

# CHURCH FUTURES

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## Press Release

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## Does the Uniting Church in Australia have a future?

### New PhD research project calls church's future into question

Does the Uniting Church in Australia have a future?

That's the key question raised by Dr Keith Suter in his third, PhD dissertation which was released this week.

"On the one hand, the Uniting Church in Australia has a declining number of members, and church buildings are being closed. On the other hand, the social welfare side (in total financial terms) is worth more than most of the corporations listed on the Australian Stock Exchange," Dr Suter says.

Dr Keith Suter has three earned, PhD's with his first doctorate on the international law of guerrilla warfare and his second on the economic and social consequences of the arms race. He has extensive experience in lecturing and teaching and is a regular on the corporate speaking circuit. He is also Foreign and International Affairs Editor on Channel 7's 'Sunrise' program and the resident expert on international issues affecting Australian business and society.

"I have been involved with the Uniting Church when the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches came together to form the first Australian church in 1977. In the business world, 80 per cent of mergers and acquisitions fail – and so the Uniting Church was being formed against the odds," said Dr Suter.

Dr Suter uses the technique of scenario planning, making this the first time this management technique has been used on an Australian church.

"Scenario planning is not about 'prediction' but 'possibilities'. It asks what could happen. It is designed to encourage people and organisations to think about the unthinkable; to think about matters which are not currently on their mental horizons," he said.

The thesis sets out four possible scenarios.

The 'Word and Deed' scenario examines how the Uniting Church could become a church of a small number of large parishes providing both spiritual activities and social welfare. This would require the enforced amalgamation of small churches into 'regional' ones.

"Secondly, the 'Secular Welfare' scenario examines how the Uniting Church could let the parishes just continue to fade away and instead focus on the provision of social welfare (albeit derived from a Christian tradition). Most of the Uniting Church's finances are already focussed on that work, such as in aged care and child care," Dr Suter said.

Dr Suter's third scenario, 'Return to the Early Church', examines how the Uniting Church could react against the corporate managerialism required by government to run social welfare programmes, and instead decide to stop accepting government contracts. The church could reinvent itself as per the first three centuries of the Christian church and so base itself on the 'emerging church' movement. Australians may not like the 'church' but there is still an interest in Jesus," Dr Suter said.

The final scenario, 'Recessional' is one in which the Uniting Church is wound up and its assets dispersed. The Uniting Church would need an explicit exit strategy.

"My dissertation has reaffirmed that the Uniting Church has fundamental organisational problems, not least in lacking a clear line of command," said Dr Suter.

"The Protestant tradition was formed in reaction against the Catholic Church, which does have a more explicit command structure (even if that language is no longer used). Both Catholic and Uniting Churches have problems coping with an increasingly secular society. Australians are not necessarily hostile to Christianity; they are just indifferent to churches and see little value in regularly attending them," he said.

"The challenge for the Uniting Church, then, is in recognizing the seriousness of its plight and taking explicit action. If it just drifts along, then it will gradually fade away," Dr Suter concluded.

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For more information, including a downloadable copy of the PhD dissertation, visit:  
<http://www.churchfutures.com.au>

Dr Suter is also available for media interviews by contacting him directly:  
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The web site: <http://www.churchfutures.com.au> also contains television quality video interviews of Dr Suter addressing his thesis. They are available for download or for use on news web sites.

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