

Concord Uniting Church
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If We Were Doing This Again: A Forward-Looking Glance Backwards to Church Union

A happy birthday to us all!

Some of you, the fortunate ones, were privileged to be there, in Sydney Town Hall, thirty years ago today, when the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) came into being. Most of us, however, had no such luck. I myself was about as far from the action as anyone could be. Chained to a desk of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in distant Switzerland, my only contribution to the festivities was to farewell my boss, WCC general secretary Philip Potter, as he left Geneva to preach at the inauguration.

The formation of the UCA did not all happen when leaders of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches signed the document that happy day. Unity is about building relationships, about renewal in faith and life. Unity is a work in progress – hence that crucial “...ing” in our name. Whether you were in the Town Hall that day, or far away, or not even born yet, all of us through these thirty years have been giving shape to the Uniting Church in Australia. The story of its formation is *our* story.

So, how to proceed? Talking with each other about the assorted thrills and spills of these years would surface some wonderful memories. Time, however, precludes that. Preparing a school report card on the UCA’s performance to date -- you know, something along the lines of

- Doctrine ... pass
- Social responsibility ... credit
- Caring agencies ... distinction
- Ecumenical involvement ... plays well with other children
- Worship ... should try harder

-- might be illuminating too.

But let’s take a different tack. I would like to think aloud with you about an important question: if we were doing this again, what might we do differently? What have we learned, through these three fascinating decades, about the delicate art of uniting churches?

In such an exercise, objectivity is impossible. Anyone pontificating about the past should own up to his or her biases, so here for the record are some of mine.

- I came into this church shaped by Congregationalism. Those old pre-union instincts still occasionally reassert themselves, particularly when I see church people trying to solve their problems by clouting each other with rule books.
- I have received more than I can say from the ecumenical movement and, as far as I can see, would not have remained a Christian without it. What I have learned -- in particular, from Anglicanism, Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism – cannot but influence the way I view the development of my own church.
- As one of its members and as the second general secretary (1980-88) of its national assembly, I have invested so many of my hopes and dreams in the Uniting Church that I cannot possibly be dispassionate about it.
- My theological orientation, if anyone wants to know, might be labeled “liberal conservative” – “liberal” in the sense that faith has to be sifted by doubt, truth claims must be open to examination and believers should not hesitate to embrace the best of secular wisdom; “conservative” in the sense that continuity matters and what has been received from the past should be treasured even when its contemporary relevance may not be fully apparent.

“If We Were Doing This Again”?

That “if” needs explaining. It does not imply that ecumenism may be *passé*, that the quest for Christian unity now ranks as an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing, or that we’re having doubts about the rightness of the step we took in 1977.

Our forbears knew, and the Uniting Church in Australia still knows, that the quest for Christian unity stems from the very heart of the gospel. We’re in this game because we have been grasped by the reconciling power of God in Christ and we cannot endure churchly divisions that visibly deny it. Saying no to ecumenism, for the UCA, is not an option. Unity is in our genes.

But there are different ways of skinning the ecumenical cat.

In 1977 we opted for a national merger of three denominations. That was one way forward, but it’s not the only way. In 1999, Roman Catholics and Lutherans at world level agreed that their historic differences over the doctrine of justification were no longer church dividing. Closer to home, the covenanting process initiated through the National Council of Churches in Australia has been helping congregations discover possibilities for local ecumenical initiatives. On this journey, the destination is what counts. There is no one path all must travel to get there.

Evaluating the UCA’s experience thus far is not only important for us, as we look to our future. It matters to others, as they plan for theirs. In 1984, the Australian Council of Churches hosted a historic visit by Protestant leaders from the People’s Republic of China. One of the first requests from Bishop K.H.Ting, heading the team, was: I want to meet with leaders of the Uniting Church in Australia. Why? Well, we in China don’t want to go back to the old denominations we had before the Revolution. We can’t live forever in the very tentative Christian Council we have now. We’ve read

your Basis of Union, we're excited by it and we think that what your church is trying to do and to be may have much to teach us.

So what have we learned? I want to suggest four positive learnings, four negatives, and a tangle of questions we would do well to ponder.

Four Positives

First, we tried. However imperfectly, and whatever mistakes we may have made since, we tried.

A Geneva colleague remarked to me, at around the time of union: "All WCC member churches talk about unity. They all pray for unity. They all hope other churches will move towards unity. But your three churches in Australia, they've had the guts to put their institutional life on the line and themselves actually *do* something about unity."

While working with the National Council of Churches in Australia, there were many times I found myself grateful for a Uniting Church that still had that commitment, a Uniting Church that is still prepared to try.

Second, there is the Basis of Union, one of the outstanding documents of the modern ecumenical movement.

It is a mixture of genres, I know -- the clauses dealing with ministries and church governance already show signs of age -- but overall our foundational document provides so much wisdom for which to be thankful. It merits regular re-reading, as do the sadly neglected reports of the Joint Commission on Church Union ("The Faith of the Church" [1959] and "The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering" [1963]) that preceded it.

Even more important than the Basis itself was the inspired approach that produced it. The Joint Commission on Church Union, from the outset, refused to think in terms of how to merge three churches. It approached its task in terms of renewal, not ecclesiastical joinery. Its key questions were what is the faith, where is it to be found, and how is the church called to make its witness and order its life in Australia today.

Third, the UCA's self-understanding is grounded in the conviction that, in the words of the Basis, "it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end". A pilgrim people, on the go. That vision of church as movement has overarched and guided our decision-making for the church as institution.

Hence the readiness of this church to be open to the gifts of all regardless of gender, ordination, age or anything else; its delight in cultural diversity; its efforts to be truly inclusive; its willingness to risk and innovate.

Recently a student at the United Theological College put to me a question about consensus decision-making. It isn't mentioned in the Basis of Union but, she suggested, surely it is implied there. I think she's right, it is. Take seriously the ecclesiology of the Basis, and a lot of other things follow.

Fourth, the UCA has taken seriously Australia as the context in which it is called to be faithful. United churches, in principle anyway, may be freer than churches that are more conscious of global confessional ties to earth themselves in the particular situations in which they happen to be set. One of the first actions of the inaugural assembly in 1977 was to adopt an eloquently prophetic statement to the nation, committing the Uniting Church to obey God in the context of this country -- incidentally, another document that bears re-reading.

It is a commitment we've tried to keep, sometimes at considerable cost. Whether standing in solidarity with indigenous Australians, welcoming refugees, working for social justice, caring for those in special need, reaching out to partner churches in Asia and the Pacific or building bridges to compatriots of other faiths, the UCA can fairly claim to be a church that takes very seriously the place where it has been put.

Four Negatives

First, it took so long. The initial diffident talks-about-talks were floated in the early years of the 20th century. The gestation that eventually produced the UCA lasted twenty years. If we were doing it again, surely we could speed things up.

Second, some felt unable to accompany us into union. Others have left us since. Whenever we celebrate a UCA anniversary there will always be that note of sadness. The fact that the family is incomplete must always raise its own list of questions about what we should have done better, what we might have tackled differently.

Third, the three churches entered union unclear about the status of their key document. I realized this only in the mid 1980s, when the assembly's liturgy experts were beavering away on re-worded ordination vows. Without giving the matter a lot of thought, I commented that it seemed a bit odd requiring ordinands to "adhere" to the Basis of Union when the church itself wasn't bound to adhere to it. Several apoplectic founding fathers bought into the correspondence, revealing quite different assumptions about the nature of the Basis' continuing authority. A presidential ruling eventually cleared things up, but if we were doing this again it's one problem we could and should avoid.

Fourth, I wonder with hindsight whether we should have dealt more sensitively with people's memories. Understandably, the UCA was eager for congregations to identify as "Uniting" and drop their previous denominational labels, to sing from The Australian Hymn Book instead of whatever they'd used before, to rationalize redundant property. We had all the right motives. Change was needed, and the sooner the better.

Protestants have never had much of a feeling for sacred places, sacred memories, so maybe we didn't recognize clearly enough that those denominational labels, those hymns, those properties were all, in different ways, very special. An old church is not just a pile of bricks. It enshrines the dreams, the heartbreaks, the faith of generations. Change? Yes, it had to come, but perhaps we could have nudged people in that direction a little more gently.

And A Tangle of Questions

In the years following union, one sometimes heard the comment “The UCA is the first truly Australian church”. Indeed, the cover of the latest Insights proclaims “A uniquely Australian church turns 30”.

I’ve never argued with such claims, though sometimes I have wondered about them. After all, the UCA is a product of the worldwide ecumenical movement. It was inspired by church unions elsewhere, in Canada and especially India. Its Basis of Union reflects the theological climate of mid 20th century Europe. And its most influential mind and first president was that eminent Ulster export, Davis McCaughey.

True, the decision to form the UCA was made by Australians, for Australians. And, as already noted, the UCA at its inception and since has tried to take seriously its calling to be faithful in this national context.

It may be, however, that this church is a lot more Australian than I or most others had realized. It may also be this unexamined Australianness that explains at least some of the problems we’re having. Let me explain.

Think for a moment about the national ethos. What are some of the distinctive qualities of Australians? They tend to be *egalitarian, pragmatic, pluralistic* and *wary of authority*.

Now think of the UCA. It has the same qualities – in spades.

Egalitarian? Yes indeed. I for one am grateful for it, as it seems are most others. In 1980, new to the assembly job, I decided that, in writing minutes of assemblies and standing committees, I would drop titles and degrees. Interestingly, nobody protested. Far more important than anyone’s minutes is the fact that, through these years, we have learned there is no conflict between informality and mutual esteem. When was the last time you heard our president called anything other than Gregor, or spoken of other than with affection and respect?

There is something biblical about rejecting pomp and refusing to be awed by status. But it has its dangers. Every opinion is not of the same value on every issue. When the church deliberates on policy affecting indigenous people, for example, it would be strange indeed for indigenous voices not to be heeded above all others. When the church has to find its way through a theological minefield, it would be stupid for it not to give special weight to guidance from the theologians. And what is it the scriptures say about gifts and graces, and the need to recognize them for what they are?

Certain forms of elitism are legitimate, necessary and biblically sanctioned, whether the national ethos likes it or not.

Pragmatic? Yes, that’s us too, and once again it is cause for gratitude. The UCA came through the sexuality debate relatively well, thanks in part to people’s willingness to

settle for a practical way of living for the time being with an intractable problem. Rigour would have destroyed us. Pragmatism, laced with a fair dose of Christian grace, saved the day. It is a useful quality to have around.

But take care. I've learned to be wary of anyone claiming a down-to-earth approach to an issue. He or she may just be refusing to think new thoughts, dodging the insights of others, ignoring the implications of the gospel or running from the wisdom of centuries past. If voices calling for realism are the only ones we heed, the UCA may be tempted to convert itself into a "successful" religious operation by offering whatever spiritual product contemporary Australia wants to buy. It would be businesslike response to depressing census figures, no doubt, but it would throw our integrity to the winds and corrupt the faith once delivered to the saints.

Pragmatism can be useful, to be sure, but as a servant of the church of God, never as its master.

Pluralistic? That we are, especially at 10 o'clock on Sunday mornings. Diversity is the word for this church. Not only has it created ethno-specific church structures, some with a high degree of autonomy, but it also includes a wide range of theological stances, moral convictions, political loyalties and liturgical customs. You name it, you can bet UCA congregations will have differences of opinion and practice about it.

In many ways the variety is enriching. But it does make life difficult, not least the UCA's relationships with other churches. It may also jeopardize our people's sense of belonging. Remember the days when we all knew pretty much the same hymns? Now, singing from different books and service sheets, we don't. Remember the expertise that went into Uniting in Worship 1 and 2? Now, often, preference goes to whatever the minister, or the local worship committee, last night cooked up instead. The question is, with all this diversity, how are we to ensure the UCA's identity remains clear?

Pluralism is fine, provided that the centre around which all the variety revolves is clear and our cohesion holds firm.

Wary of authority? At a gathering of national heads of churches in 1988, UCA president Ian Tanner announced that the meeting would be his last. But why, asked an Orthodox archbishop. Now we know you, we understand you, we trust you – why are you standing down? "The Uniting Church works like the communist party," Ian explained. "It chooses a leader, then three years later takes him out and shoots him".

I'm not sure that did much for the good archbishop's grasp of our polity, but it was an interesting take on the UCA's revolving door approach to leadership. We know we need leaders, we rather wish we didn't, we don't altogether trust them while they're in office and we find some comfort in the prospect of their imminent removal to oblivion.

There are good biblical reasons and plenty of historical precedents for being wary of those who wield authority. Church leaders do have feet of clay. Watchfulness is in order. But I am not convinced that we are dealing with the problem well, or equipping

the UCA properly for the future, by creating a church that is over-governed, over-committed and constantly changing its leadership.

We are indeed an Australian church. Through these thirty years the UCA should have been – and we should now become – more aware of ways the nation’s ethos has shaped us, for good but in some respects for ill as well.

Remember the name: the Uniting Church *in*, not *of*, Australia. We are called to serve God *in* this setting, not surrender to the prevailing ethos *of* it. Avoiding such cultural captivity is not simply an academic exercise for professional theologians, historians and sociologists of religion. It is the task facing the UCA as a whole as it tries to find its place in an Australia that has become a bewildering supermarket of religious, non-religious and anti-religious options.

The way forward, in fidelity to the vision of those who set out on this journey thirty years ago today, must include more careful thought on the question of how we should go about avoiding the traps inherent in being who we are.

So?

What are we to make of these thirty years?

Beware the temptation to be too upbeat. It may make us feel good, but the facts don’t warrant it. Pride is one of those deadly sins to be guarded against.

Beware the temptation to be too downbeat. The facts don’t warrant that either. Too easily, cynicism about the church becomes cynicism about what God may be doing through the church.

The UCA’s story is not one of unbridled success, or of abject failure. It has elements of both.

The story of the Uniting Church in Australia is just the story of a bunch of ordinary Christians stumbling along behind an extraordinary God, leaving their footprints in the dust of history at a rather special moment in the church’s long journey.

“Unworthy servants? Yes, that’s us, no argument there. But – we *have* been servants. And nobody could ask a greater joy, or a higher privilege, than that.

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