

What's ahead for the Uniting Church?

The future is evangelical

Peter Bentley

The statistics on church membership -- and on who is leaving the church -- are hotly contested today. This month, the ACC's Secretary, and author of the famous 'Bentley Report,' **Peter Bentley**, begins a detailed three-part analysis revealing what the latest statistics really say.

There is a great myth operating in the Uniting Church at present. This is the myth that congregations and members will remain in the Uniting Church, no matter what happens. It appears that sometimes migrant-ethnic communities are button-holed in this way. It appears that members are told 'you will be okay in your local church or group - just hang in there and it will be alright.'

Interestingly, this type of argument promotes congregationalism, and may actually foster further problems in the Uniting Church in the future. I believe it is clear from present trends that the most likely churches to develop within the Uniting Church are churches with a more overt evangelical foundation. If, however, these churches and members are increasingly alienated by more radical decision-making, then over time members will leave and some congregations will effectively end up disbanding. This will have an impact on the whole viability of the Uniting Church as a congregational enterprise.

What will happen in the future? Will evangelical congregations stay in the Uniting Church no matter what decision is made concerning sexual practice and leadership?

1. The Use of Statistics

I have long been intrigued by the use of statistics by some members (usually leaders) within the Uniting Church. It appears that if they do not like the statistics mentioned about a particular subject, then the usual tactic is to say, 'we are not a church that is about

numbers'. However, when statistics are found that seemingly support their case, then they are often used quite widely.

Like the rather bizarre, pseudo post-modern decision known as Resolution 84, when it comes to using statistics it appears that in the Uniting Church you can have your cake when you like it, and throw away the whole cake when you don't like it.

For example, in the feedback to leaders of the Uniting Church, it appears some leaders are quite happy to quote numbers if the letters or responses are more supportive of their case, but when the majority of responses come from a different point of view, then it is sometimes implied that the respondents or writers are crazed, right-wing, fundamentalist conservatives.

As I once heard it said: "don't pay any attention to them -- that's Queensland for you".

I am personally not surprised that for some matters today, opinions proclaimed via letters, including letter pages in the church papers, are more supportive of liberal theology, because most members now realise



there is little point in writing letters or participating in the various listening consultations that have been promoted.

One of the most prominent areas of concern at present is the future of the Uniting Church in terms of its membership. Over the last few years I have detected two main responses:

- ‘Don’t mention the war’. This means we do not discuss difficulties associated with the declining and ageing church, and certainly do not seriously consider the impact of the sexuality debate.
- ‘The Uniting Church has a wonderful future’. This puts the positive slant on the previous response, and is simply a form of propaganda designed to convince people that things will work out. It also seems to imply that if you ask a question or raise concerns, then you are actually to blame for what happens.

Certainly, I believe that the Church should not concentrate on the negative, but I also strongly believe that the Church needs to be aware of the challenges it

faces. If a leader is asked questions about membership and congregational numbers, he or she needs to be able to answer honestly and not present a picture that bears no relationship to the real situation.

I find especially curious the idea that we should not critique the current state of the Uniting Church, or always say that there are no problems in the Uniting Church, especially when one considers that many liberal people believe that the Church should do away with, for example, belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is because they believe this belief is not grounded in reality, and yet when it comes to our present day reality, they are willing to be part of a myth about the future of the Uniting Church.

Members of the church need to understand that many leaders of the Uniting Church are not able to address the present situation in the church, or perhaps are too afraid to present a realistic picture, because they know they simply do not have any answers.

The situation has gone on for so long that a culture

The raw facts

Uniting Church affiliation in the National Census

Year	Percentage	Affiliate Numbers
1981	4.9	712 609
1986	7.6	1 182 311
1991	8.2	1 387 646
1996	7.52	1 334 917
2001	6.65	1 248 674
2006	5.7	1 135 400

Source: *Pointers*, The Bulletin of the Christian Research Association ‘Trends in Religious Identification’ Details from 2001 Census’, Vol. 12, No. 3, **and**

ABS: National Census 2006, and *Religion in Australia: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1997.

of survival now dominates, rather than a culture of vibrancy and growth. I remember when I first became secretary of a large city presbytery (in 1998), I conducted an audit of all the congregations, and presented this to the executive, but at the time it was regarded as potentially too depressing. I then embarked (with presbytery approval) on a process to find a mission officer, with the idea that the officer would work closely with ministers and congregations, and help people to realise their situation and their accountability to God for the resources that had been placed in their hands, or perhaps allow the presbytery to help them 'bequeath' their resources to other congregations and groups, and thus support these wider activities and development. It was also envisaged that such groups would be helped to maintain their sense of worship and community, in effect as a form of chaplaincy.

2. Statistics and the Ageing of the membership of the Uniting Church

I had a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and other Fairfax editions) magazine *GoodWeekend* (March 11, 2006) in response to an article by comic writer and satirist, Jonathan Biggins 'Mr Biggins Goes to Church' (*GoodWeekend*, 18 February 2006). While Biggins was fairly caustic with each group he visited, I personally thought that to choose a small suburban Uniting Church (Merewether Central), when he chose for other denominations two cathedrals (St Andrew's and St Mary's, both in Sydney) and Hillsong was a little unfair in terms of comparison. Perhaps he could have gone to Wesley International Congregation for a reasonable numerical comparison. Seeing the Wesley Theatre nearly full of a variety of age groups, including several hundred people less than forty years of age, may have caused him to re-write his stereotype.

The point I made in the letter was that any church with an ageing membership has certain issues to confront, but that congregations of older people can have a major role to play in contemporary communities, in which personal relationships are devalued and neighbourly awareness is limited. Issues of an ageing church need to be considered sensitively, but they should not be ignored. Uniting Church members are realistic people. They know what the situation is like on the ground because they have been active local members for many years, and have

seen the changes firsthand. Uniting Church members should not be patronised, and the issues should not be ignored.

For the future the following factors are important:

- Older members presently provide much of the ongoing services and finances for the majority of Uniting Church congregations, but as they become older and as their numbers decrease, more pressure will be placed on the remaining active members (who are usually slightly *younger* older longstanding faithful members). There is a limit to how long this cycle can be maintained, and many congregations only have to lose a few key members to be rendered effectively non-viable.
- Older members usually have a more traditional belief, and support traditional understandings of sexual practice.
- Older members usually have a strong allegiance to the local congregation, but this should not be equated with allegiance to the denomination, simply because for older members, their primary experience and foundation was with one of the antecedent denominations.
- Older members are now increasingly likely to change congregations or leave the Uniting Church altogether, especially if they feel isolated, ignored or abused.
- An increasing number of ministers appear to have significantly different theological positions from members and the sexuality issue in particular has become a prime area for conflict.
- There is a growing divide between rural and city congregations, and between property rich congregations and property poor congregations. Many of these congregations have even less opportunity to connect with younger members, and they are becoming increasingly devoid of people resources, especially stipended leadership. The rural church will suffer a much sharper decline over the next ten years.

3. Sources for Statistics

What is the real situation? Where do we find information? There are several main areas of statistics that are commonly used in these discussions, and in

this part I will note two areas: Internal Records and The National Census. When the full figures for the 2006 National Church Life Survey are released I will provide a longer report on this key area.

I believe it is now difficult to make significant comparative analysis of membership statistics from the triennial statistical returns to the Assembly. Please read the reports presented to the 2000 and 2003 Assembly meetings to see detail of the issues. It is evident to me from my contacts in presbyteries that the difficulty of providing reliable information is related to the overall difficulty that many churches (mainly church office bearers) have in managing and responding to the request for information, and maintaining information and a reliable membership record. Therefore many churches fail to fill out their form and, as a result, estimates are increasingly used.

The National Census has basic questions on "religion" or "no religion" in terms of identification. It provides an overview of religious affiliation in Australia. The latest census was August 2006, and the basic results were made available in June 2007. Apart from a small glitch in 1991, the percentage of UCA affiliates has steadily decreased. I remember one leader in the Uniting Church proudly promoting the census statistics in that year (1991) as proof that the public were coming into the Uniting Church in droves. Apart from the fact that attendance records did not agree, this person had completely missed the point that the numerical increase had nothing to do with a love for the Uniting Church.

Firstly, all those who were still recording themselves as Methodist were now coded to the Uniting Church (from 1986), and secondly, some non-members had finally caught up with the fact that there was a Uniting Church and had sufficient enough knowledge to tick a box they thought may be closest to their antecedent church, though it could be argued that many of these could have been included in the statistics for continuing Presbyterian affiliation or continuing Congregational affiliation.

What is clear is that between 1996 and 2001 the UCA affiliation rate fell by 6.46%, and between 1996 and 2006, by 14.9%. (Tasmania recorded the largest decline -- 23%). This affiliation decrease occurred during a time when the population in Australia increased by 11.8%. For comparison the Baptists recorded a growth of 7.3%, and Pentecostals 25.7% (nearly double the population increase).

What factors are important in the UCA affiliation

decrease?

I believe there are three main factors:

- (i) Numbers who have left since 2003. While small in terms of affiliation, the debate over sexuality and leadership may also have affected non-members.
- (ii) Continuing members of the Uniting Church who decide to not tick the Uniting Church box in the Census form, and instead choose a general term such as "Christian" or write in another description. There are probably thousands of increasingly alienated UCA members who do not wish to be identified anymore with the Uniting Church.
- (iii) Ageing of affiliates.

Uniting Church congregations and the Future

What are the types of Uniting Church congregations which are more likely to survive the next ten - twenty years given the current context?

Some church commentators believe that the denomination is dead or dying. I believe that while the older institutional denominations will certainly become smaller, some denominational-style churches will remain. Clearly unless there is a significant reversal, overall numbers will be fewer and the main churches will be:

Larger evangelical and reformed churches, especially regional churches

The regional church will also have a life of its own and may have an identity quite distinct from the denomination. Like the Mega Church, it will attract people to worship from within the denomination and outside of the denomination, but it will also be of sufficient size to promote a sense of community within an area. Regional churches will be particularly helpful in large rural or coastal areas as the population shift continues and small towns are simply unable to sustain paid ministry and worshipping congregations. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

The Mega Church

An additional category in the evangelical and regional group is the mega church, which is increasingly becoming a semi-independent or network linked church. Essentially the church makes its own decisions and has little personal connection with the denomination, apart from fulfilling legal and statutory requirements. They will develop their own internal

networks and support system, independent of, though not exclusive to the denomination. The autonomous nature of these (usually) individual churches also makes the denominational identity more diffuse.

Mega churches attract people from different regions, usually a whole city. These churches are openly evangelistic and attempt to attract people to worship and make a commitment to Jesus Christ. Clearly, these churches will be evangelical in their outlook.

Smaller lay ministry based evangelical churches, like house churches

These are presently small churches, mostly with lay leadership. They are able to maintain basic services and worship, and are not reliant on large offerings or property income. They are also remote and removed from the experience of the public workings of the denomination.

An increasing number will be in the cities as people move to explore closer connections with their community and develop a non-denominational setting. Many will be in rural areas, and if they have become a non-Uniting fellowship, may even meet in church buildings which have been abandoned by the denomination or rented at a peppercorn rent. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

'Niche market' city or suburban churches

These churches will cater for disaffected church members in general, often from different denominations, and will have a liturgical and liberal orientation. They will run high profile programmes in an attempt to connect with the wider liberal social justice networks, but will remain very small in attendance given the number of potential affiliates.

Wealthy middle class suburban churches

Some average suburban churches with older members will be able to continue, due to paid staff who undertake many tasks that may have been previously undertaken by lay members. In some ways these churches will develop into a form of chaplaincy.

Alternate communities, linked to welfare centres or groups.

Various experimental groups and communities will continue or develop, especially worshipping communities founded by missions (previously Methodist Parish Missions), and groups funded by the denomination as it seeks to "do church differently". Some of these experiments may be short-lived.

Migrant-ethnic or NESB churches

While there will be increasing strain on these churches due to sexuality issues and also generational and language issues, the network of family and historical connections will continue to provide a strong base for continuity in the local scene. These churches will continue to be mainly evangelical in their outlook, and though they will mostly not support the Uniting Church position on sexuality, they will remain reliant on the Uniting Church for property access. Unless more radical decisions are made, most (but not all) will at least remain technically 'under the umbrella'. The influence of ministers and members of other churches, and their perceived position in their particular migrant-ethnic community will have a significant impact on their decision making, especially if there are reasonable alternatives for their own members. Some churches may adopt names that do not publicly identify their 'brand' as a Uniting Church, and this may be the first step to moving out of the Uniting Church.

There are some members of the church who believe that the Uniting Church will have a flood of new members when the church fully adopts a dominant liberal theological basis. Sometimes people will highlight the beliefs of non-attending Uniting Church affiliates and note the similarity with liberal social beliefs, and raise the expectation that a truly liberal church will attract these people to worship. I acknowledge that some may be attracted, but it will be a small number in reality, and they will mainly attend niche market churches which can afford to maintain stipended ministry, perhaps due to their location or property income.

For many liberal churches, the social message is the primary concern, but today there are many quasi-religious social activist groups who are far more active and, one could say, even more evangelistic in their recruiting zeal. Most denominations will not gain many members from a strong liberal-based theology. People do not readily join churches which have vague and amorphous ideas. If you are looking for certain ethics and values, then you are more likely to find the type of ethics and values you want outside the church. Most humanists are actually quite honest about their lack of interest in the 'trappings' of the Christian church.

Peter Bentley's analysis continues in December's 'Catalyst'