were some of the features that our previous denominations brought into union?

Congregationalism

provided 5% of the membership at union.

Some of its distinctive features:

- Pioneering work in pacific missions
- a strong focus on lay leadership and helping lay people to realise their vocation
- involvement of women in ministry - Sometimes people in the UCA seem to imply that they invented the ordination of women, but 50 years earlier the Congregationalists in Australia presented possibility this as a reality. I will mention more of this connection later.
- intellectual scholarship within a liberal tradition and of course a focus on the integrity and autonomy of the local congregation.

Methodism

provided 59% of the membership at union.

The Methodist tradition brought into the Uniting Church:

- a rich heritage of music and hymns
- a personal connection to social activism, welfare and evangelism, especially through the development of Parish Missions
- and perhaps a focus on practical Christianity, and personal faith rather than doctrine, though this aspect can be debated.

Presbyterianism

provided 36% of the membership at union, though significantly Victoria had more Presbyterians go into union, providing the base for its more liberal development as conservative members were more likely to stay out of union.

Some of its distinctive features:

- An emphasis on good order and church governance
- Adherence to the foundational document, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)
- A strong foundation of eldership
- An understanding that each court or Assembly had particular responsibilities.

While the UCA was a new church, the Uniting Church was created with clear markers from the antecedent denominations, for example, a Presbyterian form of church government, where different councils had different responsibilities, significant empowered Synod Boards of Mission reflecting the Methodist evangelism and local mission context. There was also a clear stream of liberal theological beliefs reflecting the orientation of the liberal evangelical Congregational and traditional Presbyterian liberal academic emphasis, and this emphasis would continue to develop, especially within some of the training colleges.

In reality though, in the initial period most local Uniting churches simply exchanged their previous church sign for that of the Uniting

Church, and continued to worship in the same way they had previously, and certainly even today one can often detect the dominant antecedent tradition of a local Uniting church.

Overall though, The Uniting Church in 1977 was an evangelical, orthodox and dare I say Godly 'progressive' church, with its local membership very much in the warm evangelical and even pietistic traditions.

And importantly in our current climate, it is helpful to understand that all the denominations held to a sexual ethic of chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage and marriage was, of course, understood as being between one woman and one man.

There was simply no contemplation of endorsement of practising homosexual behaviour, and this was the understanding and basis on which the churches went into union and to say otherwise is simply to re-write history. It would be several years before change was even considered in most states in terms of de-criminalisation of homosexual behaviour.

[cont...]



The DNA of the UCA

...the PRESENT

Over the first few decades, the Uniting Church began to develop certain characteristics which could be regarded as central or distinctive features, giving at least some form of an 'ethos' in the minds of certain leaders at the National and State levels, though never to the same extent in the local church. Some of these features:

Commitment to Social Justice and Social Concern

The UCA is widely identified in the community as a church that is prominent in its commentary on certain matters of social justice (including Aboriginal and Islander concerns), especially related to the welfare system, social services, political developments, refugees, and of course lately, GLBTIQ issues.

Some of these issues developed from specific events in Queensland during the era of the conservative government.

Commitment to Aboriginal and Islander Rights and Self-determination

The Uniting Church has been a strong supporter of justice for Aboriginal and Islander people, with the 1985 Assembly endorsing the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. The 1994 National Assembly witnessed the historic reading by the President of the National Assembly of the covenant and a response by the Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Islander Congress.

A commitment to Social and Community Service provision

There has been increasing development of Uniting Church Community services and social welfare agencies with a move from a local parish or congregational base to an institutionally managed focus, particularly with aged care and child-care.

Inclusive Language

An emphasis on inclusive language. This development was significant in terms of Australian churches, and had an impact on worship, but also notably, for example, the production of the 1992 edition of The Basis of Union.

Involvement of women in the church

The Uniting Church focused on involvement of women

at all levels and in all ways in the church, and for part of the first decade there was a quota for presbyteries and a target for other councils.

A Commission on Women and Men was formed in 1990 (continuing to 2002) and reviews were undertaken of the position of women in the church. Notably, women from other denominations seeking ordination entered the UCA, bringing in other denominational understandings and liturgical traditions.

A Liturgical Tradition developed

Uniting in Worship (1988) was produced and revised and developed to try to formalise a Uniting approach to worship. A liturgical tradition developed mainly in Victoria and WA, with varying levels of formal liturgy in other Synods, usually reflecting the previous church context.

Youth

There was an evident commitment to the inclusion of youth in decision-making with moves to formalise the involvement of youth in the councils of the church, particularly in Synod and Assembly. The usual liberal leanings of the youth enlisted have helped to fashion an image of social justice radicals, but in reality, most younger members are members of evangelical churches and not involved with the politics and structures of the church.

A prominent proponent of multiculturalism

The Fourth Assembly of the Uniting Church, held in 1985, adopted a statement that proclaimed the Uniting Church as a multicultural church, and various communities have now established their own national conferences and annual gatherings to reflect together in their own language, and one community, the Koreans have their own presbytery in NSW.

Procedures and Decision-Making

The Uniting Church introduced a new way of meeting and decision-making into the church with The Manual for Meetings, which includes a formal decision-making process, but has a focus on making decisions by consensus, rather than the older formal approach of debate and voting. A major feature of the meeting system is the use of small groups in which matters can be raised, opinions gauged and concerns or questions directed to a facilitation committee for further work and reporting back.

It would be intriguing to know how widely the manual for meetings is used at the local level, and it is varyingly experienced at Synods and Assemblies, depending on the ability of the leader, and other factors.

Other denominations have observed the UCA in action and most like what they see, but in my view this is because they do not really understand the overall political dynamics of the UCA, they only see a veneer. Interestingly, the World Council of Churches (WCC) adopted the same decision-making process, and it could be argued that this is probably a suitable decision-making process for an ecumenical body like the WCC.

Congregationalist

Presbyterian

Methodist

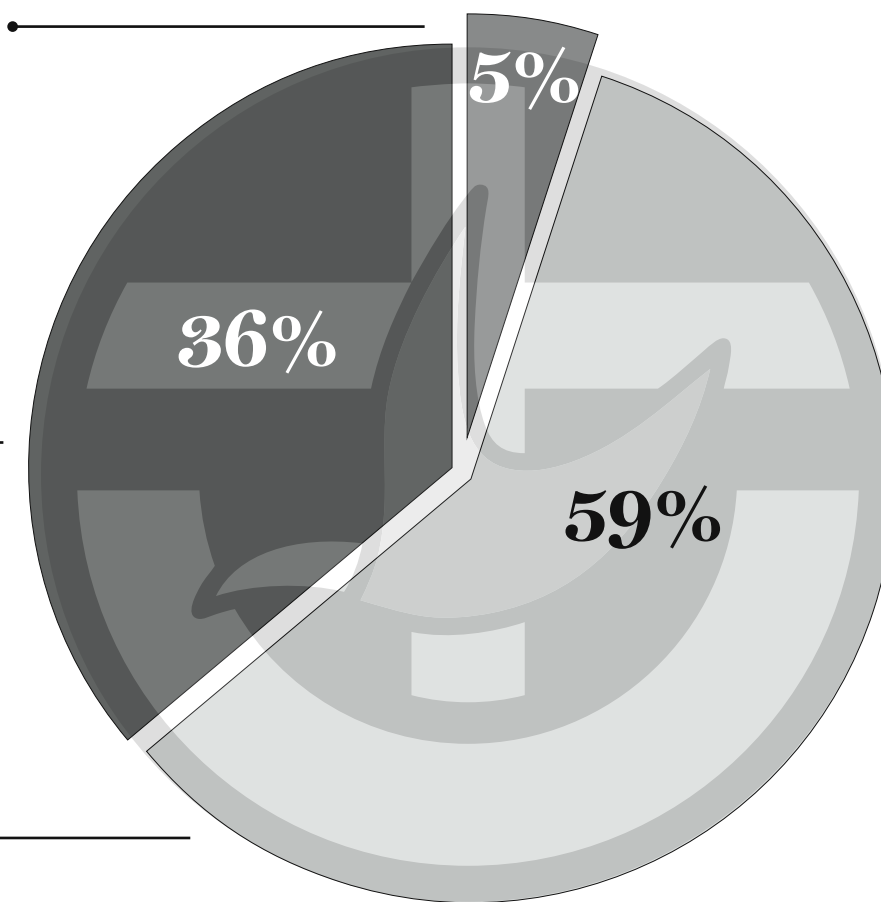
Changes in Governance and Leadership

There have been significant changes since union, with the Presbytery effectively euthanised or neutered in the Synods of Tasmania, South Australia and WA. It had never been strongly established in the Northern Synod, though there is still a distinct Congress presbytery, and Queensland has always had a more Synod based focus reflecting their Methodist heritage of a dominant state conference model.

Local Governance was changed with the move to a congregational polity in 1999 and a resultant promotion of individually based church councils. This change had a very significant impact on smaller congregations that were often left to fend for themselves. It can also be argued, however, that this move led to the development of further lay ministries and lay leadership. One factor that is very evident now is the dire situation of many smaller congregations, not only in rural areas, but also in city areas, that struggle with ageing leadership and an inability to attract and/or afford stipended ministry to help.

Eldership

Well what can one say? Unfortunately, eldership in the UCA is now in many cases an example of a failure to understand Christian leadership in community. The evident confusion about eldership and the number of possible understandings outlined at the 14th Assembly in 2015 echoes the tradition that has developed in parts of the UCA: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judge 21:25)



A Conciliar Church

The Ideal of the conciliar church has been pushed to the extreme by the UCA 'hierarchy'. It was never envisaged that one council like the Assembly, would simply act in a unilateral fashion on sexuality matters without understanding the impact of its decisions. The impact of decisions of the Assembly have simply not been fully considered in the past by most members (though some were only too aware), and more radical decisions risk the Assembly being perceived as arrogant, and as basically saying to the church membership "we do not want you as part of the church unless you conform, and play ball according to our revisionist rules".

This situation has also meant in practice that other councils of the church (mainly the Presbytery) have had to pick up the pieces and cope as best they could while they were still technically functioning. The prime reason for the move to have one Synod in SA and networks was to escape the internecine politics about sexuality in the regional council.

And lastly, possibly and ironically, a left-over concept for a Uniting church, a

Commitment to Ecumenism

As its very name implies, the Uniting Church was to be uniting in orientation, though perhaps intriguingly the 'uniting' fell off the agenda more quickly than people had thought would happen.

I am going to dare to suggest that the UCA pays its way still through involvement in state and national councils of churches, and in dialogues, but it is not as central as members would presume, and is now undertaken from a position of UCA establishment and among some leaders, an almost unconscious idea that the UCA is the one true church to lead the way for the rest.

[cont...]

The DNA of the UCA ...the FUTURE

What will be the future for the UCA?

Overall, it will be hard for most established 'older' denominations in the future, but some factors have a greater significance for the UCA as it tries to define its identity as a denomination:

- there is increasing congregationalism, perhaps ironically fostered by the change of polity to the congregational model in the church, but also reflecting the increasing individualism in society, mirrored in our churches
- there is less identification with denominations by younger people in general and an increasing lack of adherence to the denomination. If people are not happy with a group or organisation they are more likely now to simply leave, even if they have been members for 40 years (or 90 years as I have found).
- increasing questioning of the perceived or promoted ethos of the UCA by older members, and by the failure of the UCA to create an identity that is understood and embraced by most its membership.

I have mentioned before that any church that moves to a radical agenda when they have little overall allegiance, identification and understanding of the agenda among its membership will simply find itself in a crisis (like it presently has with the sexuality debate).

The next 5-7 years are critical, because most our older members will move into the next stage of life, where they are not able to help with the running of the local church. This development could come at a time when younger families and people in evangelical and non-English speaking background congregations will leave (and there could be a catastrophic exodus) if the Assembly adopts more radical sexuality proposals such as opening marriage to same-sex couples. Any membership exodus from a congregation has a compounding effect as remaining congregations become non-viable.

"... with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever."

- Basis of Union

What should the UCA DNA be?

Some leaders may hope for a fully realised socially progressive church and a social work agenda that believes good moral education will help all people to become lovely people – in essence, a Utopian dream that ignores the real state of the world, and the reality of sin. This orientation will sadly see the church become a type of political party without even the prayer (the UCA has now even been depicted as the 'Greens at prayer'), and could lead to an even quicker breakdown of our structures and further denigration of the Basis of Union and our heritage.

The next few years are really the crux for the future of the UCA, and whether it will focus on the real DNA of the Uniting Church that came into being with The Basis of Union, or that of an esoteric church that is increasingly oriented towards providing good works as a social service agency.

Whatever happens, evangelical churches (and there are many that are not ACC members) – will hopefully continue to provide:

Faithful biblical exposition and teaching, rather than blatantly didactic personal narrative that places personal experience above the Bible.

A commitment to true Christian support and ecumenism – where we learn from other churches.

Highlight a governance model that helps the Uniting Church Assembly to truly hear other voices, and enables all councils of the church to fully consider and vote on vital Assembly decisions.

Foster a faithful connection of cross-cultural congregations based on an understanding that our cross-cultural members have a deeply held theological and comprehensive view of sexual ethics.

Develop a renewed partnership with Pacific and Asian churches that links our heritage and connects the generations that have grown up in Australia.

A renewed focus on being the Church in the World, and presenting truly radical counter-culture messages of faith today and awaiting "... with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever." (Basis of Union, Paragraph 1).

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For references, statistics and further information see the articles by Peter Bentley: Liberalism, Sexuality and Future of the UCA Part 1 and II (2010), published on unitingviews.com, and The Uniting Church in Australia, by Peter Bentley and Philip. J. Hughes (1996), Melbourne: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.

OPINION

The generation brought up on self-esteem is struggling

Simon Smart

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The self-esteem movement has failed us. Maybe the Easter story can still help.

When I was in year four, my teacher used to line us up around the room in order of how well or poorly we had done on any given task. Aced the maths test? Up this end of the line. It even applied to our artwork, which in my case meant an inevitable and regular walk of shame. Needless to say I haven't felt the urge to pick up a paintbrush since.

A recent mental health survey found that 70 per cent of tertiary students report high to very high levels of psychological distress.

Tough love perhaps, but it was terrible teaching based on humiliation and fear. Things could hardly be more different for my own kids and I'm grateful for that.

But the reaction from my generation to this kind of child rearing has been extreme and, we are now discovering, ultimately unhelpful. Social researcher Hugh Mackay identifies in modern Western culture a disease he calls the "utopia complex" – a world we dream of and think we are entitled to with outcomes that are always positive.

The victims of this way of thinking are children brought up in an atmosphere of constant praise by parents who think self-esteem is more important than self-respect or self-discipline. Bewilderment, confusion, and (ironically) self-doubt come from unrealistic expectations and eventually the shock of hitting the real world where most people do not in fact shine more brightly than the other "stars" around them.

A generation brought up on an endless diet of their own specialness appears to be struggling with the hard truth that most of us are just ordinary. According to a survey by the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, reported last week in the media, university and TAFE campuses are reporting epidemic levels of mental health issues, with 70 per cent of students reporting high to very high levels of psychological distress.

The reasons for this are complex, but many psychologists believe our prioritising of self-esteem based on the validation of others has taken a toll.

Could it be that our focus has been misplaced? *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, in his provocative 2015 book *The Road to Character*, says so. He identifies a shift from a society that once encouraged humility to

one where people are urged to think of themselves as the centre of the universe.

"As I looked around the popular culture," he writes, "I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are ... this is the gospel of self-trust."

The whole schema, as David Brooks laments, begins with the self and ends with the self, which is necessarily limiting and ultimately inadequate. Without facing our divided selves, our weaknesses and limitations as well as our strengths, we will have missed something profoundly important.

The story of Easter is increasingly out of sync with our culture. This is no light bedtime tale for the kids. It's an account of betrayal, brutality, death and political scandal. It's about the darkness of the human heart and the bad news that we are all implicated in that darkness. It says that, contra the self-help and actualisation movement, sometimes we feel guilty because we are guilty.

This is not language we are used to any more. It grates. But who of us, in our more honest moments, couldn't admit to varying degrees of selfishness, thoughtlessness, greed and petty jealousies? We are wounded and wounding people, prideful, resentful and responsible for making a hash of our relationships. Sometimes we are guilty of a whole lot worse than that.

"The Christian view of human nature," writes theologian David Bentley Hart, "is wise precisely because it is so very extreme: it sees humanity, at once, as an image of the divine, fashioned for infinite love and imperishable glory, and as an almost inexhaustible wellspring of vindictiveness, cupidity, and brutality."

According to Christian teaching, we are all alienated; from ourselves, from each other, from the very universe. But the central event of Christianity – the cross and resurrection – brings together in perfect unity the tragedy of that brokenness with the infinite love of God. Jesus' death represents the most emphatic measure of the value of each person, because it implies that despite our frailties and brokenness and (yes) guilt, we are worth the huge lengths to which God goes in finding a solution.

The self-esteem movement says you can find everything you need from within yourself. Decades of this programming have left many feeling deeply inadequate. Easter might appear grim on the surface, but something about its insistence that we are not OK on our own liberates us to see the world as it is, ourselves as we are, and a glorious vision of what we might become.

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