

Lost opportunity as the new preamble is approved



Preamble and UCA Constitution

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Aboriginal Beliefs

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On Areopagus Hill

Unitingviews.com has detailed analysis of the UCA preamble and indigenous religion

A press release dated November 26, 2010 confirmed what anyone aware of Uniting Church processes would have known would take place—the numbers had been brought together and the new preamble approved. A majority of the Synods and 2/3 of presbyteries were required to vote Yes for approval.

Only three Presbyteries did not approve the new preamble, though we do not know how close some of the votes were. One presbytery voted no on a casting vote. As the press release issued by the UCA Assembly stated: “The preamble to the Uniting Church constitution was passed by the 12th Assembly in 2009 and subsequently passed by the Synods and Presbyteries (the Church’s state-based and regional councils) throughout 2010, as is required for constitutional change. Revisions to the text have been developed after extensive consultation throughout the church and in particular with the UAICC and Indigenous Uniting Church members.”

I acknowledge the last part and wholeheartedly agree that consultation is a good thing, and especially consultation with the UAICC and indigenous members, but where was this “extensive consultation throughout the church”. Consultation on earlier versions was limited by scope, time and method, and the final version which came to Assembly for decision came so late I do not believe members would have had time to give it the serious attention it de-

served before they were caught in the dynamics of a difficult and emotional debate which was itself curtailed. The words “extensive consultation” or even a nudge to the mantra of the inter-conciliar formula of the UCA is more about providing spin for public consumption, especially when the UCA commends the Australian Government on the decision to undertake a referendum on the recognition of Aboriginal and Islander people in the Australian Constitution. I recognise that spin is something all political parties do and churches often undertake, but sometimes I hope for a better approach. In the UCA case, it is more of an irony given that for some other important matters the argument has often been “the church or group is not ready, more time is needed, or that we need to sit down together and work through this for the long-term”.

Debate about the approved version of the new preamble was truncated as amendments were not possible and polarisation was enhanced by the process. I doubt if many councils were swayed by arguments at the meetings and most probably voted without really considering the theological concerns that had been validly raised. At my presbytery meeting one person’s argument was founded on the idea that they (Congress) wanted this and would be devastated if it was not approved. This may have swung some people, but certainly illustrated the base of the push. Another person at one

Synod implied that we had to follow the “pastoral approach”, basically giving people what they wanted as Jesus did. I am not sure where Jesus’ harder sayings fit into this theology.

That is why this was a lost opportunity. I have often commented that the Assembly finds it difficult to get things right in terms of process, decision-making and communication—look at the continued debacles about sexuality. UCA Theologian Michael Owen mentioned in his open letter that this type of constitutional change needed a time frame of ten years. At the very minimum I suggest it should have been three more years.

The new preamble could have been sent out for consideration and feedback—not decision. This would have enabled substantial dialogue and also given real opportunity to congregations to engage in the process. I believe this would have enabled a better outcome and hopefully resulted in at least revamping those sections that had been hastily revised just before the 12th Assembly met and consequently approved for a Yes or No decision only.

I believe that now probably few members even know what has changed, but for a section of the church they have again been alienated because of the process. I can only hope the Australian Government does not follow the same process but allows for a good and long period of dialogue and consultation.

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