

CHURCH FUTURES

The future of the Uniting Church

Scenario planning is a secular business technique for thinking about how the future could evolve. It is not about making predictions or about devising an ideal future towards which one should work.

Instead, the technique encourages people to think more broadly about the possible changes that could occur. It reduces the risk of being taken by surprise by providing warning signs and encouraging the creation of contingency plans.

It can be controversial because it highlights matters that people, particularly at the top of organizations, may prefer to ignore. It can also be uncomfortable because the author is obliged to write material which may not be in accordance with the author's own views but which is none the less suggested by the analytical framework that underpins the technique.

This is not always a technique for the faint-hearted (which helps explain the reluctance in many organizations to use it).

I have just completed a PhD at the University of Sydney on how the Uniting Church could evolve. Four possible scenarios are presented. Each scenario needs a memorable name to encourage people to remember the scenarios and to look for the warning signs:

1. 'Word and Deed' examines how the Uniting Church could become a church of a small number of large parishes providing both spiritual activities and social welfare. The city and regional missions currently provide an example. This Uniting Church could evolve from the amalgamation and consolidation of many existing small and declining congregations. As they say in farming: "Get big or get out".
2. 'Secular Welfare' examines how the Uniting Church could let the congregations just fade away and instead focus on the provision of social welfare (albeit derived from a Christian tradition). Much of the work of the existing Uniting Church is already focussed on social welfare and this is growing, while the congregations are in decline. Most Australians who have contact with the existing Uniting Church do so via Uniting Church agencies (such as in aged or child care) rather than the congregations.
3. 'Return to the Early Church' examines how the Uniting Church could reinvent itself along the lines of the first three centuries of the Christian church. This scenario taps into the 'emerging church movement' and sees a Uniting Church that is sick of the commercial corporate ethos that underpins much the government-financed social welfare work. It no longer wants to work for Caesar and wants to return to the zeal of the missionary era of the first three centuries (before the faith conquered the Roman Empire – or the Empire conquered the faith). It recognises (as did the early Christians) that it is competing in a market place of many faiths.

4. 'Recessional' examines how the Uniting Church could be wound up and its assets dispersed. This scenario examines how the Uniting Church is trying to operate in an increasingly secular society; there is no hostility towards it; it is simply treated with disdain by a population who can see no relevance in its work for them. Under this scenario the Uniting Church could just wither away, and fritter away its resources. It should therefore devise an exit strategy for a coherent wind up with the remaining resources being used in ways that reflect Christian stewardship (such as assisting the rapidly expanding churches in the Global South).

Scenario planning in a business organisation consists of two halves. Scenarios are devised in the first part of the operation (as above). In the second half, the scenarios are presented to the CEO and board (or whoever commissioned the work) and contingency plans are devised in readiness for the scenarios (or a variation thereof) coming into effect.

But the Uniting Church does not have a real CEO and board. It has a variety of councils that provide discussion but generate few concrete binding decisions. There is no overall sense of national direction. While Uniting Church members may be aware of the decline of the Uniting Church, there is no one central point of focus to generate new ways of thinking and the creation of options. Instead there is just a slow chipping away and erosion.

The dissertation's final chapter therefore argues that the Uniting Church has fundamental organizational problems. This helps explain all the "restructures" that have taken place – but the restructures have been localized and lacked a coherent national strategy. The dissertation provides some ideas for a communications strategy.

The dissertation is being made available without charge (as a soft copy) to anyone who would like it. The intention is to help provoke discussion on the deeper challenges facing the Uniting Church.