

CHURCH FUTURES

Press Release

Released: 9th December, 2014

Does the Uniting Church in Australia have a future?

Thesis has implications for churches world-wide

A PhD thesis by Australian researcher and commentator Dr Keith Suter, that looks at the future of the Uniting Church in Australia, has implications for all churches that are struggling with declining membership world wide.

Dr Suter has been involved with the Uniting Church in Australia from 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 in thesis, making this the first time this management technique has been used on an Australian church.

“I think the scenario planning technique is one that all churches could use with the American Episcopalian Church undergoing such a process at the moment,” Dr Suter said.

“The four scenarios I’ve devised, may well resonate with churches that are struggling with membership issues. By all means use the methodology and I explain the method within the doctorate, but secondly the four scenarios themselves may provide some guidance to help the debate in other churches in other countries,” he said.

“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,” said Dr Suter.

The thesis sets out four possible scenarios.

The ‘Word and Deed’ scenario examines how the Uniting Church in Australia 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 in Australia 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 in Australia 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 in Australia 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 challenge for the Uniting Church, then, is in recognising the seriousness of its plight and taking explicit action. If it just drifts along, then it will gradually fade away,” Dr Suter concluded.

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:

Phone: + 61 (2) 9358 5847

keith.suter@bigpond.com

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.

Martin Johnson Communications

martin@martinjohnson.com.au

Mob: + 61 (0) 417 028 438