

CHURCH FUTURES

FOUR SCENARIOS ON THE FUTURE OF THE UNITING CHURCH

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This article summarizes my PhD on the future of the Uniting Church.¹ It begins by looking at the three ways in which the “future” may be examined. It then argues that one way of viewing the Uniting Church is as one of the largest organizations in Australia. It then looks at the four scenarios of the future of the Uniting Church. It concludes with how the scenarios could be used.

Introduction

Consciously thinking about the future is one of the defining characteristics of human beings. In secular terms, there are three main ways of thinking about the future.

First: *prediction* means extrapolating current trends out into the future. This is the most common form of thinking about the future. Lines on graphs, for example, will often reveal a pattern. People do “predictions” everyday and take it for granted, for example, by making arrangements to have dinner with someone the following evening. One of the greatest predictions made last century which will have a huge impact this century is “Moore’s Law”. Gordon Moore is a founder of Intel and on April 19 1965 he speculated on the increasing power of computers: every 18 months (sometimes noted as 24) it will be possible to double the number of transistor circuits etched on a computer chip, and halve in price the cost each period. In 1981 French writer Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber was an early convert to the power of Moore’s Law and the microprocessor revolution: “The rapid decline of the price of microcomputers, their increasingly smaller size, their general accessibility to non-specialized users, should lead to general expansion”.² He went on to talk about the new era that will come from the linkages between the computer and

¹ Keith Suter *The Future of the Uniting Church: The Application of Scenario Planning to the Creation of Four “Futures” for the Uniting Church in Australia*, University of Sydney, 1973 (the full text is available in soft copy from the author: keith.suter@bigpond.com)

² Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber *The World Challenge*, London: Collins, 1981, p 197

the telephone, all of which seemed revolutionary at the time but now three decades later we take for granted.³

Second, there is the “*preferred*” future, where a person or organization has a vision towards which they work. For example when President John F Kennedy took office in January 1961 he knew there was a need for a bold vision to revive American spirits, which had been dampened by all the Soviet space “firsts”, such as the 1957 Sputnik. On May 25 1961 Kennedy addressed a joint session of Congress in which he laid out his vision of putting a man on the Moon and returning him safely before the end of the decade. This was achieved in 1969. With a “preferred” future we move from what is currently being suggested by prevailing trends (“prediction”) to what we would like to see happen.

Finally, there are “*possible*” futures of what could happen. They are not necessarily being currently suggested (via prediction) and they may not necessarily be what one would like to see happen (via preferred futures). The signs of possible change may be there – but one is simply not “seeing” them. Unfortunately in all walks of life, there is a tendency to get into a “comfort zone” and to mix with a narrow range of people. Scenario planning is not so much about getting the future right – as to avoid getting it wrong. Done properly it reduces the risk of being taken by surprise. As Clem Sunter has pointed out:

A critical thing to remember is that a scenario is a story of what can happen. It is not a forecast of what is going to happen. The problem with forecasting is that we so often are deceived into forecasting our wishes and desires. I have seldom come across a strategic plan which goes against the ambitions of the CEO.⁴

One of Australia’s Largest Businesses

If the Uniting Church were a company listed on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX), would you invest in it? This may appear as an unseemly question but some churches are big business. Indeed, churches in Europe for over a millennium were the continent’s biggest businesses. Even today (despite the concern over “church decline”), the Uniting Church is still in

³ Ibid, pp 211-214

⁴ Clem Sunter *The High Road: Where Are We Now?* Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg, 1996, p 13

aggregate terms larger than almost all Australian businesses listed on the ASX.

But businesses fail. The essence of the 1977 Union was (in secular management terms) a “merger and acquisition”. Professor Lynda Gratton of the London Business School has warned: “Over 80 percent of the anticipated value from mergers and acquisitions typically fails to materialize. Three out of four joint ventures fall apart after the honeymoon period”.⁵

Therefore, was the Uniting Church doomed from the start? This did not appear to be the case to most of us at the time but over three decades later a new perspective is possibly emerging. Rev John Evans has reflected:

Unfortunately for the new church the perception soon arose that it was formed out of weakness and begrudging necessity rather than being a vital and enthusiastic expression of the unity of the church in Australia. It came at a time when church attendance showed a marked decline and the role and place of the church itself was being questioned.⁶

Alternatively, perhaps the church in general has been in decline for too many decades and so the creation of the Uniting Church in 1977 was just too little too late. It is just that the Uniting Church architects failed to read the tenor of the times. (However, given the Church’s immense reserves, the extent of its decline could be disguised by the periodic sale of some of those assets).

There is also the paradox of Uniting Church membership. On the one hand, it seems to be doing the “right” thing: it is one of the most open, inviting of churches; all are welcome at the Uniting Church. On the other hand, the Uniting Church’s hospitality is not attracting many new members.

Finally, the most obvious difference between the Uniting Church and a company listed on the Australian Stock Exchange is the lack of centralized control over finance. There is no central planning, no centralized funding and no way of developing one. Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods are all responsible for their own finances. The national Assembly Office has to rely largely on what money trickles up from the Synod (its larger agencies have their own sources of fund-raising). With the devolved system of accounting, there is no guarantee that “rich” parishes will assist “poor” ones. There is no

⁵ Lynda Gratton *Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organizations Buzz with Energy – and Others Don’t*, San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, 2007, p 2

⁶ John Evans “Globalization and the Uniting Church”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 7 No2, August 2001, p 20

system for redistributing wealth and resources across the Uniting Church. For example, in NSW there are areas where Church buildings are in close proximity to each other (such as the centre of Sydney) and yet in the new suburbs in western Sydney, the state's fastest growing area, there is no money for new buildings.

The Uniting Church probably has more church buildings than any other denomination. Historian Geoffrey Blainey thinks that "The Methodists... probably erected more church buildings than any other sect..."⁷ Property investments and sales have possibly disguised the Uniting Church's otherwise financially vulnerable situation because some of the properties have been used to cross-subsidize other Uniting Church ventures. For example, many parishes could not sustain a minister simply through their tithes and offerings but can afford one via property investments (such as the commercial letting of spare parsonages/ manses).

Second, the Uniting Church is asset rich to an extent that most people (outside Church property committee circles) are unaware. Most people do not know its immense wealth in bricks and mortar. A Victorian Synod report revealed that "maintenance of buildings is now the third largest budget item for local congregations across the church".⁸ If donors to the Uniting Church knew how much money is tied up in under-utilized resources they may well be reluctant to donate money to such a wealthy if poorly organized organization.

Third, a great deal of meeting time is given over to discussing property: its acquisition, its redevelopment, its disposal and chasing up where the proceeds of sales went. With building maintenance as the Uniting Church's third biggest budget item it is a major administrative burden. A new denomination starting up has an easier time: it simply hires a local school or warehouse on a Sunday (and the let the owners worry about maintaining the building's fabric).

Bricks and mortar have given a false sense of security. With so many solid buildings as "proof" of the Uniting Church's presence, it seemed hard to imagine that the Uniting Church could ever decline. But reality is not always what it seems.

⁷ Geoffrey Blainey *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Melbourne: Viking, 2003, p435

⁸ "A Coup for Church Property", *Insights*, October 2005, p 4

To conclude, the 1977 inauguration of the Uniting Church was greeted with much hope and joy. Almost four decades later, the mood is very different. Historian Niall Ferguson of Harvard concluded his best-selling survey of economic history with a comment on "...how much destruction goes on in the modern economy. Around one in ten US companies disappears each year".⁹ The pattern is grim:

Even if they survive the first few years of existence and go on to enjoy great success, most firms fail eventually. Of the world's 100 largest companies in 1912, 29 were bankrupt by 1995, 48 had disappeared, and only 19 were still in the top 100.¹⁰

Is the Uniting Church destined to be part of that pattern of rise and fall of organizations?

Summary of the Four Scenarios¹¹

Each scenario has to be plausible. It is not a matter of whether one may like or dislike it. The test of a scenario's success in the first instance is whether a reader can say to themselves "Yes: I could imagine such a thing happening". Therefore a scenario planner may have to provide views which are not necessarily in accordance with that person's own preferences.

These are the four scenarios:

"Word and Deed": This Uniting Church is composed of a small number of large parishes, each of which provides both Christian worship services and an array of community services. Each parish contains specific congregations to cater for the needs of the members. Each parish makes maximum use of its plant and equipment in multi-purpose buildings.

"Secular Welfare": This Uniting Church – derived possibly from the existing UnitingCare – is a national network of community services. It has no parishes or congregations. It has retained a Christian ethos of service for the lonely, least and lost. The schools and colleges are separately incorporated and run their own affairs.

⁹ Niall Ferguson *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, London: Penguin, 2009, p 350

¹⁰ Ibid, p 350

¹¹ There is no discussion in this article of the elaborate methodology of scenario planning; a detailed description is contained in the PhD (footnote 1)

“Early Church”: This Uniting Church has discarded its corporate businesslike nature and is run (as was the church in the early centuries of the Christian Era) as a small group of people focussed on the more explicitly “spiritual” aspects of life, with no government-funded services.

“Recessional”: This Uniting Church is in a continual decline and so plans need to be made for an exit strategy.

“Word and Deed”

The first scenario sees the Uniting Church being consolidated into a small number of large parishes. This scenario has some resonance with the existing set of “parish missions”, such as Wesley Mission Sydney. There has also been the development of “regional churches”, such as those at Robina-Surfers Paradise (QLD), Terrigal (NSW), Pittwater/ Mona Vale (NSW), Narellan (NSW) and Aberfoyle Park (SA).

The Uniting Church depicted in this scenario has a heart that loves and hands that care. “Word and Deed” is a balanced ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and providing welfare services. The “Word” informs the “Deed”. This Uniting Church is a “Christian organization”, rather than just an “organization staffed by Christians”. It is a Church doing social work – and not a charity with a Christian history. It is a church with regular worship services designed to cater for people in a variety of circumstances. People may have stopped going to church – but this Uniting Church has not stopped going to them.

The scenario is based on a continuing interest in Christian spirituality. There may be various ideas on what constitutes “Christian spirituality” but at least there is enough widespread resonance to support an organization claiming such allegiance. This Church has acknowledged that the old ways of presenting Jesus may no longer be effective and that many children are now growing up in families in which there are no copies of the Bible at home, no tradition of going to any church (except for weddings and funerals) and in which society provides many other competing attractions other than going to church.

Therefore, this Uniting Church emphasizes the importance of Christian education and training for all its staff. It is explicit on the importance of values (priority behaviours on which we base our lives) because everyone has values and this Uniting Church helps staff to be explicitly aware of the values that need to be conveyed. All staff can act correctly because they know and endorse the Uniting Church’s explicitly shared Christian values.

The scenario is also based on the continued policy of government providing funds for community services to other organizations which will provide the services. While Australian and State/ Territory Governments are not allowed to fund “religious activities” as such, they do provide extensive funding for non-sectarian, universal community service programmes available to all who meet the governmental criteria for eligibility. This Uniting Church enjoys a high standing with government in the delivery of welfare services.

A “Word and Deed” Uniting Church is an Australian church that holds together the Christian gospel and the delivery of welfare services. This Uniting Church has a mission perspective – it exists for the chief purpose of people who are not in it. Uniting Church parishes attract government social welfare funding partly because they know their local neighbourhoods extremely well. They are recognized and trusted by the local people for the integrity with which the caring services are provided.

This Uniting Church is heavily involved in social justice and advocacy. This entails: researching the current situation (with some data drawn from the parish’s own caring work), creating alternative policies for what could be done, criticising (if necessary) current government policies, public education on what is wrong and what needs to be done, and providing clients with techniques so that they can become their own advocates and teach others to do the same.

This Uniting Church consists of a small number of large parish organizations. These are the “face” of the Uniting Church. Parishes vary somewhat one from another. But all of them cater for parish events 24 hours per day seven days a week. People now lead busy lives and so the Church is available to them as they need it – and not just when the Church is willing to provide services. Multi-purpose buildings and multi-team ministry mean that small specialized services cater for the separate needs of particular demographic groups (for example, shift-workers).

The national (Assembly) and state (Synod) bodies are small, all of which have limited functions, such as acceptance of candidates for ministry. There are no regional Presbyteries; they are no longer required. Theological education is conducted in only one or two locations, with a great reliance on modern developments in distance education via information technology.

Each parish has a team ministry, with an ordained senior minister/ chief executive officer (CEO) holding together the central vision of Word and Deed. The person is a high-profile, articulate evangelist in both the Christian and secular sense: winning souls for Christ and attracting support for the

organization's welfare work. The senior minister/CEO is a person who combines ministry skills, management competence and entrepreneurial flair.

Staff members are Christians. All employees take discussion-heavy refresher courses on a regular basis to ensure they are comfortable with sharing their faith. Lay staff cannot be evangelists as such if they are involved in the provision of government-funded caring services but if clients are interested in what motivates them to do caring work, they can respond lucidly with what their faith means to them. They are not out to seek converts while providing government-funded caring services but they do want to be able to respond clearly to enquiries from clients. All centres of caring work have regular staff worship events.

The compulsory staff Christian education programmes provide added value to the services. Clients and residents and their next of kin know that this Uniting Church has such a strong values base. Additionally, older residents facing the challenges of old age and death can be assured that the staff are equipped to share some of their own faith journey with them. This is not just a matter for ministers: a gardener, for example, may well see more of a client or resident than a minister. Many problems are of a spiritual nature and so it is necessary to help clients and residents in a deeper way. Community service work is not just a matter of dispensing food parcels, second-hand clothes etc. To be able to do community service work effectively, it is necessary to have staff who are trained to do it.

The most dramatic implication is that existing congregations will need to be consolidated. The consolidation of resources (notable the sale of small church properties) provides a fund from which to make possible a range wide of activities. Banks are getting rid of many local branches – and so why shouldn't the Uniting Church? Banks have realized that they cannot cater for all local communities and so they are using technology to serve the more outlying areas. The same reasoning could apply to the Uniting Church. For example, as foreshadowed by Moore's Law, information technology is becoming cheaper and more flexible. Why cannot, for example, a small local congregation be connected by information technology to a service in a larger location with the service conducted "live" on a large screen? Eventually: why need parishioners go to a building at all – the service could go direct to their homes via Internet?

Indicators of the scenario coming into play: continued decline in the size and number of current Uniting Church congregations; increased openness in official Uniting Church meetings about the declining state of the Uniting Church; greater sense of crisis and a willingness to take action; older

members realize that they cannot maintain their existing congregations and are so open to new ideas for alternative ways of operating; influx of younger members with little or no denominational loyalties with a desire to create a balanced Word and Deed new type of parish; training in innovative media techniques; continued disposal of small, old Uniting Church buildings; creation of modern multipurpose buildings; continued consolidation of congregations into larger congregations; and continued development of “regional churches”

“Secular Welfare”

This is a Uniting Church providing extensive community services but without any parishes/ congregations. This simplifies governance, management arrangements and risk management capabilities, and reduces unnecessary duplication and competition between Uniting Church agencies. This scenario has one Uniting Church agency – possibly the current UnitingCare – that will run all the community services. The parishes have been wound up or just allowed to fade away. Some chaplaincy services may still be provided. Theological training will have been largely wound up, with the training of chaplains done via the Internet and/ or outsourced to other organizations. Uniting Church schools and colleges – which already have a high level of autonomy – will be completely self-governing and responsible for their own affairs.

This Uniting Church is different not only because of the disappearance of the parishes/ congregations but also because the nature of social welfare work is becoming more professional: the “care economy”. A talented younger generation of workers want to help humanity; they have new business ideas and are able to exploit the emerging ideas of social entrepreneurialism.

In this scenario, there is little popular interest in Christian spirituality. There may of course be an interest in other forms of spirituality (such as a growth of interest in “New Age” religions) and a high level of secular humanitarian awareness; it is simply not directed through the Uniting Church as such.

The other driver of change is high government expenditure on social welfare. This is a capitalism of mercy, where each of the charities and for-profits compete against each other to obtain government contracts, public and corporation donations, and publicity. It is also an economy where charities become more entrepreneurial in how they conduct their work – and encourage their clients to become more entrepreneurial in how they live. There is recognition that if a charity works with the same person over a long

period with the same problems, the charity has failed. The intention is for the charity to work itself out of a job (at least in respect to that person) – and not to create a dependency culture, where the client leaves all the major decisions to the charity.

Charities contribute to social capital: they provide an essential role for the for-profits that often is not recognized by the for-profits (or government). A flourishing economy cannot exist in an economic and social graveyard. No successful businessperson is ever entirely “self-made”: it takes at least a village to raise a businessperson. We are products of the economic and social environment in which we live. Charities provide the social foundations for a flourishing economy. Rich people can only get rich because they live in favourable economic circumstances. Charities therefore help provide “social capital”: education, health and the formation of trust between individuals in specific geographical areas in which businesses want to operate. This helps explain Australia’s economic growth compared with, say, Somalia’s. Charities facilitate the smooth running of businesses, for example, a worker has fewer anxieties (and so can concentrate better on their work) knowing that their folks are being looked after in an aged care centre. Therefore charities help the for-profits make their profits. Social entrepreneurs offer new ways of doing the work of churches and secular charities and so forming new learning/ business partnerships with the for-profit sector.

This Uniting Church has a passion for the least, lonely and the lost and seeks to assist them via the provision of community services. It provides these services as part of its Christian heritage and contemporary humanitarian motivations. This Uniting Church is respected across Australia as a major provider of community services. While it has a Christian heritage, it recognizes that it is now operating in a secular society where people are more interested in the quality of the services rather than the motivation behind their delivery.

This Uniting Church consists of one central national agency – probably called UnitingCare - with local branches. All local branches carry the same name and logo. The Uniting Church Assembly, Synod, Presbyteries and Congregations have all been abolished. This Uniting Church has no parishes or congregations. For those mainly big parishes that are self-funding (such as St Michael’s in the city of Melbourne and the remaining big central Missions), there is the prospect that they could continue to exist as independent parishes. Since the brand of the new organization is probably UnitingCare, they could still use the “Uniting Church” title. Freed from worrying about parishes/ congregations, this Uniting Church will be able to move into new

community service activities. It will not be weighed down with concerns about congregational matters. It will be able to tender for government contracts without the risk of theological complications. There will be no “membership” as such. This Uniting Church will employ staff and may use some volunteers (such as in the Lifeline telephone counselling service). Volunteers will be drawn from all sections of the community that accept this organization’s ethos.

This Uniting Church will own or rent fewer properties – and all of them will relate to the provision of community services. There will be few problems over the disposal of surplus properties and the determinedly grim holding on to redundant properties which have a sentimental value to some congregation members. There will be far less need to retain “heritage” properties.

This Secular Welfare scenario means that the recruitment of lay staff should become easier in that there is not the same search for Christian workers. Employment criteria will be eased up and a wider pool of labour would, in theory, become available (subject to the usual problems of continuing to pay too little). This scenario means that UnitingCare can acknowledge its Christian heritage but not have any ambitions, reputation or facilities for evangelism. With the growing tide of humanitarian secularism, UnitingCare can evade deep discussions of religious belief. This will enable UnitingCare to reach a broader constituency of potential staff, volunteers and donors. For example, some Uniting Church congregations and agencies have limitations on accepting donations of “tainted” money, such as money drawn from companies linked to gambling, tobacco and alcohol – all traditional concerns of the Uniting Church’s predecessor Churches. These concerns could be waived and the money accepted.

This scenario envisions a reduced prophetic role. This Uniting Church may have a caring heart but it will speak out less. The professionals running the community services will be aware of the need to avoid alienating potential government funders and private donors. Cause-related marketing is not so easy with outspoken charities whose pronouncements may antagonise some people. The Uniting Church staff in this scenario may pass on some policy reform ideas to government but it will be a process of quiet counsel rather than a campaigning platform.

The indicators to watch for include: continued decline in the size and number of Uniting Church congregations; continued aging/ funerals of Uniting Church members; increased openness in official Uniting Church meetings and statements about the declining state of Uniting Church congregations/ parishes; increased Uniting Church concern about the cost of maintaining congregations/ parishes; increased concern over the cost of Uniting Church

theological education institutions; decline in the number of people coming forward for ordination; continued disposal of Uniting Church buildings; increased rental use of Uniting Church buildings for alternative purposes (such as self-help groups, meditation, yoga, non-Uniting Church religious services); increased recruitment of talented young people to work in Uniting Church welfare agencies with a desire to assist humanity (but not necessarily with any deep-seated Christian convictions); amalgamation of community services agencies; continued government philosophy of outsourcing welfare work to not-for-profit organizations.

Flourishing examples of this scenario may be found outside the Uniting Church. For example, Barnardos began as a British Christian welfare agency for children; it now sees itself in Australia as a child welfare agency involving people with all faiths and none; it is committed to social justice for children but without any specific Christian doctrinal approach.

“Early Church”

This scenario sees the Uniting Church rejecting government funds, no longer a major provider of welfare services and one without its corporate façade. Instead, this Uniting Church is much smaller, with fewer resources, and with a narrow focus similar to the Early Church that operated before the creation of the Holy Roman Empire in the fourth century: winning souls for Christ.

The Early Church had many problems – not least the risk of persecution – but it had a simpler focus. The current Uniting Church, according to this scenario’s perspective, is now organizationally too large, too diversified, too involved in too many activities (some of which are competing: such as providing elite private school education while also claiming to help the lonely, least and lost).

Therefore in this scenario there is a desire to get back to a smaller, more focussed organization. Besides, an organization based on Jesus’ model of supporting the poor and telling truth to power, would not continue to receive government funding for long.

The first driver is low government expenditure for the Uniting Church. Government cannot finance the “religious” side of church work, but it does provide extensive funding for the provision of the Uniting Church’s welfare work, such as in child care, age care and homeless persons services. Most of the money that currently flows through the Uniting Church is in fact related to welfare etc.

The Uniting Church is among the country's largest providers of these diverse services. Under what circumstances could such a cosy arrangement stop? This scenario sees the Uniting Church recognizing its dilemma: on the one hand called by God to be counter-cultural and to challenge prevailing values and views and, on the other hand, reliant upon government and secular society to fund social welfare progress and so restricted in its challenge to prevailing values. In this scenario, the Uniting Church decides to drop its welfare work and go back to the model of the Early Church.

The second driver is high Christian spirituality. Jesus spoke of the "Kingdom of God" but instead all we have is a "church". Tom Ehrich of the Church Wellness Project has argued:

Jesus moved about. Our churches stay stubbornly in place.

Jesus talked about wealth and power. We talk about sex and ordination.

Jesus formed radically open circles of friends. We erect intricate and inflexible institutional barriers that admit only those whom we deem worthy.

Jesus dodged calls for laws and doctrines. We rush to codify and dogmatize.

Jesus fed the multitudes without conditions. We marginalize those who fail our moral litmus test.

Jesus stood up to the religious establishment. We are the religious establishment.¹²

Today's situation is like that of the early centuries of the Christian Era: a variety of competing faiths and an extensive potential mission field. Instead of seeing the current period as one of retreat and threat, it is necessary to see it as one of opportunity requiring new ways of operating.

This scenario suggests, then, that the funds are not stopped by government but by a resistance within the Uniting Church itself. It does not want government money. First, there is a perception underpinning this scenario that government funding has distorted the real work - the "religious work" - of the Uniting Church. In recent decades the Uniting Church (and its predecessor bodies) has gradually become bound to government through funding

¹² Tom Ehrich "Getting it Right" *Weekly Essay: Church Wellness Project*, August 18 2007, www.onajourney.org (accessed 20/8/2007)

arrangements for the delivery of welfare services. A by-product of the government contract process has been the limitation in effect placed on the participating churches (including the Uniting Church) from criticizing the government. In June 2001, there were reports that organizations funded by the Australian Government would have to give it 24 hours' notice of any press releases - bad, indifferent or positive – they planned to issue.¹³ (Ironically of course those delivering the services were best placed to observe the faults but were not allowed to go public with their knowledge). The ruling seems to have been toned down but its effect became internalized as agencies decided to have in essence self-censorship.

It is difficult to obtain public admissions of this type of self-censorship. But in August 2011 Perth's retiring Catholic Archbishop Barry Hickey was interviewed by *The West Australian* newspaper and

... revealed he regrets not having been more outspoken on social issues because of fears grants to the Church could have been cut if it was too critical of government policies.

"In accepting government grants the Church's role as an advocate of the poor can be blunted", he said.

"While I am proud of the broad range of social work in which the Church is involved, I think I should have been more vocal about social issues such as the plight of the homeless, Aboriginals, the disadvantaged and refugees.

"I regret not having been vocal enough because there was the knowledge to do so from the Church welfare agencies".¹⁴

Looking back, we do now know of one tragic example of this too close a relationship that occurred in a previous era: the controversy over the "stolen children" taken from Indigenous families. Government Indigenous welfare departments in the twentieth century asked churches to deliver welfare services to children removed from their parents. Decades later those churches are now being criticised for carrying out the orders of those departments and they are now paying compensation. In short, the thinking in this scenario is that the Uniting Church would be better off without all the government entanglement.

¹³ "Early Warning System Attacked", *The Age*, June 1 2001; "Stifling Critics is Dangerous Policy", *The Australian*, June 1 2001, p 5

¹⁴ "Hickey Regrets Not Speaking Out", *The West Australian*, August 15 2011, p 6

A second source of problems is that members of the Uniting Church become tired of all the activities around finance. These activities take the Church's attention away from the main game: winning souls for Christ. One example is the way that so much media work is now driven by marketing needs and the importance of exposure to potential donors (and to avoid offending potential ones with outspoken statements on social justice). This is a variation on the admission made by Archbishop Hickey above: avoid offending government and potential donors. The Uniting Church could lose its prophetic voice.

The Early Christians (in the first three centuries) were not troubled by staging "photo opportunities", "cause related marketing", assessing the value of their brand, negotiating with potential philanthropists, enticing celebrities to lend their prestige to a fund-raising efforts, or trying to blend their values with the marketing priorities of sponsors.

Meanwhile, if the Uniting Church wishes to recruit more specialized staff it will have to pay higher salaries. A journalist did a survey of "corporate refugees who fancy a career stint with a charity might be interested to hear of improving pay and greater flexibility". However the article also noted:

But what about the potential public relations nightmare? When volunteers go knocking for a donation for a particular charity, will mums and dads wonder if most of their donation is going towards the \$87,000 that charity is paying its human resources director?¹⁵

But if the Uniting Church is going to run so many welfare and educational services, then it has to be ambitious in its financial activities. In the notorious words of the late Archbishop Paul Marckinkus "You can't run a church on Hail Marys".¹⁶

Turning now to the driver of high Christian spirituality, this driver has three themes: first, recognition that the church has never been static and that there have been continual disagreements over what form the church should take,

¹⁵ Fiona Carruthers "The Good Life", *The Weekend Australian Financial Review*, June 20-3 2007, p 30

¹⁶ Quoted in his *Guardian* (UK) obituary; Marckinkus (1922-2006) handled the Vatican's finances and was involved in two financial scandals; his full role was never investigated because the Italian courts ruled that Vatican employees were immune from prosecution. "Archbishop Paul Marckinkus", *The Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2006/feb/23/guardianobituaries.religion/print>

(accessed 9/22/2010)

second, new thinking on the life and ministry of Jesus and, third, the consequent implications for how “church” should be conducted.

There has never been a “standard” Christian church. Right from the outset, for example, there were differences of opinion between James, brother of Jesus (based at Jerusalem), who saw Jesus as the Davidic Messiah, and on the other hand some of the other disciples, on how the church should be organized. James remained in Jerusalem to administer the growing Nazarene community, while others (such as Paul and Barnabas) went further afield to evangelize the Gentile lands; eventually the Gentiles outnumbered the Jews in the new faith and so created fresh tensions.

In the fourth century Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and so changed again (as explained below). Christianity became the imperial faith. It captured the Empire - or the Empire captured Christianity. Christians had gone from being mainly pacifists to fighting in the Roman army and so needed a new theology of war: how could war be “just”? The Medieval Papacy had a unique prominence in Europe’s Christian community. But throughout all this period, the church kept on undergoing many changes. The Great Schism of 1054 saw the Eastern Orthodox Church create a separate identity in Russia and throughout the known eastern world. Christianity began as a religion of non-violence but by the eleventh century the Pope was calling for mass mobilizations of forces to go on Crusades to oppose the Islamic control of the Holy Land, and to stamp out heresies closer to home. The Inquisition was instituted to keep its form of faith pure. But new movements for reform continued.

Church historian Diana Butler Bass, at the end of an extensive survey of church history, notes:

Some Christians believe our best days are behind us – that Western Christianity no longer commands the influence and respect it once did; that its churches are weakened, its message muted, and its imaginative sway on individuals and the culture diminished. In order to recapture its former glory, they insist, Christians must go back to some halcyon days when the church was orthodox, prayerful and pure. The faith of our fathers will surely save us.

Of course, no one agrees exactly what constituted this golden age; what counts as orthodoxy, spirituality and morality have varied wildly through the last two thousand years. Exactly what are Christians nostalgic for? The early church, with its martyrs and Trinitarian formulations? Medieval Christendom with the glories of Aquinas and Chartres? The

Reformation? Which one, then? The Calvinists? The Lutherans? The Anabaptists? The Anglicans? The Catholic Reformation? Perhaps the best days of the Christian faith were in the nineteenth century, when missionaries spread out over the entire globe. Or perhaps the best Christian world was in the 1950s, when churches were big and families were strong.¹⁷

Perhaps, as she suggests, the best days are yet to come. The Jesus story is far from over.

Jesus is, in commercial terms, the Uniting Church's greatest selling point for this scenario. But the Uniting Church itself is the problem and not the solution. The Uniting Church has to be less focussed on itself and more focussed on Jesus. That has been, after all, the Biblical injunction for two millennia.

An example of this new Uniting Church is provided by Rev Robin Meyers is pastor of Mayflower Congregational Church, Oklahoma (an "unapologetically Christian, unapologetically liberal church in one of the most conservative states"):

Ministers love to believe that when a church thrives, it is mostly their doing. Not so. Our job is to turn loose the community property that is the gospel of Jesus Christ and then remove obstacles that keep people from thriving in such a community.¹⁸

Myers' book lists ten themes in his preaching: Jesus the teacher, not the saviour; faith as being, not belief; the cross as futility, not forgiveness; Easter as presence, not proof; original blessing, not original sin; Christianity as compassion, not condemnation; discipleship as obedience, not observance; justice as covenant, not control; prosperity as dangerous, not divine; religion as relationship, not righteousness.¹⁹

The Uniting Church in this scenario is focussed on the kingdom of God and what the phrase means in today's society. It is a mission-oriented church. It recognizes that its past will not save its future and so new ideas are eagerly sought. Its mission is to spread the good news in a Post-Modern world. This Uniting Church has become smaller to become more Biblical. It sees itself like

¹⁷ Diana Butler Bass *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 308

¹⁸ Robin R Meyers *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 226

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp 13-223

the people of Israel in Exodus: struggling to cope with the desert, with no clear path forward, mixed feelings about returning to what they know in Egypt, and clinging to the hope of a promised land if only they can continue the journey.

It is fluid, flexible, open and not fixated on a denomination or creeds or liturgy. It is open to co-operation with all other Christians but ecumenical activities would be for a common purpose and not an end in themselves. The members speak with confidence (but not arrogance). Each member has a clear idea of what the new Uniting Church is about (even if the perception varies somewhat from one person to another). People act with conviction. They are theologically literate and aware of the new theological trends.

This Uniting Church is motivated by making bold commitments to stimulate progress via setting large goals; it is a risk-taking church. It grows faith wherever life happens.

This Uniting Church is a vibrant competitor in the marketplace of religious ideas. Its members are known for their enthusiasm and commitment. Its members may personally be involved in social welfare work as an outworking of their faith but this Uniting Church itself does not tender for government contracts.

This Uniting Church is much smaller than the current one; it has a minimum bureaucracy, rules and regulations; it has few paid professional staff; it has lower running costs. (There is no evidence in the Gospel that Jesus ever invited anyone into a paid religious occupation or into the role of a religious profession; on the contrary, many of the criticisms he received came from such people).

Most of the present (aging) membership in the current Uniting Church will feel out of place in this new Uniting Church. But they are dying out anyway. Their property assets can be inherited by the new followers. The new followers have little use for the old formal buildings but the sale of such assets can help fund this new Uniting Church.

This Uniting Church takes the Bible seriously – but not literally. It recognizes that modern scholarship has challenged many old theological notions. It also recognizes that Australia is a post-Constantinian society and a multi-faith one.

This Uniting Church does not see itself as a “business”. It does not use the language of commerce (such as “aged care industry” or “charitable industry”) to describe its work. It is offended with any analogy comparing it with the corporate sector. Its members may provide some social welfare services as a direct outworking of their “worship of service” but it is not a “welfare”

organization as such. It does not rely on government funding for the provision of services; it is not beholden to any government. The members carry out their everyday tasks with an enthusiastic Christian duty. The members of this Uniting Church are well-known for the conduct of their behaviour at work, rest and play; they are distinctive by their behaviour (as were the early Christians in Acts: 2).

This Uniting Church's members have stopped speculating over "church decline"; they are focussed on the here and now, and doing what they can, rather than what they can't. Jesus, after all, never said his followers would be numerous or powerful; he only had 11 reliable ones for his ministry; the people he attracted were small children, dispossessed beggars, lepers and social outcasts. They believe that Christians are not called to "successful" – only to be faithful. Just because the message may not be received at the time, does not mean it is not worth sending. This Uniting Church does not worry about "church growth" and celebrating numerical growth. The focus is on quality and not quantity.

This Church has left the building. Or at least it owns very few buildings. (The Early Church also had very few buildings). Christianity is about spreading God's word; not owning property. It rents a lot of buildings and when the needs change so the rental arrangements are changed. Property acquisition (rental etc) is only a tactic. This Uniting Church goes to the people (wherever they may be); it does not expect them to enter its buildings. Additionally, this Uniting Church makes a lot of use of house churches (as did the Early Church).

Among the indicators to look for: revived community/ media interest in Jesus; increased availability of materials (printed, Internet etc) about Jesus; increased interest in the "emerging church" movement; willingness to experiment with new ways being church; "risk", "risk-taking", "fluidity", "emerging church" become common terms in Uniting Church discussions; recognition that repeated Uniting Church "restructures" have been a failure and that far something more fundamental is required; increased informal evangelical co-operation across denominational lines; increased congregational resentment at government control over Uniting Church welfare work; disposal of old Uniting Church buildings; invention of neutral spaces where Christians can share their faith (eg cafes, galleries, house churches); increase in the number of young members with a love of Jesus (and not necessarily with any denominational ties) increase in the willingness and capacity of Uniting Church members to share their faith ("each one reach one"); continued controversy over how the Uniting Church "institutionally"

recognizes congregations/ parishes/ fellowship groups/ members; growing recognition that a nineteenth century church structure will not work in the twenty-first century; desire to look beyond institutional survival and being willing to step forward in faith

The scenario also represents a dramatic overhaul of the current Uniting Church. Management consultant John Treace, in advising how to achieve a business turnaround, has commented that management is often at the core of a failed business and that simply providing existing management with more resources will not solve the problem. “The people who created the problem in the first place will not know what to do to fix it. Providing them with greater resources is a mistake, wastes money and degrades employee morale”.²⁰ This Uniting Church will need entirely new leadership; the old guard will have to go.

Gil Cann of the Australian Evangelical Alliance has reassured church members that “church survival” is not a church’s primary task:

It is totally unnecessary and self-imposed. Certainly God lays no such obligation on any church. Churches are not meant to last forever. They are meant to be effective for the Kingdom while they last.

The days of church “as we have known it” are numbered. Much of our traditional practice of church is unsuited to reaching young people and equipping them to follow Christ in this post-Christendom era.²¹

The challenge is to invest in the church of the future – rather than the future of one’s own church.

Fourth Scenario: “Recessional”

“Recessional” is the music played at the end of church services as people leave the building. The last few decades have seen a great deal of change and the pace of change itself will continue to accelerate. Many familiar institutions have disappeared: why should the Uniting Church be any different? Human institutions rise and fall.

²⁰ “The First Steps in a Business Turnaround”, *The Boardroom Report*, Sydney: Australian Institute of Company Directors, October 2011, p 5

²¹ Gil Cann “Going Out With a Bang or a Whimper”, *Working Together* (Melbourne), Issue no3 2005, p 3

The first driver is low government expenditure. This comes from the end of the dominant Constantinian paradigm that has overshadowed our lives for the two centuries in which Australia has been settled by Europeans. From a religious point of view, it has been the dominant paradigm, colouring many aspects of European and colonial Australian life for about 1700 years. In this scenario the welfare services are still funded by government but government sees no special reason why the Uniting Church itself should be trusted to run them because the Uniting Church is fading away. The second driver is low Christian spirituality. In this scenario, the end of the dominant Constantinian paradigm means Australians decide that – in an increasingly “consumerist” society – the Uniting Church has nothing much to offer them.

The Constantinian paradigm dominates both drivers and so must also dominate this scenario’s early paragraphs. The intention is not to assess the conflicting ideas on church history but simply to argue that in the fourth century the Christian church began to change and a new dominant paradigm emerged.²² In 313 Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. Or perhaps, more accurately, he converted Christianity to the Empire. There continues to be a debate as to why he made the conversion and the depth of the conversion. Christianity was transformed from being a marginal sect to becoming the centre of imperial power. Clergy acquired a senior status within the empire. The church, as an arm of the state, became very wealthy and influential. It continued to flourish in one form or another for a further one and half millennia. The Constantinian paradigm started around the fourth century and ran well into the 20th century (albeit with declining significance).

Becoming the imperial faith meant that the church’s new status had to be reconciled with the church’s traditional understanding of its faith. It was not always an easy journey. After all, the first three centuries of the faith were based on persecution; no one had then assumed that the faith could eventually become the basis of a state religion (especially of the empire that was doing the persecuting). The Rev Lorraine Parkinson lamented this development: “Experience show that the worst thing which can happen to religious dogma is that it becomes linked with the power of the state”.²³ Indeed, Parkinson reminds us that: “...Jesus was not a Christian! It is perfectly clear that Jesus never intended to start a new religion; he remained

²² This paradigm is set out in more detail in: Keith Suter *Global Agenda: Economics, the Environment and the Nation-State*, Sydney: Albatross, 1995, pp 97-107

²³ Lorraine Parkinson *The World According to Jesus...His Blueprint for the Best Possible World*, Melbourne: Spectrum, 2011, p 62

a Jew to the end of his life”.²⁴ She claims that the creation of the Constantinian paradigm meant:

The result was a Christianity whose triumphalism validated the Roman state and sanctioned state-sponsored violence in the name of Jesus. Without question Jesus would have said to the formulators of these doctrines: “Not in my name!”²⁵

The Constantinian church was the world’s first transnational corporation. It had a common language (Latin) and recruited its staff from all levels of society and from across Europe. The staff were often the only people who could read and write in a locality and so they provided basic clerical services to the local population. The church ran orphanages. The church also ran motels. Pilgrims and merchants travelled by road, and monasteries and other religious buildings were built on major roads at a day’s journey apart. Pilgrims and merchants had somewhere safe to stay at night and not risk thieves and wolves by sleeping in the forest or by the roadside. Churches continue to provide various forms of hospitality, such as residential aged care and looking after homeless people. In short, the Constantinian paradigm transformed Europe (and later the world beyond Europe) over the past seventeen centuries.

All three antecedent Churches that entered the Uniting Church in 1977 were derived from the UK. All three had different religious perspectives and methods of church governance but all were imbued with the overwhelming Constantinian paradigm. The presence and importance of church life were taken for granted. The Constantinian paradigm was carried to Australia following the British settlement in 1788 (as it was carried to all other parts of the Empire). Therefore the church was one of the major institutions in Australian life right from the outset of the European settlement. Religious observances began as soon as the colonists arrived. The church also provided a range of education and welfare services, such as schools, hospitals, and orphanages. For the first century of settlement, the church provided more services than colonial governments.

This scenario argues that the decline of the Constantinian paradigm has been a gradual and multi-faceted process. There has not been one single cause. This helps explain why churches have been slow to recognize that their

²⁴ Ibid, p 128

²⁵ Ibid, p 180

institution has been slowly sinking. Some of the indicators that this Constantinian paradigm is now ending are the following include: the church in the Constantinian paradigm was socially, economically and geographically in the middle of a village and people could not (because of a lack of money, vehicles and opportunities) travel far from it; now people live in one location, work (or attend school) in another and have recreation in a third. Because churches were the centre of social activities, this was where people met and found partners, and where their children would attend church youth groups; now all those activities are also provided by many other organizations and even matchmaking sites on the Internet. Sunday was a day of rest and church attendance was the main event; now it is often as busy as any other day, and parents and children have to juggle multiple responsibilities. There is also now far less theological literacy. Most Uniting Church members, for example, are unaware of the *filioque* controversy²⁶ or that the Uniting Church's position on it has changed. Even if parents do attend church, they often cannot encourage their children to do so (except possibly for special events like Christmas); parents are rarely able to pass their faith on to their children or grandchildren. For many young people, attending church is now an unusual activity and so they feel out of place if they do attend; they may have difficulty following the events and may feel bewildered by the proceedings, and will probably feel bored. "The temple of our times is not the church, but the tv".²⁷ The church is no longer where people develop their paradigms/ worldviews on values, ultimate meaning, purpose of life and justifications for their beliefs etc.²⁸ Instead, from the 1960s onwards, that role was performed by television and now the Internet/ social media. Similarly, hymns used to be a major source of musical inspiration; now it comes from Hollywood movies. When churches participate in public debates, such as over welfare or educational standards, the discourse is secular. They speak from their own expertise in the provision of services. Few church spokespersons would say that something must be done "because the Bible says so". Many Australian homes do not even have a Bible, and those that do, leave it unread. Few major Australian politicians

²⁶ Richard Swinburne *Was Jesus God?* Oxford University Press, 2008; Geoffrey Robinson *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2007, pp 107-8, 242

²⁷ Kjell A Nordstrom and Jonas Ridderstrale *Funky Business*, Stockholm: Bookhouse, 1999, p 72

²⁸ Television "soaps" (such as *Days of our Lives*) for some people now fill the need in the public imagination once occupied by medieval morality plays: they provide models of behaviour and may air matters too sensitive to discuss within a family setting.

would quote from the Bible (unlike, say, in making sporting references) because the references would probably not be understood.

The Uniting Church in this scenario is embattled, weary and unable to attract new members. It is on a downward spiral. It is operating in a social context where the Uniting Church is not “front of mind”. Uniting Church members are principally concerned (even if they are reluctant to admit it) that the congregation will still be around for their last remaining years; after that they have little interest in its fate.

Committee meetings at congregational level are focussed on such matters as the need for good preaching, comfortable chairs, modern music, coffee/ tea arrangements etc – these elements may connect with the community but rarely actually bring them into a church building in the first place. “Church growth” seminars are held but little comes of them. Members are too tired and too dispirited; the most ambitious schemes are simply too ambitious for this Uniting Church. This Uniting Church has little involvement in social justice matters; members may have an interest but no longer have the passion and energy for it. Members are unable to encourage their children or grandchildren to attend services. It is difficult to recruit new ministers. Rev John Bodycomb (born in 1931) said in 2002 that he probably would not bother to be ordained today:

Would I fancy being a geriatric-chaplain? Let’s face it: there are some congregations where at least half of the faithful could be my grandparents. Unless I had a great fondness for older people, this would be daunting, to say the least...

And finally, will there be a church to hire me, or are the prognostications of doom about to come true? I’m not sure I want to become part of an organization that is about to wither up and die.²⁹

Church meetings are largely taken up with discussion of reorganization and amalgamation, with programmes being “temporarily suspended”. A lot of time is spent on “restructuring”, matters of procedure, frequency of meetings (usually extending the time between meetings as a way of saving money), roles of office bearers, complaints about a “lack of consultation”. Presbyteries are amalgamated. Evening meetings are difficult to hold because older members do not like going out at night. People are too frail to drive and too frightened to risk public transport.

²⁹ John Bodycomb “Why They Don’t get Ordained”, *Crosslight*, October 2002, p 6

The wider community may no longer be so tolerant of public Christian events. The sharing of faith now needs to be done more carefully to avoid causing offence. Once a public Christian event is suspended temporarily it is very difficult to reinstall it.

American church leaders Tim Celek and Dieter Zander have warned:

*It's been said that Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.*³⁰

The Uniting Church, under this scenario, will test the validity of that warning.

Among the indicators to look for: congregations lose their will to live; Christianity generally is seen as simply a cultural artefact with no real significance; reduction in the number of Uniting Church members; reduction in the number of congregations/ parishes; reduction in the number of ministers; disappearance of Uniting Church Sunday schools; general public lack a general Biblical literacy; failure of evangelism outreach activities; decline of ecumenical Christian organizations and activities; decline in the use of Uniting Church buildings for baptisms, wedding and funerals; unease that the Uniting Church has become a society for the preservation of ancient monuments; increased frailty of members and so fewer people take part in public Uniting Church events (such as Palm Sunday processions); the Uniting Church loses visibility in the public space; increased "busy-ness" of life (with competing priorities) means less time for Uniting Church matters; reduction in the number of Synod/ Presbytery meetings to save time and money; reduction in the number of people willing to volunteer for committees etc; no "new blood", same old names reappearing in official documents; reduction in the number of adult fellowship groups; reduction in the provision of services and programmes; reduction in Uniting Church agencies/ boards; controversies over sackings/ redundancies of Uniting Church staff; reduction/ abolition of church publications; reduction in services provided by Assembly and Synod officials; reduced morale and optimism for the Uniting Church's future; reduced congregational engagement with the wider work of the Synod and Assembly; social definition/ government perception of "Christianity" reduced down to a narrow focus on ceremonial/ sacramental activities (rather than an expectation of a broader Christian social justice engagement in society); increased willingness for Uniting Church officials to talk of the Uniting Church's demise; continued rural depopulation and so a reduction in rural

³⁰ Tim Celek and Dieter Zander *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996, p 93

contributions to the Uniting Church; secular events being held in Uniting Church buildings but these fail to provide a transition process for those people then to attend Uniting Church worship services; increased complaints about Uniting Church ministers being incompetent for coping with the new challenges confronting the Uniting Church; increased Uniting Church attention to the mechanics of “grieving” for a lost congregation, counselling for people whose congregation has been wound up; people are helped to “let go” heal and “move on”; growing realization that Uniting Church buildings are costly to maintain, increasingly difficult to sell, and painful to demolish; increased resentment that Uniting Church officials had failed to “read the signs” of the Uniting Church’s impending demise

This Uniting Church needs an exit strategy. This Uniting Church could first permit the exodus of larger, surviving parishes (and schools and university colleges etc) to seek a separate incorporation, then: (i) the residue to be wound up entirely (with assets, for example, going to fraternal churches in the Global South) or (ii) residue merged *with* another denomination to try to form another new Australian church or (iii) residue to be merged into another denomination and so be blended into that larger organization and thus disappear entirely.

Where to now?

At this point in the usual scenario planning process, the scenarios would be presented to the client. Normally, one would ask: what do the scenarios mean for the organization and how does the organization move from scenario planning to strategic planning? That process cannot be followed here. The Uniting Church lacks a central guidance system to push through any thoroughgoing reform. Few people really think about the Uniting Church in wholistic organizational terms. Since 1977 I have attended many Uniting Church meetings (congregational/ parish, presbytery, synod, assembly) where people have (to use the vernacular) “fought for their corner”. I have seen parishes which refuse to provide money to other parishes, parishes that oppose presbytery attempts to get “their” resources, and which resent “their” money going to synod or assembly projects. What we have, we hold.

A prior step therefore needs to be taken: to encourage debate within the Uniting Church on its future to encourage the membership to recognize the need for change, or at least not to block the efforts of others who wish to change the Uniting Church. This is overall a three-stage process:

- (i) to set out the threats to the current Uniting Church

- (ii) to set out four scenarios on the Uniting Church's possible "futures" to widen the nature of the debate and
- (iii) to devise some recommendations for a strategy for the Uniting Church's transformation.

This article has been about the first two stages. The third stage goes from "possible" futures to a "preferred" one and so is beyond the article's scope. It could, anyway, only be devised once in the fullness of time there is widespread recognition that some form of transformation is required and there is a willingness to change. If there is not some form of agreed action, then the fourth scenario may well slide inevitably into place

In May 2004 the NSW Synod magazine *Insights* editorialized on the Uniting Church's plight:

And yet each congregation is a virtually sovereign expression of the church which rarely has any internal capacity to update itself and which resists change in general (and property related change in particular).

Even where the will to change exists, few congregations are equipped with members with the right mix of project management skills and long-term commitment to guide the congregation through the process of converting property assets from one use to another.³¹

The omens for reform, then, are not good. "Recessional" may fall into place simply because the other three scenarios receive insufficient action by Uniting Church members.

I suggest that Uniting Church congregations reflect on the following questions:

- i) What is going wrong in the Uniting Church: it has the most "open" and "inviting" membership approach of all the churches (for example, it does not have the exclusive communion table of the most Catholic parishes) - and yet its membership continues to decline? What has gone wrong?
- ii) Is this congregation too focussed on managing the present to think about the challenges of the future?
- iii) How can the congregation communicate with a younger generation?
- iv) The Uniting Church has an increasing number of older people; they will be around for a long time but may not be able to give much money in

³¹ "Consider the Possibilities for 'Rebirth', *Insights*, May 2004, p 18

their tithes and offerings - how will this congregation afford to operate with declining offerings?

- v) Are we just recycling the past: doing next year what we did last year?
- vi) Why can't we amalgamate with another nearby congregation?
- vii) If the Uniting Church did not exist, would we now bother to create it?
- viii) Are we just too tired to carry on? The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.
- ix. If this congregation closed down today, would the local community notice its disappearance? Would the community care?

In short, people will not accept "solutions" to problems when they don't see that there is a "problem" in the first place. It is necessary to stimulate debate over the problem before starting to publicize any solution.