

# **THE FUTURE OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA:**

THE APPLICATION OF SCENARIO PLANNING  
TO THE CREATION OF FOUR “FUTURES” FOR  
THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

**BY KEITH D. SUTER**

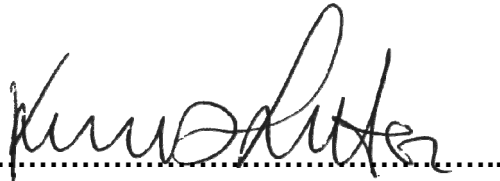
**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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28 March 2013**

# **THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY**

## **CANDIDATE'S CERTIFICATE**

**I certify that the thesis entitled “The Future of the Uniting Church in Australia: The Application of Scenario Planning to the Creation of Four “Futures” for the Uniting Church in Australia” and submitted for the degree of PhD in Religious Studies is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution**

**Signed.....**



**Date: March 28 2013**

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# Part 1

## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION**

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### **SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION**

The dissertation is in nine chapters, divided into three parts. This chapter explains why the dissertation was written and how it was done.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Chapter 3 explains the management technique of scenario planning. This is the first time that the technique has been applied to the future of an Australian church.<sup>1</sup>

Part II consists five chapters. Chapter 4 is an introduction to the four scenarios (“futures”).

Chapter 5 deals with the first scenario: “Word and Deed” and examines how the Uniting Church could become a church of a small number of large parishes providing both spiritual activities and social welfare.

Chapter 6 deals with the second scenario: “Secular Welfare” and examines how the Uniting Church could just let the parishes fade away and instead focus on the provision of social welfare (albeit derived from a Christian tradition).

Chapter 7 deals with the third scenario: “Return to the Early Church”, which examines how the Uniting Church could reinvent itself as per the first three centuries of the Christian church.

Chapter 8 deals with the fourth scenario: “Recessional” (taken from the name of the piece of music played at the end of a church service) in which the Uniting Church is wound up and its assets dispersed.

Part III, containing chapter 9, asks the question “Where to from here?” In a usual scenario planning exercise, the task at this point would shift to the practicalities of following through the scenarios (“futures”), not least the creation of contingency plans. This chapter argues that the Uniting Church is

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<sup>1</sup> The US-based Episcopal Church has now commenced “Envisioning the Future of Faith Formation in the Episcopal Church”, with a draft version tabled in November 2011. The methodology is the same as set out in chapter 3 below. Information is contained on the website: [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org)

organizationally incapable of moving to that next task. Instead it contains some basic ideas to assist the Uniting Church to think about its future.

The Appendix contains information on how I work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in assessing their futures

There is also a Bibliography.

Finally, as to style, I am guided by American Christian writer Laurie Beth Jones:

My reference to Jesus as “he” in the lower case is in no way intended to be or to convey a diminution of his Lordship or Divinity. It is merely an acknowledgement of a more contemporary writing style.<sup>2</sup>

Also on style, I follow the technique of “the Rev Mary Smith” in the first reference, with “Ms Smith” in subsequent references.

## **REASONS FOR WRITING THE DISSERTATION**

Most of this chapter is devoted to explaining why the dissertation was written and how the information was amassed for doing so. Five factors have come together.

One was a research project in which I was involved which examined scenarios for an aging Australia.

A second was the encouragement from Professor Garry Trompf, whom I have known for almost four decades, to conduct additional research in Religious Studies at the University of Sydney.

A third was the growing realization that I had become one of the veterans of the Uniting Church (an accomplishment which I never expected to attain when I joined the then Central Methodist Mission in 1976). It seemed appropriate to reflect on the events through which I had lived.

Fourth, I have been developing a career as a scenario planner and it seemed appropriate that one career should assist another.

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<sup>2</sup> Laurie Beth Jones *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, New York: Hyperion, 1995, p 305

Finally, this chapter ends with the strange story of the rise and fall of the Uniting Church's Strategic Planning Unit (SPU). It was the SPU's failure to tackle the Uniting Church's future that has also helped trigger my interest in doing this dissertation.

### **Alternative Futures for Aged Care**

Religion is big business in Australia. If it were a corporation, it would be one of the biggest and fastest-growing in the country, accounting for more than \$23 billion in revenue in 2005, employing hundreds of thousands of staff (salaried and volunteers) and wielding unsurpassed political and social clout.<sup>3</sup>

The Uniting Church is the largest single provider of aged care in Australia. It is a growing industry. The then UnitingCare Ageing and Disability Service of NSW and ACT sent staff on a training programme in 1999 to examine the technique of scenario planning. This was run by the Australian Business Network (ABN), the Australian version of the then California-based Global Business Network (GBN).<sup>4</sup> The Service decided to explore this technique to see how it could be applied to aged care.

Coincidentally I had been involved in the ABN training programmes from their outset in the early 1990s. Les McDonald, then the service's CEO, discussed with me how I could do such a research programme. I was then working part-time "next door" at Wesley Mission (220 Pitt Street, Sydney) and was not a part of his service. I was also developing a career in scenario planning and corporate speaking in my non-Wesley Mission time.

It was agreed that I would do such a research project on my non-Wesley Mission days<sup>5</sup> and that Steve England, then a member of the service and who had undertaken the course, would be the co-author.

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<sup>3</sup> Adele Ferguson "God's Business", *Business Review Weekly* (Sydney), June 29-July 5 2006, p 42

<sup>4</sup> GBN in the US has since been sold to Michael Porter's Monitor Group. Porter, based at Harvard, is a writer on business strategy, whom we will encounter later in this dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> As will be hinted at from time to time in this dissertation, relations between Wesley Mission and the NSW Synod were not always good and so I had to make sure that I lived a double life, keeping separate my two "church" lives!



This was the first time that scenario planning had been used on the aged care industry in Australia.<sup>6</sup> It was launched in October 2001.<sup>7</sup> I have since used it as the basis of many presentations in my corporate speaking capacity when speaking to the aged care industry and allied service providers.

Coincidentally, the US aged care peak body the American Association for Homes and Services for the Aging used the same technique and produced four similar scenarios.<sup>8</sup> In June 2003 the International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing held its Fifth International Conference and I spoke on both the Uniting Church and American reports.<sup>9</sup>

One by-product of all the research for the UnitingCare document was my realization of just how much trouble the wider Uniting Church was confronting (or perhaps not confronting). Being a member of Wesley Mission - one of the largest parish churches in the world - distorted my perception of the perilous state of the rest of the Uniting Church. Wesley Mission has continued to grow but that cannot be said of most of the rest of the Uniting Church.

Certainly the aged care side of the Uniting Church was flourishing. But many ordinary parishes were not. Some parishes with aged care facilities were running multi-million dollar businesses: the “tail was wagging the dog”. One of the issues generated by the scenario planning report was the need to amalgamate the NSW/ACT aged care boards from around 54 down to eight, with greater care taken over the composition of each board. The old system of local parishes running these comparatively large enterprises meant that weak boards of well-meaning but untrained persons were often out of their depth in the new era of aged care. Local parish administrations had not grown to keep up with the task of running aged care services. This was a reflection of a larger problem: the Uniting Church was running out of members generally. Who will serve on future boards?

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Suter and Steve England *Alternative Futures for Aged Care in Australia*, Sydney: UnitingCare, 2001

<sup>7</sup> “Pioneering Document Plots “Alternative Futures” for Aged Care”, *Insights* (Sydney), December 2001, pp 16-7

<sup>8</sup> American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA) *Services for the Aging in America: Four Scenarios for the Next Decade*, Washington DC, 2002

<sup>9</sup> *Program of the Fifth International Conference: Global Ageing: Partnering in Service Solutions: Sydney: June 2003*, Washington DC: International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing, 2003, pp 4-5, 11

Part of the scenario planning process consists of interviewing people directly involved in the issue being examined. It was fascinating to have private conversations with some Uniting Church figures who also harboured fears about the future of the church they loved and had served for so long.

One person (whom I can't identify here) noted that the forerunners of the Uniting Church went into child care because they had children to be cared for. The Uniting Church after 1977 maintained that role and is also a major player in child care. But the Uniting Church has problems attracting board members because so few members now have children and any direct interest in child care. Indeed, it is possible that, with the exception of the Pentecostals (such as Hillsong, north-west Sydney) all Australian churches now have a larger percentage of their members in aged care than they have children at school

### **Religious Studies, University of Sydney**

At the end of 1981 I was transferred from Wesley Mission to the national Assembly of the Uniting Church, where I was the General Secretary of the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility 1982-5. In those four years I was embroiled in, among other things, the debate over economic justice and the emerging impact of the so-called New Right economic rationalists. At the end of the 1985 I was transferred to Perth to run the Uniting Church's first parish-based social justice body: Trinity Peace Research Institute.

In all this time I maintained my links with Professor Garry Trompf of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Sydney, whom I had first known when we were both at Wesley College, University of Sydney in the late 1970s. With his encouragement I did an external part-time MA (Honours) degree by dissertation, reflecting on the economic justice debate in which I had been involved while at the Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

These links have continued and he suggested that I apply the scenario planning technique to the Uniting Church as an external part-time doctoral dissertation. This current dissertation stands alone and so is designed to be read separately from the earlier MA one.

I am grateful to Professor Trompf for his continued encouragement and guidance. My being linked with the department for so long has been a very rewarding experience.

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Suter "The Uniting Church and Economic Justice: The "Changing Australia" Controversy", MA Hons dissertation, University of Sydney, 1990

## Author's Uniting Church Career

I never set out to become one of the “grand old men” of the Uniting Church in Australia or a Christian social justice activist.<sup>11</sup> I arrived in Australia from the UK in 1973 to do a PhD in the international law of guerrilla warfare.<sup>12</sup> In late 1976, having submitted the PhD<sup>13</sup>, I applied for the position of Director of Administration at the then Central Methodist Mission, Sydney, awaiting the dissertation's examination. I envisaged that this would be a temporary position, while the third-of-a-million word dissertation was examined by three examiners, all of whom were overseas.

In fact, I very much enjoyed my time at the Mission and stayed on when the Uniting Church in Australia was created in June 1977. In retrospect I have been very grateful for my experiences in the Uniting Church and the people with whom I have been privileged to work. It has not always been plain sailing but it has never been boring. I am therefore able to write this dissertation from the perspective of a “participant-observer” (this is set out in the final section of this chapter).

My theological position is well set out by Professor Alister McGrath of Oxford in one of his debates with atheists:

“Spiritually, God is the oxygen of my existence; I would find it very difficult to thrive without a belief in God. Of course, the word “God” needs some clarification. It means different things to different people, even though there are often clear areas of overlap. To clarify: I believe in the God who is made known and available to me through Jesus Christ – that is, a personal God who I believe knows me as an individual, cares for me, and enables and inspires me to live my life with a firm sense of purpose and a deep satisfaction in the service of others”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lucinda Horrocks “Keith Suter: Christian Activism for Peace and Global Change” in Geoffrey Stokes, Roderic Pitty and Gary Smith (Editors) *Global Citizens: Australian Activists for Change*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp 120-38

<sup>12</sup> Life is full of ironies: this was to be jointly supervised by Professor Julius Stone at Sydney Law School; he was “dismissed”/ “forced to retire” (depending on which Stone camp one was in) the month I arrived in Australia!

<sup>13</sup> Keith Suter “An International Law of Guerrilla Warfare: A Study of the Politics of Law-Making”, (PhD dissertation, two volumes) University of Sydney. 1976. This was later published: Keith Suter *An International Law of Guerrilla Warfare: The Global Politics of Law-Making*, London: Frances Pinter, 1984

<sup>14</sup> Alister McGrath “Breaking the Science-Atheism Bond”, reprinted from *Science and Spirit* magazine (2006), [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/172/story\\_17216.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/172/story_17216.html) (accessed November 30 2006). That is my position; the theology in the third scenario (chapter 7) is a different one.

To summarize the four salaried positions I have held within the Uniting Church 1976-2008, I was the Director of Administration 1976-81 at the Central Methodist Mission/ Wesley Mission. This entailed the usual administrative duties of human resources, legal matters and having responsibility for the building's city location on Pitt Street (with the quaint title of Lyceum Property Trust Steward).<sup>15</sup> I also took Sunday services at the Mission's then RJ Williams Lodge aged care facility, Glebe. During this period I also helped create the Uniting Church's Church Records and Historical Society and was its first Treasurer (1977-83).

For the years 1982-5, I was the General Secretary of Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility.<sup>16</sup> I was the first such full-time holder of that position and had to find ways of enhancing the Uniting Church's traditional interest (that is, from the forerunner churches) in social responsibility/ social justice. During that period, the Commission was particularly concerned with economic justice, peace and environmental protection.

For the years 1986-90 I was at the Trinity Peace Research Institute. Trinity Uniting Church owns the central block of St George's Terrace, Perth (the state's most important street). With a large surplus income from its real estate holdings, it decided to spend some of it on creating the first Uniting Church parish-based social justice agency. 1986 was the International Year of Peace and so the parish created a peace research institute and I was the director.<sup>17</sup> I was also a Board member of Wesley Parish Mission, Perth (a voluntary role) and a member of Perth Presbytery.

While I was in Perth, I also did a Sunday night telephone interview each fortnight with Rev Gordon Moyes on his "Sunday Night Live" programme on Sydney's Radio 2GB in which we reviewed international affairs. With my Perth contract coming to an end, he asked whether I would be interested in returning to Wesley Mission and if so he would create a position for me.

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<sup>15</sup> The Mission has roots going back to the 1812 meeting on The Rocks, Sydney of Methodist lay people. It is probably the oldest Methodist congregation in the southern hemisphere (with the possible exception of a parish in India). The original parish underwent a major reorganization in 1884 and acquired the name "Central Methodist Mission", the first in Australia and one of the first in the world (there is a friendly rivalry with missions in England). With its continued expansion it had to acquire larger buildings and so it moved to the Lyceum Theatre on Pitt Street in 1907. See: Don Wright *Mantle of Christ: A History of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984

<sup>16</sup> Keith Suter "The Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility", *Church Heritage* (Sydney), September 1991, pp 95-121

<sup>17</sup> See: Keith Suter *The Triangle of Peace: Trinity Peace Research Institute 1986-90*, Perth: Trinity Uniting Church, 1990

From 1991-2008, I was the part-time Consultant for Strategic Planning, later called Consultant for Social Policy. This vague title enabled me to range over a variety of matters. I was a spokesperson for the Mission on social justice matters, including having a weekly news commentary of Radio 2GB<sup>18</sup>. For 20 years (1991-2011) I also reviewed a non-fiction book each week for one hour on Radio 2GB's highly-rating Brian Wilshire Show. This was a wonderful opportunity to acquire a huge library of free books on politics, business, economics and sociology and a weekly incentive to read at least one book each week for two decades. I stopped doing the programme in 2011 in order to write this dissertation – which reflects some of the diversity of the books I reviewed.<sup>19</sup> I got into the habit of reading broadly while an undergraduate at the University of Sussex. Peter Calvocoressi, who taught me International Relations, said in his memoirs that "...I would occasionally try to leaven the lump of "reading lists" by mentioning a book which had little or nothing to do with what we were studying".<sup>20</sup>

I also handled individual migration and refugee matters, and took up the cases of Mission clients with government departments (such as the Housing Commission and appearing before the NSW Housing Tribunal). I resumed taking services at RJ Williams Lodge, Glebe and was a guest preacher at other Uniting Church parishes. I chaired the Elders of the Mission's evening congregation. I also represented Wesley Mission's Edward Eager Lodge (for homeless persons) on the Presbytery of Sydney (the Uniting Church's regional body for parishes south of the Harbour).

Given that Wesley Mission is a growing part of the Uniting Church, I was often asked to speak on such topics as scenario planning, church growth and future challenges for the church in a variety of parishes in Australia and New Zealand.

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<sup>18</sup> The weekly scripts were also published in local church newspapers and magazines via a syndicate system and have been archived on the Wesley Mission website: [www.wesleymission.org.au](http://www.wesleymission.org.au)

<sup>19</sup> I am not sure how the late Pierre Wack and his Shell colleagues (whom we encounter in chapter 3) would respond to the notion of "post-modernism". Leonard Sweet (whom we encounter in chapter 7) is a professor of post-modern Christianity and has the equally diverse reading style expected by Wack: "It is not enough anymore to read and study the academic superpowers and the scholarly superscholars in one's discipline or field. Roaming, roomy reading is a post-modern imperative. In fact, sometimes one needs untethered reading habits – reading that is spontaneous in origin, promiscuous in range, unpredictable in destination, like a river meandering even as it flows forward". Leonard Sweet *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture*, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999, p 243

<sup>20</sup> Peter Calvocoressi *Threading My Way*, London: Duckworth, 1994, p 46

From the early 1990s Rev Gordon Moyes had hoped that Fairfield Uniting Church in Sydney's west, could become the western end of Wesley Mission. This proposal was blocked by Parramatta Presbytery (in which Fairfield was based). However this was the beginning of a continuing relationship I have had with the parish/ congregation and I continue to be on the roster of guest preachers, including its Christmas Day service. Despite the overall gloomy picture of the Uniting Church presented in chapter 2, this is one local congregation that continues to hold its own, if not actually grow (it has a Sunday School of over 20 children – which is larger than the number of some adults in other congregations).

I was the longest-serving non-governmental representative (1997 until my retirement from the Mission in 2008) on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's National Community Services Data Committee (NCSDC), which published the National Community Services Data Dictionary. I also represented Wesley Mission on the Association of Major Charitable Organizations (AMCO), the peak body of the main NSW charities, and the NSW Council of Social Services.

I also supervised two Doctorate of Ministry (D Min) dissertations done by Uniting Church ministers on various aspects of reaching Generation X. These were written by Rev Dr Pamela McNally (now Anderson) then serving at Wesley Mission<sup>21</sup> and Rev Dr Mele Koloa Fakahua-Ratcliffe then serving at Marrickville Uniting Church.<sup>22</sup> I was also on the faculty of Wesley Institute of Ministry and the Arts, Drummoyne, where I taught the course on Christian Perspectives on Social Reform.

I was also a link between Wesley Mission and the wider Christian church. For example, 2003 was the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Wesley's birth and so Methodist churches around the world commemorated the year; I co-ordinated a number of Mission activities for the year.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "How to Reach Non-Church Generation X? A Case Study of a Lecture Series on Romantic Relationships for Non-church Generation X in Sydney, Australia", San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1998

<sup>22</sup> "Ministry to Generation X: Five Methods the Church Can Use to Reach Generation X", San Francisco Theological Seminary, 2006

<sup>23</sup> Also, see Keith Suter "A Man Whose Message Still Carries Today" *The Age* (Melbourne) June 14 2003, p 2, and Keith Suter "New Religious Order" *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) June 17 2003, p 26

Meanwhile, from January 1991 onwards I was also developing a second career on the other days: scenario planning and corporate speaking. While in Perth in the late 1980s I came across the writings of British management writer and social philosopher Charles Handy. Over three decades ago he foreshadowed a new era of work, whereby people would have a “portfolio” of careers, with a few part-time jobs running simultaneously. I was impressed with his reasoning and decided that I would use the period after 1991 to develop a parallel life in scenario planning and corporate speaking. Coincidentally I was able to assist with ABN’s launching in November 2001 of his memoirs at Wesley Mission’s conference centre on Pitt Street.<sup>24</sup>

### **Other Activities**

I retired from Wesley Mission in 2008<sup>25</sup> and have expanded my other activities in scenario planning, corporate speaking and the media (for example, I am the Foreign Affairs Editor of Television Channel 7’s “Sunrise” and “The Morning Show” and also serve as the channel’s religious affairs commentator).<sup>26</sup> I still do guest preaching at Uniting Church parishes. In early 2010 I held a Crawford Miller Research Fellowship at St Cross College, University of Oxford, which has also helped with my doctoral reflection.

Having once been associated with Sir Alan Walker since 1976, one never completely left his address book. He retired from Wesley Mission in 1978 and went on to work for the US-based World Evangelism for the Methodist Church. Then, after retiring again, he created the Pacific College of Evangelism on the old Uniting Church Burnside estate at Oatlands/ North Parramatta, NSW (now the Alan Walker College of Evangelism). Meanwhile, in 1981 he also created the National Goals and Directions Movement and continued to run it right up until his passing<sup>27</sup>; this was a think tank for stimulating a Christian-values-based debate on how Australia ought to evolve into the future.<sup>28</sup> One of our projects was in the lead up to the 1988 Australian

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Handy *The Elephant and the Flea: Looking Backwards to the Future*, London: Hutchinson, 2001

<sup>25</sup> In 2012 I was appointed the Honorary Secretary of Wesley Mission Sydney, replacing Dr David Greateorex.

<sup>26</sup> I also wrote on religious matters eg Keith Suter “The Decline of the Christian Church in Australia”, *Contemporary Review* (Oxford), June 2004, pp 331-6. I also used to write on religious matters for the “History” page of *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney)

<sup>27</sup> Alan Walker *A Vision for the World: Alan Walker Tells His Story*, Wantirna, VIC: New Melbourne Press, 1999, pp 132-9

<sup>28</sup> Don Wright Alan Walker: *Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide: Openbook, 1997, pp 276-8

Bicentennial, in which we received funding from the Australian Bicentennial Authority to stimulate a debate on how Australians viewed their future.<sup>29</sup> I was the Executive Director from 1981 right up until we wound it up (which we could only do in December 2003, after Sir Alan's death).

Throughout all my time at the Uniting Church I have also had many opportunities to attend a variety of conferences and seminars in Australia and overseas. For example, I served on the World Council of Churches delegations at the three United Nations General Assembly Special Sessions on Disarmament (1972, 1982 and 1988) in New York. All these conferences and seminars have provided educational experiences. This dissertation reflects some of the material I have obtained at these events.

Corporate governance receives several mentions in the dissertation. I have benefited considerably from my membership of the Institute of Directors in Australia (from 1980) and then the new Australian Institute of Company Directors (from 1990). I was the chair of its Environment/ Sustainability Committee for almost a decade beginning in the mid-1990s and I now assist with some of its director training activities. I was also the corporate governance consultant to Health Services Association (NSW) in the 1990s.

Finally, since retiring from the Uniting Church (at least in a paid capacity) and embarking on this doctoral research, I have learned lot more of what is happening in Christian circles than I could get while immersed in the hectic daily immediate business of the Uniting Church. In a far more dramatic fashion, Karen Armstrong in 1969 stopped being a nun and with, many ups and downs, she has created a role for herself as a religious commentator<sup>30</sup> (I was privileged to her speak at Oxford in early 2010). She had to leave the Catholic Church's overwhelming institutional embrace to learn more about faith. In a very minor way, I could say the same thing, especially to learn about the "emerging church" (in chapter 7).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Three publications in total: National Goals and Directions *Visions for Australia, A Vision for Australia: Key Issues 1-3, A Vision for Australia: Key Issues 4-6*, Sydney: Albatross, 1988

<sup>30</sup> Karen Armstrong *The Spiral Staircase*, London: HarperCollins, 2004

<sup>31</sup> This dissertation examines how we "see" and not "see" major developments. When it comes to the "emerging church" (examined in chapter 7), I admit I was slow to "see" its emergence. The NSW Synod magazine *Insights* over the years has written about the "emerging church" but I did not really understand that development until I started work on this dissertation. Only by now going through my old copies of that magazine did I start to "see" the signs of it.



## Scenario Planning Career

I cannot recall when I first heard about the scenario planning technique. It may well have been in the mid-1960s when I was on the finance staff of the UK Ministry of Defence in London. The Pentagon, with Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defence, had been very interested in this technique (this history will be examined in chapter 3).

In 1991, when I returned to Sydney, I deliberately spent more time on the technique. I was recruited by Australian magazine publisher Oliver Freeman<sup>32</sup> to be part of his training team. Freeman had gone to Global Business Network (GBN) conferences in the United States in the 1980s, and he encouraged the use of the Shell/ GBN method of scenario planning in Australia. The Australian Business Network (ABN) was launched formally on November 25 1993.<sup>33</sup> Australia. This method is the basis of the technique used in this dissertation and it is explained in chapter 3.<sup>34</sup>

I also give presentations on scenario planning to The CEO Institute, which is a network of heads of companies and organizations who meet in peer groups in private syndicates on a regular basis to share ideas. I am also a member of the training programme of Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD). I was also an examiner of a PhD on the use of scenario planning in the Australian Government.<sup>35</sup>

In 1993 I was invited to join The Club of Rome<sup>36</sup>. This is an international think tank of no more than 100 persons drawn from around the world. It first came to prominence in 1972 with *The Limits to Growth*<sup>37</sup>, which helped trigger the

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<sup>32</sup> His latest book is Richard Watson and Oliver Freeman *Futurevision: Scenarios for the World in 2040*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2012

<sup>33</sup> When GBN CEO Peter Schwartz sold the parent company to Harvard's Michael Porter and it was absorbed into Porter's private Monitor Group, ABN (though separately registered in Australia) had to change its name. It became the Neville Freeman Group (run by Freeman and media personality Richard Neville).

<sup>34</sup> Regular updates of GBN Australia's work (such as its training conferences and seminars) were contained on the second page of *The ABN Report* monthly magazine published in the 1990s (the magazine also contained "The Suter Column" in which I provided comments on current economic and social policy). Another Oliver Freeman publishing initiative at that time was the republication for the local Australian market of the US business magazine *Executive Excellence* (for which I also used to write).

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Thomson "Scenario Planning in Australian Government", PhD dissertation, University of Canberra, 2006

<sup>36</sup> [www.clubofrome.org](http://www.clubofrome.org)

<sup>37</sup> Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Dennis Meadows *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*, London: Earthscan, 2005

environment debate with its warnings on the consumption of raw materials, increasing pollution and increasing population growth.<sup>38</sup> The Club was formed by Italian business leader Aurelio Peccei<sup>39</sup> and former international civil servant Alexander King<sup>40</sup>. Through networking in The Club, I have become associated with the London-based Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM), a public-private agency spun off from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which also does scenario planning.

Most of my scenario planning work is “commercial in confidence” and so I am not at liberty to discuss particular clients. The 2001 UnitingCare study (summarized in chapter 3) is the most publicized scenario planning project on which I have worked. The then UnitingCare CEO Les McDonald deliberately wanted to stimulate a debate on aged care because the challenges identified were not unique to the Uniting Church but would also affect all other non-governmental aged care providers.

I have worked with a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - most of which I cannot identify - using scenario planning as a way of examining their future options. Many of them do not like what they hear because – to use the phrase that occurs in chapter 3 – they are “unwilling to think about the unthinkable”. I have often been bundled out of meetings as quickly as possible by committee members who do not wish to contemplate the slow demise of their NGOs. It is of little pleasure to me to hear that their NGOs have in fact later collapsed and they did not get a chance to devise a coherent exit strategy.

One NGO to whom public reference can be made is the NSW Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). I have spoken at WCTU gatherings on scenario planning. WCTU is one of the world’s oldest and most famous women’s organizations. The NSW branch was formed in 1882<sup>41</sup>. But it has not had much effectiveness in recent decades and although very wealthy in asset terms (mainly buildings and bequests) it cannot attract younger women to its cause (WCTU has only about 200-300 members across the entire country).

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<sup>38</sup> The most recent addition to this literature is: Jorgen Randers *2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years*, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2012

<sup>39</sup> Aurelio Peccei *One Hundred Pages for the Future: Reflection of the President of The Club of Rome*, London: Macdonald, 1982

<sup>40</sup> Alexander King *Let the Cat Turn Round: One Man’s Traverse of the Twentieth Century*, London: CPTM, 2006

<sup>41</sup> “A Sober Look at How Things Are” *The Sydney Sun-Herald*, August 10 2009, p 15

In 2007 NSW WCTU devised an exit strategy<sup>42</sup>: it wound itself up, sold or donated its assets, and created the WCTU Foundation to provide donations to other bodies opposing alcohol. I am one of the honorary trustees of the new WCTU Foundation. I regard this as a template of an NGO confronting its future and taking appropriate action. Most declining NGOs lack that courage and fortitude, and just fade away. They still end up dying but they may squander their remaining assets in a futile bid to keep ticking over rather than ensuring that the assets be used with more purpose.

## THE ASSEMBLY STRATEGIC PLANNING UNIT

The NSW UnitingCare aged care project attracted the attention of the national Assembly of the Uniting Church housed in the same building at 222 Pitt Street, Sydney. The Assembly created its Strategic Planning Union (SPU) after a re-organization which took place after I had left for Perth.<sup>43</sup> It was designed to meet three times a year to discuss the medium term future (10-20 years) of the Uniting Church. (Rather confusingly the word “Assembly” is used by the Uniting Church in two contexts – both for the triennial gathering of the supreme governing body and the secretariat that handles national matters between those meetings). In retrospect the SPU’s major report was issued to the Ninth Assembly (2000).<sup>44</sup> By the time I met with it, it was already heading towards its death.

I met with the SPU in November 2001 (the month after the UnitingCare report was launched).<sup>45</sup> I explained how scenario planning could be used as a technique for examining the Uniting Church’s future. I was politely received. But nothing of lasting significance came of that meeting. Scenario planning was not attempted by the SPU. Indeed the SPU recommended to the 2003

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<sup>42</sup> The exit strategy consisted of, among other things, selling the WCTU property overlooking Darling Harbour, depositing the files in the NSW State Library, donating historical artifacts (banners, shields etc) to the Powerhouse Museum Sydney, and with odd items of furniture etc sold to raise funds for the Foundation. Ironically the problem was not so much in implementing the exit strategy as in getting the agreement of the remaining elderly members to it in the first place.

<sup>43</sup> “SPU Mission and Mandate” <http://nat.uca.org.au/SPU/about/mandate.htm> (accessed November 12 2003)

<sup>44</sup> “Strategic Planning Unit Report to the Ninth Assembly: Inviting the Church to Engage the Future”, March 2000, Ninth Assembly documents

<sup>45</sup> “What If...A Report from the Final Strategic Planning Unit Meeting for 2001”, *Assembly Update* (Sydney), November 2001, pp 7-8

Assembly that it be wound up<sup>46</sup>, which it was. Evidently there is now no formal unit within the Uniting Church Assembly for thinking about the Uniting Church's long-term future.

What lessons can be learned from this strange episode that will assist this dissertation? First, there is obviously a systemic problem with strategic planning units generally (and not just in the Uniting Church). I was a member of the Wesley Mission SPU around this time and it, too, perished. SPUs were a management trend of the 1980s and 1990s (which coincided with a Uniting Church Assembly re-organization) but companies and organizations had difficulty in getting them to work. The Shell Oil Company (which is examined in chapter 3) invented one of the world's first SPUs and has persisted with it (albeit with a later change in name).

Management writers Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad commented that, in effect, the Assembly SPU's death was similar to that in other organizations:

“Why, we ask ourselves, in so many companies are strategic planning departments being disbanded or dramatically downsized? Why do senior managers seem relatively unperturbed that they spend so little time thinking about strategy and plotting a course into the future?”<sup>47</sup>

The authors then go on to explain why so much “strategy” work fails because the people doing it do not think ambitiously enough. The Assembly's SPU's demise was in keeping with the widespread failure of that management fad.

Second, throughout this dissertation there are many references to the lack of strategic thinking within the Uniting Church. “Strategy” is a focus on the big picture; I have seen very few examples of this type of thinking in the Methodist/ Uniting Church.

Here is an example of the type of strategic thinking that could be done. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander are pastors of California churches specializing in reaching “Generation X” (or the “Baby Busters”: the generation to come after the “Baby Boomers”). Zander says his church has four major challenges:

1. How do we meet the challenge to stay fresh? Because the alternative is stagnation and death, we have to fight against the “same old, same old”.

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<sup>46</sup> “Strategic Planning Unit Report”, documents for the 10<sup>th</sup> National Assembly of the Uniting Church, 2003: <http://assembly.uca.org/assembly2003/reports.SPU.htm> (accessed April 7 2006)

<sup>47</sup> Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad *Competing for the Future*, Boston: Harvard Business School, 1994, pp 280-1

2. How do we reconcile the tensions of buildings and budgets? The institutional components of the “church” are very real, and they’re much more difficult with an age group that has very limited resources. How do we grow larger as a church but grow smaller (ie more community) at the same time? This generation is sceptical of anything “big”.
3. How do we think through and respond to the cultural diversity at our doorstep? How do we serve as a unifying force for the physical community in which we live?
4. How do we give away our ministry? How do we successfully adapt the model we’ve developed at Calvary to other communities?<sup>48</sup>

Another “strategic” question is a quotation recorded in a book by American church growth writer Howard Hanchey: “If this congregation disappeared from this community, what would the community miss or remember about you?”<sup>49</sup> These are worthwhile questions for all components of the Uniting Church (and not just the Assembly).

A third problem for the Assembly’s SPU was the powerlessness of the SPU to do almost anything of substance even if it could generate some new thinking. In most matters, an Assembly committee can at best only stimulate discussion elsewhere in the Uniting Church (principally at synod, presbytery and parish/ congregation “levels”).<sup>50</sup> Unlike an SPU in a corporation, the Assembly SPU could not oblige the other staff to pay any attention to what it was about.

This is another systemic issue. There is no one single commanding authority in the organization to force change on a reluctant organization (such as amalgamating parishes and selling buildings). Rev Dr Bill Loader of the WA Uniting Church wrote a book explaining the basics of Christianity and the future of the church. He looked at some of the options for the church and then commented:

The worsening financial state of the Church is forcing the Church to consider some of these options, but it is far better if they are looked at

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<sup>48</sup> Tim Celek and Dieter Zander with Patrick Kampert *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996, pp 171-2

<sup>49</sup> Howard Hanchey *From Survival to Celebration: Leadership for the Confident Church*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1994, p 115

<sup>50</sup> The word “levels” is in quotation marks because strictly speaking the Uniting Church is not an hierarchical organization: it consists of co-equal councils (examined in chapter 2).

with a view to being more effective than only with a view to saving money.<sup>51</sup>

I agree. But that is not how the Uniting Church operates. As we shall see in this dissertation, the Uniting Church is making ad hoc cuts, rather than doing so as part of a grand strategy. There is no one part of the Uniting Church that can enforce a coordinated series of cuts. Instead, there are just localized cuts as the need arises. This feature will be particularly returned to in chapter 8, in the context of looking at a possible death of the Uniting Church.

A related matter is the shortage of resources for this type of long-term planning at the Assembly. At first sight the SPU seemed an impressive committee, containing both the Assembly President and President-Elect and members drawn from across the Synods. But the project was a task done in the context of many other competing tasks, and my comments are not meant as a personal criticism of the national secretariat or the office holders who were involved. The Uniting Church simply does not have enough resources to put into the Assembly (as I knew when I worked there 1982-5).

A fourth problem is the lack within the Uniting Church of an acute sense of crisis.<sup>52</sup> The continued downward slide of Uniting Church membership since its formation in 1977 is reported on regularly in Uniting Church newspapers. For example in August 2007, the Victorian Synod newspaper said: "The Uniting Church in Australia is losing some of its identification as a faith community, and that's likely to keep happening in the future... The [2006] census showed that over the last 10 years, the number of people who "identify" with the Uniting Church – at least on the census form – has dropped sharply".<sup>53</sup> In short, the Uniting Church is slowly declining rather than dramatically folding up.

At the back of the minds of most members, then, is the fear of the Uniting Church's continued decline - but there is also a lack of a sense of urgency.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Loader *Dear Kim, This is What I Believe: Explaining Christian Faith Today*, Canberra: Kippax Uniting Church, September 2001, p 47

<sup>52</sup> In management jargon, this is the "burning platform" phenomenon – there is a crisis which needs to be dealt with urgently.

<sup>53</sup> "The Church is Losing its "Identifiers"" *Crosslight* (Melbourne), August 2007, p 3

<sup>54</sup> Social historian Shawn Levy has written an account of life in London during the "swinging '60s". I was there throughout the period and this book helped me make sense of all the changes that took place around me during that tumultuous decade. No doubt future historians of the Uniting Church will wonder why the members were so complacent about all the changes that surely they should have noticed happening to the Uniting Church. But when you are in the thick of it, it is difficult to grasp just how momentous are the events. Chapter 8  
*Footnote continued on the next page*

Somehow the organization continues to tick over and people struggle on hoping for a miracle. This is perhaps the triumph of hope over reality.

To conclude, US-based church historian Philip Jenkins, in his extensive study of the conflicts over Christian theology in the fifth and sixth centuries, notes that the feuding resulted in the church failing to note the later rise of Islam. The four centres in the disputes were: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople (Istanbul). The last three are now in countries that are overwhelmingly Muslim in population and tradition, with Christian minorities barely hanging on. He warns: "Communities should not become so obsessively focussed on their internal feuds that they forget what they have in common and fall prey to far more substantial external dangers that they have been too blinkered to notice".<sup>55</sup> That advice also applies to the Uniting Church.

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVER

To conclude, this dissertation is written from the perspective of a "participant observer". The "participant observer" technique is used in anthropology (I am a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London), especially ethnographers who observe the culture-sharing group and become a participant in the cultural setting<sup>56</sup>. The technique is valuable because of the insights one can derive from close contact with a community's values, dynamics, structures and conflicts.

As the foregoing sections have shown, I have been intimately involved with the Uniting Church from its outset and so I have accumulated much material along the way. Given the failure of the SPU's task, the idea began to form in my mind that I could do what the SPU had failed to do: apply the scenario planning technique to the Uniting Church.<sup>57</sup> This would require time, and this became far more available after I retired from Wesley Mission in 2008. I would also be free from explicit links with one controversial part of the Uniting

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below suggests that the Uniting Church is facing an accelerating demise – and yet that is not so apparent to many members at present. Shawn Levy *Ready, Steady, Go! Swinging London and the Invention of Cool*, London: Fourth Estate, 2002

<sup>55</sup> Philip Jenkins *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010, p 17

<sup>56</sup> John W Creswell *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, London: SAGE, 2007, 243

<sup>57</sup> My decision is explained in the newspaper interview with journalist Keith McDonald "Soul-Searching in a Changing Church", *The West Australian*, July 29 2006, p 9

Church (Wesley Mission) and so my comments would not be seen as being yet another hostile round in the continuing tensions between Wesley Mission and the Uniting Church hierarchy.<sup>58</sup>

One risk of the participant observer method is of course that one is too close to the action and so is somehow biased. A fish does not know that it swims in water. The scenario planning technique is supposed to guard against that risk but I am sure it always exists.

I have benefited greatly from the opportunity to preach at a variety of locations and so field test my ideas on the church in general and the Uniting Church in particular while in the pulpit. I have also been able to attend a variety of conferences and other gatherings to test my ideas. I am grateful to all the people who put up with my sermons and conference speeches over the years.

A second risk is that information may accidentally be revealed that should remain confidential. That is a risk in any social welfare organization that handles personal cases and I handled quite a few at Wesley Mission 1991-2008. No private information is used in this dissertation. There were no formal interviews conducted for this dissertation. All of the dissertation's documentation is in the public domain. Of course, the insights gained from all this work have informed the background to this dissertation.

Also very helpful has been my involvement in university colleges over the decades. I lived on the University of Sydney campus 1973 to 1985 and I spent 1986-1990 on the campus of the University of Western Australia.<sup>59</sup> More recently I have had a research fellowship at St Cross College, University of Oxford. It is often in the informal collegial atmosphere that one may gain useful insights.

Finally I have taught part-time on university campuses in one capacity or another continually since 1973. I am currently with the Sydney International Campus of Boston University, USA. Teaching has also helped me to explore my ideas. I have taught courses at the Universities of Sydney and NSW in the

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<sup>58</sup> A flavour of the tensions may be gained from one of the leading protagonists: Gordon Moyes *Leaving a Legacy: The Autobiography of Gordon Moyes*, North Sydney: Ark House Press, 2005. The protagonists for the other side have tended (so far at least) to be more circumspect.

<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey Smith was a student at former Methodist Kingswood College, University of Western Australia and wrote his MPhil dissertation on its history; he had to write gingerly about some of its recent turbulent past. It has now been merged into the adjacent college to form the Trinity College; see: Geoffrey M Smith "Transplanting Tradition: The History of Kingswood College", Murdoch University, 2009 (MPhil Dissertation)



1990s and more recently at Macquarie on, among other things, globalization. I have applied scenario planning to the future of the nation-state and the growth of globalization.<sup>60</sup>

Having set out the background to the dissertation, it is now time to examine the Uniting Church in Australia.

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<sup>60</sup> Keith Suter *Global Order and Global Disorder: Globalization and the Nation-State*, Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003

## Chapter 2: THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the Uniting Church.<sup>1</sup>

The second section looks at its history and growth, how it has managed to survive as an organization and its capacity for innovation.

The final section asks the question: if the Uniting Church were a company listed on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX), would you invest in it? It looks at some of the Church's systemic problems: the underlying issues of whether the 1977 merger was right, and then some of the standard matters for examining any large organization: strategic alignment, morale, assessing its effectiveness, membership figures, property holdings, restructures and branding. That section ends with the greatest crisis so far in the Church's history: the dispute over sexuality.

One introductory comment is that this dissertation is dealing with the future of the church as an organization. It will be a very "secular" approach, with language and concepts more from the world of business than theology.

Second, it is a study of the Uniting Church as an organization as such, rather than "church" in general. There is a separate debate (touched on in chapter 7) about what constitutes a "church". The original term is *ekklesia*, and Christian mission expert Rev Michael Griffiths noted that the translation into "church" in English is misleading because "...it may be used for a building, a congregation, an institution, an establishment, sometimes for a whole denomination as well as the universal church of Christ".<sup>2</sup>

American Christian researchers George Barna and Mark Hatch describe the "church" grandly:

The Church, manifested largely through the local church, is God's chosen instrument for people to experience a taste of His kingdom on Earth and to prepare the way for the return of Jesus before ushering in God's perfect and unassailable rule throughout all creation. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> There is considerable introductory information on the national Assembly's website: <http://assembly.uca.org.au>

<sup>2</sup> Michael Griffiths *The Church and World Mission: Arousing the People of God to Witness*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1980, p 48

primary means through which we are to be ministered to and through which we may minister to others. The local church is to be a source of strength and continuity, a place of love, safety, security and growth for all who follow Jesus – and all who wish to explore the possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

For me a “church” is a community of people who name the name of Christ – and they may do so without extensive buildings or providing welfare services etc. People in that sense make a “church” rather than the physical location in which they meet.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation, by contrast, is examining the denominational organization called the Uniting Church in Australia.

## THE UNITING CHURCH

### History and Structure

The Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated on June 22 1977.<sup>5</sup> It was a memorable day for me.<sup>6</sup> The first Assembly took place in the Mission’s Lyceum Theatre on Pitt Street, Sydney. I was the Director of Administration/ Lyceum Property Trust Steward and so I worked with the NSW Police on handling the crowd control.

Most of the crowd were well-wishers but a noisy minority were not. They were led by the theologically conservative American Rev Dr Carl McIntyre. As *Christianity Today* noted in his obituary “Cantankerous Carl McIntyre protested against nearly every expression of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity, and always with a flourish”.<sup>7</sup> McIntyre opposed “theological liberalism”, most

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<sup>3</sup> George Barna and Mark Hatch *Boiling Point: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ventura, CA: 2001, p 235

<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to the viewpoint Harvey Cox attributes to early church father Cyprian (d 258) that “church” referred to “bishops”: “Cyprian’s equation of the “church” with the clergy has lasted a long time. Until quite recently, when people spoke of “entering the church”, it meant becoming a clergyman. Not until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) did the Roman Catholic Church modify its language to refer to the *whole* church as the “People of God”, but that message has yet to modify popular ideas about what the “church” is”. Harvey Cox *The Future of Faith* New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 97

<sup>5</sup> For a biography of the first Assembly President, See: Sarah Martin *Davis McCaughey: A Life*, Kensington: University of NSW Press, 2012

<sup>6</sup> Rev Bob MacArthur (a former Presbyterian) has published his recollections: Bob MacArthur “The Inauguration of the Uniting Church”, *The Recorder: Newsletter of the Uniting Church Historical Society (NSW/ACT)*, June 2011, pp 2-3

<sup>7</sup> “Fundamentalist With Flair”, *Christianity Today*, May 21 2002, <http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/006/7.52.html> (accessed 24/6/ 2002)

church unions and the World Council of Churches (he was back in Australia in 1991 to try to disrupt the WCC Assembly in Canberra). He arrived outside our building with a few noisy supporters and added a little more colour to an already colourful afternoon. But otherwise he did no great harm and we managed to keep them all on the other side of Pitt Street away from the Lyceum Theatre.<sup>8</sup> They were even less visible at the grand Sydney Town Hall Inaugural ceremony that evening which had over 2,000 people present. ABC Television broadcast the event twice (by popular demand). For those of us present, it was an unforgettable day that passed off very well.

Compared with the long struggle to create the Uniting Church<sup>9</sup>, the day itself was relatively peaceful. By some calculations, the path to union began as far back as 1901. The eventually successful movement towards the 1977 Union began in 1957.

Even at the last moment, when the inauguration was scheduled for June 2 1976, last minute litigation by some Presbyterians delayed the process for about a year.<sup>10</sup> State governments, which had to table legislation to create the Uniting Church within their own jurisdictions, did not want to proceed with the enabling legislation until that litigation was resolved.<sup>11</sup> Presbyterian litigation over particular properties rumbled on for a few years more after the Uniting Church's eventual creation.<sup>12</sup> A key event in this process was the work of the Presbyterian Property Commission headed by the Anglican Mr Justice Kenneth Handley QC.<sup>13</sup> A recent booklet has put the date of the effective beginning of the rebellion against Union within the Presbyterian Church as early as 1974 when the movement towards union became more pronounced.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The day's two events are described in: John Harrison *Baptism of Fire*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986, pp 7-14

<sup>9</sup> An early document of the process that led eventually to union is: *The Faith of the Church: The First Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1959 (1978)

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Best "Delay on the Way", *Crosslight* (Melbourne), June 2007. p 7

<sup>11</sup> For example, the eventual NSW Act is: Uniting Church in Australia Act, 1977, No. 47

<sup>12</sup> Of the three denominations, the Presbyterians had the most consistent history of litigation; see: Malcolm D Prentis "The Presbyterian Church of Australia 1901-77", *Church Heritage* (Sydney), 15, 4 (September 2008), pp 227-43

<sup>13</sup> The history is in the Ferguson Library, Sydney

<sup>14</sup> Bob Thomas *The Crisis of '77*, Box Hill North: PTC Media, 2004

The Uniting Church brought together the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. In fact instead of three becoming one, some Congregational and thirty-six percent of the Presbyterians did not join.<sup>15</sup> The Methodist Church, being centralized at the national level<sup>16</sup>, voted on the basis of all in or all out; the other two denominations had different governance structures and so individual components voted to join or not.<sup>17</sup>

The Uniting Church was the first “Australian” church in the sense that it was the first national church created afresh within the country – rather than being drawn from overseas (such as the Catholic or Anglican Churches). It is a mainstream Protestant Church, which has maintained its links with its sister churches and is ecumenical by virtue of, among other things, establishing links with such bodies as the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia.

The structure of the Uniting Church is not the usual hierarchical one found in most other mainstream churches. The foundational Basis of Union<sup>18</sup> (paragraph 15) explains that the “Uniting Church recognizes that responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the

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<sup>15</sup> This dissertation does not deal very much with the “continuing” Presbyterians who chose not to join the 1977 union. One impact was that the Presbyterians who were in favour of the ordination of women left, and so the remainder were far more conservative and consequently refused to accept the ordination of the handful of women who had been ordained already (including my Oxford colleague Rev Dr Margaret Yee). An insight into that turbulent period may be gained from Noelene Martin *Freda: A Biography of Freda Whitlam*, 2008 (privately published), especially pp 213-35, Whitlam was dismissed as Principal of Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) Croydon. Even more critical is the memoir by Rev Dr Peter Cameron *Heretic*, Sydney: Doubleday, Sydney, 1994; Cameron was the only Australian Presbyterian minister found guilty of heresy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (he preached advocating the ordination of women). Also, see: Mark Hutchinson *Iron in Our Blood: A History of the Presbyterian Church in NSW 1788-2001*, Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 2001

<sup>16</sup> Australian Methodists (Methodist Church of Australasia) had not always been united; see: EG Clancy “The Struggle for Methodist Union in New South Wales”, *Church Heritage* (Sydney), 12, 3 (March 2002), pp 172-197; James Udy “Reunion Within Australian Methodism”, *Church Heritage*, 12, 3 (March 2002), pp 156-171

<sup>17</sup> Among the several studies of the Uniting Church that are not cited elsewhere in this chapter are: Peter Bentley and Philip J Hughes *The Uniting Church in Australia*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996; Ian Breward (Editor) *The Future of Our Heritage*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Historical Society, 1984; David R Merritt *Understanding the Uniting Church in Australia*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Pres, 1978 2002)

<sup>18</sup> See: *The Basis of Union: 1992 Edition*, Adelaide: MediaCom, 2003; Michael Owen (Editor) *Witness of Faith: Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1984; J Davis McCaughey *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980; Keith D Pearson and David R Merritt *Understanding the Uniting Church*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1977 (1983); D’Arcy Wood *Building on a Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986

gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them.” There is a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its own tasks and responsibilities. Christ is supreme in the Church and may speak to it through any of its councils. Each council will recognize the limits of its own authority and give heed to the other councils of the Church. Among the councils are the (local) congregation, (regional) presbytery (which contains a number of congregations<sup>19</sup>), Synod (which tends to be based on State/ Territory lines<sup>20</sup>, with ACT as part of NSW), and the national Assembly.<sup>21</sup>

Paragraph 17 recognises that the Uniting Church’s “law” (regulations and by-laws) is made by humans and should be “...always subject to revision in order that it [the law] may better serve the Gospel”. Therefore the Uniting Church keeps its “law” under constant review. From a secular management point of view, this suggests a nimble organization that is not held back by the desire to keep honouring traditions which may need to be updated.<sup>22</sup>

The Uniting Church is “modern” in the sense it is open to review, has a flexible structure, and it recognizes various layers of “leadership”.<sup>23</sup> The traditional style of leadership is based on power at the top which then percolates down, as in the military, the large corporation and the Catholic Church. Modern management literature argues that all layers of an organization should be given the opportunity for leadership. Indeed the Uniting Church strictly does not have “layers” in a vertical direction and instead has more horizontal structure running across.<sup>24</sup> However, as will seen later in this chapter on the

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<sup>19</sup> In a little more detail: the Presbytery is the regional forum for Congregations to act together; these joint activities include: ministerial settlements (employing ministers), assistance for local activities, assistance with property matters, and the pastoral care of ministers. As a person who has had about three decades on Presbyteries in Sydney and Perth, one has to comment that for a gathering of professional preachers, the proceedings tend to be fairly dull.

<sup>20</sup> As an indicator of “Recessional” (chapter 8), the original Synod of Tasmania is now a Presbytery within the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

<sup>21</sup> The word “Assembly” is confusing because it is both used in the name for the triennial gathering at the national level and in the name for the national secretariat.

<sup>22</sup> For example, while there may be various theological arguments against permitting Catholic Church priests and nuns to marry, there is also the practical one of the resentment that would be generated among elderly priests and nuns that they had to make do without marriage and so why make it any easier for the newcomers?

<sup>23</sup> My Catholic friends also remind me that there is no controversy in the Uniting Church over female leadership: Catholics make saints out of dead women but still will not ordain living ones: Fred Jansohn “Sainthood? Okay Priesthood? No Way” *ARCVoice* (Sydney), March 2007, p 10

“Resolution 84” controversy, this innovative structure is not easily grasped by people outside (or even inside) the organization.

To conclude, in 1997 the Rev RN Gledhill (then aged 93) explained why people should believe in the Uniting Church: “(1) its openness to change and creativity; (2) the freedom to allow its members to express their own varied opinions and convictions; (3) its concern and outreach for the needs of the wider community; and (4) its emphasis on what it believes to be the essence and purpose of the Christian faith and way of life”.<sup>25</sup> Despite some of my concerns expressed in this chapter, I could not put it better myself.

### **The Continuing Union**

The Uniting Church has survived since 1977 without any breakup. There has been a serious rift over the ordination of practising homosexuals and lesbians (the “Resolution 84” controversy, examined later) but the institution has survived a variety of other controversies.

The biggest controversy prior to the Resolution 84 one was the accommodation of Pentecostal/ charismatic parishes/ congregations within the Uniting Church. Some did leave (I was a member of the Perth Presbytery in the late 1980s when the Churchlands parish went its own way<sup>26</sup>) but others stayed, most notably perhaps the Wesley International Congregation at Wesley Mission established by Rev Dr Tony Chi in the early 1980s, one of the largest Uniting Church congregations in Australia (with almost a thousand people each week). Meanwhile “Alpha” evangelism courses, pioneered by Rev Nicky Gumbel at the charismatic Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Brompton, London, are being used by Uniting Church parishes of a variety of theological persuasions.<sup>27</sup>

Three other examples where rifts and resignations could have emerged have been: baptism, ecclesiastical culture and alcohol. On baptism, Rev Dr Robert

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<sup>24</sup> An example of the administrative downside to this arrangement at Presbytery level: who can insist that a chronically unwell chair of Presbytery step down? In a centralized hierarchical company, a sick staff member can be removed but it is much more complicated in the Uniting Church.

<sup>25</sup> RN Gledhill “Stay with the Church” (letter), *Insights*, May 1997, p 3

<sup>26</sup> Strictly, of course, the parish/ congregation does not “leave” because all property is vested in a Synod Property Trust and so the buildings and other assets remain within the Uniting Church. The members leave and base themselves elsewhere; the property stays.

<sup>27</sup> See: Nicky Gumbel *Questions of Life*, Eastbourne, England: Kingsway, 1993

Bos calls the debate over it “that other controversy”<sup>28</sup> (as a reference to the Resolution 84 one). Essentially the debate is over when should baptism occur: either when one accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (and therefore closer to being an adult) or (more traditionally) as an infant when one is welcomed into the family of the church to (hopefully) continue to grow in the faith for the rest of one’s life? The way that Bos summarizes the twists and turns in the debates suggests that this was an issue that touched many raw nerves (not least those of some Pentecostal/ charismatic parishes/ congregations). There were, for example in my experience, some instances where ministers refused to baptise infants (or found convenient ways of evading their duties so that it was not clear that they had done so). As Bos notes, some people did leave the Uniting Church over their dissatisfaction with some of the Church’s views.<sup>29</sup> But the Uniting Church found this matter easier to resolve than that encompassed by the heading “Resolution 84”.

On ecclesiastical culture, in my experience, former Methodist ministers were used to a more centralized system of governance with their holding the power, while former Congregational and Presbyterian ministers were accustomed to more decision-making power resting with the laity. There have been some tensions where former Methodist ministers have gone to former Congregational or Presbyterian congregations.<sup>30</sup> As the years roll by, and younger ministers (without the preceding traditions) enter congregations so that risk has been reduced.

Third, the Methodist and Congregational Churches entered union with a firm view on the dangers of alcohol. Indeed, in the “old days”, Methodist ministers were expected to sign the Pledge with ordination and not to permit any alcohol in the parsonage. I need to declare an interest here because I was the Chair of the NSW Alcohol Awareness Network while at Wesley Mission (1991-2008) and I was a participant in the spirited Presbytery debates 2005-6 when Paddington Uniting Church sought to become the state’s first Uniting Church congregation to have a liquor licence.<sup>31</sup> We lost the debate and just as we

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Bos “That Other Controversy: Debates over Baptism in the UCA, 1977-2003”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 11, no 1 March 2005, pp 1-20. For a fascinating “big picture” view of baptism and evangelism more generally, see: Dean Drayton “The Greening of Evangelism”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 13 no 1, March 2007, pp 18-38

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid* p 5

<sup>30</sup> It would be impolitic (if not possibly litigious) to identify any particular ministers.

<sup>31</sup> “Offering Beer, Wine, Holy Spirit”, *The Daily Telegraph*, June 8 2005, p 21



warned there has been at least one unfortunate alcohol-based incident: the church was used as the location for launching a new brand of vodka.<sup>32</sup>

However, there has been a grudging acceptance that the strict temperance era has now ended. For example, Methodists forbade alcohol from being served in residential aged care facilities but now some residents want it served with their meals and so the Uniting Church has had to move with the times. Even the café on the ground floor of Wesley Mission's Piccadilly Tower at 220 Pitt Street, Sydney (separately owned and run) now serves alcohol. The Uniting Church has become reconciled to the new era without any breakup.

We tend to take this continued unification for granted but it is a solid achievement. The Church is “uniting” rather than “united” to emphasize that the process of unification with other churches is still underway. It is possible for other denominations (or perhaps individual parishes thereof) to join it.

By contrast, looking to the wider church experience on unification, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's autobiography makes grim reading. He was involved in a variety of schemes to bring churches together, notably the Church of South India and his work in the World Council of Churches. One is left with a sense of wonder that any type of church union is possible. Towards the end of his book he notes: “I belonged to a generation which had been given their formative vision of the Christian life and received their Christian calling in an ecumenical setting. But now the majority of those in the Churches had been shaped either in a conservative evangelical setting where visible unity was not seen to be important, or in a merely denominational setting which had deprived them of the opportunity to form deep and trustful friendships outside of that setting.”<sup>33</sup> However, he kept on keeping on: “...I find myself driven back to the simple fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of his Church, that he still prays for it, and that that prayer cannot be forever denied”.<sup>34</sup>

The Uniting Church's eventually successful union is still a comparative rarity among mainline Protestant churches worldwide. For example, some New Zealand Protestants have had a long history (from about the 1960s) of trying to unite, and the closest has been the creation of Uniting Congregations of

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<sup>32</sup> Amy (“Miss Behaving”) Cooper “Party of the Week: Vodka O Passion for Purity Commitment Ceremony Paddington Uniting Church”, *The Sun-Herald*, March 23 2008, p S5

<sup>33</sup> Lesslie Newbigin *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1985. pp 249-50

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p 250

Aotearoa New Zealand (UCANZ).<sup>35</sup> This is composed of individual parishes within Anglican, Churches of Christ, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches which share resources; there is no change in their legal status as such. A far more formal proposed Plan of Union between the Anglicans and Methodists was rejected by the Anglicans in the 1970s.<sup>36</sup>

In the UK, Anglican-Methodist reunion was a major preoccupation for the two denominations during the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the flavour of this debate is found in the official biography of the Rev John Stott (1921-2011).<sup>37</sup> That proposal eventually died in the early 1970s. It was revived again recently but the British Methodists have now rejected amalgamation with the Anglican Church.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the worldwide Anglican Communion is now threatened with division over the ordination in some dioceses of women and gays.

The United Reformed Church (URC) was formed in the UK as a result of the coming together of the Presbyterian Church in England and the majority of the churches in the Congregational Church in England and Wales. It has kept together without dissension and has even been joined by other smaller denominations (such as most of the British Churches of Christ in 1981). The new church has not, however, been able to reverse its numerical decline in both members and ministers.<sup>39</sup>

American Presbyterians split in 1861 over the Civil War (1861-5) and did not manage to reunite until 1983 - to form the Presbyterian Church (USA). In 1843 the Church of Scotland had the "Great Disruption" over the exact relationship between church and state and after, 160 years of separation, leaders of the Free Church of Scotland were welcomed for the first time at the annual Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2007.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Peter MacKenzie "Proposed UCANZ guidelines would bolster partnership" (letter) *Touchstone*, October 2010, p 4

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Davis "Uniting Congregations denomination way to go" (letter) *Touchstone*, November 2008, p 5

<sup>37</sup> Timothy Dudley-Smith *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001, pp 60-2, 138

<sup>38</sup> "British Methodists to join Anglicans?" *Touchstone* March 2010, p 2

<sup>39</sup> David M Thompson "The United Reformed Church in a New Millennium", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, December 2009, pp 61-68

<sup>40</sup> "Scotland Makes Church History", *Crosslight*, June 2007, p 4

Some other churches are, then, in some cases following the Australian example - but at a very slow rate. Therefore by international standards the Uniting Church's continued unity is an exception.

### **Innovation**

All three Churches that went into union had a reputation for social innovation. This has continued within the Uniting Church. Rev Dr John Bodycomb, a former Congregationalist, has summarized the history of his denomination, which began in the sixteenth century, with people who wanted to return to the "New Testament" model of church, away from state interference, and proudly non-conformist.<sup>41</sup> Congregationalists would go on to take strong moral positions on gambling and alcohol, for example.

A Presbyterian example arose in 1927, when the Rev John Flynn created what is now known as the Royal Flying Doctor Service, as an offshoot of the then Australian Inland Mission.<sup>42</sup> His colleague Alfred Hermann Traegar in 1925 created a pedal-powered generator to power radio equipment. He not only had to overcome the harsh realities of the Outback but there was the indifference (if not hostility) of government to overcome. It is now an Australian icon.

Similarly, Rev Alan (later Sir Alan) Walker in 1963 created the Lifeline telephone counselling service.<sup>43</sup> Walker brought together the problem of loneliness in the city, the potential assistance arising from the growing use of the telephone, and his desire to equip laity for effective service and witness. This invention has spread to other centres across Australia (with a national telephone number for the price of a local call: 131114) and then to other countries.

Similarly, the Methodists and Presbyterians ran pioneering residential aged care facilities. The first services (in the nineteenth century) were residential services for homeless people and "wayward girls" (usually unmarried mothers) and then (as people started to live longer) the expertise was

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<sup>41</sup> John Bodycomb *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey*, Richmond, VIC: Spectrum, 2010, pp 1-2, 10-12, 265-7

<sup>42</sup> Ivan Rudolph *John Flynn: Of Flying Doctors and Frontier Faith*, Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2000

<sup>43</sup> See: Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide: Openbook, 1997, pp 160-2

expanded to care for older people in the early twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> The work was often at the local parish level (such as the Albert Street Methodist Mission Brisbane creating the first residential aged care services for elderly Queenslanders at Chermside in 1936) - and often without any government assistance. That parish also created what is now the state-wide nursing service Blue Care.

It was assumed by government as recently as the 1950s that healthy older single people would generally live with their families and sick older people would go to hospital<sup>45</sup> (and die there). Melbourne-based Methodists and Presbyterians in the mid-1950s lobbied Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies to provide government assistance for aged care. He agreed to a generous dollar-for-dollar subsidy, which was later doubled even more generously to two dollars for each church dollar. The Uniting Church is Australia's largest single provider of aged care.

A WA example was the Rev Ralph Sutton of the Perth Central Methodist Mission who saw the pressing need to provide employment, training and rehabilitation for people handicapped by their disabilities. In 1958 he launched the Good Samaritan Industries (GSI) with the slogan "Not a charity but a chance". This is now a multi-million dollar enterprise.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, local-level innovation in social welfare continues. For example, the then NSW Moderator Jim Mein was most taken with ROMEO: Retired Old Men Eating Out.<sup>47</sup> This programme was created by UnitingCare Mayflower Gerringong, NSW originally for widowers but now caters for other lonely retired men. *The Australian Financial Review's* medical columnist reported favourably on an initiative partly done by UnitingCare Sydney North which is encouraging the development of communal sheds for men in retirement

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<sup>44</sup> This, for example, was the path trod by the Sydney Central Methodist Mission; see: Don Wright *Mantle of Christ: A History of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984, pp 125-6. A similar pattern may be seen in Melbourne: Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain *The Challenge of the City: The Centenary History of the Wesley Central Mission, 1893-1993*, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1993 and Brisbane: FR Smith *The Church on the Square: A History of the Albert Street Church*, Brisbane: Uniting Church Centre [no date]

<sup>45</sup> Hal Kendig and Stephen Duckett *Australian Directions in Aged Care: The Generation of Policies for Generations of Older People*, University of Sydney, Australian Health Policy Institute, 2001, pp 5-6

<sup>46</sup> Jim Cain "When Dreamers Dare to Dream... How GSI Has Grown from One Man's Idea", *Western Impact* (Perth), March 2006, p 3; "Good Sammies" also pioneered the clothing collection bins at petrol stations etc.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Mein "Follow ROMEO's example and Get Creative", *Insights*, November 2006, p 2

facilities, which is addressing a mental health issue of keeping elderly male minds active.<sup>48</sup>

The Uniting Church is also the second largest provider of welfare services in the Outback (after the Commonwealth Government). Frontier Services is the major provider of aged care, health and community services, and pastoral support in Outback and remote Australia. It took over the work of the (Presbyterian) Australian Inland Mission, Methodist Inland Mission and the inland mission of the Congregational Union, and works across 85 per cent of the continent's geography.<sup>49</sup>

The Uniting Church has had to come to terms with its heritage of the treatment of Indigenous Peoples. Part of its earlier innovation heritage was appalling (but common for its day); as Rev Dr Alan Russell (himself partly of Indigenous blood) has noted:

Presbyterianism spread not through conversion of the population, but by the repopulation of the countryside by free settlers, many recruited by John Dunmore Lang between 1830 and 1838. These settlers became leaders in the community and successful farmer-graziers in the rural areas of Australia. The hallmarks of their lives became austerity, diligence and prudence. Their record of justice towards Aborigines was appalling, for "these squatters" drove Aboriginal people off their land. They were a damned people, they had no rights and were treated as vermin.<sup>50</sup>

However, in recent decades the antecedent churches and the Uniting Church have been far more innovative in a positive sense. In 1985 there was the creation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), which among other things, organized the January 26 1988 March for Justice, Freedom and Hope.<sup>51</sup> The Uniting Church has more recently often sided with

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<sup>48</sup> Jill Margo "Why Every Man Needs a Quiet Spell in his Shed", *The Australian Financial Review*, April 11 2004, p 15

<sup>49</sup> [www.frontierservices.org](http://www.frontierservices.org)

<sup>50</sup> Alan Gallard Russell "The Search for an Authentic Christianity in a Pragmatic, Religionless Society: A Theological Reflection of the Origins of Australian Society", Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, November 2001

<sup>51</sup> William W Emilsen "The March for Justice, Freedom and Hope, 26 January 1988", *Uniting Church Studies* Vol 16, No 2, December 2010, pp 45-71

Indigenous Peoples in, among other things, various disputes with government and mining companies.<sup>52</sup>

Former Presbyterian Sir Ronald Wilson, WA's first High Court Judge, was also a President of the Assembly.<sup>53</sup> In a separate later capacity he presided over The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Children from their Families and he was a great champion of human rights causes. He was Assembly President for some of the time I was in Perth at Trinity Peace Research Institute and I very much enjoyed our conversations on social justice matters.

More recently – and even more controversially – the Uniting Church has amended its constitution's preamble to acknowledge that "The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers. The Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony..."<sup>54</sup> The Uniting Church is the first mainstream Australian church to take such a radical step. Theologically, on Indigenous matters, then the Uniting Church has moved from one end of the spectrum to the other.

The Uniting Church has also tried to pioneer a role as a multicultural church. Again, given the history of the three antecedent denominations, there were already well-established patterns of missionary service and church planting in the South Pacific and parts of Asia (such as what is now South Korea).<sup>55</sup> Some descendants are now living in Australia and worshipping in the Uniting Church. For example, the NSW Synod decided to create a Korean Commission in 2004 to cater for Koreans; it began with nine churches and by 2010 had 17 and was continuing to expand.<sup>56</sup>

Several church services are therefore conducted in languages other than English. Rev Robert Watson, the then WA Moderator, claimed in 2006 that "On any Sunday at least forty different languages are used in worship across

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<sup>52</sup> For one account, see the memoirs of Rev Dr Noel Preston: *Beyond the Boundary: A Memoir Exploring Ethics, Politics and Spirituality*, Burleigh, Qld: Zeus, 2006

<sup>53</sup> For further information on Wilson, see Antonio Buti *A Matter of Conscience*, Crawley, WA: UWA Press, 2007

<sup>54</sup> For an introduction, see the entire volume of *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, June 2010; and John Michael Owen "Ambling into Error: Against the New Preamble", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 16, No 2, December 2010, pp 11-20

<sup>55</sup> "Descendants Witness the Fruits of Grace in Korea", *Insights*, December 2010, pp 10-11

<sup>56</sup> "The Growing Edge", *Insights*, December 2010, pp 16-17

Australia. Increasingly we see our congregations embracing a range of worship styles and deciding that for some it is better to gather on a Wednesday night than a Sunday morning”.<sup>57</sup> For example, Trinity Uniting Church, Perth has now an Afrikaans-speaking service.<sup>58</sup>

Another form of innovation is the capacity of a parish to find ways to experience revival. While this dissertation will contain various mentions of congregations in decline or having disappeared, it is worth noting that some can come back from the brink of extinction. An example is the former Congregational Church on Pitt Street, Sydney (mother church of Australian Congregationalism). This had virtually collapsed in the early 1980s and Gordon Moyes and I discussed ways in which Wesley Mission could make use of the magnificent buildings on the Pitt Street site one block away from the Mission’s head office. In more recent years, however, the Church has bounced back.<sup>59</sup> Much the same could be said about another Sydney congregation: the Wayside Chapel at Kings Cross made famous by the late Rev Ted Noffs and now run by Rev Graham Long.<sup>60</sup> This too has had its ups and downs and presently is doing very well, with a major building redevelopment just completed.

Another form of innovation (inherited from the Methodists) is the “parish mission” concept. This began in England and was quickly copied in NSW in 1884 by Rev WG Taylor at the Sydney Central Methodist Mission.<sup>61</sup> The idea is that the parish should provide a range of welfare services throughout the week, especially because in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries government was not doing so. This tradition continues to flourish across Australia and has already been encountered in this dissertation. Rev John Wesley, of course, himself was very “modern” in terms of what is now called

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Watson “Anniversary Encourages Focus on Who We Are”, *Western Impact*, June 2006, p 2

<sup>58</sup> “Afrikaans Ministry a Welcoming Success”, *Revive* (Perth), December 2010, p 6

<sup>59</sup> See: Susan Emilsen, Ben Skerman, Patricia Curthoys and William Emilsen *Pride of Place: A History of the Pitt Street Congregational Church*, Melbourne: Circa, 2008. Pitt Street Uniting Church was particularly identified in the 1980s with the campaign against racism and the courageous ministry of Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon; see: Dorothy McRae-McMahon “The White Backlash” in Penny O’Donnell and Lynette Simons (Editors) *Australians Against Racism: Testimonies from the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Australia*, Sydney: Pluto, 1995, pp 83-91

<sup>60</sup> Graham Long *Stories from the Wayside*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2011

<sup>61</sup> The most recent extensive study of Taylor is by former Wesley Mission staffer John Lillyman in his MA dissertation: “Taylor of Down Under: The Life Story of an Australian Evangelist”, Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College Graduate School. 1994

“micro-lending” schemes and the creation of “labour market programmes” for the unemployed.<sup>62</sup>

## THE UNITING CHURCH AS AN ORGANIZATION

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 churches are big business. In Chapter 8 (“Recessional”) there is a survey of how 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 aggregate terms larger than almost all registered Australian businesses listed on the ASX.

This section will examine the Uniting Church in much the same way as one might examine any Australian business.

### Tenor of the Times

A fish does not know it swims in water: it takes its ambient environment for granted. One of the values of scenario planning (examined in the next chapter) is that it makes a person more sensitive to changes in that wider environment.

In 1990 I submitted my MA (Honours) dissertation on the *Changing Australia* controversy.<sup>63</sup> I had been General Secretary of the Uniting Church Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility 1982-5. One of the projects was the creation of the first major ecumenical social justice statement. Three decades ago - although we in the participating churches were not aware of it fully at the time - the economic tenor of the times was changing from Keynesian economics to Neo-Classical economics.<sup>64</sup> Henceforth there would be greater use of the “market” (such as through “privatization”, “corporatization”, and “new managerialism”). The ecumenical social justice statement, heavily influenced by classical Catholic Social Teaching, Anglican Archbishop William

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<sup>62</sup> For example, see: Roy Hattersley *John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning*, London: Abacus, 2002, p 317

<sup>63</sup> Keith D Suter “The Uniting Church in Australia and Economic Justice: The Changing Australia Controversy” Department of Religious Studies, University of Sydney, March 1990

<sup>64</sup> Some of the flavour this period is contained in: David Love *Unfinished Business: Paul Keating’s Interrupted Revolution*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2008, pp 25-133



Temple's writings and John Wesley's sermons on wealth, was heavily criticized by the emerging New Right economic rationalists.<sup>65</sup>

By the late-1980s, it was clear that Australia, for good or ill, was undergoing the biggest economic change for decades and we had produced a statement which in effect reaffirmed the older economic values rather than the newer values of the market. We had unknowingly contradicted the emerging change in the tenor of the times. I still endorse the reasoning of the statement and have been a critic in the last two decades of the New Right economic rationalism. If I had known then what I know now, I would have pushed for the inclusion of an explicit criticism of New Right economic rationalism.

This recollection is included because in general terms it has a bearing on the current dissertation: it is possible not to notice a change in the tenor of the times. By the late 1980s, when I wrote that dissertation, it was clear that the economic tenor of the times had changed and so I researched this change.

What I did not pick up in the late 1980s was a further change in the tenor of the times: that possibly the Uniting Church was in terminal decline.

It is interesting now to look back on the cheery optimism of the early accounts of the Uniting Church. Sure, there were problems, so to speak, but also a confidence that we could overcome them. For example, church historian Rev Ian Breward, writing in 1987, reflecting on the Church's first decade, is an example of that confidence.<sup>66</sup> Rev Ian Tanner, Assembly President 1985-88, has a similar breezy tone in his recollections of the (in retrospect) comparatively trouble-free three years.<sup>67</sup> In 1993 Rev Geoffrey Barnes was equally upbeat in his assessment:

The UCA is an event in Australian religious history of the utmost importance. It brought together for the first time in our history denominations originating in Britain and adapted their respective

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<sup>65</sup> The controversy is also examined in a doctoral dissertation: Ann Wansbrough "Speaking Together: A Methodology for the National Council of Churches' Contribution to Public Policy Debate in Australia" Department of Religious Studies, University of Sydney, February 2000, especially Appendix 2, pp 157-160

<sup>66</sup> Ian Breward "A Decade of Pilgrimage: The Uniting Church from 1977-87", *TOP (Trinity Occasional Papers)* (Brisbane), December 1987, VI,2, pp 3-9

<sup>67</sup> Ian Tanner "The Assembly's Fourth Triennium (1985-1988)", *Uniting Church Studies* Vol 13, No 1 March 2007, pp 56-69

traditions to the Australian context. As the third largest church in the nation it is integral to the future of Australia.<sup>68</sup>

No hint of impending demise there.

At the time, of course, the period did not seem “trouble free” because there were some controversies (such as over the *Changing Australia* ecumenical social justice statement). But compared with the current tenor of the times, they were halcyon days.

### **A Flawed Merger?**

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.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, in more general terms, British management writer Charles Handy noted that “The average life of the Fortune 500 business [that is the US’s biggest corporations] is only forty years”.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Geoffrey Barnes “The Contribution of Congregationalism to the Future of the Uniting Church”, *TOP (Trinity Occasional Papers)*, November 1993, pp 38-9

<sup>69</sup> Lynda Gratton *Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organizations Buzz with Energy – and Others Don’t*, San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, 2007, p 2 This depressing assessment is also found in: Geoff Colvin *The Upside of the Downturn*, London: Nicholas Brealey, 2009, pp 97-8; and in Jeremy Kourdi *Business Strategy: A Guide to Taking Your Business Forward*, London: The Economist, 2009, pp 77-82

<sup>70</sup> Charles Handy *The Hungry Spirit*, London: Arrow, 1998, p 158

<sup>71</sup> John Evans “Globalization and the Uniting Church”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 7 No2, August 2001, p 20

An example of church unity being driven by necessity rather than enthusiasm is the production of the standard hymn books: *Together in Song* and its predecessor *The Australian Hymn Book*. Church historian Rev Denis Towner claims that their production was a “miracle” of church co-operation. Certainly there was a need for an Australian hymnody that reflected local conditions (such as “The north wind is tossing the trees...”, rather than a reference to Christmas taking place in the “In the bleak mid-winter...”). But he identifies necessity as the first reason: “...our old hymn books were in urgent need of replacing and no single Australian denomination could afford such a publication in its own right”.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the churches were in decline and so needed to work together to have any hope of funding a new Australian hymn book.

There remains in my mind the (unanswerable) question of whether the Uniting Church might have had a greater chance of surviving its current turmoils if it had been able to combine much earlier and so been a stronger entity. Ironically the conservative Presbyterians who stalled the progress towards unity themselves have not benefited much from their blocking moves because the “continuing” Presbyterians have not been able to flourish since 1977.

Another question that also cannot be answered is whether Australian churches could have learned more explicitly from the US Christian experience. Current American churches are unusual in their capacity for stability when most of the churches in Europe (other than Poland and Russia) are not growing.<sup>73</sup> It could be argued that European Christianity was weighed down by 2,000 years of church history, whereas American churches could begin afresh from the seventeenth century onwards and so do things in their own way to cater for the American social environment. Australia could have followed the American example but in fact its early churches were derived directly from Europe. By the time that an “Australian” church was created (the Uniting Church in 1977) its antecedent churches were too weighed down by European traditions and so it missed the opportunity for innovation.

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<sup>72</sup> Denis R Towner “Changing Words of Hymns: The Experience of the Australian Hymn Book Committee”, *Church Heritage* 15,2 (September 2007), p 60

<sup>73</sup> There is the irony that the new US opted for a “church-state split” and yet the churches there have flourished better since 1783 than the European churches where they often enjoyed a special relationship with the state (such as the Anglican Church in England and the Lutheran Church in Germany).

Alternatively (as examined in chapter 8 “Recessional”), 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).

Just to add to the air of despondency, there is the fact from the wider world of business that (as noted above) most “mergers and acquisitions” fail:

The burning question remains – why do so many mergers fail to live up to shareholder expectations? In the short term, many seeming successful acquisitions look good, but disappointing productivity levels are often masked by one-off cost savings, asset disposals, pension-fund holidays, or astute tax manoeuvres that inflate balance-sheet figures during the first few years.<sup>74</sup>

Some of those references (such as “pension-fund holidays”) do not apply to the Uniting Church but “asset disposals” (such as the sale of church buildings) certainly do, and they will be examined later in this chapter. The creation of the Uniting Church in 1977, then, was defying to the experience in the contemporary business world.

Given the size of the not-for-profit sector, business publications are paying increasing attention to them. *The Australian Financial Review*’s colour supplement examined the problems of mergers in the not-for-profit sector. Often the passion employees invest in their work makes these mergers even tougher:

They can prove even tougher than big corporate mergers. The obstacles range from the complicated, entrenched federated structures to the care factor – the deep passion employees feel for their individual causes, which make it hard to change course.

The idea of big mergers leaves many non-profit workers cold. Most are generally paid less than for-profit workers, have fewer resources to work with, yet cover a wider range of tasks. Their personal mission to help people is often what keeps the organization alive. In a sense, they are the “shareholders” who need to approve any merger.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Susan Cartwright “Why Mergers Fail and How to Prevent It”, *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, London: A&C Black, 2006. p 105

<sup>75</sup> Tony Featherstone “The Care Factor”, *AFR Boss*, April 2008, p 32

## Strategic Alignment

“Strategic alignment” (in management terms) means getting all the ducks in a row. It means holding together the systems and initiatives within an organization and it is a major way of ensuring consistency of action.

Management writers Robert Kaplan and David Norton have written about the necessity of ensuring that the components of an organization are “aligned with the objectives for the internal process and integrated with each other”.<sup>76</sup>

Churches know all about this (even if the term itself is modern). For two thousand years, the church has been concerned about doctrine.<sup>77</sup> But is the Uniting Church a community without a unity of theological understanding?

Rev Dr Robert Bos (who had some years at the Assembly reflecting on doctrine) has argued that the Uniting Church needs to be much clearer about its doctrine. “Unless we address the issues of doctrine, unity and mission we run the risk of losing touch with our heritage and the roots that refresh us in the faith of the whole church”.<sup>78</sup>

Bos went on to set out (in effect) the four levels of strategic alignment: (i) those things which hold the Uniting Church within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; (ii) there is the Basis of Union, which is the foundational document as to the expression of the Uniting Church’s identity, purpose and structure; (iii) there are formally approved doctrinal statements of the Uniting Church; and (iv) there is the individual liberty of each Church member to have opinions providing they do not contradict the previous three layers.<sup>79</sup>

Bos is concerned that modernism puts the thinking individual at the centre of his/ her own universe, while post-modernism refuses to recognize meta-narratives and sees each person as their own meaning-maker, with sometimes little respect for tradition, proven authorities or even expertise.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Robert S Kaplan and David P Norton *Strategy Maps: Converting Intangible Assets into Tangible Outcomes*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004, p 199

<sup>77</sup> For an introduction to the struggles over Christology, see: Philip Jenkins *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010 A person reading this book may well not blame Uniting Church members for failing to understand the finer points of doctrine given the complexity of the subject.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Bos :”That We May Not Lose the Way: The Place of Doctrine in the Uniting Church 30 Years On”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 14, No 1, June 2008, p 1

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, pp 2-3

<sup>80</sup> Ibid p 3

Bos complained about the lack of commitment to the Assembly's work on this matter. Much of his work on theology at the national level did not percolate down to the parish/ congregational level. (In my estimation he was largely unknown for his work among virtually ordinary parishioners; I cannot remember a single occasion when his name was mentioned at Wesley Mission presumably next door to his Assembly office).

In fact, I think he is being a bit too charitable in his assessment of most Uniting Church members. My guess – this is impossible to verify of course - is that most members of the Uniting Church have little interest and even less knowledge of the matters he raised. There is, in business terms, an almost complete failure of strategic alignment within the Uniting Church.

Kaplan and Norton in another book on strategy talk about the need to make “strategy everyone's everyday job”. Their research of American corporations showed:

There are no meetings at which managers discuss strategy. Our research indicates that 85 per cent of management teams spend less than one hour per month discussing strategy. Is it any wonder that strategies fail to be implemented when strategy discussions don't even appear on the executive agenda and calendar?<sup>81</sup>

My three decades of serving Uniting Church presbyteries certainly support that observation.

Harvard's Michael Porter three decades ago set out some of the basic “strategic” questions that each organization needs to ask:

What is driving competition in my industry or in industries I am thinking of entering? What actions are competitors likely to take, and what is the best way to respond? How will my industry evolve? How can the firm be best positioned to compete in the long run?<sup>82</sup>

I doubt if these questions get asked much at most Presbytery meetings.

Therefore, can strategic planning – as per the management literature – work within the Uniting Church? At the Synod and Assembly there is some talk of it. But at presbytery/ parish/ congregational levels such thinking seems to peter

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<sup>81</sup> Robert S Kaplan and David P Norton *The Strategy-Focused Organization*, Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001, pp 13-14

<sup>82</sup> Michael Porter *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*, New York: The Free Press, 1980, p xx1

out. A key difference is that at the Assembly and Synods there are paid staff; there are far fewer paid staff at the other levels. A corporation can do far more to ensure strategic alignment (if it wanted to) because it has paid staff and so it can instruct its staff to focus on this matter. By contrast, an organization so heavily reliant on volunteers (as in the other Uniting Church levels) relies on their goodwill and what they are themselves willing to contribute. The Uniting Church cannot instruct its lay membership to do strategic thinking.

As noted in chapter 1, the Assembly Standing Committee established the (short-lived) Strategic Planning Unit (SPU) to: “provide visionary direction at a national level including: envisioning the Church and society at least five to ten years ahead and challenging the Church to anticipate and influence change in an intentional and proactive manner that encourages living out the Gospel in a changing world”.<sup>83</sup> I think it found its work irrelevant to the wider Church membership: not because it was unimportant but because the wider membership were not interested in it. In my experience, drawing up grand strategic plans for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in general (let alone churches) is often a waste of time because volunteers have their own agenda.

The problem is, of course, that the Uniting Church is a multi-billion dollar organization. If it were just a few souls gathered (as they were in the church’s first three centuries) then all this “business talk” would be irrelevant. But the Uniting Church is big business.

For example, a 2009 Victorian Synod report warned:

The Uniting Church is facing major structural risks that could impede its effectiveness as well as its ability to offer solutions to the dangers it faces...

The Synod’s standing committee was presented with a list of five major risks in a report from the church’s risk management committee (RMVC):

The risks are:

- weak governance structures
- ineffective property policies
- lack of strategic planning

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<sup>83</sup> Strategic Planning Unit report to the Ninth Assembly, p 32

- damage to the reputation of the church, and
- inherent risks associated with working with vulnerable people<sup>84</sup>

The report noted that the Church's culture of conflict avoidance often resulted in decision-making that is slow and ineffective. Boards have difficulty recruiting skilled people, and the responsibilities of individual committees often overlap. Directors of any Australian company presented with such a report would need to act smartly to address these issues because of their extensive company director responsibilities (which could result in fines or even prison sentences).<sup>85</sup>

However, undeterred about the jadedness at presbytery/ congregational level, the Victorian Synod rolled out its next strategic plan – one has to admire the triumph of hope over experience. “On the Way Together” (OWT)<sup>86</sup> is the new programme. It has all the appropriate jargon:

Discipleship: giving sustained attention to growing disciples;

Leadership: cultivating spiritually formed, visionary leaders

Partnership: seeking opportunities for friend-making, and

Risk-taking: building a culture of inspired innovation<sup>87</sup>

I should imagine that much of this has rolled right over the heads of the ordinary members in Victoria, who remain largely unaware of it.

To conclude, “strategic alignment” usually means a vertical alignment of thinking (top to bottom). The Uniting Church also has a horizontal strategic alignment problem. As a prelude to the “property” and “branding” issues examined below, there is often at the local level a large diversity of parishes/ congregations which do not co-operate together well. This is best seen in the capital cities, where the three main churches that went into Union in 1977 usually try to continue to operate as separate entities.

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<sup>84</sup> “Church at Risk”, *Crosslight*, May 2009, pp 1 and 4

<sup>85</sup> See: Bob Baxt *Duties and Responsibilities of Directors and Officers*, Sydney: Australian Institute of Company Directors, 2012

<sup>86</sup> “On the Way Together on track”, *Crosslight*, April 2010, p 5

<sup>87</sup> More information at: <http://victas.uca.org.au/onthewaytogether>



For example, the only occasion when the three main City of Sydney parish churches came together explicitly as a joint venture of their own (as distinct from co-operating in wider events, such as at Presbytery) was the 1977 lecture tour and “School for Successful Church Leadership” at Sydney with Rev Dr Robert Schuller from the Crystal Cathedral in California. The School for Successful Church Leadership was held at St Stephen’s Macquarie Street, a large sum of money was provided by the former Pitt Street Congregational Church, and Wesley Mission supplied the back-up staff (I was the administrator). The three parishes have since very much gone their own way and have not tried to repeat this type of joint activity.

## **Fatigue**

There is a need to interrupt the narrative of the standard business analysis of the Uniting Church by noting that there is one factor which (I think) dogs the current Uniting Church in a way that is not found in successful corporations: operational fatigue and a depressed morale. This is why staff recruitment and retention are so important for flourishing secular corporations: they offer the chance of bringing in fresh ideas and energy via new staff members.

The Uniting Church has a membership problem in attracting and retaining new blood. The other side of recruitment is retrenchment, sacking and “managing out” the deadwood. The Uniting Church cannot easily do that either (especially to its own members, as distinct from paid staff).

The Uniting Church is asset rich and passion poor. It has an aging membership and many members are just worn out. Their hearts are in the right place but they are just tired out. In 1999 a Victorian presbytery minister Rev Paul Blacker warned that:

Being overwhelmed and tired is a current phenomenon in the Uniting Church. Collectively, our ministers are suffering a form of spiritual chronic fatigue and the demands of “being church” are sapping congregations of energy and vitality. We are busy being people of the church, but are we being Christ’s faithful people?<sup>88</sup>

For example, in 2001 the US Methodist Church drew up a list of ten things “you can do to mobilize your board of church and society” (in other words, the local congregational social justice committee). My immediate reaction is that most Uniting Church presbyteries and congregations do not even have such a

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<sup>88</sup> Paul C Blacker “Its Chronic Fatigue in Uniting Church”, *Crosslight*, May 1999, p 7

committee. Assuming they did, the article went on to list ten actions, such as hosting gatherings at which there could be social justice discussions, promote special offerings for social justice work, and promote issue education.<sup>89</sup> All these are worthy activities (and I spent 1982-5 trying to do this while I was at the Assembly) but three decades on many (but not all) Uniting Church members are much older, tired and frailer. Tragically some have even passed away.

The aging process takes its toll, as management writer Glen Peters warned:

The individual reaches a stage when conservatism creeps into one's thinking and dramatic change is generally avoided. This is not the time to think about revolutionary ideals or changing society or world order.<sup>90</sup>

Unlike a secular corporation with a budget for staff recruitment and retention, the Uniting Church does not have the capacity to "recruit" members in a way that a corporation can. It can certainly employ new staff but not so easily volunteers (who are of course the backbone of the Uniting Church). The remaining members are often, then, tired and frail. I mean no disrespect to them – but one has to face facts. Dwindling members can mean dwindling finances and so can be an indicator of the "Recession" scenario (examined in chapter 8).

Branding is examined below. Branding is not just advertising and logos. It also includes how Uniting Church members and staff interact with the general public. If there is a prevailing spirit of fatigue, then this also damages the Uniting Church's brand. It deters people from wanting to be associated with it.

Another dimension of the fatigue issue is that the Uniting Church lacks an acute sense of crisis. On November 26 2005, Dr Fiona Wood, who had played such a crucial role in assisting burns victims of the 2002 Bali terrorist bombing, spoke at the Australian Red Cross Conference (ARC) in Melbourne. She said that her medical colleagues in WA worked together well because there were no petty arguments because the crisis had united people.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Clayton Childers "10 Things You Can Do to Mobilize Your Board of Church and Society". *Christian Social Action* (Washington DC), September 2001, p 35

<sup>90</sup> Glen Peters *Beyond the Next Wave*, London: Pitman, 1996, p 139

<sup>91</sup> There is no written report of her speech. I was present because I am the Chair of the ARC(NSW) International Humanitarian Law Committee

Her comments got me thinking about the lack of a sense an “acute” sense of crisis within the Uniting Church. There is certainly a sense of “chronic fatigue” (a continuing weariness) but nothing that grips the mind the way that the Bali bombing did. Indeed, official statements, such as the monthly Moderatorial articles in the NSW Synod magazine *Insights*, all have an optimistic reassuring tone to them. For example:

Jim Mein (2006): “...I certainly do not want to be a leader of a dying church. With God’s help, I am playing my part to restore the hope and commitment of our members. I believe we can transform our lives and, in our actions, disprove the death of the church.”<sup>92</sup>

Rev Niall Reid (2011): I have heard it said that the Synod’s work is being determined by financial constraints but I believe it is the work of the Spirit pushing us into a new place, where we cannot be dependent on others to do the work, to be at mission, reflect theologically, and stand up for justice on our behalf.<sup>93</sup>

Reid might be right. Only time will tell. In the meantime, NSW members may well not be getting a full picture of just how dire is their situation.

Of course, a reply is that the role of the leader is to inspire and (in Barack Obama’s words) let people know “we can”. Mein and Reid may both complain that I am being too harsh on them because they are providing inspirational leadership, they are not giving in to any prevailing pessimism about the Uniting Church’s future, and they are hoping to limit the sense of chronic fatigue.

That may be the case. But it still does detract from the advantage that Fiona Wood had in 2002 that she could use the acute sense of crisis to bring out the best in her staff.

Finally, Thomas Bandy provides a radical approach to church development.<sup>94</sup> This US/ Canadian church growth expert<sup>95</sup> has had some well-attended trips

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<sup>92</sup> Jim Mein “Death-Denying Society”, *Insights*, April 2006, p 2

<sup>93</sup> Niall Reid “Change for the Better”, *Insights*, February 2011, p 2

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Bandy *Christian Chaos: Revolutionizing the Congregation*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999

<sup>95</sup> His consultancy company is Thriving Church: [www.thrivingchurch.com](http://www.thrivingchurch.com)

to Australia, not least under the auspices of the Uniting Church.<sup>96</sup> His material is certainly challenging.<sup>97</sup>

His basic question is: “What is it about your experience of Jesus that the community around you cannot live without?”<sup>98</sup> This means that each member needs to be a local evangelist. It also means they need to have an answer to that question. If there is not a ready response, then that person is not yet ready for church leadership. Being willing to serve on a committee etc is not enough – a person needs to be able to answer that basic question. If a person cannot answer the question, they are still welcome in the church – but as a guest because they are not yet ready for membership.

Bandy’s analysis of the Uniting Church in his Australian presentations is (I think) very accurate. But I wonder whether his proposals are simply too challenging for the Uniting Church: too radical, requiring too much commitment and needing too much energy. Perhaps the current membership is too fatigued for his type of enthusiasm.<sup>99</sup>

To conclude, perhaps instead of all the business jargon about “excitement”, “challenge” and “risk-taking”, most Uniting Church members now just want “comfort”. The notion of the “comfortable pew” arose in the early 1960s in Canada, where the Anglican Church invited former Anglican and by then agnostic Pierre Berton (a leading Canadian journalist) to present an “outsider’s” view of the Church. It became a very controversial best-seller. It presented a picture of a complacent Church out of touch with the times and unwilling to adapt. “...A generation from now will still another writer in another book be able to say that the church in the ‘sixties continued to cater to the comfortable pew by ignoring the uncomfortable issues that lay just below the surface?”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> The Uniting Church hosted him in July 2004 and produced two CDs from the two days: *Thriving Church: Leadership Conference*, Melbourne: Commission for Mission, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

<sup>97</sup> An example of an enthusiastic response is by the then NSW Moderator Jim Mein “A Revolving Door Church”, *Insights*, May 2006, p 2

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Dave Hall “Faith for a Future”, *Crosslight* (Melbourne), September 2004, p 9

<sup>99</sup> I have not been able to find any formal assessment of the overall impact on the Uniting Church of the Bandy presentations (in person and via his extensive material). Anecdotally, I have heard of ministers who have been fired up at the inspirational conferences but then confronted with the reality of their parishes when they got home.

<sup>100</sup> Pierre Berton *The Comfortable Pew*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966, p 13

New Zealand Methodist Rev Jim Stuart picked up this theme in 2007:

I fear Methodism today has traded love of God for a comfortable pew and well-oiled functioning institution. When we discover the love of God, we only do so in the midst of the human struggles of the world. We cannot separate our thoughts about God from our love for God.

This is what drove Wesley out of the comfort and security of Oxford into the chaos of pain of industrial England. The love of God experienced deep within his heart was a kind of madness, it would not let him settle for anything less than what he came to call the parish of the whole world. To want the world to stay the same is in itself not only a betrayal of the love of God and acquiescence to the status quo, it is a denial of the very existence of God.<sup>101</sup>

### **Running a Business - Without Recognizing It**

Given the Uniting Church collectively is one of the country's largest organizations there is a lack of commensurate skill in running such a large organization. In 1994, one of the editorial team of the NSW Synod magazine commented:

One explanation is leadership turnover: presbytery leadership changes too often to develop expertise in handling crises. When they can't manage hard issues, they dodge them; manipulate situations instead of dealing with them.

Importantly, presbyteries aren't well resourced to work alongside parishes. They're stuck in a trouble-shooting rut.

Some presbyteries are well served by regional education officers providing information and training about education activities and the needs of the church. And presbytery officers provide conflict resolution, mediation and facilitation skills, as well as management and administrative leadership.

But some presbyteries are simply not effective in authority...

The church needs to develop skills at all levels of government but particularly for presbytery leadership...

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<sup>101</sup> Jim Stuart "The Madness of a Loving God", *Touchstone*, September 2007, p 10

Management is not everything, but there are skills that need to be brought to the task. God is not honoured by sloppy work.<sup>102</sup>

This criticism – made almost two decades ago – could still be made today. The Uniting Church is still hindered by a lack of management skills in the day-to-day running of parishes/ congregations. By contrast, the social welfare agencies are usually run more professionally by lay people who have made careers out of this type of work.

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

One of the consistent problems for all not-for-profit organizations is their inability to assess their effectiveness: are they still “making a difference”? If an organization is not clear about its vision and mission, it may not be able to assess how well it is going because it has no goals towards which to work and benchmarks against which to compare progress (or lack thereof).

Chapter 8 “Recessional” shows how, for much of its existence, the church in Europe and the European colonies was a major player in helping to run the state and so it had little to worry about assessing its effectiveness: its existence was a “given”.

In recent times, however, there has been some soul-searching as to how a church may assess its effectiveness. Clearly it must survive financially but it has to go beyond this. Historian RB Walker showed how the Wesleyan Methodist Church in NSW in the nineteenth century was even then troubled about the “wastage of full members who ceased to attend class meetings and were struck off the roll”.<sup>103</sup> “One matter that troubled the Methodists in the late nineteenth century was the relatively small number of souls they garnered in relation to the multiplication of their agencies”.<sup>104</sup>

Over a century later, much the same debate is still held within the Uniting Church. The position today is perhaps even more complicated because of the different definitions of “membership” and how “membership” is calculated (examined next).

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<sup>102</sup> Stephen Webb “Editorial”, *Insights*, August 1994, p 4

<sup>103</sup> RB Walker “The Growth and Typology of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in New South Wales, 1812-1901”, *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol 6, No 4, December 1971, p 339

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid* p 339

There is also confusion about how to measure the long-term, effectiveness of preaching. Paul Sangster wrote a biography of his father Rev Dr WE Sangster (1900-60), regarded as one of the greatest Methodist preachers in world history. He had a remarkable ministry, including preaching at Central Hall, Westminster to congregations of about 3,000 people. But his son lamented:

A preacher's ability cannot be measured by the size of his congregations, by his own reputation, or by the skill of his published sermons. It can only be measured in the lives of his people, and God alone knows what my father's preaching achieved.<sup>105</sup>

In the meantime, it is worth noting that a lack of strategic thinking, clear benchmarks etc, means that an organization may simply "keep on keeping on" and have a "maintenance mentality". In other words it is seeking simply to stay in existence rather than try to move forward. It cannot "move forward" because it lacks a clear sense of direction. Indeed, one of the indicators of the "Recessional" scenario is that the Uniting Church is simply fighting rearguard actions (such as amalgamations and retrenchments) simply to stand still.

### **Membership Figures**

According to the Assembly website:

The Uniting Church is the third largest Christian denomination in Australia. It has around 2,800 congregations, 51 presbyteries and seven synods. Uniting Church members number 300,000 while 1.3 million Australians claim an association.<sup>106</sup>

Behind this bland statement, there is a spirited debate over the accuracy of the membership figure, due partly to the alleged decline in Uniting Church membership derived from resignations over the Resolution 84 controversy. There is also a decline due to members passing away.

Essentially, there are only three ways a set of membership figures can move over time: up, down and holding steady. While a few parishes/ congregations can claim to be doing well individually and possibly even expanding, there is no claim at all that the aggregate membership total is increasing.

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<sup>105</sup> Paul Sangster *Doctor Sangster*, London: The Epworth Press, 1962, p 278

<sup>106</sup> "Uniting Church in Australia: Vital Statistics", <http://www.uca.org.au/about.htm>, accessed 4/04/2011

Therefore the debate is over the “decline” versus the “holding steady” positions. Most comments fall into the “decline” category.<sup>107</sup> One of the ways in which the membership figure is arrived at is via the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) which is conducted in a variety of Christian denominations in the Australian census years. NCLS is sponsored by Catholic, Anglican and Protestant churches (including the Uniting Church).<sup>108</sup> In the 2006 one, Assembly Secretary Rev Terence Corkin was pleased to note that the Uniting Church figure was holding steady.<sup>109</sup> Doubtless the debate will continue over how the current figures are to be interpreted.

However, the long-term trend remains worrying because of the overall aging demographic profile. In other words, one may enter a congregation as (say) a guest preacher (as I do) and an immediate glance around the building will inform one that most of the people here on this Sunday will not be around in (say) twenty years time.

The demographic profile trend issue is important for a number of reasons. One, as suggested above, the congregation may be slowly dying off, one member at a time. It is dispiriting for clergy to perform so many burials and so few weddings and baptisms. It also dampens congregational morale when they attend more burials of their friends than other more joyous congregational occasions. It adds to the feeling of winding down.

Second, members may also become frailer and so not be able to attend services or assist with organizing events. Events such as fetes and other fund-raising events not only help to raise money but they also help to keep the congregation in the public eye. There may also be some governance issues, such as having sufficient people to attend committee meetings etc. A related concern is that committees overwhelmingly containing older people may deter younger members from joining because they will feel out of place, and so their young perspectives may be missing in the deliberations.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> For example, Christian researcher Peter Bentley (and Executive Secretary of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations) has argued that a reason for the decline is the Resolution 84 controversy; see: Peter Bentley “These Statistics Don’t Lie – Church Members have Left in Droves”, *Catalyst* (Sydney), December 2007, pp 12-14

<sup>108</sup> [www.ncls.org.au](http://www.ncls.org.au)

<sup>109</sup> “UCA Puts Break on Decline: Survey”, *Western Impact*, April 2006, p 3

<sup>110</sup> One of my NGO experiences is that the committees now consist of retired people for whom a committee meeting is their main event of the day. Previously many of these people would have had other responsibilities to attend to (such as earning a living) and so the meeting used to be brisk; now the meetings drag on because there is no longer any need to finish quickly.



Third, older members, by virtue of being financially cautious and having a longer time in which to acquire assets, are the financial backbone of the Uniting Church. They may well remember the Church in their wills but this form of “deferred giving” is only done once. The loss of members means a reduction in long-term congregational funding.

Fourth, a young visitor to the congregation may find few contemporaries in the congregation and so decide not to return the following week. A young person, no doubt made to feel very welcome by the congregation, will feel out of place. Young people are the transmission chain along which faith travels. If the chain is somehow broken, then it is much harder to revive (or rediscover) the faith among later generations who would need to start from scratch.

Fifth, an older congregation may be more resistant to change: “The older we get, the more we tend to stick to the friends and practices we know and feel comfortable with”, says Rev Dean Eland, the Victorian synod’s mission and resourcing manager. “That makes us less inclined to be outward-looking and outward-reaching”.<sup>111</sup> John Wesley once said that the “world is my parish” – for many older people nowadays the reality is “the parish is my world”.

Sixth, there is also a geographical dimension involved. The Uniting Church has tended to have strong roots in the rural sector.<sup>112</sup> But as rural and remote Australia loses its population (for example, children are not interested in inheriting the family farm and the property becomes part of a larger, more industrialized agricultural sector), so the Uniting Church is particularly wounded.

Finally, as a prelude to the examination of property, older members may have a nostalgic connection with a particular building. In New Right “economic rational” terms it might make more sense to close some buildings and blend congregations together. But there is also a risk that if a building were closed, then the alienated members might decide to stop attending Uniting Church services entirely: they will not go to a different site.

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<sup>111</sup> “UC’s Down: It’s Not Out, But It’s Old”, *Crosslight*, August 1997, p 1

<sup>112</sup> This is partly a reflection of the Presbyterian heritage. There were no Presbyterian convicts (the Scots did not use transportation). “...the Scotsman who came out here were free, young, well-educated Scotsmen on the make – younger sons out to make their way in the world. They were Army officers, lawyers, bankers, investors. They dominated colonial society. They were the Upper Class and most of the western [NSW] squatters were Scottish Presbyterians”. Kenneth J Cable *Religion in Colonial New South Wales*, Eastwood NSW: Baptist Historical Society, 1993, pp 37-8

To conclude, 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.

### **Property/ Asset Management**

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.<sup>113</sup> There is no central planning, no centralized funding and no way of developing one.

Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods are all responsible for their own finances.<sup>114</sup> 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 system for redistributing wealth and resources across the Uniting Church. For example, in NSW there are areas where Church buildings 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.<sup>115</sup>

Various people at various times have raised this problem but all without much success. John Glover was the Queensland Synod Property Office in the early 1980s and he commented:

Nationally and overseas we have not the financial capacity to grow churches, yet we have millions of dollars of capital deployed in areas of depopulation, where properties have become under-utilized or redundant.

It is not just sapping our capital resources as a national church, but also our resources of manpower associated with the maintenance and

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<sup>113</sup> Parishes/ congregations are responsible for their own finances. Synod boards of finance and property (their precise titles vary from one synod to another) have only a limited role in checking on their finances. They do not have, for example, enough staff to audit individual parish accounts.

<sup>114</sup> Each Synod has a Property Trust which holds the properties. But the Trust does not actually conduct operations. In legal terms, this is a “bare trust”, which means that it enters into a contract with a third party on behalf of the constituent Uniting Church body, on the instructions of that body; it brings no “independent mind” to the task. Government departments often wonder just who is running the show.

<sup>115</sup> “Church Stalls Where Need is Greatest”, *Insights*, May 2004, pp 15-6

operation of properties which no longer are producing a substantial divided for the Kingdom of God.<sup>116</sup>

Over two decades later and on the other side of the continent, Uniting Church member and former chair of the WA Lotteries Commission Lloyd Stewart also complained about this lack of financial co-ordination:

No other organization maintains under-utilized capital assets or continues to provide poorly resourced activities. From the business sector through to charities, organizations are busily doing a cost benefit analysis of their buildings and other assets to ensure maximum usage is obtained. Return on capital is not just a nasty commercial fact of life, it applies to any group seeking support from society. It is no longer acceptable to appeal to members asking them for money to patch up old buildings sitting on valuable land that could be used more effectively. This is not evangelism but rather poor stewardship.<sup>117</sup>

The Uniting Church probably has more church buildings than any other denomination.<sup>118</sup> Historian Geoffrey Blainey thinks that “The Methodists... probably erected more church buildings than any other sect...”<sup>119</sup> The Presbyterians and Congregationalists were also major land holders. 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).

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<sup>116</sup> John Glover “Are We One-Teacher Schools?” *Life and Times*, May 15 1983, p 4

<sup>117</sup> Lloyd Stewart “There Must Be a Better Way” (letter), *Western Impact*, July 2005, p 10

<sup>118</sup> Australian problems with church property began early; Joseph Orton was troubled with them as early as 1832: Alex Tyrrell *A Sphere of Benevolence: The Life of Joseph Orton, Wesley Methodist Missionary (1795-1842)*, Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 1993, pp 91-2

<sup>119</sup> Geoffrey Blainey *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Melbourne: Viking, 2003, p435

Much could be written about church property.<sup>120</sup> Eight points need to be made here. First, concern about property is not unique to the Uniting Church. Historians Felipe Fernandez-Armesto and Derek Wilson have pointed out:

The trouble with religious buildings is they set in concrete ideas about God which are, or should be constantly developing. More than any other type of material aid to faith, a church fixes the attitudes of those who frequent it. It pours them into a cultural mould in to which some fit better than others. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars of religion were appalling but they did come to an end. By contrast, the Catholic-Protestant confrontation in art left Europe (and the Americas) dotted with buildings which continued to scream defiance at each other. Baroque Catholicism's exuberant delight in colour and writhing forms, its reaffirmations of pomp and pageantry, the cult of the saints, the centrality of the mass and the permeation of the material by the holy contrasted sharply with Protestantism's treatment of the church building as merely a convenient auditorium where the elect could gather to hear the proclamation of the word.<sup>121</sup>

The Uniting Church, then, is a continuation of a very old tradition. Chapters 7 and 8 explain both the background to this concern with real estate and how the new emerging church is not quite so fixated on property.

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. As suggested by the above quotations, this is poor stewardship of resources. A Victorian Synod report revealed that "maintenance of buildings is now the third largest budget item for local congregations across the church".<sup>122</sup> 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.

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<sup>120</sup> Much has been written, for example: British Council of Churches *Report on Christian Stewardship and Church Buildings*, London, Autumn, 1986; James F Cobble *Developing an Effective Church Safety Program*, Melbourne: Ansvar Insurance, 2007; Robert Gribble *Living Stones: Theological Guidelines for Uniting Church Worship Buildings*, Melbourne: Victorian Synod, 1997; Ron Johnson *Protecting People Protecting Property: Risk Management and Insurance Manual for Churches*, Melbourne: Ansvar Insurance [no date]

<sup>121</sup> Felipe Fernandez-Armesto and Derek Wilson *Reformations: A Radical Interpretation of Christianity and the World, 1500-2000*, New York: Scribner, 1996, p 113

<sup>122</sup> "A Coup for Church Property", *Insights*, October 2005, p 4

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<sup>123</sup> 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).<sup>124</sup>

Fourth, discussion about selling buildings often creates controversy. Rev Niall Reid as NSW Moderator found this out in 2008 when he suggested that there be some rationalization of Uniting Church buildings.<sup>125</sup> Former NSW Moderator Margaret Reeson came to Reid's defence. A common opposition is: "You can't sell this building because my grandparents/ great grandparents etc built this". Reeson traced the acquisition of Church buildings and argued that most were actually acquired through community efforts (rather than a single family's relative(s)) and so are "...owned by us all".<sup>126</sup> She is being very rational – but disposal of buildings can bring out the irrationality in members.

Fifth, a property consultant to the Victorian Synod set out three options for congregations merging and considering the disposal of surplus property: (i) they can try to continue to use the existing buildings (which will be expensive) (ii) the merged congregation can opt to use one and sell the other (virtually guaranteed to be a time-consuming controversy); (iii) they can sell all the existing properties and use the proceeds to build a modern worship centre to meet all the new building standards on occupational health and safety etc (which is probably the most expensive of the three options).<sup>127</sup> All this seems too hard and so many congregations may well prefer to limp along with what they have.

Sixth, some Uniting Church buildings are heritage-listed and so this creates a further complexity. A 2005 survey showed that almost half of the Tasmanian Uniting Church buildings are heritage-listed (44 per cent); the percentage was

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<sup>123</sup> *A Theology of Property for a Pilgrim People*, Melbourne: Property Board of the Victorian/ Tasmanian Synod, September 2008, p 3

<sup>124</sup> Ironically an "edifice complex" often sets in and so the new denomination decides to acquire its own building and so attention shifts from evangelism to building fund-raising schemes.

<sup>125</sup> Niall Reid "Sell Property to Further Mission", *Insights*, November 2008, p 2

<sup>126</sup> Margaret Reeson "Great-grandfather's Gift: Origins of Church Property in the Uniting Church", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 15, No1, June 2009, p 31

<sup>127</sup> Dean Merlino "The Place of Property", *Crosslight*, July 2010. p 12

lower elsewhere. The survey said that the Church nationally had 2,301 buildings with at least 329 heritage-listed: one in seven.<sup>128</sup> Serving on Presbytery committees for three decades has revealed to me some macabre property moments. For example, some local Sydney councils which have no interest in religion nonetheless make it difficult for churches (Uniting and all the others) to dispose of properties if this means a change in the streetscape. The councillors may not have anything to do with Christianity but they do like the look of traditional church buildings in their neighbourhood. Thus churches are required to in effect maintain historic monuments rather than flourishing worship centres.

Seventh, the 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.

Finally, there is the wider issue of how the Uniting Church makes decisions on a “consensus” basis. This means that meetings can be deadlocked by a large minority. This blocks easy decision-making. Ideally, a congregation should be on one site with one set of property commitments. But getting groups to agree to dispose of old properties is often very difficult. The Uniting Church is still – after all these years – carrying a lot of surplus properties.

## **Restructures**

The Uniting Church has had several major restructures. The first major one at the national Assembly Office occurred within six years of the Church’s creation. The third President Rev Rolland (“Rollie”) Busch wanted to have the Assembly Office operate in a more coherent way, with greater co-operation between the Commissions.<sup>129</sup> Less than fifteen years later there was yet another major restructure of the Assembly.<sup>130</sup>

Meanwhile, the mid-1980s Assembly restructure was simply the first of other major restructures at various other parts of the Church. For example, Tasmania, which was a separate Synod in 1977, was later amalgamated into the Victorian Synod to become a presbytery. Later on the Victorian Synod

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<sup>128</sup> “Heritage UCA”, *Crosslight*, September 2005, p 3

<sup>129</sup> William W Emilsen “On Being Very Visible: Rollie Busch as a Public Theologian”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 14, No 1, June 2008, pp 50-2

<sup>130</sup> The Carlton Consulting Group *Assembly Structures Review Group: Report to the Assembly Standing Committee*, Sydney: Uniting Church Assembly, August 1997

restructured its thirteen mainland presbyteries to become seven regional councils (with Tasmania as an eighth), with effect from January 1 2008. As usual, the restructuring was marketed as a step forward.<sup>131</sup>

Another change came with the abolition of something that technically never existed: the “parish”. There is no reference to “parish” in the Basis of Union and instead it speaks of “congregations”. But Uniting Church work at the local level often revolved around parishes. 22 years later, reality matched legality. Rev John Lamont, at Balwyn Heights, reflected on why the change was necessary: “Among the reasons: some tensions remained unresolved between congregations within parishes; ministers were sometimes unable to work together in teams; operating a large parish structure meant an administrative overload; financial resources are dwindling; and overall the church is declining numerically”.<sup>132</sup>

Lamont also hinted at “restructure fatigue”:

The regulations now have so many changes that I am beginning to wonder which regulation supersedes which in the bulging folder that is my book of regulations...

It requires enormous energy at all levels of the church to adapt to continual structural change, and the hope is that we have it right this time.<sup>133</sup>

Regulations were also a concern of the first Assembly President Rev Davis McCaughey, 1977-9. Historian Alison Head in a biographical article noted that “One of the most pressing problems to surface during these first years was that of administrative structures”.<sup>134</sup> She also included a variation of one of his famous – and oft-repeated - sayings (which he once told me in a conversation): half of the regulations could be removed and it would not matter which half went. She went on: “One concern of the President was that too much time was expended in meetings and administration by ministers, thus reducing time spent in preparation for worship and preaching”.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> “New Presbyteries, New Possibilities”, *Crosslight*, May 2007, p 4

<sup>132</sup> John Lamont “We’ve Come Full Circle!” *Crosslight*, May 1999, p 7

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* p 7

<sup>134</sup> Alison Head “David McCaughey: First Uniting Church President 1977-79”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 12, No 1, March 2006, p 7

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p 8

My guess is that even more ministerial time is now spent in meetings and administration, with “restructuring” a continuous theme in that work.<sup>136</sup>

Victorian member Kaylea Fearn pointed out in 2009:

In the Vic/Tas Synod, we are all aware of the shortage of ministers, particularly those of us who are going through the tedious process of calling a new minister.

However, with the recent changes in Presbytery structures, I am struck by how many ordained ministers are working in Presbytery administrative roles.

While those roles are no less important than ministerial roles, surely there are many competent lay people within our church that can take on some of the Presbytery positions and free up ordained ministers to meet the shortage in congregational ministry.<sup>137</sup>

Incidentally, there is also a greater burden on laypeople involved in Uniting Church administration. Much of this need not be of the Uniting Church’s own doing: for example additional government regulations on work health and safety, building requirements, and child care regulations. No doubt all the additional rules were well meant but they add to the increased workload of the Uniting Church.

Another aspect of this fixation on structures, restructuring and administration is that the Uniting Church is very much a process-driven church. It seems that the Church cares less about the actual decision made, and cares more about how the decision was made, such as how many people participated in the decision-making.

Is there a deeper issue at work here – and one that has a bearing on the “Recessional” scenario? Participating in over three decades of Uniting Church discussions over “structures” and “restructures”, I wonder whether these discussions are a committee-led response to the continuing decline of the Uniting Church. It is a lot easier to sit on a committee and rearrange people and positions than it is to, for example, go out and knock on doors, so to speak, seeking fresh members and so boost recruitment through home visitation and evangelism.

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<sup>136</sup> For example, at the all-day Presbytery of Sydney meeting on February 10 2007, our major item of business was discussing whether or not there should be a change in the frequency of NSW Synod meetings.

<sup>137</sup> Kaylea Fearn “Shortage of Ministers” (letter), *Crosslight*, March 2009, p 14



Since I was one of the victims of the first major restructure at the Assembly Office (with the amalgamation of the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility being down-graded into the new Commission for Mission in the mid-1980s<sup>138</sup>) then I might be accused of being jaundiced in my assessment of restructures. However, in retrospect I have benefited from being pushed out and so I hold no grudge against the management consultants and church officials who did that restructure.<sup>139</sup> Incidentally, there is a wide cynicism about the use of outside management consultants to provide advice in the secular business world.<sup>140</sup>

To use everyday language, do all these restructures simply represent a rearrangement of the deckchairs on the *Titanic*?

Finally, changing structures without changing underlying values and corporate culture does not produce church growth. This has been shown in the Uniting Church since the first major one in the mid-1980s – and yet the restructures continue. Management writers Yves Doz (INSEAD management school) and Mikko Kosonen (former head of strategy at Nokia) have set out this warning:

Despite the painful realities of reorganization, senior executives sometimes still entertain the illusion that organizational structures can be changed at the stroke of a pen on an organization chart. This is not true. The underlying personal networks are remarkably resilient, perhaps as resilient as cognitive schemes. In many organizations social networks survive – and outlive – reorganizations.<sup>141</sup>

If restructuring has such a poor record, why does the Uniting Church keep doing it? Possibly the Uniting Church's perception of reality is distorted by one or two paradigms or both. First, as hinted above, the Uniting Church is possibly slowly fading away and the restructures are a way of delaying the inevitable fate (which is chapter 8's Recessional scenario).

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<sup>138</sup> Even the title of the unit later got changed: National Social Responsibility and Justice in 2003 became UnitingJustice Australia; see: <http://nat.uca.org.au/unitingjustice/aboutUJA/UJLaunch.htm> (accessed 26/09/2006)

<sup>139</sup> Life is full of irony; the firm that in effect pushed me out of the Assembly in 1985 was WD Scott; I now serve as an Officer of Wesley Mission Sydney alongside the other lay Officer Mark Scott, who is the grandson of the firm's founder Sir Walter Scott.

<sup>140</sup> See: Martin Kihn *House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time*, New York: Time-Warner Books, 2005, pp 77-8, 175; Lewis Pinault *Consulting Demons: Inside the Unscrupulous World of Global Corporate Consulting*, New York: HarperCollins, 2000

<sup>141</sup> Yves Doz and Mikko Kosonen *Fast Strategy: How Strategic Agility will Help You Stay Ahead of the Game*, London: Wharton School of Publishing, 2008, pp 184-5

Second, the restructures suggest that the Uniting Church is running itself as a consolidated diverse business - in other words, an organization of many activities but all broadly under the one roof. If this is the case, then the Uniting Church is only fooling itself as to what restructures can achieve for it because it is too diversified with so many loci of authority that no one central system of command is applicable (very different, say, from the Coca-Cola company).

## **Branding**

Is the Uniting Church a “house of brands” or a “branded house”?

A “house of brands” means that a corporation (such as the Mars Family) may own several different products and consumers may be unaware that they are, in fact, consuming goods from the one corporation (Mars Bars, M&Ms, Maltesers, and Pedigree brand of pet foods). The consumers do not care; they just want the products and not an explanation as to who is the ultimate owner.

A “branded house”, by contrast, means that all the products clearly come from the same corporation.<sup>142</sup> This gives the overall organization a higher public visibility, with each component mutually reinforcing each other. However, this can be a risky strategy because a scandal (say) in one component or with one product could tarnish the overall brand, and so damage other components/products which are not directly associated with the scandal.<sup>143</sup>

The issue of brands is very important in business:

A brand is the critical connecting point between a business, its customers and other stakeholders. If reputation is the sum of all you stand for – as demonstrated by your behaviours – then brand is the shorthand message for all the promises of that reputation. It is the message carrier, functionally and emotionally, for all the products or

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<sup>142</sup> Somewhat controversially the University of Sydney has embarked upon a transition from a “house of brands” to a “branded house”, with individual departments etc losing their own identities and instead all displaying the same logo. See: Stuart Rees “University’s One-Size Brand is Ill-Fitting”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 15 2010; <http://www.smh.com.au/action/printArticle?id=1693169> (accessed 21/1/2011)

<sup>143</sup> Wesley Mission Sydney had an experience of this in the year 2000. Each parish Mission is a separate entity. However I had to field many NSW complaints when the completely separate Wesley Central Mission Melbourne got embroiled in a controversy regarding its new Superintendent Rev Timothy Langley and his attempt to create a “safe injecting room/medically supervised injecting centre”. Information was also leaked from within that Mission to the Victorian media about his \$160,000 “salary package”.irate members of the NSW general public rang the Mission in Sydney complaining that we were wrong to permit the drug experiment and pay staff so much money. Of course, we in Sydney had no say in any of this.

services and all the subsequent experiences of those products or services, whether by actual usage or from passed on experience and referral. That's why the thumbprint of the brand should be on everything you offer and deliver.<sup>144</sup>

The most well-known – and one of the most valuable - brands in the world is Coca-Cola's.<sup>145</sup> The total cost of the contents of the soft drink is minute compared with the price it commands at the outlet: this difference is a reflection of the value of the Coke brand. A counterfeit drink could taste the same but could not command the same price as the "real thing".<sup>146</sup>

The "brand" is abstract: it is a cluster of promises, reassurances, remembrances and relationship. A holidaying parent, say, with a group of squabbling, noisy, hungry children can walk into a McDonald's store anywhere in the world and be reassured of the same quality service as they would get in the store "back home".<sup>147</sup> Brands simplify purchasing decisions: you know what you are going to get.<sup>148</sup>

As a multi-billion dollar business, the Uniting Church ought to be concerned about its own branding. But from an outside business point of view, the impression would be that branding is too complicated and its lack of consistency is yet another manifestation of the lack of strategic alignment.<sup>149</sup>

There is more to brands than just logos but the issue of logos is a good example of the lack of strategic alignment. In 1975, a Brisbane-based group drawn from the three Churches that were to form the Uniting Church were

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<sup>144</sup> Kevin Luscombe, Graeme Chipp and Peter Fitzgerald *Marketing in the Board: Questions Directors Might Ask and What to Look For in the Answers*, Melbourne: Growth Solutions, 2007, p 2

<sup>145</sup> See: Humphrey McQueen *The Essence of Capitalism: The Origins of Our Future*, Sydney: Sceptre, 2001, pp 170-187

<sup>146</sup> The former President of the Coca-Cola Company has emphasized the importance of the company's brand, Donald R Keough *The Ten Commandments for Business Failure*, New York: Penguin, 2011, pp 141-3

<sup>147</sup> A quick way to destroy the MacDonald's brand would be to let every franchise do whatever it wanted.

<sup>148</sup> Virgin is another well known brand; for information on how Richard Branson also views the importance of brands see: Richard Branson *Business Stripped Bare: Adventures of a Global Entrepreneur*, London Random House, 2008, pp 41-93

<sup>149</sup> For example, according to a survey commissioned by UnitingCare Ageing NSW Western Region: "Just 4 per cent of prospective aged care clients recognize the UnitingCare brand and six out of ten existing residents don't know they're living in a Uniting Church aged care facility". Erin Tennant "Scant awareness for UnitingCare Brand", *Insights*, July 2005, p 10

given the task of designing, among other things, the Uniting Church logo. “Thirty years on, the Uniting Church logo they designed is one of the most recognized Christian symbols in Australia”.<sup>150</sup>

However, under that logo there is a large number of other logos used by Uniting Church agencies and parishes (each parish Mission, such as those in Sydney and Melbourne, for example, has as its own logo and each Uniting Church school also has its own). In marketing terms, then, the Uniting Church is very bad at “brand management”.

An example of this problem is that most Australians have no idea just how big the Uniting Church is. In total the Uniting Church’s welfare work is probably about four times the size of the Salvation Army’s. But the Salvation Army’s brand management is so expert that most people would think that it is bigger than the Uniting Church. This gives the Salvation Army an advantage in matters like being “top of mind” for fund-raising.

There was a discussion above on the disputed membership figures. When it comes to employees, by contrast, the figures are far more accurate because they are taken from the payroll and are reported to the Australian Taxation Office. In employment terms, the Uniting Church (largely due to its social welfare work) is not only much bigger than the Salvation Army but it is even bigger than BHP: “The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is responsible for more than 76,500 jobs. That makes it bigger than BHP (50,000 jobs). It’s a really quiet achiever”.<sup>151</sup> However, most people inside and outside the Uniting Church would be unaware of this.<sup>152</sup>

Another factor pushing for a unified Uniting Church welfare approach was national, state/ territory government preference for dealing with a small number of large organizations rather than a large number of small

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<sup>150</sup> “Paraphernalia Process Produces Lasting Legacy”, *Revive*, June 2007, p 11

<sup>151</sup> “It’s Enterprise UCA”, *Crosslight*, September 1999. p 1

<sup>152</sup> Much the same could be said about NZ churches: “Despite public perceptions of the Church as a marginalized and fading institution in New Zealand, new figures released last month show religion makes a huge contribution to our economy. Religious organizations are numerous and diverse, they employ a large number of paid and unpaid staff, and when their involvement in schools and social services are added to their figures, they are one of the top five players in the not-for-profit sector”. Julia Stuart “Churches Major Force in NZ Economy”, *Touchstone*, October 2007, p 3

organizations, for example submitting tenders for labour market programmes.<sup>153</sup>

In 1982-5, when I was at the Assembly, there were initial discussions on what could be done to create greater co-operation between the various Uniting Church welfare bodies. Eventually UnitingCare was created, with a secretariat based in Canberra. It was launched on July 17 2000, with 400 agencies forming a national network of caring services which interact with the lives of about a million Australians each year.<sup>154</sup> UnitingCare Australia operates as the peak Uniting Church body on community services matters and is a national agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church. It has its own logo.

This means that the logos are actually proliferating: Uniting Church, UnitingCare and often the local agency (such as the Wesley Mission ones in the capital cities). This is not good brand management (and certainly would not be tolerated in the Salvation Army.)

### **Resolution 84**

“Resolution 84” is the shorthand title for the greatest crisis - so far – to hit the Uniting Church: the acceptance into specified ministries of those living in committed same-gender relationships.<sup>155</sup> The Resolution was adopted by the 2003 Assembly and reflected the stalemate reached on this matter. The Assembly decided that it could not adopt a national policy on whether practising homosexuals and lesbians should be ordained as ministers, and so left the matter to each presbytery to decide on each application in each context.

The Church did not actually split over the issue of whether practising homosexuals and lesbians should be ordained but some members left. Assembly President (2000-3) Rev James Haire really did fear that the Church could split over this matter.<sup>156</sup> The controversy generated more heated debate in all parts of the Uniting Church than any other matter in its history. For example, an Assembly report on this subject had 8,000 responses from all

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<sup>153</sup> The technical term here is a “mature” industry; an “immature” industry is a large number of small providers, while a “mature” one is a small number of large ones.

<sup>154</sup> “UnitingCare National Launch”, *UnitingCare Circular* (Canberra), December 2000, p 5

<sup>155</sup> For an inside account of this controversy, see: John E Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, Vic: PenFolk, 2010, pp 539, 544-5, 548-62, 565, 584, 589-95, 604-9, 633, 651-5

<sup>156</sup> “On Being President: An Interview with James Haire”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 11, No 2, August 2005, p 5

other parts of the Church – easily the largest number on any subject in the Church’s history and indeed much more than all the other responses to all other matters combined.<sup>157</sup>

This matter has had a long history and no one in the early years could have predicted just what a tempest would strike the Uniting Church over it. Rev Robert Weatherlake has explained how the issue has evolved.<sup>158</sup> In 1982 a presbytery asked the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) for guidance about what to do regarding an application from a potential ministerial candidate who was living in a lesbian relationship. The ASC decided that sexual orientation of a candidate is not and has not been of itself a bar to ordination and that a decision on the candidate’s suitability may depend among other things on the manner in which the sexuality is expressed. Decisions on individual applications for candidates are made at the presbytery level. Three decades – and much controversy – later, that is still broadly the situation.

In 1985 the Presbytery of Bourke asked the Assembly to affirm Biblical teaching concerning faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness. This request was not dealt with by the 1985 Assembly and so it was referred to the ASC. As with the experience in some overseas denominations, advocates for and against the ordination of homosexuals and lesbians wanted a clear national decision. The matter has trundled on through Uniting Church committees/ working groups/ reports etc for over two decades. It was too controversial for a clear, single, final national decision on the substantive matter at the Assembly. Advocates for the various positions would not leave the matter alone.

Here are six general observations. First, there is no basic agreement on what the disagreement is about. For the advocates of such ordination, this is a human rights issue because it is a matter of ending discrimination against a particular population group (in much the same as there are attempts to permit the recognition of same-sex marriages under Australian law). For the opponents there is a different issue: this is a post-modern rewriting of the Bible to suit contemporary tastes. I have sat through many exhausting Uniting

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<sup>157</sup> For an introduction, see: Peter Bentley “Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the Uniting Church in Australia”, *Church Heritage* (Sydney), Vol 14, No 3 (March 2006, pp 188-95

<sup>158</sup> Robert Weatherlake “Matters of Vital Importance to the Life of the Church”, *Travelling EMU* (Sydney), Winter 2003, pp 10-11

Church debates on this matter and it is clear that there is not even a common starting point between both sides.

Second, the Uniting Church has probably received more secular media coverage on this issue than any other single issue - and it has not been much to the Church's benefit. Rev Dr Dean Drayton, Assembly President 2003-6, was worried about the media not understanding the special nature of Uniting Church governance on the various issues he had to deal with:

This [system of governance] is still a mystery to nearly all of the media. From their point of view, the Church is organized hierarchically, and the President is boss. They ask "What do you mean by inter-related councils?" and "Why can't you give me a quote about what you think rather than what the Church has decided?" They see it as a cop-out that the President's role is to speak what the Church has decided. But it is vital that we make our decisions in councils. It is also true that regular changes in national leadership means there is little chance of ever having the public profile of, say, an Archbishop.<sup>159</sup>

Third, there is the question of what the Uniting Church's obsession with identity politics has to say to the wider community about its own priorities. Given the state of the world, perhaps there are other issues far more worthy of absorbing so much time and effort?

Fourth, as theologian Rev Dr Clive Pearson said to a 2004 Uniting Church theology conference: "We're so caught up with sexuality in the Uniting Church, but we need to realize that other big issues are lining up".<sup>160</sup> A good example of such a "big issue" is the future of the Uniting Church itself.

Fifth, some members have left the Uniting Church over this matter. It is not possible to get any agreement on the size of the exodus. As the dust settles, some may want to return<sup>161</sup> but others have gone for good.

Finally, it is notable that the breezy tone of earlier Assembly Presidents about the state of the Uniting Church has been replaced by a new grimness of the later ones. For example, Assembly President (1991-94) Rev Dr D'Arcy Wood,

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<sup>159</sup> Dean Drayton "The Assembly's Tenth Triennium (2003-2006): Reflections of a President, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 12, No 2, August 2006, p 15

<sup>160</sup> Bruce Best "From the Edge to the Centre", *Insights*, October 2004, p 5

<sup>161</sup> The reunion process is underway in New Zealand, where the Opawa Methodist Church left the NZ Methodist Church over the gay/ lesbian issue in 2000; the parish rejoined in 2011; see: "Opawa Church Rejoins Methodist Connexion", *Touchstone*, April 2011, p 7

while acknowledging the gathering storm over sexuality during his term in office, concluded his survey of being President with the comment that he actually found being Moderator of the SA Synod "...more difficult than being President. The reason, I believe, is that a Moderator has to deal with more parish problems, pastoral issues and presbytery concerns than a national president".<sup>162</sup> His successors have, by contrast, acquired a new note of grim determination.

## CONCLUSION

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".<sup>163</sup> 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.<sup>164</sup>

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

It is now necessary to examine a management technique to help us think through what could happen to the Uniting Church.

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<sup>162</sup> D'Arcy Wood "Some Recollections of the Six President", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, December 2009, p 60

<sup>163</sup> Niall Ferguson *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, London: Penguin, 2009, p 350

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, p 350



## Chapter 3: SCENARIO PLANNING

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the management technique for thinking about the future: scenario planning. It begins with examining three ways of thinking about the future: “prediction”, “preferred” and “possible”. “Prediction” and “preferred” are listed for the sake of completeness and to compare with them with scenario planning’s “possible” futures.

It then focuses on the “possible futures” via scenario planning and examines the technique, its evolution, use and value. Then there is an examination of the Uniting Church aged care research project in which I was involved as a case study of scenario planning.

The chapter concludes with answering the question why, if scenario planning is such a useful management technique, is there not greater use made of it?

### THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

#### Introduction

Consciously thinking about the future<sup>1</sup> is one of the defining characteristics of human beings.<sup>2</sup> All religious systems of belief, for example, attempt to answer the basic questions: where did I come from, what I am doing here, and where do I go after I die? They all have some form of eschatological beliefs.

Similarly, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, there are many examples of “futures thinking”. Some Old Testament prophets (such as Amos and Hosea) warned people that if they did not change their ways and repent, some awful fate would befall them. Others were on the official payroll, such as King David’s advisers the men of Issachar, “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (I Chronicles 12:32). In the three types of thinking about the future set out below, these warnings would form a rudimentary type of “prediction”: “if you continue to do certain actions then certain consequences will follow.”

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive introduction to this field is: Richard A Slaughter (Editor) *The Knowledge Base of Future Studies* (three volumes), Melbourne: DDM Media, 1996 (I have a chapter on “Prospects for Waging Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”: volume 3: pp 161-172)

<sup>2</sup> Other animals know instinctively about the need to prepare for the future, such as squirrels collecting nuts in readiness for the winter hibernation, but they do not (as far as we can tell) devote as much energy as humans do to thinking about it.

Similarly, Jesus emphasized the value of futures thinking by criticizing the official religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, for being able to predict the weather but not being able to interpret the signs of the times. They could not, in our terms, see new paradigms.

Far more recently, in the past century or so, some European and North American writers have created a branch of fiction literature based on speculations about the future: science fiction.<sup>3</sup> Two of the most famous “classical authors” were, first, HG Wells, particularly with his *Anticipations* (1901), dealing with the world in 2000 with cars and trains catering for dispersed populations living in suburbs, greater personal freedom for men and women, and the creation of some form of European union, and with *The World Set Free* (1914) foreshadowing the invention of nuclear weapons. In 1938 he called for the creation of a world encyclopaedia to consolidate the rapidly expanding world of knowledge; this was a forerunner of the present Internet and Wikipedia. Meanwhile, Jules Verne’s 1865 novel *From the Earth to the Moon* spoke of a projectile – “Columbiad” – being “fired” into space from a location in Florida (not far from where the first journey to the Moon began in 1969). Both writers are now seen as the “fathers of science fiction”.<sup>4</sup> Technology, then, was seen as a key driver of change and human progress, and so they speculated on what humans could do.

However, other writers were not quite so optimistic and so used fiction as a form of warning, for example, George Orwell took the writings of “political pessimist” James Burnham as the basis of his grim novel *1984*.<sup>5</sup> After 1945’s explosions of the atomic bombs, the mood became even more sombre:

British-Australian novelist Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957) is a best-selling fictional account of the results of a nuclear war and the book inspired the film of the same name in 1959. Set in 1963 in the aftermath of a global war, *On the Beach* focuses on how a group of people, among them the commander of the last American nuclear submarine, face death from radioactive fallout that is steadily working its way from the

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<sup>3</sup> A good introduction is: Richard Rhodes (Editor) *Visions of Technology*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999

<sup>4</sup> HG Wells himself saw his role as being different from Jules Verne’s: he saw Verne as a speculator of what technology could achieve, while Wells claimed that he wrote “exercises of the imagination in a quite different field”: less predictive of technology and more focussed on the human side of science. See: HG Wells “Preface” to *The Complete Science Fiction Treasury of HG Wells*, New York: Avenel, 1979 (1934), p iii

<sup>5</sup> William Steinhof *The Road to 1984*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, pp 43-54

northern hemisphere to the south, eradicating all life. The theme of universal extinction from fallout played into growing concerns and fears over the issue.<sup>6</sup>

In World War II many scientists<sup>7</sup> were mobilized by both sides for research and development for the war effort and their involvement brought many changes to the nature of warfare.<sup>8</sup> The US Government, now the new global power, decided to mobilize science for the defence of the US by, among other things, creating a research and development “think tank” to deal with the future of war: RAND.<sup>9</sup>

This section examines three main ways of thinking about the future so as to put RAND’s scenario planning technique in context. The basic three-category typology is one that I have developed over the years on the corporate speaking circuit. In each case, there is a basic explanation of the technique and a few comments on the future of the church.

### **Prediction: Method<sup>10</sup>**

Prediction means extrapolating current trends out into the future.<sup>11</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup> James P Delgado *Nuclear Dawn: The Atomic Bomb from the Manhattan Project to the Cold War*, Oxford: Osprey, 2009, p 121

<sup>7</sup> A standard example is PMS Blackett, one of the originators of operations research, whose data eventually convinced the Admiralty that large convoys of ships would be a safer way to cross the Atlantic rather than single vessels making their own way; see: Mary Jo Nye *Blackett: Physics, War and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004

<sup>8</sup> Alexander King, one of the two founders of The Club of Rome, was also a scientist mobilized for World War II, including combating malaria (which was to kill more Australian soldiers than the Japanese); he coined the term “DDT” for the highly effective insecticide he helped develop; see: Alexander King *Let The Cat Turn Round: One Man’s Traverse of the Twentieth Century*, London: CPTM, 2006, p 126

<sup>9</sup> RAND specialized in “war-gaming”; HG Wells was there first as well with his “war game” books: *Floor Games* (1911) and *Little Wars* (1913) and so he is also seen as the “father of war-gaming”.

<sup>10</sup> A very good introduction is: Nate Silver *The Signal and the Noise: The Art and Science of Prediction*, London: Allen Lane, 2012

<sup>11</sup> For example: Charles Birch, then a member of The Club of Rome, wrote the Australian best-seller: *Confronting the Future: Australia and the World: The Next Hundred Years*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1975

Economic predictions are perhaps the most widespread – and most criticized – branch of forecasting covered by the mass media. Studies of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) which hit most of the Western world in 2007-8 have revealed the extent of the failure of extremely well-paid financiers to predict the future.<sup>12</sup> They were too optimistic about the strength of the US economy.

Within futurist circles a more sophisticated approach is the Delphi method. Here experts in the field of study are asked to give their expectations about the topic under study, with the results being collated and the report going back out to the experts to see what further comments they would like to make in order to create a consensus.<sup>13</sup> Of course, expert forecasting is not always so expert at all, which is why we continue to attempt it in the hope of doing better.<sup>14</sup>

Accurate prediction has underpinned human development. Being able to predict the rise and fall of the Middle Eastern rivers, for example, was a turning point in the evolution of civilization, as historian David Gress has pointed out:

Both the early high cultures, Egypt and Mesopotamia, arose along great rivers and depended for survival on being able to predict and control the seasonal variations in water flow. Without accurate knowledge and without the technology of irrigation, organized society was impossible. Centralized, autocratic power was necessary to codify this knowledge and maintain the technology.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile some Old Testament prophetic-type warnings have continued via secular writings. For example, Richard Slaughter was Australia's first Professor of Foresight and has written extensively on both the techniques of foresight and his particular concern with the environment.<sup>16</sup> Similarly in

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<sup>12</sup> Roger Lowenstein *The End of Wall Street*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2010, p 151

<sup>13</sup> Marvin Cetron *Probable Tomorrows*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1997, pp 229-31

<sup>14</sup> See: Philip E Tetlock *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton University Press, 2005

<sup>15</sup> David Gress *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and its Opponents*, New York: Free Press, 1998, p 40

<sup>16</sup> Richard A Slaughter *The Biggest Wake Up Call in History*, Indooroopilly, QLD: Foresight International, 2010

management literature there is now an immense amount of material looking at how to minimize risk and how to detect potential business failures.<sup>17</sup>

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. The actual term “Moore’s Law” was coined five years later by Caltech’s Carver Mead who could see that Moore’s prediction was holding true.

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”.<sup>18</sup> He went on to talk about the new era that will come from the linkages between the computer and the telephone, all of which seemed revolutionary at the time but now three decades later we take for granted.<sup>19</sup>

Management writers Philip Evans and Thomas Wurster (both associated with the Boston Consulting Group) have warned companies that increasing computer power will transform business:

This law, or its equivalent, has prevailed for the past 50 years. In the judgment of some of the world’s leading experts, it is likely to prevail for the next fifty years. Moore’s Law implies a tenfold increase in memory and processing power every five years, a hundredfold every ten years, a thousandfold every fifteen. This is the most dramatic rate of sustained technical progress in history.<sup>20</sup>

I became aware of Moore’s Law through attending information technology conferences in the 1980s. I also travelled a great deal behind the “Iron Curtain” throughout Eastern Europe and I noted how communist authorities were so concerned to control information. But could they do so in the era

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Max H Bazerman and Michael D Watkins *Predictable Surprises: The Disasters You Should Have Seen Coming, and How to Prevent Them*, Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber *The World Challenge*, London: Collins, 1981, p 197

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp 211-214

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Evans and Thomas S Wurster *Blown to Bits: How the New Economics of Information Transforms Strategy*, Boston: Harvard Business School, 2000, p 14

increasing computer power? I speculated that computer power could help contribute to the collapse of the Soviet Union because it would erode the communist capacity to control information and the spread of ideas.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, there has been a great improvement in the capacity for prediction because of the rise of “super computers” and their “super number crunching”. Along with “Moore’s Law” there is also “Kryder’s Law”, first proposed by Mark Kryder the chief technology officer of hard drive manufacturer Seagate Technology. He successfully noticed that the storage capacity of hard drives has been doubling every two years. Storage capacity has increased and the cost has come down.<sup>22</sup> This permits extensive “data-mining”: collecting and high-speed analysing of information. For example, Princeton-based economist Orley Ashenfelter loves wine but instead of the “swishing and spitting” approach of wine gurus, he has developed a computer programme to predict how good a wine will be well ahead of the actual years of consumption.<sup>23</sup>

Super Crunching predictions usually bring together some combinations of size, speed and scale. The sizes of the datasets are really big – both in the number of observations and in the number of variables. The speed of the analysis is increasing.<sup>24</sup>

## Prediction and the Church

Turning now to prediction within the context of this dissertation, there are two main types to note: predictions about the Second Coming and the “end of the world” (or the “end of the world” and then the Second Coming<sup>25</sup>) and, second, predictions about the fate of the church.

One of the most widely read predictions about the end of the world is at the end of the Bible: The Revelation of John (*circa* AD 90). This gave us some imagery that remains potent today in some Christian circles, such as the “scarlet woman” and the “ten kings of Europe”. Virtually all Christians look with

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<sup>21</sup> Keith Suter *Reshaping the Global Agenda: The United Nations at Forty*, Sydney: United Nations Association of Australia, 1986, pp 89-99

<sup>22</sup> Ian Ayres *Super Crunchers: How Anything Can be Predicted*, London: John Murray, 2007, p 137-8

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp 1-6

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p 10

<sup>25</sup> This is the distinction between “pre-millennial” and “post-millennial” theological thinking: does Jesus come back only after everything has gone wrong (and so we need not worry about working for a better Earth because that is irrelevant and is anyway delaying the Second Coming) - or should we work for the Kingdom of God on Earth in readiness for Jesus’ return?

expectancy to the Second Coming of Jesus and so for almost two thousand years there has been speculation on when this will occur, under what conditions, and what it will mean for believers.<sup>26</sup>

I became involved in the “Armageddon Theology” debate when a person in the late 1970s who attended one of my peace movement talks on the US-USSR nuclear arms race and the risk of a World War III, told me of hearing similar warnings at an Assembly of God service at which the NZ-Australian Pastor Barry Smith (1933-2002) had been the preacher.<sup>27</sup> I had not previously been aware of Armageddon Theology. He warned that the Second Coming would occur in 1988: the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary – “one biblical generation” according to him - since the creation of the state of Israel, creation of the “scarlet woman” (World Council of Churches) and the “10 kings of Europe” (what is now the European Union). He even included speculation that Dr Henry Kissinger was the “Anti-Christ”.<sup>28</sup> I decided to explore this branch of theology and so got to see the extensive sub-culture that ran outside the formal mainstream theological studies to which I had been exposed. I then became embroiled in the debate.<sup>29</sup>

One of the biggest best-selling books of that era was Hal Lindsey’s 1970 *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which continues to sell, despite the failure to have an accurate prediction of when the end of the world will occur. A later version warned about the 1980s: “Even if I didn’t know anything about prophecy, I would know enough from studying what is going on in our world to see we are headed toward catastrophe”.<sup>30</sup> Lindsey (like the members of the Reagan Cabinet as we shall see later on) assumed that the Cold War would continue until World War III broke out; he (and Reagan’s Cabinet) could not imagine the Cold War ending with a peaceful Soviet surrender. The current biggest selling Christian novels with an Armageddon Theology approach are the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye, now running into millions of copies. I assume that he is selling more books than virtually any mainstream theologian.

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<sup>26</sup> For a survey, see: Damian Thompson *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*, London: Minerva, 1997

<sup>27</sup> Quite spookily a best-selling novel on how the West could win a “limited” nuclear World War III set 1985 as the year (very close to Smith’s 1988 date): General Sir John Hackett and others *The Third World War: August 1985*, London: Sphere, 1979

<sup>28</sup> Barry Smith *Warning*, Upper Hutt, NZ: Smith Family Evangelism, 1980, pp 37-44

<sup>29</sup> For example: Keith Suter *Global Change, Armageddon and the New World Order*, Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1992

<sup>30</sup> Hal Lindsey *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, New York: Bantam, 1981, p 161

The Armageddon bandwagon rolls on:

In recent decades the millennial impetus to apocalyptic imagination has been reinforced by various provocative “earth-shaking” developments. “Messianism” is always associated with the presences of “signs”. Recent “signs” might include the astonishing collapse of the Soviet “Evil Empire”; the terrifying spectre of global epidemics such as AIDS; warnings by scientists about imminent climatic and ecological disaster; genocidal horrors in countries such as Cambodia in the 1970s or Rwanda in the 1990s; the development of advanced weapons and the threat of “nuclear holocaust”; the “breakdown of the family” and disorienting flux in gender roles and norms of sexual intimacy; the growth of violent crime; the rapid rise of technology; global techno-economic integration; the resurgence of militant Islam; the growth of spiritual pluralism and occultism; the founding, expansion and continuing peril of the Zionist state of Israel; and the prospect of a united Western Europe.<sup>31</sup>

American Christian writer Tom Sine has examined this branch of theology in the context of the paranoid streak in American political thinking. The 1991 collapse of the USSR presented a dilemma to some conservative American Christians: “They realized that they must find a new global conspirator that they can clearly demonstrate is labouring to collectivize the planet for the Antichrist or their critique could come unravelled”.<sup>32</sup> New conspiracy theories are being produced, such as: Wall Street bankers, Muslims and climate change.

This is a fascinating subject<sup>33</sup> but attention must now be paid to the other form of Christian prediction: fate of the church.

Looking at the future of the church in the Western world (including the US) the forecasts are fairly gloomy. Tom Sine has warned:

Church planters need a wake-up call. Most under thirty-five congregations will not have the resources to build the expensive church buildings my generation erected. Howard Snyder has long urged the American Church to overcome its “edifice complex”.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer (Editors) *Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem*, London: Routledge, 1997, p 2

<sup>32</sup> Tom Sine *Cease Fire*, Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1995, p 70

<sup>33</sup> A recent addition to this list was May 21 2011, the date for when California radio evangelist Harold Camping said the Second Coming would occur: “Recalculated: The Date of the Apocalypse”, *Time* magazine, June 6 2011, p 13



Christian organizations will need to create much less cost-intensive virtual organizations that rely much less on buildings and paid staff to carry out their mission. We won't be able to afford the top heavy bureaucratic models very far into the twenty-first century with the high executive salaries paid by a number of US-based organizations. We will need to experiment with webbed and networked organizations that are building free and where growing numbers of us work bi-vocationally in ministry.<sup>34</sup>

Tom Sine in a later book reflected on his experiences of working with the Habitat for Humanity NGO. He asked the board what was the NGO's median age. No one knew: so he told them: it was 65 years of age. The board had been warned therefore to find new ways of attracting young people. But, as Sine has warned over the decades, there is a growing gap between rich and poor Americans, and so there is no guarantee that young people will have the money for good causes, even if they wanted to give it.<sup>35</sup>

The British situation is even bleaker. One study predicts that "Christianity in Britain will have largely disappeared" by 2050 and that the collapse is occurring faster than is commonly appreciated. Even the charismatic churches are running out of steam.<sup>36</sup> There is a Christian overlay to society (religious-based holidays, rituals, bishops in the House of Lords, Royal Family attending church each Sunday etc) that disguise the extent of the decay behind the façade.

Within Australia, apart from some (temporary) hopeful occurrences in the 1950s, the trend has also been towards decline for most of the twentieth century. Alan Walker's biographer Don Wright described the Methodist Church in 1933, when Walker became a probationary minister:

On the whole, Methodism did best at the task of church maintenance. Its Sunday schools and youth groups exercised a strong hold over the children of church members, though there was little interest in reaching the growing proportion of young people outside. There was a healthy concern with improving the leadership of youth groups, but that was never more than partly successful.... Yet, overall, the impression given

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<sup>34</sup> Tom Sine *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld*, London: Monarch, 1999

<sup>35</sup> Tom Sine *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, p 129

<sup>36</sup> Philip Hughes "Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures", *Christian Research Association Bulletin* (Nunawading, VIC), Vol 16, No 2, June 2006, pp 8-12

by the Methodist Church in which Alan Walker became a probationary minister was one of stagnation, of not quite knowing where it was going or how it would get there.<sup>37</sup>

In short, the writing was on the wall even in the early 1930s. Given the Church's extensive resources (buildings, bequests, volunteers, etc), it could afford to tolerate a slow decline because it had a generous buffer to protect it and, of course, people like Walker believed that they could reverse the decline. Chapter 8 puts the recent decline in a larger historical context.

There are competing predictions about the Uniting Church's future. First, Rev Gregor Henderson has been both the Assembly Secretary and President of the Assembly. On a 2008 tour of New Zealand he explained to the Methodist newspaper that about a third of Uniting Church congregations have more members than they did three to five years ago, about a third are holding their own, and a third are declining. The reasons for the growth came from new families wanting their children to be involved in church activities; migrants from a Methodist or Reformed background wanting to maintain their old faith in a new land; and the "relative peace we have had over the past three to five years on the issue of human sexuality..."<sup>38</sup>

He went on to forecast the Uniting Church's future:

"I see us becoming a faithful minority. In some ways we will resemble the Christian Church in Sri Lanka or Indonesia, and we should look to the Asian churches as we try to find a way forward."<sup>39</sup>

An alternative viewpoint comes from Peter Bentley whose tenure on the staff at the Assembly ended around the time of the controversial "Bentley Report" in which he set out the figures showing the widespread opposition to the Assembly proposals on sexuality (the Resolution 84 matter) – much to the despair of the Assembly staff and officers. He claims that the Uniting Church's membership is declining faster - thanks partly to the sexuality matter - than the bland official assurances of people such as Henderson:

Members of the church need to understand that many leaders of the Uniting Church are not able to address the present situation in the

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<sup>37</sup> Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1997, p 26

<sup>38</sup> "Uniting Church in Australia Nurtures Shoots of Growth in Secular Climate", *Touchstone*, December 2008, p 2

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

church, or perhaps are too afraid to present a realistic picture, because they know they simply do not have any answers.

The situation has gone on for so long that a culture of survival now dominates, rather than a culture of vibrancy and growth. I remember when I first became secretary of a large city presbytery [Sydney] (in 1998) I conducted an audit of all the congregations, and presented this to the executive, but at the time it was regarded as potentially too depressing.<sup>40</sup>

I was a member of Sydney Presbytery throughout all the period that Bentley was Secretary and I endorse his comments on the regional body's lack of ideas and the culture of survival.

Finally, in 1997, Rev Dr Philip Hughes from the Christian Research Association (with which Peter Bentley has also been associated) predicted:

...the Uniting Church will be considerably smaller in 2010 than it is now. It could lose 20 per cent of its attendees in the next 13 years so that, on an average Sunday around Australia, there will be 120,000 UC people meeting rather than 150,000 at present.

The decline might go on until 2030 but eventually it will bottom out and the Uniting Church will find a new identity.<sup>41</sup>

We are now about half way towards that 2030 prediction and so far the Uniting Church seems to be tracking much as Hughes predicted. Part II of this dissertation will examine what that Uniting Church in 2030 could look like.

Just to conclude, there is the experience of Rev Dr John Bodycomb whose controversial 1986 book<sup>42</sup> I have used when giving talks on church growth. Bodycomb has now written his memoirs in which he reflects on his six decades in ministry. He became Dean of the Uniting Church's Theological Hall at Melbourne in 1977 and investigated the ups and downs of organized religion (which then became the basis of his doctoral dissertation). "During the time I was investigating this phenomenon and for a while after submitting the dissertation, I was in demand as some sort of authority on the topic of church growth and decline, but my popularity began to wane when it was apparent

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Bentley "What's Ahead for the Uniting Church?" *Catalyst*, September 2007, pp 17-18

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in: "A Vision of 2010", *Crosslight*, November 1997, p 3

<sup>42</sup> John Bodycomb *A Matter of Life and Death: The Future of Australia's Churches*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986

that I had no simple panacea that would reverse the trends”.<sup>43</sup> In 1986 he gave a set of lectures and then published the text as *A Matter of Life and Death: The Future of Australia's Churches*. That book will be examined again in chapter 4, as part of the introduction to the four scenarios (“futures”). What is worth noting now is his viewpoint in his 2010 book:

I have no reason to revise any of my conclusions on what causes the ups and downs of affiliation with churches, or my forecasts. On the contrary, all this has been powerfully reinforced over the twenty-seven years since I concluded my research. There has been a large numerical decline in the old mainstream churches, with none more drastically affected than my own. Virtually an entire generation seems to have voted with their feet, and the offspring of this generation look to be doing likewise.<sup>44</sup>

### **Preferred Futures: Method**

A “preferred” future is 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. Then came Yuri Gagarin’s heroic trip on April 12 1961 and it seemed that the Soviet space lead was invincible. 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.<sup>45</sup> This was achieved in 1969. The Soviets, by contrast, never got to the Moon (and the next person likely to get there will be either Chinese or Indian).

With a “preferred” future we move from what is currently being suggested by prevailing trends (“prediction”) to what we would like to see happen. Once again, the Bible has many examples of “preferred thinking”, notably Jesus’ picture of the Kingdom of God.

In more modern terms, the Bible has been used by some Christian preachers to show how God wants the best for people providing those people have a positive outlook on life. American writer Barbara Ehrenreich’s critique of

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<sup>43</sup> John Bodycomb *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey*, Richmond, VIC: Spectrum, 2010, p 21

<sup>44</sup> Ibid pp 21-2

<sup>45</sup> William D Eggers and John O’Leary *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon...Getting Big Things Done in Government*, Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009, p 150-1

“positive thinking” is a survey of how Americans have changed over the centuries from being obsessed with dark Calvinist thoughts with “fire and brimstone preaching”, to having a sunny culture based on overwhelming optimism.

Ehrenreich has an entire chapter on “God wants you to be rich” and the American church leaders who have preached various types of positive thinking.<sup>46</sup> Many flourishing US mega-churches (which we encounter in chapter 5 below) avoid mentions of hell and other “negative” ideas. Her chapter mentions many of the well known Christian speakers (some of whom have an Australian following), such as Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller.

Ironically in late 2010/ early 2011 the latter became a victim of his own grand thinking. Schuller’s “possibility thinking” encouraged him to risk too much in the expansion of his Crystal Cathedral and he could not raise enough funds for his ambitious programmes, and so he filed for bankruptcy. The Catholic Church has now bought his Crystal Cathedral.<sup>47</sup> The extensive media reporting has shown an unsavoury story of faith, family and fame being a toxic combination. Despite his problems, the US mega-church movement (which he helped pioneer) and the “prosperity gospel” theology continue to do well. Religion seems to be a business and just like in any industry some corporations overextended themselves (such as Enron, FAI Insurance and Ansett Airlines) – but industry is continually dynamic and new opportunities emerge.

In my corporate speaking presentations I use the management best-seller: *Blue Ocean Strategy*.<sup>48</sup> The authors claim that most strategy work is based on “red ocean” thinking – imagine blood in the water from all the struggles – whereby firms are competing against each other. Michael Porter’s work (referred to elsewhere in this dissertation) is an example of this – though the authors are too polite to mention it explicitly. They offer a whole new approach: instead of trying to beat the competition, go elsewhere. Kim and

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*, London, Granta, 2009, pp 123-146

<sup>47</sup> Duncan G Stroik “A Catholic Crystal Cathedral?” *Annals Australasia* (Sydney) January/ February 2013, pp 44-5

<sup>48</sup> W Chan Lim and Renee Mauborgne *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005

Mauborgne set out some basic techniques for developing “blue ocean” strategies.

One of their case studies concerns the changing strategies for the auto industry.<sup>49</sup> Henry Ford’s 1908 Model T automobile was the first internationally well known US vehicle but this was not where the industry began. The US auto industry dates back to 1893 when the Duryea brothers launched the first one-cylinder auto in the US. The autos at that time were a luxurious novelty, with one model even offering electric curlers in the back seat for on-the-go primping. They were unreliable and expensive. By 1908 there were about 500 US companies making autos.

Henry Ford decided not to compete in that “red ocean” and instead (in effect) used “blue ocean” thinking. His Model T was built for the middle class: it came in only one colour (black) and it was reliable, hardy and durable. It was inexpensive: an auto for the masses. US lifestyles were transformed.

By 1924 the automobile had become an essential household item. General Motors (GM) used “blue ocean” thinking for a new strategy. Instead of competing against Ford’s functional, one-colour, single-model strategy, GM exploited the new post-World War I wealth of the “Roaring Twenties”. GM’s Alfred Sloan introduced “a car for every purse and purpose” and so made the most of the new mass consumer market. A person (in theory) stayed with GM for their entire life, just trading up and down the range: their parents took them home from the maternity hospital in the family vehicle, then a person acquired their own first car in their late teens and getting ready to enter college, then a new model when they had a reasonable pay-package, then an upmarket model (a Buick) when they made their fortune,<sup>50</sup> and finally they travelled to their grave in a coffin in a funeral director’s Cadillac.

### **Preferred Futures and the Church**

Turning again to the implications for this dissertation, “preferred” futures as previously noted are a key feature of the Bible and so need not be elaborated too much here. The Hillsong Church in north-west Sydney is a good example of “blue ocean” thinking. One may not agree with its “prosperity gospel”

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp 193-5

<sup>50</sup> On a recent trip to China I was told the following story: GM has fallen on hard times of late but the Buick model - traditionally the “doctor’s car” (the doctor has wealth but is careful not to flaunt it) – is now becoming popular in China, where rich people also want a luxury car but don’t want to flaunt their wealth.

message but it certainly has refashioned “church” for the Australian aspiring middle class setting and has done extremely well out of it.

The architects of the Uniting Church had their own vision of what they hoped that the Church would become. How those visions have progressed was examined in chapter 2.

The point to note here is that the Uniting Church now lacks a person with the potential of a Henry Ford or Alfred Sloan.<sup>51</sup> Even the early Uniting Church architects lacked the drive and prestige of a Ford and Sloan.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this says something about the dour pre-1977 organizational cultures of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches<sup>53</sup> and their distrust of any one church figure. In any event, there seems to be no one who can command enough expertise, respect and authority to create a “blue ocean” strategy to revive/ reinvent the Uniting Church and carry it through.

### **Possible Futures: Method**

Possible futures are 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.

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<sup>51</sup> Doubtless Rev Gordon Moyes would challenge this observation because he could claim to be such a figure but his energy went into Wesley Mission rather than the wider Uniting Church (except for a brief period as Chair of Sydney Presbytery); the relationship with Church bureaucrats got off to a bad start in 1977 when they insisted he had to be “re-ordained” because they didn’t recognize his Churches of Christ ordination and it never really improved; see; Gordon Moyes *Leaving a Legacy: The Autobiography of Gordon Moyes*, North Sydney: Ark House Press, 2005, pp 128-31. Alan Walker had an equally troubled relationship with the Methodist Church power-brokers; see Robert D Linder “Alan Walker among the Sharks: why the most important Christian in Australia in the latter half of the twentieth century was not also a beloved national figure”, *Church Heritage* (Sydney), Vol 17 No 1, March 2011, pp 2-22. An example of this clash was the highly successful – and highly controversial – Mission to the Nation in the early 1950s, which the Methodist Church abruptly cancelled: Rex Mathias *Mission to the Nation: The Story of Alan Walker’s Evangelistic Crusade*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986, pp 60, 88-96

<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the staff of Hillsong Church, Baulkham Hills NSW (notably Brian and Bobbie Houston and Darlene Zschech) do seem to be able to do so

<sup>53</sup> Ironically there were such figures in their early UK histories eg John Knox and John Wesley

<sup>54</sup> There is the broader issue of why people deliberately choose not to listen to warning signs: Margaret Heffernan *Wilful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*, London Simon & Schuster, 2011

Scenario planning is not so much about getting the future right<sup>55</sup> – 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.<sup>56</sup>

A popular word in scenario planning methodology is “paradigm”. The Classical Greek word *paradeigma* meant model, framework, pattern or example.<sup>57</sup> The word entered the common parlance in 1962 with Thomas Kuhn’s classic book *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>58</sup> He challenged the then common viewpoint that scientific progress “advanced” via one neat step at a time, with scientists, so to speak, standing on the shoulders of their predecessors.<sup>59</sup> Kuhn argued that there is in fact no steady accumulation of scientific knowledge. Instead, each theory is a revolutionary break from the previous theory, resulting eventually in the arbitrary replacement of one way of viewing knowledge with another view.<sup>60</sup> Kuhn was attempting to explain change specifically in the natural sciences. The word has since been used (or misused) extensively in virtually all the other disciplines. The word has generated its own extensive academic industry which will not be summarized

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<sup>55</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:7 “Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?”

<sup>56</sup> Clem Sunter *The High Road: Where Are We Now?* Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg, 1996, p 13

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Clarke and Stewart Clegg *Changing Paradigms*, London: HarperCollins, 1998, p 9

<sup>58</sup> Chicago: University of Chicago Press. It appeared in the long-forgotten series of monographs called the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, which is ironic because it did not unify science at all. “It broke it up, exposing the inner workings of human creativity and starting, along the way, a thousand arguments that not even Kuhn’s death two weeks ago, at seventy-three, will resolve... Kuhn will be remembered because he taught that the process of science was fundamentally human, that discoveries were the product not of some plodding, rational process but of human ingenuity intermingled with politics and personality – that science was in the end, a *social* process”. Malcolm Gladwell “My Jaw Dropped”, *The New Yorker*, July 8 1996, p 32

<sup>59</sup> A good introduction is: Marnie Hughes-Warrington *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp 210-291

<sup>60</sup> The process may be helped by death: the generation holding the old paradigms dies off, thereby creating space for the new paradigm.



here.<sup>61</sup> American theologian James Sire, almost four decades ago, produced a very useful guide to the debates over different religious paradigms.<sup>62</sup>

The key point is that “paradigm” is now the central term in scenario planning. The term means both (a) a set of beliefs and assumptions about how each person/ organization “sees” the world<sup>63</sup> and (b) a filtering device which is the window through which each person/ organizations sees the world. Once a paradigm is commonly accepted it lingers and becomes the new “reality”.<sup>64</sup>

Once a person is familiar with the term, it is possible to “see” examples of paradigms in a variety of places and contexts. Here are a few diverse examples:

It was long assumed that no runner could break the four minute barrier. Then in 1954 UK medical student Roger Bannister ran a mile in 3:59.4 seconds. Within the next few years, 50 more runners did the same thing. Roger Bannister’s showing the world that breaking the four-minute mile was possible spurred many more runners to push themselves harder, stronger, faster, in the belief – or more accurately, the knowledge - that the four-minute mile was no longer an impossible dream but something that they could attain if only they worked at it.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> A good starting point is Richard Tarnas *The Passion of the Western Mind*, New York: Harmony, 1991. pp 437-445

<sup>62</sup> James W Sire *The Universe Next Door: A Guide to World Views*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977.

<sup>63</sup> This also means that different age groups “see” the world differently because they have had different experiences. UK novelist Ian McEwan, for example, writes about the British generation who lived during World War II: they “...would have fought, or suffered, in the war and known death on an unusual scale, and would not been able to believe that a drift into irrelevance was the reward for all the sacrifice”. Baby Boomers by contrast have not known that sacrifice and have accepted Britain’s decline as a normal fact of life. Ian McEwan *On Chesil Beach*, London: Vintage, 2008, p 24

<sup>64</sup> For example, I was amused to see the April 2011 edition of the *QANTAS Inflight* magazine (pp 50-6) extolling the virtues of visitors going to the UNESCO-listed Heritage Australian sites (“Sentenced to Life”), as though it were the most natural thing to do in the world; no one would guess that Australia three decades ago had more political controversies over UNESCO sites than the rest of the world put together; also see: Ashley Hay “Our World Heritage”, *Australian Geographic* (Sydney), April-June 2011, pp 90-103. For the extensive controversy at the outset of the listing process, see: Keith Suter “The UNESCO World Heritage Convention”, *Environmental and Planning Law Journal* (Sydney), Vol 8 No 1 March 1991, pp 4-15

<sup>65</sup> Ken Lizotte *The Expert’s Edge*, Sydney: McGraw-Hill, 2008, p 42

One of the worst UK European military disasters in World War II was the failure to “take the bridge too far” in the highly ambitious 1944 Operation Market Garden around Arnhem. Brian Urquhart (later a very distinguished UN civil servant) was the intelligence officer whose research showed that in fact the Allied paratroopers would be landing in the middle of a heavily fortified German position and so could not achieve their objectives. His advice was dismissed, he was told to take sick leave and, when the full disaster was revealed, he was told to quietly leave the regiment, and he had no further contact with it for decades. In recent years he became more candid about that traumatic experience:

It was, of course, inconceivable that the opinion of one person, a young and inexperienced officer at that, could change a vast military plan approved by the President of the United States, the Prime of Minister of Britain, and all the military top brass, but it seemed to me that I could have gone about it more effectively. I believed then, as most conceited young people do, that a strong rational argument will carry the day if sufficiently well supported by substantiated facts. This, of course, is nonsense. Once a group of people have made up their minds on something, it develops a life and momentum of its own which is almost impervious to reason or argument. This is particularly true when personal ambition and bravado are involved.<sup>66</sup>

With the ending of the Cold War, the collapse of communism in Europe and the winding up of communist parties in western countries, we are able to get a better idea of the size (or perhaps more accurately the smallness) of the western communist parties. Many ex-communists are now publishing their memoirs. In Australia, we now know that the influence of the communist party peaked in the late 1940s, when the communists in the coal mine unions confronted the Chifley Labor Government and were beaten. There continued to be government and media references to the “communist threat” in the 1950s and 1960s – but the membership was declining. Behind the public façade, the party was fading away.<sup>67</sup> Reading these memoirs is instructive because they show the dedication of people to persist with their cause in the

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<sup>66</sup> Brian Urquhart *A Life in Peace and War*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, pp 75-6

<sup>67</sup> For example, Mark Aarons has used the extensive files of the Australian Security Intelligence Organizations (ASIO) to provide a history of his family's history in the communist party. ASIO documents show that as early as 1950, the party was in decline. It evidently served the interests of both the communist party and ASIO to maintain a façade of pretending that the party was more influential than it really was. Mark Aarons *The Family File*, Melbourne: Black Inc, 2010, p 123

hope that eventually there would be a reversal in their fortunes and once again the communist party would be flourishing. Hope triumphed over reality. They were locked into their own paradigm and would not face facts. (Could the same be said about current members of the Uniting Church? This speculation will be returned to in chapter 8).

On a lighter note, so to speak, one of the great music industry blunders was the failure of the Decca recording company to offer the fledgling Beatles a contract (and so the money-spinner went to EMI). Decca had its own paradigm problem:

Despite some initial positive signs, Decca notified a formal rejection just over three weeks afterward. The official reason – comparable with Hollywood’s predictions in 1927 that talkies had no future – was: “Four-man guitar groups are on the way out”.<sup>68</sup>

This is a reminder of the 1908 assessment of the Astaire sister and brother act, in which a theatre manager said: “The girl seems to have talent, but the boy can do nothing!”<sup>69</sup>

Finally, even the best of us can have problems. Soon after Einstein published his theory of relativity, he was approached by someone impressed with the new theory: “On the basis of his  $E=mc^2$  equation, the man insisted, it would be possible to “to use the energy contained within the atom for the production of frightening explosives”. Einstein brushed away the discussion, calling the concept foolish”.<sup>70</sup>

### **Possible Futures and the Church**

Turning now to the role of paradigms and the church, chapter 8 is given over to the examining the dominant paradigm in which most Australian Christians have lived – the Constantinian Era – and what has happened to that paradigm.

Here are a few other examples of paradigms:

Matthew 2:1-12 records the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Wise Men (an early version of futurists). King Herod was intrigued that his own court astrologers and wise people had failed to alert him to the birth of a new ruler

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<sup>68</sup> Philip Norman *John Lennon: The Life*, New York: HarperCollins, 2008, pp 253-4

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in: Peter J Levinson *Puttin’ on the Ritz: Fred Astaire and the Fine Art of Panache*, New York: St Martins Press, 2009, p 14

<sup>70</sup> Walter Isaacson *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p 272

(and potential competitor) only seven miles away. Why had his own staff not known this? Perhaps they failed to note Jesus' birth because it would have represented too much of a change in their own lives. They were satisfied with the old order and did not want to stir up problems for Herod (who had a violent temper).

Jesus of course represented a wholly new paradigm. His former neighbours were stunned at his ability to preach (Mark 6:3) – they thought he was just a carpenter. As Dr Michael Frost has commented: “They knew full well that none of their neighbours or friends grew to be great rabbis and religious leaders, let alone claim to be the Messiah”.<sup>71</sup>

In Luke 14:1-6, there is the story of Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath. Contemporary Australians may have difficulty understanding what a radical act that was. Keeping the Sabbath was very important to the Jews in Jesus' day, who saw keeping that day as a way of distinguishing themselves from their Roman colonizers, and so they did not work on that day no matter how useful. Jesus' action was a deliberate violation of that tradition – he was showing the importance of healing rather than following tradition, and he was offering a new way of living whereby humans can live by grace rather than have to follow a complex set of rules.

A new paradigm (“reality”) emerged for Jesus when he encountered the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15: 21-8). As The Very Rev Pamela Tankersley of the NZ Presbyterian Church observed:

This “woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, who is a Canaanite” is a most unlikely person for Jesus to pay to attention to: she is the wrong race – a Syrophonician not an Israelite, the wrong religion – Canaanite, not Jewish, and the wrong gender – a woman, not a man... The strength of Jesus here, to me, is that when he is confronted with a new reality, in this case the reality of an outsider laying claim to his healing power, he has the compassion, justice and integrity to be able enlarge his understanding of his own call.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Frost *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006, p 44

<sup>72</sup> Pamela Tankersley “An Audacious Woman”, *CCA News* (Chiang Mai, Thailand) April 2011, p 4

Rev John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was eventually banned from preaching in Anglican Churches. As NZ Methodist Rev Jim Stuart has recalled

Wesley had to step outside the traditional theology, polity and practice of the Church of England and engage in what he initially called his “horror at this strange way of preaching in the fields” to discover a new way to communicate the Gospel in his time...The established church was so entrenched in the parish model of ministry that it was unable to conceive of any kind of legitimate ministry beyond the parish.<sup>73</sup>

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was heavily criticized by conservative Christians for its Programme to Combat Racism. But paradigms can change:

The WCC was also condemned for fighting against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s. Yet today, almost everyone supports the end of that system, and the rise of Nelson Mandela to the presidency of the emerging South African democracy.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith’s extensive second volume of the authorized biography of Anglican the Rev John Stott<sup>75</sup> is an extended account of how one the twentieth century’s most famous conservative Anglican evangelicals gradually changed his paradigm to include social justice (somewhat to the despair of some of his conservative admirers), including joining in the debate over the peace issue in the 1980s.<sup>76</sup>

Returning to Africa, American Episcopalian Very Rev Harry Pritchett recalled a story of a different type of paradigm:

A bishop recently returned from a trip to Africa where he had discussed the issue of ordaining women with African bishops who were opposed to the idea. He made the following observation: “Their objections seemed to be less theologically based than I had supposed. It was more that they

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<sup>73</sup> Jim Stuart “Secrets Hidden in Plain Sight”, *Touchstone*, March 2009, p 10

<sup>74</sup> Rodney Watkins “Transitional Christian Unity”, *Peace Review* (San Francisco), 7:1 (1995), p 12

<sup>75</sup> Timothy Dudley-Smith *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001

<sup>76</sup> Stott, Alan Walker and I were among the speakers at the World Methodist Peace Conference at Methodist Central Hall, London, 1985; the recordings are in the British Library Sound Archive: reference C1277

could not imagine a woman in that role. They cannot do what they cannot imagine.”<sup>77</sup>

Finally, there is the warning from management writer Fabian Dattner: “The hardest thing in the world to do is give advice to someone who is doing well as things are. They cannot see any reason for doing life differently”.<sup>78</sup> An example of things going deceptively well is contained in Rev John Mavor’s memoirs:

The 1960s were a time when Christian education was flourishing in the Churches across the world. Sunday School curricula were being developed, The Christian Education departments of Churches were well staffed. There were strong youth organizations. This was true ecumenically as well as in particular denominations.<sup>79</sup>

As we now know, things were really not so optimistic, and Mavor later recalls how most of those staff (or their successors) are no longer employed in those positions. The Church he joined in the early 1950s is (despite Union in 1977) much smaller, with fewer members and resources, and with far less impact on society.

In retrospect, it would have been useful to have “thought about the unthinkable” and looked more deeply at the challenges facing the Church. Scenario planning is an important way to do this.

## “THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE”

### World War III

It is now necessary to trace the evolution of scenario planning from military research into the civilian sector. It began with the US Air Force think tank, was widely (if controversially) publicised and then was taken up by a Shell Oil Company employee who could see its potential use in the oil industry.

Atomic bombs were invented at the end of World War II (1939-45) and became an essential component of the US and USSR defence forces in the Cold War (later joined by UK, France and China, and more recently some

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<sup>77</sup> Harry H Pritchett “Another Way Home” (sermon), January 7 1996: <http://www.day1.net/print.php5?tid=467> (accessed 31/12/2007)

<sup>78</sup> Fabian Dattner “Ground Hog Day”, *Australian Institute of Management Magazine* (Sydney), October 2002, p 39

<sup>79</sup> John Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, VIC: PenFolk Publishing, 2009, p287

other countries). But how, in fact, were these super-destructive weapons to be actually used as military weapons?

The US Air Force (USAF) (which had started life as a small component of the US Army: USAAF), became a separate arm of service in 1947. It was on a fast learning curve because aerial operations had played a decisive role in that war and were seen as crucial in the new Cold War. In October 1945 USAAF created the RAND research and development think tank at Santa Monica, California – one of the world's first think tanks. It was a component of the Douglas Aircraft Corporation, and it was charged with the task of planning how the US could fight and win a nuclear war against the USSR. In 1948 RAND was separately established as a non-profit advisory corporation (and has since remained so). Throughout its history RAND has prided itself on recruiting some of the country's brightest people.<sup>80</sup>

One of the early staff members (recruited as a systems analyst in 1947) was Herman Kahn (1922-83). He had a legendary IQ: when he was recruited into the US Army in 1943 he achieved the highest score ever recorded in the Army's mental aptitude test. He is now remembered mainly as a model for Peter Sellers' "Dr Strangelove" in the popular Stanley Kubrick 1964 movie *Dr Strangelove* (working for the BLAND Corporation). Kahn was willing to meet the producer to discuss the proposed movie because he believed that it was important (even if via grim humour) for civilians to think about how World War III was going to be fought. His first book, which helped establish him in the public eye, was the 1960 *On Thermonuclear War*, with its reference to "megadeaths".

In fact he eventually had to leave RAND in 1961 (to form the Hudson Institute think tank, north of New York City) because the administrators did not like his controversial writings, speeches, sardonic humour and personality. He was a colourful oddity in the quiet, quasi-academic grove of civilian defence intellectuals, where people plotted in a coldly rational way how to win a nuclear war by killing millions of people.

A nuclear war was assumed to be inevitable and so it was necessary to think about winning it. Kahn not only had to get (in his view) Americans to think about the practicalities of fighting a war but also about how they were going to survive it, and so he supported the creation of extensive and expensive civil

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<sup>80</sup> Alex Abella *Soldiers of Reason: The RAND Corporation and the Rise of the American Empire*, New York: Harcourt, 2008

defence programmes. His second book (1962) was *Thinking About the Unthinkable*.

He also worked out the practicalities of fighting an unprecedented nuclear war. After all, no defence force had any experience of fighting one, no force had used real ones in their peacetime military exercises, and scientists were divided over just what damage would be done if they were ever used. Kahn popularised the term “escalation” (now very common in our everyday language) to “describe an increase in the level of conflict in international crisis situations”.<sup>81</sup> He then went through the 44 “rungs” up the ladder to escalation to “spasm or insensate war”. (It is easy to see how Stanley Kubrick could get a gothic comedy out of all this). In order to help decision-makers make sense of this new terrain, he also provided a number of “scenarios”<sup>82</sup> to assist them think about the unthinkable.

Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi has written an intellectual biography of Kahn. She has surveyed some of the popular media attention that Kahn attracted in his day, including copious pictures and cartoons showing how he managed to capture the popular imagination (for good or ill). He – more than anyone else in the English-speaking world – created future studies: “The marrow of *On Thermonuclear War* was Kahn’s faith in the titanic power of the futurological method”.<sup>83</sup>

She also looked at how some of the people who followed Kahn’s thinking have ended up in the US Government. Indeed she begins her book with the famous June 2002 words of the Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld:

“There are things we know...we know”, he remarked nonchalantly.  
“There are known unknowns, things .....we now know we don’t know.  
But there are also unknown unknowns...things we don’t know we don’t know.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Herman Kahn *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, New York: Hudson Institute, 1965, p 3

<sup>82</sup> Khan called these vignettes “scenarios” – a term he obtained from the nearby Hollywood movie studios; see: Robert J Lempert, Steven W Popper, Steven C Bankes *Shaping the Next One Hundred Years: New Methods for Qualitative, Long-Term Policy Analysis*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003, p 15

<sup>83</sup> Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*, London: Harvard University Press, 2005, p 310

<sup>84</sup> Ibid p 1



Before Rumsfeld uttered those wise words, many scenario planners would have used the phrase because it sums up an aspect of thinking about the unthinkable. Not only may a matter be too ghastly to even contemplate (and so we try to avoid thinking about it), but the future itself is unclear. Now we have to be more cautious in using the phrase because of the risk of derision. But Rumsfeld had summed up a basic dilemma of national security: how to plan for a future about which one can know so little. The phrase could also apply to the Uniting Church.

To conclude, the risk of a US-Soviet nuclear war gradually subsided (though it still remains a possibility).<sup>85</sup> Kahn went on to expand his intellectual interests<sup>86</sup>, including taking a very optimistic view of what capitalism could achieve.<sup>87</sup> He was critical of the scenarios in the 1972 Club of Rome *Limits to Growth* book because he thought that technology and the market system of economics could solve environmental problems. RAND also moved on and while it still does do some defence work, it has broadened out its research agenda to include health and social research.

### Civilian Scenario Planning

Kahn put scenario planning on the intellectual map. That was one of his great achievements. Pierre Wack (1922-97) decided he could use the method to help his employer, the global Royal Dutch Shell Oil Corporation.<sup>88</sup>

Pierre Wack, a French citizen, joined the London head office of Royal Dutch Shell in 1971 (transferred from *Shell Francaise*) and he stayed for 10 years. Shell had a mandatory retirement policy of aged 60. By all accounts (there is as yet no published full biography of him<sup>89</sup>) he was a colourful, almost mystical person, who would not normally fit the persona of a senior oil

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<sup>85</sup> Ironically, Kahn also played a role in stimulating the peace movement because he had drawn attention to the dangers of a nuclear war. One of the peace movement leaders in the 1960s was Bertrand Russell, who expressly quoted from Kahn's writings as the reason why the UK should oppose nuclear weapons. See: Ray Monk *Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness 1921-1970*, London: Vintage, 2001, p 406

<sup>86</sup> He also examined Australia's future: Herman Kahn and Thomas Pepper *Will She Be Right? The Future of Australia*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980

<sup>87</sup> For example: Herman Kahn and Anthony J Wiener *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years*, New York: Macmillan, 1967

<sup>88</sup> Wack visited Kahn at the Hudson Institute while on the staff of *Shell Francaise* and so he was well aware of Kahn's methodology. Wack and his team (notably Ted Newland) created a different methodology and this is largely the one followed in this dissertation.

<sup>89</sup> See: Art Kleiner *The Age of Heretics*, New York: Doubleday, 1996 (this deals with the early pioneers of scenario planning including both Kahn and Wack)

executive. But, then, he was not called to be in the mainstream of the oil business. He was not so much focussed on the then current financial year and the daily problems of drilling for oil but what kind of world Shell could find itself in.

Historians will call this current period in history, among other things, the “oil era”. It began in August 1859 with “Colonel” EL Drake’s rudimentary oil well near Titusville, Pennsylvania (now preserved as a museum) and it has become the basis of our age.<sup>90</sup> I am, for example, currently tapping away on oil – the computer keyboard is made partly of plastic. Oil is not just an important source of energy but the petrochemical industry has given us many products that we now take for granted, such as plastic. Oil, then, is vital for the modern way of life.

Oil companies must make large capital investments in the face of extreme uncertainty. It is therefore a long-term industry in the sense that finding and extracting oil requires extensive investment “upstream”, with the industry also either having to do the “downstream” distribution itself or via partners which will run the oil stations/ convenience stores etc. “Prediction” was a standard activity: predicting demand and then building the facilities to meet that demand.

Oil companies have therefore been obliged in recent decades to do long-term planning. For all their bureaucratic tendencies, the accountants and engineers who ran Shell recognized that when they created one of the world’s first “strategic planning units” in the civilian sector, they needed someone who was not one of them: someone who would think differently. They certainly got their money’s worth.

As Kahn was legendary within the military planning community, so Wack was equally legendary in the oil industry. But he never had Kahn’s thirst for personal publicity or a Hollywood movie maker to augment his public standing, and so he was not as well known to the wider public.

The dominant paradigm in oil companies in the 1950/60s was that oil was a “strategic commodity”. It was not an ordinary commodity, such as wool, coal and iron that varied frequently in price. Because oil underpinned the Western

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<sup>90</sup> There is also now, of course, the “peak oil” debate, in which it is argued we are approaching the peak of oil production and while oil will still be around in (say) a century’s time, it will be at deeper depths and more energy-intensive to extract. This is the “Hubbert Peak” controversy (he was another Shell employee). See: Peter Tertzakian *A Thousand Barrels a Second: The Coming Oil Break point and the Challenges Facing an Energy Dependent World*, Sydney: McGraw-Hill, 2006, p 126

way of life, the US and other Western governments accorded its price and reliable supply a special status. Any attempt to disrupt the oil supply (which for the West was often from the Middle East) would be met by swift action.

The standard example occurred in 1953, when the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now known as BP: British Petroleum). The British Government encouraged the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to mount a coup against the Prime Minister. It was a stunning success, with the Prime Minister removed by a “popular uprising” secretly orchestrated by the CIA. It was the CIA’s first foray at removing a government and it became the benchmark against which all other operations were measured (often disappointingly). It took the US forty seven years to admit officially that it had staged the coup. President Clinton did so in the forlorn hope of trying to improve relations with Iran, where the memory of the coup has lasted longer than it did in the US.<sup>91</sup> The 1953 Iran coup, all oil executives decided, was a “lesson” to Middle Eastern leaders not to try again to disrupt oil supplies to the West. Oil was too important to be disrupted.

However, Pierre Wack “re-perceived” oil. In fact, he wrote one of the most reprinted articles in the history of the *Harvard Business Review* on “the gentle art of reperceiving”.<sup>92</sup> What would happen, Wack speculated, if oil were just like any other commodity – and vulnerable to fluctuations in supply and price? The Shell executives told him he was wasting his time – any potential disruption would be met by US and other Western governments once again using military force and/ or covert intelligence services. By the same token, of course, the US and other Western governments also did their best to accommodate the Arab and Iranian leaders to keep them sympathetic to Western interests (for example, they rarely criticised Arab and Iranian human rights records and they supplied much military training and equipment to the leaders). Wack, in short, they argued, was too imaginative: there could be no disruption.

However, Wack persisted and he encouraged Shell to have contingency plans in place should there to be a disruption. That dramatic disruption came as a complete surprise to the West (and Israel and the USSR) in October 1973. As the “Yom Kippur War” got underway, with the Arabs launching a surprise

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen Kinzer *All The Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2003, p 212

<sup>92</sup> Pierre Wack “The Gentle Art of Reperceiving”, *Harvard Business Review* 1985, in two parts: 63(5) pp 72-9 and 63(6) pp 139-50.

attack on Israel on October 6 1973 (one of the most sacred days in the Jewish religious year), so a second surprise took place on October 17: the Arab/Iranian-dominated Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) implemented an oil embargo on selected Western countries and the price of oil quadrupled.<sup>93</sup> Oil was never again to return to the pre-October 1973 price levels.

Wack had no way of predicting the 1973 Middle East conflict and consequent price hike. No one else had predicted it either (including Western and Soviet intelligence agencies). But he made sure that Shell was able to cope with its consequences (and it was the only oil company to do so). No other oil company had been willing to “think about the unthinkable” about any increase in the price of oil.

This was the classic civilian scenario planning exercise: Wack had reduced Shell’s risk of being taken by surprise. From being one of the weakest of the seven big oil companies, Shell became the world’s second largest (after Exxon Mobil) and probably the most profitable. For the record, oil is now regarded as just an “ordinary commodity” with daily price fluctuations.

Shell was able to capitalize upon the 1973 crisis and went on to become one of the world’s largest corporations. The reputation of Wack and scenario planning in the civilian sector had been made.<sup>94</sup>

After his mandatory retirement, Wack travelled extensively, partly capitalizing on his reputation among people and organizations who knew the value of scenario planning. Wack was followed by Peter Schwartz. In due course, Schwartz left Shell and formed with four colleagues the Global Business Network (GBN) based in California. There is a pleasant easygoing camaraderie among former Shell staff which facilitated the growth of the fascinating GBN organization. I have very much enjoyed my association with it, albeit on the periphery.

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<sup>93</sup> Simon Dunstan *The Yom Kippur War: The Arab-Israeli War of 1973*, Oxford: Osprey, 2007, p 23

<sup>94</sup> Shell continues to publish scenarios; see: [www.shell.com/scenarios](http://www.shell.com/scenarios)

## SCENARIO PLANNING

### The Technique

There is no one standard methodology.<sup>95</sup> The one set out in this dissertation is a variation of the version based on the Shell approach as taught in the 1990s by Global Business Network (GBN) and the Australian Business Network (ABN). Scenario planning methodology is very much an evolving field<sup>96</sup>.

1. Work out the basic issue.

Scenario planning is done in response to the perception that there is a “problem” to be solved. It is important that the right initial “question” be identified.

2. Understand the organization that has commissioned the scenario planning.

What is the “official vision” of the organization? How does the organization perceive its business? Why has it decided on that “problem” to be investigated? What is the “official perception” of the future (namely the line laid down by the board or CEO)? How do they see that future changing? What are their hopes and fears? What is its future strategy? What are its stated values?

Peter Schwartz set out his technique:

We probe the decision-makers’ cognitive processes and the organizational and market environment in which they operate. A good approach is to engage the crucial decision-makers in a long interview and ask them a set of abstract questions intended to trigger spontaneous and expansive responses. There are five such questions, the first of which I call the “oracle” question. If you could speak with an oracle, what questions would you ask about the future? Second, given the decision you face, what is the scenario for the best possible

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<sup>95</sup> While at Oxford in 2010, I was introduced to a variation on the basic scenario planning technique developed by Shell; see: Rafael Ramirez et al (editors) *Business Planning for Turbulent Times: New Methods for Applying Scenarios*, London: Earthscan, 2010. But I have continued with the approach described in this dissertation because that is the one I am most comfortable with.

<sup>96</sup> See: Lena Borjeson et al “Scenario Types and Techniques: Towards a User’s Guide” *Futures* 38 2006, pp 723-739, [www.elsevier.com](http://www.elsevier.com)

outcome? Third, what is the scenario for the worst possible outcome? Fourth, if you were retiring or leaving your company, what would you want your erstwhile colleagues to consider as your legacy? Finally are there important barriers to change in your organization?<sup>97</sup>

3. Work out the driving forces. The forces can be broadly grouped into five areas: STEEP:
  - *Social* — for example: what are the demographic changes? Australians have gained as much life expectancy in the past century as in the previous 5,000 years: what can they expect in this century? What are the changing expectations that people have? How are the changes in morality affecting the traditional religious institutions?
  - *Technological* — for example: how will the genome project (mapping the body's DNA structure) impact on medical research? Will that research lead to a genetic engineering revolution so that people could live far longer than at present (say to 200 years)? What could be the impact of Moore's Law in IT?
  - *Economic* — for example: How will the economy go? Will the gap between rich and poor Australians increase? What will be the impact of the rising giants like India and China?
  - *Environmental* — for example: how will "climate change" affect Australia? What old diseases will reappear? Can we create a "green" economy based on environmental sustainability?
  - *Political* — for example: Will there be an increase in ethnic tensions? What about the risks of terrorism? Will China and the US go to war?
4. Rank the key factors in order of importance to determine the most important two.

Form a cross: "+" (a Cartesian coordinate system, with the two most salient driving forces as the X- and Y-axes). The two axes cross each other at their mid-points, thereby creating four quadrants. These will be the basis of the four scenarios, with the end of each axis having a "high" and a "low" end.

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<sup>97</sup> Peter Schwartz "The Official Future, Self-Delusion, and the Value of Scenarios" *Financial Times* (London) May 2 2000:  
<http://www.gbn.org/public/gbnstory/scenarios/coumns.financialtimes.htm> (accessed 26/09/00)

For example in the Uniting Church aged care project examined later on, the two driving forces were “economic change” and “technological change”<sup>98</sup>, and so we looked at what the future of aged care would mean in the context of:

- high economic growth/ high technological change
- low economic growth/low technological change
- low economic growth/ high technological change
- high economic growth/ low technological growth<sup>99</sup>

The maximum number of scenarios is best kept at four because it gets a bit too complicated to go beyond that number in terms of easily recalling the scenarios and making use of them: these are (up to) four different worlds.

Avoid creating only three because the client is tempted to go for the “middle” one as the most moderate. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage the client to re-perceive their future: they need to be challenged (and not comforted).

#### 5. Work out the Scenario Logic.

The drivers are then used as the axes along which the eventual scenarios will differ.

These are four different worlds. Create four plausible scenarios. In other words, think through what, for example, the future of aged care would look like if there were both high technological change and high economic growth.

#### 6. Make the Scenarios Come Alive.

Each scenario needs to be compelling. There has to be sufficient detail in each story to make it easy to follow. A scenario may be uncomfortable but it needs to be believable. Each scenario should have a memorable name.

Conversations with “remarkable people”<sup>100</sup> (or in the Australian style “lateral poppies”<sup>101</sup>) will be useful here. These are people who are outside

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<sup>98</sup> The US Episcopal Church is working with technology and social (“community”) for its scenario planning project

<sup>99</sup> In the end, we could not create a scenario based on high economic growth and low technological change in the Australian context – and so we had to create a different one (which will be revealed later in this chapter).

the current scenario planning project who may have different perceptions from what the scenario planning team may be thinking. "Remarkable people" are acknowledged experts in a particular field - but not the one under examination for the scenario planning project. They help guard against "group think" and narrow perceptions. They can also suggest new matters to examine.

Two questions are put to them: (a) is each draft scenario plausible? (b) is there something we have overlooked?

7. Identify the Leading Indicators.

The future will determine which scenario was "right" in the sense that it was closest to what actually happened. It is important to have indications as quickly as possible as to which scenario is coming into play. An initial source of the indicators will be the driving forces.

Each axis will have a "high" and "low" end, and so the indicators can be drawn from the way in which ends of the axes start to come into play.

8. Work out the Implications of the Scenarios.

We now return to the original problem identified by the organization. What do the scenarios mean for the organization? What are the implications for the organization's current strategy? What contingency plans need to be in place? What are the options for the stakeholders?

9. Do Not Argue Over the Value of Each Scenario: Don't Try to Pick Winners.

If probabilities are assigned to the scenarios, then this has become a "prediction" project, rather than a "possibility" one. There should not be arguments over which scenario is more likely than the others. Each scenario has to be equally plausible. Future events will tell you which scenario was "right".

Meanwhile, one scenario may seem more "preferable" than the others. But scenario planning is not about creating "preferred" futures. People are welcome to create "preferred futures" after having their perceptions

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<sup>100</sup> The phrase was popularized by Wack (who had written for a French literary-arts magazine) and who had known the philosopher GI Gurdjieff in Paris, who had called his memoir: *Meetings with Remarkable Men*.

<sup>101</sup> "Remarkable people" was deemed un-Australian by Oliver Freeman and the ABN team and so the title used "lateral poppies": "tall poppies" who "think laterally".



expanded by a scenario planning exercise - but that is a separate project. Creating a “preferred future” is not scenario planning.

#### 10. Strategic Conversation.

This, in effect, represents “part two” of the process. In oil terms, this is the “downstream” work: getting the word out to staff (and volunteers in NGOs). An organization learns through its network of interconnecting conversations and exchange of ideas between individuals.<sup>102</sup>

The implication here is that the company/ organization has to “own” the document. The staff/ volunteers have to be fully conversant with it and looking for the warning signs. It has to be embedded within the culture. This is not, therefore, an obscure document that is only examined once a year.

People need to “live” within each scenario and become fully familiar with it. They will then be well positioned to gauge which of the scenarios is coming into play and have the contingency plans ready.

If the scenarios are commissioned by a large organization, then they should be discussed at the various levels so that staff can think through what each scenario means for their own area of work. The scenarios may represent a new world for them and so it is necessary to get their reactions.

Change often begins at the margins and so junior staff (or volunteers in NGOs) may be best placed to detect it first. By contrast, the heads of companies/ organizations may have a psychological bias in maintaining the status quo which they know and feel comfortable with, for example they may be close to retirement and so they do not want to be challenged by potential events over the horizon.

#### **Comments on the Technique**

To flesh out the technique, here are a few observations on it.

It is pointless having a planning unit and then being unwilling/ unable to make use of the unit’s outcomes. I think this helps explain the rise and fall of some of the units in the 1980s and 1990s (such as those at the Assembly and Wesley Mission): their work was not being transmitted down through the organizations. The work was seen as too abstract and too distant:

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<sup>102</sup> The best introduction is: Kees van der Heijden *The Art of Strategic Conversation*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 1996

Strategic scenario planning practice will fail unless the people who make decisions are deeply engaged with it as a continuing process of entrepreneurial learning and adaptation, using the insights to develop their appreciation of the environment around them, and through this, of their own organization. Scenario thinking is a cognitive skill that must be developed as a learning process, linked to the perceptions and knowledge of the decision makers.<sup>103</sup>

Scenario planning challenges the “super-specialization”<sup>104</sup> of university academics. Academics do well partly through having to learn more and more about a particular topic. Scenario planning requires a different type of mindset: being able to see the connections across subjects, rather than delving deeper and deeper into one of them. Ideally one needs to be exposed to a variety of different paradigms, rather than just collecting facts. Businesses and other organizations also become super-specialized and narrowly focussed, especially with a short-term financial outlook. They have difficulty seeing the “big picture”.

Scenarios – as used in this dissertation – are more rigorous and systematic than just “options” to set people thinking. Rev Howard Snyder, for example, examined some of the major changes in global affairs. I agree with much of the analysis. However, towards the end of the book he set out five “scenarios” on how the globe could evolve (“environmental disaster”, “friendly fascism”, “Armageddon”, “nuclear terrorism” and “world spiritual renewal”).<sup>105</sup> These are just a shopping list of options. He did not follow the Shell/ GBN methodology for devising scenarios and so, according to this dissertation’s approach, they cannot be called “scenarios”: they are just possibilities to think about. They are certainly interesting and provocative possibilities – but not “scenarios” as such.

A good interview technique is asking “why” three or more times. For example, when interviewing experts, using “why” repeatedly will drill down eventually to the drivers of change. The intention is not to interrogate people (they are, after

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<sup>103</sup> Bill Sharpe and Kees van der Heijden (Editors) *Scenarios for Success*, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley, 2007, pp xix-xx

<sup>104</sup> The phrase “super-specialization” was used a few times by Barry Jones in his presentation dealing with the problems of scientists communicating with each other, let alone the general public and politicians, made at the Royal Society of NSW “Belief and Science: the Belief/Knowledge Dilemma”, University of Sydney, April 6 2011; also see: “Discussion Between Barry Jones and David Malouf” *RSNSW Bulletin and Proceedings*, No 344, p 2

<sup>105</sup> Howard A Snyder *EarthCurrents: The Struggle for the World’s Soul*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995, pp 232-8

all, receiving no fee for the interview) but simply to keep pushing on until the STEEP factor is reached.

“Knowledge”, then, is not quite as important as fresh ways of looking at an issue. Everyone has different ways of looking at the world and so could have something to contribute.

The process is one of listening for faint signals of change – and so there is a need for a diversity of sources of information.

“Prediction” is usually quantitative: extrapolating data into the future along trend lines. Scenario planning relies more on narrative – creating a plausible story. It is a story about how things could go in the future (rather than a story about the past or present).

The story needs to be a convincing one – a plausible one – which the client can accept as a possibility, and so much research needs to go into it to enhance the “feel” and “texture” of the story (much as JK Rowling has done with her *Harry Potter* novels).

Another difference between prediction/ forecasting and scenario planning is that prediction is moving from the inside out and scenario planning goes from the outside in. Prediction is based on how the organization (“inside”) will move into the future (“outside”), such as the discussion over the Uniting Church’s future membership levels. Scenario planning takes the “outside” (the future, such as an increase in Australian secularism) and looks at its impact on the Uniting Church (the “inside”).

With regard to church “futures”, people in my experience try to explain events in the church by reference to only what happens in the church and so often ignore the wider STEEP factors. For example, in the 1950s people went to church for both religious and social need (such as meeting people because the local parish was a centre of social life). But in one generation that changed. A parish is still a spiritual centre but without the benefit of being a social centre. Cars have made people more mobile (before they arrived, people used to walk to the local church) and so they can now go to many other places. Television entertains people at home. In short, church thinking was too insular and so it missed the bigger changes taking place around it and how those changes could affect the church’s future.

On a lighter note, my (probably excessive) use of the words “paradigm” and “paradigm shift” got me into trouble with at least one very conservative Christian group: Endtime Ministries based in Queensland (run by Wendy

Howard). She identified “paradigm shift” as a New Age term and called on Wesley Mission to sack me.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, there is the link between scenario planning and Dr Edward de Bono’s “lateral thinking”. Both have a common starting point - perception:

Time and again you will hear Edward say, “Change a person’s perception and you will change their behaviour. Rarely can you change a person’s behaviour by logic alone”.<sup>107</sup>

As de Bono has said:

Philosophy does not teach the practical operations of thinking. Even when philosophy does teach “logic”, this is only a small part of everyday thinking, where perception is even more important than logic.<sup>108</sup>

Perception is real even when it is not reality. Perception is how to see things, and you feel and react according to what you see – regardless of the underlying reality.<sup>109</sup>

De Bono’s very popular and profitable “lateral thinking” techniques<sup>110</sup> have provided simple and yet powerful tools to optimise thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. However, these are generic tools and they are different from the specific scenario planning process devised by Kahn and Wack. In short, they both have a common starting point – perception - but then they quickly branch out in different directions.

## EXAMPLES OF SCENARIO PLANNING

Most scenario planning is done as “commercial in confidence” and so is not revealed to the general public. It is, after all, a business technique and most businesses say little about how they operate except when they want to make announcements to boost their share price or public image. Government departments are also reluctant to share their inner workings.

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<sup>106</sup> Wendy W B Howard “The Dangerous Infiltration of New World Order Change-Agents” [http://www.despatch.cth.com.au/au/Books\\_D/Suter\\_Moyes.htm](http://www.despatch.cth.com.au/au/Books_D/Suter_Moyes.htm) (accessed 15/02/2008)

<sup>107</sup> Piers Dudgeon *Breaking Out of the Box: The Biography of Edward de Bono*, London: Headline, 2001, p 66

<sup>108</sup> Edward de Bono *How to Have a Beautiful Mind*, London: Vermillion, 2004, p 111

<sup>109</sup> Ibid p 158

<sup>110</sup> For example, Edward de Bono *De Bono’s Thinking Course*, London: BBC, 2007 (1982)

Here are a few of the more well known examples to show how the technique works in practice.

### **South Africa: The “High Road” and the “Low Road”**

Pierre Wack, having retired from Shell, spent some time in the early 1980s in South Africa and was part of the team convened by Clem Sunter, then at the country’s largest corporation (Anglo-American), working on scenarios of South Africa’s future. South Africa was under the apartheid regime, which seemed destined to stay in place indefinitely.

Sunter then toured the country speaking of two scenarios: the “high road” and the “low road”. The “high road” was a story of the release of Nelson Mandela (the world’s longest-serving political prisoner), the creation of multi-racial electorate and Mandela’s election as the first South African black President. His white audiences were outraged.

Sunter would then explain the “low road” scenario as a story of the country falling into increasing sporadic violence, continued international isolation, a white exodus to safer countries and a generally grim future. This encouraged his white audiences to think about the “high road” scenario.

In March 1989 Frederik de Klerk was elected President. Max Hastings was the Editor of the conservative *The Daily Telegraph* (London) and recalled the mood of those years in his memoirs. Few observers, including his own journalist in South Africa, anticipated just what would follow because no one expected de Klerk to be any different from his predecessors. But on February 2 1990 de Klerk suddenly lifted the 33-year ban on the African National Congress and invited Mandela to join him in negotiations towards a constitution which would grant the vote to the country’s African majority. This drama was occurring around the time of the ending of the Cold War. Hastings concluded his survey of that 1990-1 period:

Which of our generation would have dared to predict, even twenty years ago, that we should see within own lifetimes, an end to the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and a relatively peaceful transition to black majority rule in South Africa? Much of the business of newspapers is to purvey tales of disappointment, failure, tragedy. How intoxicating it was, that for a season, we found ourselves bearers of historic and happy

tidings on two of the greatest issues that faced the world in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup>

I have my own footnote to this story. In 2001 I was a guest of Annette Liu, then the Vice President of Taiwan (the most senior woman elected in 5,000 years of Chinese history) at her seminar of Nobel Peace Prize Winners in Taipei. Frederik de Klerk was one of the Nobel participants. He knew nothing of my professional interest in scenario planning. But quite spontaneously, while explaining how he was able to manage the transfer of power to black majority rule, he paid tribute specifically to Clem Sunter who had given the scenario talks in the 1980s and had created the political opportunity for de Klerk to make his historic reforms. Sunter had, so to speak, helped white South Africans “to think about the unthinkable”.

### **End of the Cold War**

Peter Schwartz followed Pierre Wack at Shell. In 1983 he proposed to the Shell senior executive team that his unit look at the future of the Soviet Union. Shell bosses were sceptical. The Cold War was in deep freeze, with President Reagan’s reference to the “Evil Empire”, Mrs Thatcher’s own hatred for the regime (Shell is partly headquartered in London), and Soviet leader Yuri Andropov’s own mutual antipathy towards the West. Additionally the USSR was not a supplier of oil to the West. But, Schwartz argued, it had some of the world’s largest oil and gas reserves and so it ought to be on the Shell research agenda. He eventually won approval for the research.

Two scenarios were devised: “Incrementalism” and the “Greening of Russia”. The latter contained the possibility that if the largely unknown (to the West) politician Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he might well push ahead with economic and social reforms. It would not be so much due to Gorbachev personally but that his arrival in power would be a symptom of the underlying pressures for reform for which he would be the spokesperson. Schwartz’s account continues:

Shell has a habit of presenting its global scenarios to government agencies, in part to glean their reactions. Every Soviet expert but one told us we were crazy. The exception was Heinrich Vogel of Germany. The CIA said, “You really don’t know what you talking about. You just don’t have the facts.” In retrospect, people have credited our research, but the CIA certainly had access to all the data we did. Our insight came

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<sup>111</sup> Max Hastings *Editor: An Inside Story of Newspapers*, London: Macmillan, 2002, p 145

solely from asking the right questions. From having to consider more than one scenario [sic]. If we had to pick only one, we might have been just as wrong as the CIA. We ourselves did not know for certain that things were moving towards our “Greening” scenario until Gorbachev was elected. But having more than one scenario allowed us to anticipate his arrival and understand its significance when he ascended to the leadership.<sup>112</sup>

The CIA was hampered, at least in its public pronouncements, by the “official vision” to which it had to direct its attention. In other words, the line from the White House was that the USSR was the “Evil Empire” (in Reagan’s 1983 phrase) and that the US and USSR were on an arms race to the finish. The “official vision” blinded the CIA to looking for signs of change.

Earlier in his book (now a classic on scenario planning), Schwartz pays tribute to Pierre Wack and the rest of Wack’s team (such as Ted Newland and Napier Collyns). However it is necessary not only to praise Wack and his team, but (according to Schwartz) we should also to acknowledge the role of the Shell bosses: “...it is thoughtful and farsighted Shell executives who invited him into that role in the first place, provided him with the resources he needed and paid him the compliment of listening to him and taking him seriously”.<sup>113</sup>

By implication this helps explain the failure of the CIA to identify the signs of the peaceful end of the Cold War: it had had no official encouragement to look for the faint signals of change. The Reagan White House was so focussed on the “Evil Empire” it was unwilling to “think about the unthinkable”.<sup>114</sup>

### **Australia’s Economic Futures**

Dr Graham Galer is a former Shell planner. He spent 36 years in Shell and retired in 1993. He has since done a PhD at the University of Kent<sup>115</sup> and he has been active within the UK end of GBN and he visits Australia occasionally to see a member of his family, which is how I first got to know him. His scenario planning experiences have two bearings on this dissertation.

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<sup>112</sup> Peter Schwartz *The Art of the Long View*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p 58

<sup>113</sup> Ibid p 9

<sup>114</sup> Alan Axelrod *The Real History of the Cold War*, New York: Sterling, 2009, pp 398-402

<sup>115</sup> Graham Galer *The Mythical Organization*, Axminster, Devon: Triarchy Press, 2008

First, he, too, has taken a close interest in South Africa's future and has written extensively on how scenario planning has helped the country's development.<sup>116</sup> This reaffirms other claims about the importance of this technique for shaping South Africa's post-apartheid future.

Second, while based at Shell Australia in the late 1970s, Galer assisted in a variety of ways with a scenario planning project on Australia's economic future. The resulting book<sup>117</sup> was not a formal Shell project – simply that Shell wanted to assist the debate over the country's economic future (Wack was also interviewed for the project). Galer gave me a copy of the book in 1999.

The book was completed in December 1979, while the Fraser Liberal-National Government was still in power. It was still a time of government intervention in the economy, high tariff barriers, extensive government regulation of the economy with close co-operation of the unions (sometimes not quite so friendly – but they were always a power to be reckoned with). This was broadly the economic philosophy that had underpinned the country since federation in 1901. Political parties may have differed over the details but broadly there was support for a managed economy.

The authors set out two scenarios of Australia's economy to the year 2000. One was "The Mercantilist Trend", which was based on a continuation broadly of the then present situation, and its advantages and disadvantages.

The other was "The Libertarian Alternative" which, to use more modern jargon, would see a future of New Right de-regulation, reduced tariffs, reduced involvement of the government in the economy, and sale of government assets ("privatization"), leaner, more efficient companies, and with the end of the "jobs for life" mentality. In 1979 such a scenario was no doubt thought "unthinkable" by contemporary politicians. In fact, from 1983 onwards, with the election of the Hawke/ Keating Labor Government that is how the economy has evolved.

My footnote to all this is that regrettably I did not know Galer or this book until the late 1990s. As mentioned in chapter I, I spent 1982-5 partly working on the ecumenical social justice statement *Changing Australia* in which the

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<sup>116</sup> For example: Graham Galer "Preparing the Ground? Scenarios and Political Change in South Africa", *Development* (2004) 47(4), December 2004, pp 26-34; "Scenarios of Change in South Africa", *The Round Table* Vol 93 No 375, July 2004, pp 369-83

<sup>117</sup> Wolfgang Kasper, Richard Blandy, John Freebairn. Douglas Hocking, Robert O'Neill *Australia at the Crossroads: Our Choices to the Year 2000*, Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980



churches, in effect, endorsed the “Mercantilist Trend” and its communitarian outlook, and so we were caught out by the emerging New Right economic rationalism (the “Libertarian Alternative”). Had we read the book in the early 1980s we would not have been taken by surprise by the criticisms from certain quarters. We would still have stayed with our theological reasoning but we would have been better prepared for the ensuring storm of criticism.

## AUSTRALIA’S AGING FUTURES

### Creating the Project

Chapter 1 noted my interest in the overall future of the Uniting Church as result of the 2000-1 study in which I was involved dealing with the future of aged care.<sup>118</sup>

In 2000 UnitingCare NSW was one of the few not-for-profit groups operating viably in aged care. That was the result of a concerted focus on efficiency in management and profitability over the previous decade. However, the surpluses generated were not large in percentage terms and were very sensitive to changes in government funding policies. The withdrawal of capital funding from government over the previous decade, and additional structural changes to the funding of aged care with the introduction of the Aged Care Act 1997, made it difficult to regenerate the capital requirements for high care facilities.

The scenario planning project was seen as one tool to help to make sense of changes and to help shape the future of aged care. There was a large number of “unknowns” around the future of aged care. For instance, what service models might exist in the future? What forms of aged care will people want in older age? How will aged care be financed? There was a need to consider how the delivery of services and the degree to which physical facilities either supported or potentially hindered longer-term service development.

The process commenced in November 2000, seeking to answer the questions: “What are the alternative, plausible scenarios for the future of aged care in Australia, and what are the most robust strategies for the Ageing & Disability Service to pursue to respond to those strategies?”

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<sup>118</sup> Keith Suter and Steve England *Alternative Futures for Aged Care in Australia*, Sydney: UnitingCare, 2001

The desired project outcomes were:

- Creation of a set of scenarios to guide the UnitingCare Ageing & Disability Service in the provision of aged care
- To embed within the UnitingCare Ageing & Disability Service culture the practice of “strategic conversation”
- To demonstrate to the Uniting Church’s aged care network in NSW and beyond the value of scenario planning and strategic conversation

As part of publicising the project and “talking it up” to create an air of expectancy, a video on scenario planning was produced featuring CEO Les MacDonald interviewing me on the value of Scenario Planning. This was shown widely throughout the aged care network and beyond.

In addition, each month from November to September 2001, a “Talking Point” article by me was included as part of the monthly newsletter *Communique* to assist in maintaining interest in the project. “Talking Point” topics included: “Why have a Scenario Planning Project?” “Health in the Year 2010” “The Death of Dying” “The Resurgence of Disease” “Aged Care and the Human Rights Revolution” “What Comes after Retirement?” “What can Australia learn from Japan in Aged Care?” “Will Superannuation be Enough?” “The Robots have Arrived” and “The Pace of Change”.

Initial interviews were conducted with thirty-three specialists in aged care and related fields including consumers, consumer advocates, government bureaucrats, church bureaucrats, for-profit and not-for-profit service providers and peak organisations, social demographers, academics, financiers and specialists in superannuation.

From these interviews, the scenario logic and the draft scenarios emerged. The draft scenarios were then tested in interviews with another group of people. In the language of scenario planning, these “remarkable people” / “lateral poppies” were people whose background, skills and interests lie outside the area under investigation (in this case aged care) and could bring other perspectives to bear when considering the draft scenarios. Seventeen lateral poppies were interviewed.

### **The Four Scenarios**

The report (which was our personal opinion and did not necessarily reflect the official views of the Uniting Church) contained four scenarios (or “futures”). In following the STEEP questioning format, we found that the two main drivers of change in this context would be Economic change and Technological change. We then used the two axes to create the four quadrants.

We had a problem in trying to imagine an Australian aged care “future” in which there would be high economic growth and low technological change. We thought that in a demographically small and reasonably homogeneous country like Australia, high economic change would always affect technological change. Our later interviews with the “remarkable people/ lateral poppies” agreed. (In the US such communities can live in technologically limited communities surrounded by economic change, such as the Amish/ Pennsylvania Dutch).

Our first scenario, then, we called “Business as Usual” and placed it in the centre of the two axes. This was where our clients (the aged care boards) then sat: they had survived the 1997 Aged Care Act (the most extensive change to aged care legislation in Australian history) and assumed they could survive the forthcoming accreditation/ registration reviews. Even so, we did foreshadow some reasons for avoiding complacency, such as the shortage of medical personnel. We also politely raised the issue of governance: namely that the boards were now running multi-million dollar businesses but may not have the full range of professional business skills to do so.

The second scenario we called “Brave New World” and it was based on high technological change/ high economic change. Under this scenario we imagined a future of great medical and economic progress. In the *Brave New World* novel there are no old people: people live active lives and as they start to age so they were dispensed with via hallucinating drugs (as the author Aldous Huxley went in his own final days). The implication here for the provision of aged care, is that there would be little demand for “low care” facilities because people would want to stay for as long as possible in their own homes but there would be a demand for “high care” places for the final stage of life.

The third scenario was “Blade Runner” and it was based on high technological change and low (or uneven) economic growth. As in the movie *Blade Runner* we imagined a world of greater disparity between rich and poor, with the rich living in “gated suburbs” and the poor surviving in ghettos. The latter would present challenges for the delivery of community care. When I presented the report at the Fifth International Conference of the International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing, a US delegate told me informally that he already had to send out his community care staff with armed guards – and he

was based in Connecticut, USA (which is usually seen as one of the more peaceful US states).<sup>119</sup>

The fourth scenario was “Out of the Rat Race” and was based on low or uneven economic change and low technological change. People would have grown weary while in the workforce of being “down-sized”, privatized, corporatized and so were opting for a quieter life after leaving the workforce. While the report was being publicized some people said they were thinking of the popular television programme *Sea Change* when they heard this scenario being described. Again, under this scenario, older people would be opting to stay at home for as long possible (either in their current locations or on the coast or in rural beauty spots) and so not require the billions of dollars’ worth of UnitingCare aged care bricks and mortar - few of which anyway were built anywhere near “sea change” coastal resorts or rural “beauty spots” (such as vineyards).

The report was launched in October 2001. But it then got pushed to one side by a completely separate matter which resulted in the resignation of the CEO who had commissioned the report (Les MacDonald). No doubt the report did contribute to the subsequent major restructuring of the aging service, with the enforced amalgamation of local aged care boards into regional ones (and retrenchment of some local executive staff) and the up-skilling of the boards, with a much larger number of central staff at Head Office to cope with the increasing government requirements. Aged care generally has become (as the government expected with the 1997 legislation) a much more professional undertaking.

Compiling any scenario planning document is, effectively, the “upstream” first part. The “downstream” second part is talking up the document, obtaining ownership of it, embedding it within an organizational culture, encouraging staff/ volunteers to be on the look-out for the indications that one particular scenario is coming into play. I have continued to do this in a personal capacity on the corporate speaking circuit.

To conclude, of the four scenarios which one seems to be coming into play? It seems to be “Brave New World”. As an aged care trade magazine recently explained:

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<sup>119</sup> Tragically the state’s reputation was changed in December 2012 with the shooting massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown.

Low care is suffering a slow and significant death. As a proportion of aged care services, low-level residential care is in distinct and continued decline. Of the existing residential aged care population, 70 per cent of residents are classified as high care and in recent [government aged care] approval rounds, new high care beds are being allocated at nearly twice the rate of low care beds.

The death of low care is at the hands of both consumer preferences for community care services as well government policy that shifts necessary funding dollars away from low care provision.<sup>120</sup>

Additionally the Southern Command of the Salvation Army and South Australian Baptist Community Care (BCS) have decided to move out of residential aged care.

## WHY ISN'T GREATER USE MADE OF SCENARIO PLANNING?

### Introduction

If scenario planning is so good, why isn't greater use made of it? *The Financial Times* (London) surveyed the scenario planning field in July 2003 and interviewed Peter Schwartz:

The sad fact is that 30-odd years after Shell and a handful of other companies started using scenario planning in business, it remains a fringe activity. Most business schools teach it only in passing. Interest among senior managers waxes and wanes. Of the handful of US consulting groups with deep expertise, only GBN can claim to be prospering. "We are the last one standing," says Mr Schwartz ruefully.<sup>121</sup>

There are various explanations for this, some of which have already been hinted at in this chapter.

### Resource-Intensive

Scenario planning is not something done by a handful of senior executives at a luxury golfing resorting over a weekend (which is often where "corporate planning" seems to be carried out). As the UnitingCare aged report showed, it

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<sup>120</sup> Linda Belardi "The Great Demise?" *Aged Care Insite* (Melbourne), August-September 2010, p 6

<sup>121</sup> "Thinking Ahead is Just the Easy Part", *The Financial Times*, July 14 2003  
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/92d94ba6-24e4-11d8-81c6-08209b00dd01,id=03071400480>  
(accessed 10/2/2008)

runs over a number of months (I estimate about nine months for the entire first part) and it is not cheap given the staff/ consultants that have to be engaged for the process.

This probably helps explain why the Uniting Church Assembly Strategic Planning Union (mentioned in chapter 1) decided not to follow this up. Shell is a multi-billion pound undertaking and so it can afford to take this type of work seriously. The Assembly did not have the resources to do a proper job.

### **Need for Support Throughout the Organization**

Even if an organization has the resources, it still requires “buy-in” from senior management. Schwartz’s team at Shell could work on the future of the USSR in a way that the CIA could not. Political leaders have their own “official view” of the future and so cannot easily entertain alternative views.<sup>122</sup> This may be partly a reflection on the modern role of the mass media which like to divide the nation to multiply the ratings, that is, to find areas of disagreement (real or imagined) to play one political faction off against another. It is therefore much better to have one single official viewpoint and stick to it.

Governments, then, are risk averse and do not like stimulating public debate in case it goes beyond the official viewpoint. For example, one of the consistent issues in Australian politics for the past century and a half has been the optimal size of the population. The theme has had a number of variables over the various decades, such as the need to “keep out the yellow peril” and then “populate or perish”. As the current controversy over asylum seekers shows, it is difficult to have a rational balanced debate.

The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs funded a scenario planning project by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) on population options for the country to 2050. I was one of the people interviewed for it. The report suggested that the country could cope with a population of 50 million people but there would be great strains on the environment. The Department thought the report was too controversial to publish and so refused to allow it to go into the public domain.

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<sup>122</sup> The UnitingCare aged care project attracted the attention of the Commonwealth Department of Aging and we agreed that a member of its staff could sit in all our meetings. But there was the government’s insistence that the official be nowhere mentioned in the report. This would give the minister “plausible deniability”, so that if the report did generate any controversy that embarrassed the government, the government could claim that it knew nothing at all about it. Thankfully the report didn’t generate any controversy like that.

However, a copy was eventually leaked to the media. I was then sent the full document<sup>123</sup> (well over 300 pages) by ABC Television *Four Corners* which used it as the basis of a programme (I was interviewed for it). An edited version was then placed on the Department's website.<sup>124</sup> Unfortunately instead of being a good teaching moment to have a rational debate on population policy, this became an episode focussed not so much on the substantive population/ environment issue as on the mechanics of how the government tried to prevent publication.

Probably the best Australian example of this problem in government circles was the rise and fall of the Australian Commission for the Future.<sup>125</sup> This had been a Labor pledge in the 1983 federal election and it was the idea of Barry Jones MP, who became the Minister for Science in the Hawke Government. The Commission, chaired by journalist Phillip Adams, was launched amid great fanfare in 1985.<sup>126</sup> Treasury (now energised with New Right economic rationalism) was hostile to it throughout its short and turbulent existence because Treasury regarded the market as determining Australia's future – not for a government agency to speculate on it. The Commission was wound up in 1988 (and Jones lost his job in 1990).

*Search*, the journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS), in an editorial welcoming the Commission's creation, also recalled the unhappy experience of the New Zealand Commission for the Future 1977-82.<sup>127</sup> Ironically, this got wound up not because of New Right economic rationalism (the then Muldoon Government was very much committed to the old style of government intervention in the economy) but because the Commission expressed concerns about whether the country could afford all the big projects. As with

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<sup>123</sup> Barney Foran and Franzi Poldy *Future Dilemmas: Options to 2050 for Australia's Population, Technology, Resources and Environment*, Canberra: CSIRO, May 2002

<sup>124</sup> "We'll Be Right with 50 Million" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 2-3 2002, p 1

<sup>125</sup> An approximate US equivalent of the Australian and NZ sagas was the apolitical Congressional Office for Technology Assessment that was abolished by the Republican majority in the 1995, again for publishing reports that jarred with their own point of view.

<sup>126</sup> "Science in Government: Commission for the Future", *Search* (Sydney), Vol 16 No 3-4, April-May 1985, p 75

<sup>127</sup> "Editorial: The Commission for the Future", *ibid*, p 58

the Australian Commission, it found itself challenging the dominant political paradigm and so it had to go.<sup>128</sup>

Thus, scenario planning may be too risky for a government to contemplate. Many companies – and the Uniting Church – may well feel similarly inhibited for the same reason.

### **Scenario Planning Will Not Solve All Problems**

Scenario planning is not a panacea. The previous case studies have all shown how successful it can be. There are probably many unpublicized documents which are great failures.

Additionally, even Shell has some blunders to scar its reputation. Though these may not be directly related to its scenario planning work, they do cause embarrassment. For example, *The Financial Times* did a profile of Peter Schwartz in 2004 (who had retired from Shell by then). By implication its successes in scenario planning had created a culture of arrogance:

Against this impressive record [on scenario planning] must be set Shell's mistakes: its failures to foresee the uproar of its disposal of the Brent Spar platform in the 1990s [in the North Sea] and the downgrading of reserves that led to its current crisis...

Brent Spar showed Shell's tendency to think of itself as a government, he [Schwartz] says. The company had talked to the governments concerned about sinking the Brent Spar platform at sea, which scientists regarded as the most environmentally acceptable option, but had not considered how campaigners would succeed in whipping up public concern...

In spite of the attention it pays to international affairs, Shell is very insular, Mr Schwartz adds. It rarely hires senior managers from outside....

The company paid little attention to external communications. It saw scant reason to talk to journalists or financial analysts. The failure of Sir Philip Watts, the chairman, to appear in January to explain the initial 20 per cent reduction in declared reserves was an example of this, he says.

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<sup>128</sup> The Australian Commission disappeared without a trace. The NZ Commission chaired by Professor James Duncan in effect went into exile and continued to operate as a non-governmental trust. It publishes *Future Times* (for which I write occasionally).



“That was typical. There was no one there with the public relations authority [to advise him]. That was a critical weakness”.<sup>129</sup>

In short, scenario planning can be a useful management tool but there are still many other qualities required for running a successful business.

### **Need for Speed**

Scenario planning is a long-range activity but we live in a world of short attention spans. People want quick results. This is partly a by-product of the rise of New Right economic rationalism in which the intention is to maximize self-gain as quickly as possible. Financial analysts have an attention span of 90 days (as do most boards).

Peter Schwartz was in Australia in August 1996. I heard him speak in Sydney at a conference on long-range trends. There was feeling of impatience among some audience members who wanted snappier ideas and quicker results. Some of the mood was captured by his interview in *The Australian Financial Review*:

Schwartz predicts that 2 billion teenagers will soon be the most potent demographic group, a global youth culture united by shared entrepreneurial values and cheap technology. “The pressure of their numbers”, he writes, “will be so immense that it will reshape the world”.

But surely most teens are more concerned with basic survival than a pair of Nikes? And most have never made a telephone call, let alone gone online. “Up to a point that’s true”, Schwartz agreed. “But technology is about to go through a revolution”...

“Essentially what you’ll need on the ground is a telephone”, continues Schwartz. “The implications are revolutionary”.<sup>130</sup>

15 years later, a youthful Arab revolution started to sweep across North Africa and the Middle East. Schwartz was right – and it is very much being assisted

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<sup>129</sup> “Planning Strengths Weakened by Mistakes, *The Financial Times*, June 17 2004  
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/92d94ba6-24e4-11d8-81c6-08209b00dd01,id=04061700850>  
(accessed 10/2/2008)

<sup>130</sup> “Sultan of the Scenario” *The Australian Financial Review Weekend Review*, August 30 1996, p 3

by technology.<sup>131</sup> But it took 15 years to get underway. That is too long for the thinking of some people.

### **Black Swans**

Finally, we need to aware of “Black Swans”.<sup>132</sup> Taleb’s book has become acquired reading matter in the finance sector. The author worked in a big finance company at the time of the October 1987 Wall Street crash and he reflects on the way he and his colleagues were taken by surprise. He also suggested that there could be another financial crisis (which has since hit the world beginning in 2007-8). How are we to cope with a low probability/ high impact event?

Before the Europeans arrived in Western Australia, it was assumed that all swans were white. Everywhere they went in Europe all the swans were white and so they assumed that all the world’s swans were white. They generalized from past knowledge. The discovery of black swans in WA (now a state logo) therefore shocked the Europeans.

The book’s underlying idea is fascinating. Humans have an ingrained tendency to underestimate outliers, such as the possibility that there is a place in the world yet to be reached by Europeans that may contain black swans. Humans are also reluctant to “unlearn” old ideas.

As noted above, US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld made notorious the very sensible observation that there are things we know we know, other things that we know we don’t know, and there are also things we don’t know that we don’t know (for example, that WA has black swans). How can we develop techniques to deal with that final category?

Unfortunately the book does not give us too many specific recommendations for action. The book’s usefulness comes from the fascinating insights and warnings scattered along the way. For example, in a study of risk of within a casino (normally a guaranteed way to make money from foolish gamblers), the casino ran into problems not from the customers but from events it had not thought about, for example, it lost US\$100 million when a performer was maimed by a normally docile tiger in the entertainment ring.

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<sup>131</sup> For an “insider” account of the Egyptian turmoil, see: Wael Ghonim *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power*, London: Harper Collins, 2012

<sup>132</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, London: Allen Lane, 2007

Another example comes from the identification of the most important three recent technologies: computer, Internet and the laser. All were unplanned, unpredicted and unappreciated upon their discovery and they remained unappreciated well after their initial use.<sup>133</sup> The “9/11” terrorist attacks (September 11 2001) were also “black swans”.<sup>134</sup>

Church history is also full of “black swans”:

- Jesus’ life and ministry, death and resurrection are of course the best example.
- The way that a “...small Jewish sect [became] in about three hundred years the official religion of the whole Roman Empire... The conquest of classical civilization by Christianity is one of the wonders of history. Most religions that have spread rapidly have relied on force as a means of making converts or of gaining the support of the ruling classes, but in the first three centuries of its existence, with no organized support from the ruling class, Christianity converted a large part of the population of the Roman Empire by persuasion alone”.<sup>135</sup>
- On October 31 1517 the Catholic priest Martin Luther nailed 95 “theses” to a door at Wittenberg on the abuse of church power – and the Reformation was underway.
- In April 1739 Rev John Wesley, with great reluctance, started preaching in open fields at Bristol, western England. “To his complete surprise during that first month of field preaching it is estimated that Wesley preached to approximately 47,500 persons, averaging about 3,000 on every occasion. Wesley’s misgivings had become Providence’s opportunities. I often wonder if there ever would have been the Methodist movement if Wesley had decided not to go to Bristol!”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid p 135

<sup>134</sup> John O’Neill worked in the Clinton Administration in the 1990s opposing Osama bin Laden; the incoming Bush Administration denied that bin Laden was a problem (Saddam Hussein in Iraq was the problem); O’Neill resigned in disgust and became the chief security officer of the World Trade Tower, where he was last seen alive on 9/11. See: Richard A Clarke *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror*, New York: Free Press, 2004

<sup>135</sup> JH Hexter *The Judeo-Christian Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 pp 89, 50

<sup>136</sup> Jim Stuart “The Ways of Providence”, *Touchstone*, December 2009, p 8

- In the US in the 1730s there came the Great Awakening, particularly identified with Jonathan Edwards, one of the most remarkable evangelical eruptions in world history.<sup>137</sup>
- William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury, made public theology exciting in his *Christianity and Social Order* book, as Rev Keith Clements recalled:

...the years of the Second World War saw the most extraordinary burst of public theology in Britain which both for its seriousness and its range of popular appeal has been unprecedented and moreover has been unequalled since... [Temple argued] lucidly for the church having vitally important principles to lay down about the priorities for a just and free society, and a good deal to say on what those principles were and how they should be embodied in British society and the international community. ...Many would also argue that by the time of his death in 1944 it was Temple rather than Winston Churchill who was effectively the leader of the nation.<sup>138</sup>

- On December 1 1955 black seamstress Rosa Parks at Montgomery Alabama, refused to give up her seat to a young white man on a bus; the driver refused to drive on until she did so. Blacks used this small incident to trigger a boycott of the city bus system. They held their initial meeting in the church of a young Baptist minister, who suddenly realized that racial discrimination was wrong and so he agreed to get involved in the boycott. December 1 1955 was a turning point for both US Civil Rights and Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>139</sup>
- Arthur Stace (1884-1967) was an illiterate low-life alcoholic criminal. In 1930 he was converted to Christianity and temperance at St Barnabas Anglican Church Sydney (having gone into the church to see if it was worth robbing). In 1932 he heard a sermon preached by Rev John Ridley, who wanted to shout "Eternity" throughout the streets of Sydney.<sup>140</sup> That sermon stimulated Stace to write in beautiful

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<sup>137</sup> George M Marsden *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2008

<sup>138</sup> Keith Clements "Learning to Speak: The Church's Voice in Public Affairs" *Zadok Perspectives* (Melbourne) Summer 2009, p 2

<sup>139</sup> Taylor Branch *Parting the Waters: Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement 1954-63*, London: Macmillan, 1988, pp 128-138

<sup>140</sup> Harold E Evans *Soldier and Evangelist: The Story of Rev John G Ridley MC*, Eastwood, NSW: Baptist Historical Society, 1981, p 64.

copperplate script around Sydney one of the most famous words in the city's history (and the word used for the Sydney Harbour Bridge illumination on New Year's Eve 2000): "Eternity".

In short, "black swan" events are low probability/ high impact events that can change an organization or even history. The 2011 "Arab Spring" is an example of this: a despairing street-side vegetable seller committed suicide in late 2010 in Tunisia; he was fed up with the corrupt local government officials. An open secret (corruption is rife) became a public truth, which was widely discussed on Facebook and elsewhere in cyberspace (an impact of Moore's Law). Young people rebelled in Tunisia, then Egypt, and then Libya. There are 22 Arab leaders. As this is being written, three have been overthrown; one more is under threat (Syria) – there are another eighteen to go.

## CONCLUSION

The Uniting Church is living in an era of rapid change. It is now necessary to see how the Uniting Church could use the management technique of scenario planning to think about its future.

Sarah Sladek, CEO of the XYZ University, and an expert in the different generations involved (or not involved) in voluntary organizations has warned that there are four responses to change: denial, fear, acceptance and embracing.<sup>141</sup> These reactions will be encountered as we work through the four Uniting Church scenarios (or "futures") and their consequences.

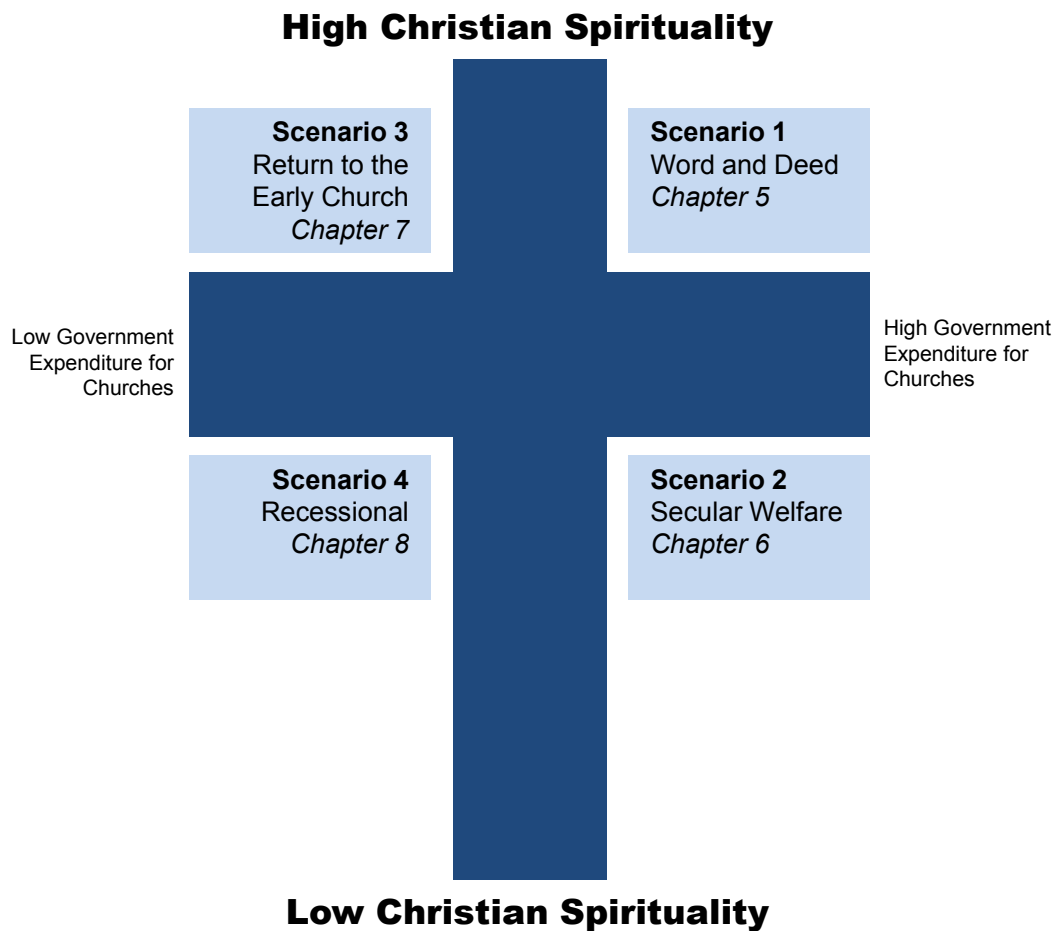
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<sup>141</sup> Sarah L Sladek *The End of Membership as We Know It: Building the Fortune-Flipping, Must-Have Association of the Next Century*, Washington DC: Centre for Association Learning, 2011, p 25

# Part 2

## The Four Scenarios in Diagram Form

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## **Chapter 4: INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR SCENARIOS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Part II of the dissertation sets out four scenarios (or “futures”) of the future of the Uniting Church in Australia. The purpose of this chapter is to make some introductory observations about the scenarios and the process of their creation. It ends with an examination of some of the work of Rev Dr John Bodycomb on church growth/ decline.

This dissertation is very much concerned with how the Uniting Church can respond to the challenges of its day. It is worth recalling that this is no new problem:

The Christian community from the beginning was an innovating community:

In the New Testament itself the community argued about the meaning of faithfulness as it moved out of Jerusalem and Galilee into the wider Mediterranean world. How much of the Jewish law should be binding on Gentiles? In what ways should Christians relate to the urban economies of Antioch and Athens and Rome? How should theology accept and resist the ethics of Platonism and Stoicism? The Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul and the Gospel according to John take up these issues repeatedly.

Another great change came when some Christians found themselves in positions of government. The teachings of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, say little or nothing about conduct befitting magistrates and emperors. For better and for worse, Christians developed various ethics for the exercise of political power.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in the long sweep of two thousand years of Christian history, the Uniting Church’s challenges are not unique. Second, the Uniting Church is a non-governmental organization (NGO) and all NGOs are also subject to challenges and so may be in a position to learn from how other NGOs are coping with, if not exploiting, the challenges. Finally, “The weekday edition of *The New York Times* contains more information than the average person was

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<sup>1</sup> Roger L Shinn “A Venturing Social Ethic”, *The Ecumenical Review* (Geneva) January 1985, pp 134-5



likely to come across during a lifetime in seventeenth century England”.<sup>2</sup> This means there are wider sources of information (some of which may challenge Uniting Church doctrine) but also providing new ideas on how the Uniting Church could grow.

The Uniting Church in the future will be different from the current (early 2013) version. Declining membership, troubled finances, and the pace of technological and other changes are all combining to force changes on the Uniting Church. Dr Ruth Powell (National Church Life Survey) told the 2007 NSW Synod of “...an aging membership (more than half of the church’s members were now over 60) and a decline in numbers over the last five years in the Uniting Church in New South Wales and the ACT from 49,000 to 33,600 people – meaning the church was now one-third the size it was 15 years ago”.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, as the NSW Synod magazine editorialized in 2004: “there are far more congregations than necessary; they are on average far too small to be sustainable; almost all of them have at least one property; most of these properties hinder the mission of the congregation rather than advance it; and many of them face heritage restrictions”.<sup>4</sup>

How, then, could the Uniting Church evolve?

## PROCESS

### Following the Technique

Chapter 3 set out a standard way of doing scenario planning. This dissertation has varied a little from that format:

- There is no formal “client” because this is a self-financed project and so this is not being produced for a “client” as such.
- Without a formal “client”, there is therefore no “official future” of the Uniting Church to begin with (and perhaps somewhat disturbingly there is no one central source, given the devolved nature of the Uniting Church, which could provide that overall “official future”).
- There have not been the formal interviews of experts in the field - and instead I have relied on my own experience in the Methodist/ Uniting Churches since 1976.

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Morris, John Meed, Neil Svenson *The Knowledge Manager*, London: Pitman, 1996, p 38

<sup>3</sup> “Challenging Statistics” *Insights*, November 2007, p 14

<sup>4</sup> “Consider the Possibilities for “Rebirth””, *Insights*, May 2004, p 18

- There has not been a consultation with “remarkable people”/ “lateral poppies” to ask whether each draft scenario is plausible and whether some major scenario has been overlooked. But I have been able to test the ideas informally via sermons and other presentations at conferences over recent years.

Thus Part II catapults the process straight to the presentation of four scenarios.

## The Two Drivers

Whenever two or more scenario planners are gathered together and start discussing their respective projects, a key question is: “what drivers have you selected?” Chapter 3 identified the standard five: Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political (STEEP). In interviews with experts, a standard question is usually around what factors are driving the change. As the interviews progress, so it should become clear that a particular one or two are the most important and are the most often recurring in the responses.

I have selected:

- **Social: Christian spirituality**
- **Economic: availability of government funds for the provision of social welfare<sup>5</sup>**
- **Christian Spirituality** is necessary as a driver because it is a defining characteristic of the Uniting Church (as distinct from a secular company).<sup>6</sup> There is no easy way of measuring this driver. It is even more complicated by the Christian “veneer” of developed Western countries like Australia, New Zealand and the UK, which have retained

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<sup>5</sup> The Australian Constitution (Section 116) does not permit government expenditure to assist the daily religious activities of church services etc or for evangelism – unless the expenditure can be justified via other measures eg heritage expenditure for preserving historic buildings, some of which are places of worship, or for the provision of education and so some funding can go to church-based schools.

<sup>6</sup> A discussion of what constitutes “spirituality” would be worthy of a dissertation in its own right. For some diversity of views, see, for example, Marcus Borg *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p 120; Diana Butler Bass *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, New York: HarperCollins, 2012, pp 66-71; Harvey Cox *The Future of Faith*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, pp 10-14; Tom Frame *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009, pp 184-6; Eugene Stockton *The Deep With: Towards an Archetypal Theology*, Lawson, NSW: Blue Mountains Education and Research Trust, 2011, pp15-22; Phyllis Tickle *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Grand Rapids, MI: 2008, pp 36-7

many Christian characteristics but no longer have large numbers of people regularly involved in Christian activities.

- **The Economic driver of government funding for social welfare** is necessary because money plays a major role in the Uniting Church. For example, the Uniting Church is Australia's largest provider of aged care, a major provider of other forms of social welfare, one of the country's main employers, and one of the country's largest single owners of real estate.

Each then becomes an axis, with "high" at one end and "low" at the other.

They are then used to form an upright "cross": + (the standard Cartesian coordinates in mathematical language). The horizontal (Economics) and vertical (Christian Spirituality) axes then provide four quadrants:

- top left hand quadrant: high Christian spirituality/ low availability of money for the Uniting Church: "Return to the Early Church"
- top right hand quadrant: high Christian spirituality/ high availability of money for the Uniting Church: "Word and Deed"
- bottom left hand quadrant: low Christian spirituality/ low availability of money for the Uniting Church: "Recessional"
- bottom right hand quadrant: low Christian spirituality/ high availability of money for the Uniting Church: "Secular Welfare"

To assist the flow of the narrative, the scenarios are set out in the following order:

- chapter 5: "Word and Deed"
- chapter 6: "Secular Welfare"
- chapter 7: "Return to the Early Church"
- chapter 8: "Recessional"

Part II's narrative arc – which is reflected in the increasing size each chapter – is to begin with the scenario which is the least confronting and then gather pace until the final one which examines the demise of the Uniting Church.

### **Format of Each Scenario**

Each remaining chapter in Part II has four major components:

- the drivers for that chapter
- the chapter's new Uniting Church
- implications of the scenario for the current Uniting Church
- indicators of when that the scenario could be coming into play for the current Uniting Church

The indicators contain faint signals of change. Australian Christian writer Gil Cann noted:

When a church is in maintenance mode most prayer is for the sick, most counselling is for those with problems, most exhorting is to the half-hearted, and most visiting is to those who have called for help. When a church is in missionary mode most prayer is for the well, most counsel is of those who are seeking to help others, most support is to the committed and most visiting is of those who have not called for help.<sup>7</sup>

I have used that simple test when visiting congregations to give me some idea of how the congregation is travelling.

### **Common Characteristics of the Four Scenarios**

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".

Views may be expressed in this dissertation which are not necessarily in accordance with my own views (such as the theological position in chapter 7).

It is important not to start with a presumption that the Uniting Church will survive, and so it is necessary to ask simply what form it could take. There is no guarantee that the Uniting Church will survive. There is therefore a crucial difference between this dissertation and the innovative task carried by the then NSW Moderator Jim Mein. He convened a series of Moderator's Vision Development Workshops<sup>8</sup>; I was involved with the process. That project's underlying assumption was one of working out what form the Uniting Church could take; not asking whether the Uniting Church had a future.

The Uniting Church is governed ultimately by Acts of State Parliaments. These may need to be amended for any of the scenarios to be fully implemented. The dissertation does not draft any new model legislation. Politicians do not like to dabble too much in the internal affairs of religious organizations and so providing a clear case is made for change, there would be little obstacle to changing the 1977 Acts.

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<sup>7</sup> Gil Cann "How to Tell if Your Church is Healthy" *Australian Evangelical Alliance: Working Together* (Melbourne), 2001 – Issue 2, p 10

<sup>8</sup> Jim Mein "Change or Be Changed?" *Insights*, November 2004, p 2 (A lot of documents were produced but since they are not in the public domain none is cited in this dissertation).

All scenarios contain some facts that are already known, for example, in “Word and Deed”, there is already a network of parish missions and some regional churches are being developed; in “Secular Welfare”, there are already moves to consolidate caring services because some congregations can no longer provide the necessary governance and resources to run them; in “Early Church”, there is already a flourishing sub-culture of literature on the “emerging church” and some experiments in doing church differently (such as “café church” movement); and in “Recessional” there are already doubts about the Uniting Church’s continued future. In short, some of each scenario ought not to be a surprise. This adds to the credibility/ plausibility of the scenario.

Finally, it is worth noting that a piece of information may appear in more than one scenario. It is in the nature of scenario planning that the same event/ process may be viewed in different ways in different contexts.

### **Summary of the Four Scenarios**

**Chapter 5: “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.

**Chapter 6: “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 university colleges are separately incorporated and run their own affairs.

**Chapter 7: “Return to the 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.

**Chapter 8: “Recessional”:** This Uniting Church is in a continual decline and so plans need to be made for an exit strategy.

## RESEARCH BY REV DR JOHN BODYCOMB

### Introduction

Chapter 3 mentioned the innovative and controversial research of Rev Dr John Bodycomb as an example of predictions made in 1986. This section examines two aspects of that work: his analytical framework and his three scenarios.

In 1986 Bodycomb was invited to give the JD Northey Lectures<sup>9</sup> (named in honour of a former Principal of the Congregational Theological College, who coincidentally was Principal when Bodycomb studied there in the 1950s). The value for me of Bodycomb's lectures was partly his use of sociological research and his attempt to encourage the Uniting Church to look at the wider context in which it worked. I think there has been a tendency (at least until recently) to see the church as an isolated institution living in a world of its own, whereas it really ought to be examined in the wider economic, social and political context in which it exists. Bodycomb's controversial work is a move in the right direction.

### Analytical Framework

Over the years, while working with Uniting Church parishes and congregations on church growth, I have found Bodycomb's analytical framework (which represent the core of two of his four lectures) very useful to help a parish/ congregation reflect on where it is placed.

Bodycomb identified a total of 16 factors that need to be examined.<sup>10</sup> The first seven are beyond a church's control and the other nine are very much within its control:

### External Factors

1. Demographic factors
2. Location and neighbourhood
3. Functional alternatives (for example, people may have gone to church in earlier decades/ centuries for "entertainment" but now they have television; or they may have gone to get guidance on how they should spend their lives but now there are psychologists etc)

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<sup>9</sup> John Bodycomb *A Matter of Death and Life: The Future of Australia's Churches*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p 22

4. Prevailing values (for example, a church, say, with a message of a simple communitarian way life may be overshadowed by the contemporary value of consumerism and “looking out for number one”)
5. Threats and terrors (for example, Americans went to church in the 1950s partly out of a fear of communist attack and so they sought a sense of divine assurance)
6. Church image
7. Societal receptivity

### **Internal Factors**

1. Denominational style and policies
2. Credal confidence (the confidence that the church has in its own belief system and the capacity of people to share their faith)
3. Experiential validation (“Religious experience would seem to go with enthusiasm for one’s faith and readiness to declare its benefits to others”).<sup>11</sup>
4. Growth orientation
5. Corporate life
6. Member satisfaction
7. Hard-nosed know-how
8. Internal demography
9. Pastoral leadership

One value of Bodycomb’s framework is that it helps local churches to recognize that no matter how hard they try, they may be doomed to failure. For example, a strength of the Uniting Church in previous decades has been its loyal rural following. But with the decline in the rural population, then no matter how hard rural people may work at maintaining their congregation, there are simply not enough people to sustain a local ministry. This is no reflection of them or their dedication – it is simply that local demography is against them.

On “internal” factors there is the warning about internal demography, which is a polite way of referring to the age of the members. In his first lecture, Bodycomb observed:

Unfortunately one of the disadvantages to having a top-heavy age distribution in our ordained ministry is that older clergy can have a tendency to look backwards for their operational models. After all, that is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid p 38

where it happened, and when one is three-quarters down the track, it can be hard not to think, “If it worked then, why shouldn’t it work now?”<sup>12</sup>

## Church Growth

It is useful to interrupt the Bodycomb narrative at this point to look at the different types of “church growth”. There are three main ways of achieving growth:

- “conversion growth”: is where a previously “unchurched” person responds to some sort of event (such as a Billy Graham Crusade) and decides to join a church;
- “transfer growth”: occurs when a person is already a Christian and becomes attracted to a particular style of worship or preaching elsewhere, and so leaves their own congregation and joins this other one;
- “biological growth”: is where Christian parents raise their children as Christians and so they virtually automatically join with their parents in the local congregation, and are later members of a Christian group of their contemporaries and so remain Christians in youth groups (such as Crusaders or the Student Christian Movement) and then stay in church as adults.

Strictly “transfer growth” is not “growth” in that the overall number of Christians has not increased – simply that there has been a change in their location.

“Conversion growth” requires a determined evangelical effort and, in my experience, some members in Uniting Church congregations are now too weary or lacking in self-confidence to be unable to do this.

“Biological growth” by definition requires the birth of children and their being raised in “Christian” homes, and again demography is against the Uniting Church because the rapid population boom of previous decades has now subsided, and often parents cannot get their children to go to church when there are now so many alternative activities to attract them. The local church was often an important social centre in previous eras; in many locations it no longer enjoys that status.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid p 9



Finally, technological changes in modern society have also tended to work against the Uniting Church (and most other denominations). In my presentations on church growth, I look at the way in which the local congregation is no longer the centre of local life. For example:

- cars mean that people are more mobile, with a greater range of potential activities on a Sunday
- television provides an alternative form of “entertainment” and so a person can watch television rather than listen to a sermon
- cinemas now provide a secular meeting place to listen to stories, expand their horizons, learn about new worlds and be moved by emotional experiences. (Arguably popular charismatic churches such as Hillsong have in turn borrowed back from cinemas some of the theatrical excitement, drama and colour of the movies.)
- telephones provide an alternative support network of friends who could be anywhere on the globe, and so a person seeking advice or assistance is not limited to the local minister
- education means that people can think more for themselves and be widely read, and so no longer dependent on the “educated” minister to impart ideas and interpretations of what is happening

In short, it should have been obvious to us that the Uniting Church was in trouble right at the moment of its creation in 1977. But we were blinded by the optimistic paradigm of creating the “first” Australian church.

Bodycomb spoke almost a decade later and the membership trends were already heading down.

### **Bodycomb’s Three Scenarios**

Bodycomb’s final Lecture contained three scenarios.<sup>13</sup> As was noted in the previous chapter, the Shell/ GBN technique being followed in this dissertation is to provide two or four scenarios. Also Bodycomb’s approach was more to extrapolate from the research he was commissioned to carry out by the Victorian Synod in 1983 on personnel needs and recruitment for ordained ministers in the 1990s.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid pp 50-2

The Bodycomb scenarios (particularly the first two) are therefore more in the “prediction” category than a use of the standard Shell/ GBN scenario planning methodology. Nonetheless his projections are worth exploring because they were a clear warning of the problems looming for the Uniting Church.

“GERICON” saw a church “geriatric and contracting”, with the median age of its members rising steadily and the death rate not matched by recruitment.

“This is a church aging, weakening, withering, shrinking, gasping”.

“TENESTAS” saw a church “holding on tenaciously to the status quo – making the most of what it is and has”. It is dominated by what could be called “a theology of the feasible”.

“IMAGINEX” saw a church “using its imagination to expand into the bazaar of ideas about life and living – determined to promote its system of meaning as aggressively and effectively as sanctified ingenuity allows”. This would include an increased corps deployed through the sectors of education, health care, industry and business; establishment of shop-front religious centres (book stores, listening posts, counselling centres, coffee shops etc).

Two of the three scenarios foreshadowed a decline in the Uniting Church and the third required many bold ventures. In retrospect, as Bodycomb mentioned in his 2010 memoirs, the two gloomier predictions turned out to be correct<sup>14</sup> and these trends have been covered extensively elsewhere in the dissertation.

### **An “IMAGINEX” Example**

Could the IMAGINEX scenario have ever worked? A remarkable example in Bodycomb’s own city is St Michael’s (formerly Collins Street Independent Church), one of Australia’s two main Congregational parishes (the other being on Pitt Street, Sydney). But I think that this model is possibly too adventurous for even Bodycomb.

Rev Dr Francis Macnab has led the parish since 1977 and increased its attendance from about 300 in 1977 to around 1,000 every Sunday in 2002.<sup>15</sup> Some of the site was redeveloped into a major office block and so the parish also has offices for some of its outreach activities such as the Cairnmillar Institute for counselling and education. Macnab is one of the city’s best known ministers, with a flair for communication, controversy and innovative thinking:

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<sup>14</sup> John Bodycomb *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey*, Richmond, VIC: Spectrum, pp 21-2

<sup>15</sup> Website: [www.stmichaels.org.au](http://www.stmichaels.org.au)

He is one of the few Victorian ministers who are a twenty-first century example of the “prince” preachers who so powerfully influenced Melbourne and Victoria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Deliberately choosing not to be involved in church councils, he has cut his own path rather more successfully than many of his ministerial colleagues.<sup>16</sup>

Macnab has not been afraid of controversy. In 2008 his parish carried out an aggressive advertising campaign for a “new faith” based on some of the more contemporary ideas now found in theology (to be encountered again in chapter 7). The columns of the official Synod monthly magazine *Crosslight* were dominated by the controversy. Macnab refused to write an article for the magazine to explain his point of view.<sup>17</sup>

The magazine instead published the text of an extensive media statement explaining the “new faith” campaign and how Macnab, who had preached on the theme for many years inside his parish, had decided to make it a more public issue. The statement then listed some of his views:

- “We know little about Jesus – Scriptural presentations of his life were written very late, long after he died, and we need to critically review those presentations;
- “People should not accept the Biblical record as literally true;
- “If we reinterpret the Scriptures properly, the physical resurrection of Jesus is something that was concocted years after the event;
- “If you re-read the Psalms, you’ll find they are full of violence of God and are in many places inhumane – God telling people to “kill your enemies and leave their children orphans, then massacre the children”;
- “Most Christian nominations [sic] are still propagating a fiction – they are still talking as if the Christmas and Easter stories are literally true, which they are not;
- “To date, Christian churches have been largely preoccupied with their theological statements, dogma and their creeds, and have often missed out on what is happening at the baseline of human suffering and existence...”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Breward “Victoria: Waiting in Hope” in William W Emilsen and Susan Emilsen *The Uniting Church in Australia: The First 25 Years*, Melbourne: Circa, 2003, p 212

<sup>17</sup> “Macnab rejects *Crosslight*”, *Crosslight*, October 2008, p 9

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

Macnab has, in effect, shown that Bodycomb's IMAGINEX was not entirely unthinkable. It required a particular type of imaginative, energetic and brave leader, who was able to command great loyalty from the parishioners, and who had a parish with extensive physical assets (the St Michael's site is prime Melbourne City real estate). IMAGINEX could therefore be done: it was not "unthinkable".

However, we return to some basic characteristics of the Uniting Church. In management terms, the best approach is first to determine the needs/ wants of the customers/ clients, then create strategies to meet those needs/ wants and only then worry about the structure of the organization. Structure follows strategy.

Uniting Church discussions, by contrast, are almost always dominated by structure. It is the basic "given". Thus, the Uniting Church often starts with "structures" and then works out what it can do within those structures.

The St Michael's case study is an example of a person defying that Uniting Church approach and (in standard management literature terms) finding out what works by first meeting the clients' needs/ wants. This put him on a collision course with the hierarchy of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania – but given the Church's devolved style of governance no one has moved to sack Macnab or charge him with heresy.<sup>19</sup>

The downside to this remarkable case study is drawn from chapter 2's study of the Uniting Church and the issues of branding, consistency of message and strategic alignment. A person can, for example, walk into any McDonald's outlet in Australia knowing automatically what service to expect and what products will be available. One of McDonald's branding advantages globally is that a person can go into a store overseas and immediately feel at home with the local offerings.

But that same person could not do the same by walking into any Uniting Church congregation. Indeed, given Macnab's conscious theatrical flair for music, colour and regalia of the Middle Ages, such a person may well wonder what century they were in if they were to enter St Michael's. Only a few blocks away there is Melbourne Wesley Parish, which provides a different type of religious experience.

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<sup>19</sup> I cannot recall any "heresy" trials in the Uniting Church since its creation in 1977 – rather different from the problems of Presbyterians Rev Samuel Angus and Rev Peter Cameron and Methodist Rev Ted Noffs.

The devolved nature of the Uniting Church that permits local experimentation may also hinder the creation of a national branding identity.<sup>20</sup> What does it mean to be a member of the Uniting Church? What does the Uniting Church stand for?

### The “Next Church”

Before looking at how the Assembly responded to the overall Bodycomb controversy, it is worth looking at how Macnab’s St Michael’s fits in with the controversy over the US’s “Next Church” paradigm. Charles Truehart (self-described as an “old-fashioned Episcopalian”) wrote the August 1996 cover story of *The Atlantic* magazine on “Welcome to the Next Church”.<sup>21</sup> The cover proclaimed: “Giant full-service churches are winning millions of customers with pop-culture packaging”. He had toured the US’s mega-churches and wrote one of the magazine’s more controversial articles.<sup>22</sup>

Truehart found churches with seamless multimedia worship, round-the-clock niches of work and services, spiritual guidance, and a place to belong. He predicted that an old church order was giving way to a new form of being church. Half of America’s Protestant churches, he claimed, had fewer than 75 members: they have more history than future.

The New Church gives people what they want. Like any business proposition, they find out what the people (customers) seek and then supply it. He compared the mega-churches with the giant chain store Wal-Mart and the way that a Wal-Mart store sucks the customers away from corner grocery stores where ever they are placed.

One of the article’s implications for St Michael’s is that the New Church has no denominational ties. Unaffiliated churches, Truehart claimed, have led the way in acting independently, creatively, and aggressively to build communities of people whose lives revolve around the church. They do not seek denominational ties. On the contrary, they avoid a denomination’s issues of

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<sup>20</sup> Melbourne-based religious columnist Alan Austin did an article contrasting two turbulent ministers in trouble with their church bureaucrats around the same time: Fr Kennedy of the South Brisbane Catholic parish was fired by his Archbishop, while the Victorian Moderator investigated Macnab’s even more creative approach to theology but decided to take no action; see; Alan Austin “St Mary’s and St Michael’s”, *Online Opinion*, March 9 2009 <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=8636> (accessed 3/10/2009)

<sup>21</sup> Charles Truehart “Welcome to the Next Church”, *The Atlantic* (Washington DC), August 1996, pp 37-58

<sup>22</sup> For an introduction to the controversy, see: Frank Burch Brown “A Matter of Taste” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1959>

staffing, liturgy, financing - and brand recognition. Ironically, St Michael's operates as though it were by implication a New Church – except of course that for property purposes it is governed by the Victorian Uniting Church Property Trust. The Truehart article suggests that a flourishing church in the US does better without being tied to a denomination. St Michael's lack of involvement with the wider Uniting Church is an example of how a parish can do better on its own.

The Truehart case studies of Willow Creek mega-church etc will be encountered again in chapter 5: a Uniting Church scenario of a small number of large congregations offering a word and deed ministry. The Truehart article will also receive a mention in chapter 7, dealing with the early church because the New Testament did not speak too much about early church life. What we think of most as “church” is largely (but not solely) derived from the later European heritage and not necessarily the Bible, and so could be discarded (formal liturgies, organ music, gothic architecture, stained glass windows, emphasis on institutional loyalty etc). The European overlay is therefore a comparatively recent expression of the faith and not necessarily an essential component of it.

### **An Assembly Response**

The Bodycomb Lectures generated some controversy at the time, if only because Uniting Church members had difficulty in thinking that their new creation was headed for decline so soon after its birth.

The three scenarios were used as the introduction to a 1988 report by the Assembly Task Group on Mission Resources on *What Future for the Church?*<sup>23</sup> The report overall endorsed the gloomy prediction by Bodycomb. The report mainly examined the Church's financial resources and the declining amount of money that the Uniting Church could expect from within its own capacity (tithes, offerings, rental for buildings and interest on investments etc).

The report did not foreshadow the influx of government funding to churches for the provision of welfare services. Nor did it examine the wider economic environment in which the Uniting Church had to operate. These were beyond the Assembly's usual way of thinking (which was to look inwards, rather than outwards).

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<sup>23</sup> Joint Assembly Standing Committee/ Finance Committee Task Group – Mission Resources *What Future for the Church?* Sydney: Uniting Church Assembly, 1988

The report was instead more a matter of sounding alarm to the presbyteries, synods and parish/ congregations on the parlous internal state of Uniting Church funding: “This paper challenges us all to accept the need for change”.<sup>24</sup>

As usual, the Assembly decided to set up bodies to examine ways in which the report could be considered. This was the usual bureaucratic response by the Assembly. But, then, given the devolved nature of the Uniting Church there was little more that the Assembly could do. Apart from some internal budgeting and structural changes, nothing of much substance flowed from the report. Despite the mention of “change” very little change occurred – except for the Uniting Church’s overall continued decline.

How, then, could the Uniting Church evolve? Here are four scenarios.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid p 14

## **Chapter 5: SCENARIO 1: “WORD AND DEED”**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The first scenario, from a Uniting Church point of view, is the least challenging to the current paradigm. It sees the Uniting Church being consolidated into a small number of large parishes.<sup>1</sup>

The 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). These developments are loosely similar to the growth of US “mega-churches” such as Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church at Lake Forest, California.<sup>2</sup> As American researchers George Barna and Mark Hatch have explained:

Megachurch ministry has become attractive because of the economies of scale that can be realized in a large ministry. People can have access to a broader range of programmes, events and styles of ministry; individuals can pursue a variety of niche interests or simply maintain their anonymity; financial and human resources, as well as facilities, can be used more efficiently; talented people have opportunities to focus on their areas of giftedness and the church can afford to hire a greater quantity and quality of top-of-the-line personnel; and the bulk of the church permits it to have greater influence in the community. The icons of the Protestant church world have become the pastors of who preside over the largest churches.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A “parish” in this context will consist of several “congregations”.

<sup>2</sup> A standard US text is: Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*, Grand Rapids, MI: Michigan: Zondervan, 1995

<sup>3</sup> George Barna and Mark Hatch *Boiling Point: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ventura, CA: 2001, p 247



## Chapter 5

The Uniting Church depicted in this scenario has a heart that loves and hands that care. “Word and Deed”, as the name suggests, is a balanced ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and providing welfare services. The “Word” informs the “Deed”. As American pastors Tim Celek and Dieter Zander remind us about Jesus:

He spent time with prostitutes and drunkards so much so that he himself got labelled that way by these exclusive club members. We don’t see in the biblical texts that Jesus required these outcasts to clean up their act before he would be friends with them, and he’s God incarnate. How much more should we fallible, imperfect humans have this attitude? If Christians are to be the representation of Jesus on earth, the task we are called to be engaged in is to be spending time with people whose lives are not all together and to continually invite them to forsake the things that are damaging them and walk in the light and in righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

Charles Truehart<sup>5</sup> (whom we encountered in the previous chapter) did a survey of growing US churches and he identified them as being those that offer a variety of ministry services to a variety of people, with a focus on the customer, at times that suit the customer.<sup>6</sup> They grow larger, in part, by getting smaller – in other words, yes: they have large overall congregations but parishioners are encouraged to join in small cells. Half a century ago, leading Australian Methodist Gloster Udy (at what was to become the Parramatta Mission) reminded people of the “key” to church growth: the cell as developed by John Wesley.<sup>7</sup> Modern American church leaders have therefore learned from the past to develop a new model of church to compete in the US religious market economy.

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Celek and Dieter Zander with Patrick Kampert *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996, 128

<sup>5</sup> Charles Truehart “Welcome to the Next Church”, *The Atlantic* (Washington DC), August 1996, pp 37-58

<sup>6</sup> A big difference between the US “Next Church” and the Word and Deed scenario portrayed here is, of course, that the latter parishes are locked into the Uniting Church as a denomination. Truehart argues that a strength of the US Next Church is that each one is not officially linked to any denomination and so can go its own way, That is not possible for any Uniting Church parish (even St Michael’s in Melbourne).

<sup>7</sup> Gloster S Udy *Key to Change*, Sydney: Surrey Beatty, 1985 (1962)

## Chapter 5

Unlike the US (with its Constitutional limitation on government funds going to churches), this Uniting Church derives a great deal of money from government to provide social welfare. In this scenario, the Uniting Church is heavily engaged in the Australian religious economy and is making the most of the market economy of religion.

This Uniting Church is a “Christian organization”, rather than just an “organization staffed by Christians”. It is a Church doing social work – and not just 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.

### **DRIVERS**

The two drivers of this scenario are

- high Christian spirituality
- high government expenditure available for churches to conduct social welfare programmes.

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.

#### **High Christian Spirituality**

This Uniting Church is competing for members in an Australian society that still has a basic interest in Christianity and there are people seeking to learn more about this faith. 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.

## Chapter 5

The challenge is to find innovative ways to provide a “seeker-sensitive service”.<sup>8</sup> This Uniting Church sees itself as “missionaries in a foreign land”, confronted with the need to “...understand the larger culture and use its language to communicate Christ”.<sup>9</sup>

Rev Alan Walker spent the late 1930s in England seeing how the Methodist mission system worked. His most recent biographer commented on the idea of Mrs Lane, wife of the Poplar (East London) Mission Superintendent, who spoke of:

... “persistent friendliness” – of simply being available to people and of finding ways to help them so that they were bound to the mission in gratitude. Such a policy could open up opportunities for evangelism which might not otherwise come. The mission also drove home the point made to him by men who were more experienced and wiser in the work of the ministry than he...that while evangelism and philanthropy must exist side by side with no separation made, yet evangelism must be given primacy as the soil from which philanthropy grew naturally. If social work were given the first place, evangelism would not necessarily grow from it.<sup>10</sup>

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.

The business world acknowledges that a clear organization-wide set of values is important for a successful organization. Of course, much of the discussion in that world turns on how best to make a profit, for example: “What precisely do we mean when we say we put the customer first?” “Which customers come first?” Values in this context represent the glue that holds the organization together. The important thing to note is that businesses try to sing from the same hymn book.

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase comes from the book written by the senior pastor of Calvary Church, Grand Rapids MI, who has specialised in reaching out to unchurched people in the US: Ed Dobson *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service: How Traditional Churches can Reach the Unchurched*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 15

<sup>10</sup> Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide, Openbook, 1997, p 32

This emphasis on values is even more important nowadays with “de-layerised” companies. There has been a reduction in the horizontal lines of transmission, with the removal of layers of middle management supervision, and with staff expected to know intuitively how to operate. Values in this context assist the staff up and down a business to know how to respond on their own without having to seek guidance from a senior person. Staff know how to operate effectively.

This system is inculcated into the Uniting Church staff in this scenario. All staff can act correctly because they know and endorse the Uniting Church’s explicitly shared Christian values.

### **High Government Expenditure on Social Welfare**

The scenario is also based on the continued policy of government providing funds for community services to other organizations which will provide the services. There is no return to the old system of government monopoly in the supply of services.

Additionally, 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.

One component of the new era is the fact that “...industry boundaries – as we knew them – are dead: usher in the era of convergence”.<sup>11</sup> Management writers Doz and Kosonen argue that major destabilizing forces have been at work in the last few years; they have eroded industry boundaries in unprecedented ways. They identify in particular: digitalization (a manifestation of Moore’s Law), globalization and government deregulation. This suggests that this Uniting Church has to have a broad mandate with “open edges” to make the most of the new opportunities.

British retailer Marks & Spencer provides an example of the value of this strategic agility:

Marks & Spencer’s entry into the food business is an example of recognizing opportunities on their own merit. When it first started selling “ready-made food” 30 or so years ago, Marks & Spencer’s original idea

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<sup>11</sup> Yves Doz and Mikko Kosonen *Fast Strategy: How Strategic Agility will Help You Stay Ahead of the Game*, London: Wharton School of Publishing, 2008, pp 10-11

was to use expensive basement space more efficiently and to generate lunchtime traffic in their clothing stores. Much more recently, management recognized that with the fitness trends, providing healthy food in Marks & Spencer's stores supported their image in the clothing business very well. However, they soon realized that health food could become much more than just a support activity for clothing. This led the company to enter the food market with a new "food only" store concept in which they could leverage their competences in retailing while building an autonomous new business.<sup>12</sup>

A lesson here for this Uniting Church is the need to be aware of changing customer trends and so be sensitive to the need for change. This Uniting Church will need to be strategically flexible.

### SCENARIO

#### **Ethos:**

##### (i) Vision

A "Word and Deed" Uniting Church is an Australian church that holds together the Christian gospel and the delivery of welfare services.

##### (ii) Mission

This Uniting Church has the following characteristics:

- Priest: it is inspired and guided by Christian worship
- Prophet: it is the voice of the voiceless, the downtrodden and marginalized
- Pastor: it provides caring services looking after the lonely, the least and the lost
- Professional: its caring services are run in a businesslike way

Another way of putting this is:

- Promote: the Christian Gospel
- Serve: daily demonstration of the Gospel
- Share: the proclamation of the Gospel

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 68

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### (iii) Identity

This Uniting Church has a mission perspective – it exists for the chief purpose of people who are not in it. It is not a comfortable club of self-absorbed Christians only looking after each other's interests. It is more than just a faith community wanting, among other things, to get a bit involved in social welfare.

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's provision of caring services helps to maintain the outward focus of the Church. Unlike some other churches which serve themselves with a "feel good, feel God" self-absorbed "name it and claim it" mentality, the Uniting Church is concerned with the wider community and with the less privileged.

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.

### (iv) Profile

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 (notably on Sunday mornings or Sunday evenings).

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).

### **Structure**

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.

### **Continuing Union: Who Will be Lost?**

The major change will be the amalgamation of small congregations into the larger parishes – or their winding up entirely. Some members, given past experience in local congregation amalgamations, will probably resign or let their membership lapse. This would be unfortunate but probably inevitable given the dramatic nature of the change brought about via some amalgamations. Another loss will probably be bequests ("deferred giving"), as some aggrieved ex-members decide to change their wills.

The innovations in membership recruitment and retention (explained below) should easily make up for this loss.

### **Innovation**

Ministry within each parish is seamless, with a diverse range of components held together by a clear unified sense of direction.

Seamless delivery means the cross-fertilization of ideas and the sharing of knowledge within the organization. For example, one aspect of the work is advocacy, dealing with government and media, and speaking in general terms (bearing in mind the privacy implications) of the problems of the clients and why there should be changes in government legislation and practice. Such persons can speak from the daily experiences of the organization's work.

Each parish consists of several congregations, each catering for the specific local needs of the people. Each meets the consumer-like demands of worshippers. There is much diversity under a common sense of direction.

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Different activities cater for different age groups and demographics. Spiritual intimacy is found within cell groups, to which all members are allocated.

Worship locations are designed to be attractive to a variety of people. The market economy of religion means that this Uniting Church is well aware of the growth potential of current non-members. It is easy to join this Uniting Church.

One aspect of this broad mantle of care is the provision of chaplaincy services to local schools. Chaplaincy may be a child's first contact with the world of religion. The chaplain has no evangelical role but a child, seeing the dedication with which the chaplain approaches their role, may be curious to know more about what motivates such a person to conduct this work.

Similarly, this Uniting Church is also a major provider of chaplaincy/ pastoral care services to state and private hospitals. If people are reluctant to attend church, then it is necessary to go to them.

This Uniting Church – noting that aged care is often an important “face” of the Uniting Church – creates an aged care centre first and then uses it as a basis for local chaplaincy. (This has reversed the usual approach of first having a congregational worship centre and then possibly adding an aged care facility). Community care chaplains (who are not funded by government) encourage their clients to invite their friends to their home during visits and so create a little “house churches”.

### **Tenor of the Times**

This Uniting Church is guided by the tenor of the times in its response to the consumer-like demand of parishioners, and the clients and residents in the community services

### **Strategic Alignment**

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, for older residents facing the challenges of old age and death, they 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.

These arrangements are also reassuring for potential donors. The donors know explicitly what work this Uniting Church does and what values drive its work. They can, for example, be assured that staff in the childcare community services will be good role models for the children.

### **Fatigue**

Congregational fatigue will be reduced. There will be no Presbytery meetings (Presbytery has been discarded), and much fewer Synod ones. The focus is much more on working within the parish rather than being part of a larger bureaucratic structure.

### **Business Competency**

There is enhanced business competency because of all the additional training. There is an explicit recognition that religion is big business and staff and volunteers should be prepared for it. Professional bodies such as the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) are commissioned to provide specific training for staff and volunteers.

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of this Uniting Church is assessed by both the growth of the congregations and the secular systems provided by government to check on the delivery of welfare programmes. On the one hand, this Uniting Church is very concerned about church growth and measuring the numbers of members, people who attend etc.

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On the other hand, government has its own extensive programmes to assess the effectiveness of welfare services and so this Uniting Church can rely on that outside scrutiny to help assess its own effectiveness in the delivery of welfare services.

### **Membership**

Church growth programmes are well organized and new members are inducted via a system of membership classes. There is a regular follow-up with visitors to encourage return visits. This Uniting Church is guided by the methodology of fast food outlets, which make their customers feel welcome and encourage them to “call again”. It is easier to add numbers to a parish that is already relatively large (a membership momentum is built up) rather than start from the beginning.

This Uniting Church presents God in ways that people can relate to. It does not get too bogged down in esoteric theological discussions that require a great deal of prior knowledge to understand. It recognizes that most members have a limited knowledge about theology – they are attracted to this Uniting Church by their hearts rather than their heads.

There is no clear separation between “church” and “world”. This Uniting Church provides caring services to people who may never attend church worship services and may not necessarily share the Christian convictions of the Uniting Church. This Church is going to people in need.

The size and resources of the parishes mean that there can be a broad mantle of care. There is a variety of niche caring services to cater for local needs, such as migrants, divorcees, youth or unemployed.

### **Property**

This Uniting Church’s buildings are not necessarily of the “standard” formal church format. For example, instead of the traditional ornate heavy wrought iron gates and wooden doors, there are glass doors through which passers-by may see what is happening inside the building. Shopping malls and movie theatres – rather than traditional European medieval gothic churches with stained glass windows – provide the architectural inspiration. Such physical locations are “neutral” and non-threatening to people with little or none church experience.

The building facilities are multi-purpose and so can be used seven days a week in a variety of ways, for example, being rented out for commercial purposes for conferences and exhibitions.

The facilities are also used for parish fellowship groups, such as groups of young people (such as Internet café facilities) and older people wishing to do informal education activities, such as “schools for seniors”.

The facilities have large car parks. People are now used to travelling long distances to work, school and entertainment and so going to this Uniting Church by car is no exception.

The worship facilities within each location vary in size from small intimate rooms to large theatres with comfortable seats and wide screens for video projection etc. They make, where necessary, full use of multi-media presentations.

Worship styles are similarly diverse, with a range of music options. At any one time, particularly on a Sunday, a large worship building could contain services with noisy vibrant music and also quiet contemplative Taize services. Different services, styles and music will cater for the different tastes of members of the same family.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITING CHURCH**

The most dramatic implication is that existing congregations will need to be consolidated.<sup>13</sup>

The consolidation of resources (notable the sale of small church properties) provides a fund from which to make possible a range wide of activities.

Existing declining congregations are sowing the seeds of their continued decline. Most congregations consist of older people. When a younger visitor arrives, they feel out of place and the parish may not cater for their needs. The visitor does not return. This means that over time the congregation just continues to fade away through the lack of new active young members or older members with fresh ideas. It becomes – though it does not necessarily set out to be this – just a cosy clique.

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly a similar debate is underway in the Australian Catholic Church, where a fundamental problem is the shortage of priests. Kevin Doherty, a semi-retired business executive, has set out some ideas that go beyond the amalgamation of two or three Catholic parishes: he says combine eight or ten. The dispersed local parishes are a product of the “horse and buggy era” – people are now used to travelling longer distances for worship. Kevin Doherty “If Only Our Church had the Courage!” *ARCvoice*, September 2009, p 5

Rev John Mavor has written about the rise of Uniting Church “regional congregations” which are much of the way along to this scenario:

...I came to see the value of this kind of congregation. This was particularly true for the Uniting Church where there was often a multiplicity of congregations in an area. Queensland has led the way in the Uniting Church in the establishment of regional congregations.<sup>14</sup>

In April 2000 the first national conference took place at Robina-Surfers Paradise Uniting Church in Queensland to examine the role of regional churches in the Church's future.<sup>15</sup> The conference was told that a “minister-centred” church (one in which every member regarded the minister as their pastor) had a ceiling of around 120-150 members: any higher and the demands are too much for any one minister. A regional church had at least 300 members and so could employ more pastors and other staff. Interestingly the conference was told that the average Uniting Church congregation contains 54 members – I have preached at congregations where the attendance figures were much lower.<sup>16</sup>

Journalist Jane Lampman of *The Christian Science Monitor* did a survey of US mega-churches. One person she interviewed advised: “Today people demand quality, even if it's subconscious”, says David Travis of Leadership Network, a church consultant group. “They find quality almost everywhere else in their lives and expect it in all venues – music, visuals, preaching, written communication”.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly business writers Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema have warned that “As value standards rise, so do customer expectations”:

Market leaders raise expectations and value norms not only in their own industries, but across the board. Customers are being conditioned –

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<sup>14</sup> John E Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, VIC: PenFolk, 2009, p 438

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Demack “Regional Churches: The Way Ahead?”, *Insights*, May 2000, pp 17-8

<sup>16</sup> This takes us back to the problem of Uniting Church statistics: people may be counted as “members” but may not necessarily be regular attendees.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Lampman “Megachurches are Pulling in the People”, *The Christian Science Monitor / World Edition* (Boston), February 18-24 2006, p 10

spoiled, some may say – to anticipate lower prices speedier service, and more innovative products from all their suppliers.<sup>18</sup>

The implication here is we should not assume that Christians have different expectations when they enter a church. They are seeing improved standards elsewhere and so why shouldn't they take those expectations with them when they enter a church building? Uniting Church members now have increasingly higher standards and a lower tolerance for poor organization, amateurish forms of worship, and tatty buildings.

Management writers Joseph Pine and James Gilmore have explained the economic background to this broader trend. In essence, traditionally economic development has evolved through three stages: commodities (agriculture and mining), manufacturing, and the provision of services (such as religion, education, cafes, and healthcare). Now people have so much wealth that it is necessary in the developed Western world to create a fourth layer: the "experience economy"<sup>19</sup> to extract money from them.

Experiences are memorable rather than tangible. A cheap biro probably writes just as well as a Mont Blanc pen but the owner of a Mont Blanc pen has the "experience" of demonstrating their wealth to others at, say, a committee meeting by flourishing the pen. Watches are now cheap and easily available – and so a whole new industry has been invented to cater for the wealthy who want to flaunt their wealth via bejewelled watches. Starbucks have taken the humble commodity coffee and made drinking a cup of coffee an "experience".<sup>20</sup>

This "experience economy" development has led to an increase in consumer expectations. The previous low standards of service – "take or leave it" – are no longer acceptable. If a provider is not providing services at a sufficiently high level of service, then the consumers can easily go to the competition.

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,

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema *The Discipline of Market Leaders: Choose Your Customers, Narrow Your Focus and Dominate Your Market*, London: HarperCollins, 1996, pp 21-2

<sup>19</sup> B Joseph Pine II and James H Gilmore *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp 1-2, 3, 6, 35

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?

Former Methodists would probably feel more comfortable with this scenario – given their Wesleyan heritage – than former Congregationalists and former Presbyterians, whose own traditions were more modest in the provision of welfare services.<sup>21</sup> Maxine Langston of the US Methodist Church, for example, explained the Wesleyan heritage:

John Wesley, both in proclamation and in deed, stressed to his followers that they must be involved in relieving the social ills of the day. For instance, he made a modest effort to break the chain of poverty by establishing an employment project in the Society Room in London. His concern for health care led him to establish the first free clinic in London, in protest of the high fees that doctors charged the poor. He spent considerable time and energy in trying to improve the prisons in England.

Combining a concern for the poor, the sick, and the lonely were the Strangers' Friend Societies. Laypersons would visit "a poor stranger having no parish or friend ..." carrying along a penny a week. Early on, the Methodists established orphanages and schools, primarily of the children of miners and other working-class persons.<sup>22</sup>

The Word and Deed scenario, then, although not found in all Christian denominational heritages, none the less has deep roots. As the Anglican Rev John Stott pointed out:

It is exceedingly strange that any followers of Jesus Christ should ever have needed to ask whether social involvement was their concern, and that controversy should have blown up over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. For it is evident that in his public ministry Jesus both "went about...teaching and preaching" (Matthew

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<sup>21</sup> This does not suggest, of course, that there was no tradition at all – such as Presbyterian Rev John Flynn's Australian Inland Mission

<sup>22</sup> Maxine M Langston "Christians Involved in a Network of Caring", *Engage/ Social Action* (Washington DC), March 1981, p 16

4:23, 9:35 RSV) and “went about doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38 RSV). In consequence, “evangelism and social concern have been intimately related to one another throughout the history of the Church...Christian people often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why”.<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on Word and Deed provides credibility. As New Zealand Brethren minister Rev Brian Hathaway (1942-2003) pointed out:

Credibility is primarily gained lovingly and sacrificially serving other people. In an age of hedonistic self-indulgence, this is not popular. Neither does it offer a quick fix for a broken society or excitement, glamour and instant access for the Church – it is a ministry over the long haul. The heart of the three years of the ministry of Jesus was essentially this – serving others. “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve”, Matthew 20: 25-28).<sup>24</sup>

Hathaway went on to remind readers of the inspiring personal example of Mother Teresa:

For the last 20 years, one of the most credible witnesses to Christ has been a frail little nun, living a simple lifestyle among the poor in Calcutta. Mother Teresa has captured the hearts of Christian and non-Christian, rich and poor, powerful and weak, East and West, with her compassion and servant heart for the dying of Calcutta. One doesn't build a church by ministering to the dying. There is not much future for such people. They will not be able to contribute to growth statistics, building programmes, dynamic celebration services or evangelistic outreaches. Such a strategy (ministering to the dying) is not high on the list of Church growth strategies but I am absolutely sure that it is on God's heart.<sup>25</sup>

Appendix III of his book set out the community involvement of Hathaway's Auckland-based Te Atatu Bible Chapel in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Activities included outdoor adventure specialities, helping people with their household budgeting, Christian bookshop, Christmas dinner for lonely people, Christian community newspaper, community vegetable garden, co-operative house building

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<sup>23</sup> John Stott *Issues Facing Christians Today*, London: Marshall, 1984, p 2

<sup>24</sup> Brian Hathaway *Beyond Renewal: The Kingdom of God*, London: Word, 1990, p 67

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp 67-8

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp 211-9

ventures, coaching for school examinations, emergency housing, medical/ counselling centre, food bank, holiday activities for school students, industrial chaplaincy, marriage counselling, prison ministry, unemployment schemes. Three decades on, some of these activities may seem a little old fashioned but the key point is the diversity of the activities: both to the community and as avenues for church members to get involved in helping others. A large parish can mobilize more resources to cross-fertilize schemes.

An Australian example is provided by Rev Alan Walker recalling his work at the Central Methodist Mission, Sydney. His survey of the Mission in the late 1950s-70s showed how the Mission responded to new demands as they arose, such as the arrival of post-War migrants and the need for fellowship groups to help them settle into Sydney: "Sydney Cosmos Society".<sup>27</sup> Naturally as the needs changed, so the groups declined but they served a purpose while they were needed. The Mission's size, resources and ambitions could cater for all these new ventures.

This emphasis on a balanced Word and Deed ministry is not currently adequately reflected in the Uniting Church Constitution. The Constitution makes reference to the various Word bodies (congregations, elders etc) but there is far less acknowledgement of the welfare agencies – which now represent about 90 per cent of the funds flowing through the Uniting Church.<sup>28</sup> There is a similar lack of recognition of chaplaincy services (in schools, aged care, prisons etc), which are now one of the Uniting Church main operational areas.

Presumably this is a reflection of the way in which the agencies have been run by congregations or parishes and so do not have a separate status (except at the national Assembly level).

What is to be done about UnitingCare? This is the national badge for all Uniting Church community services programmes and services. This is therefore the main Uniting Church welfare umbrella, although it does not have detailed control over welfare services. Under this Word and Deed scenario it would probably need to be broken up and control pass back to the Uniting

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Walker *Love in Action: The Thrilling Story of an Australian Company of Christians*, London: Collins, 1977, pp 32-3

<sup>28</sup> Since the Uniting Church does not produce a consolidated set of accounts, it is impossible to assess the Word/ Deed financial balance. This assessment is based on my experience at Wesley Mission Sydney.



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Church parishes (which is where many of the constituent agencies began and still often reside).

Similarly the network of Uniting Church schools, which are largely self-governing would continue as they currently exist. Much the same could be said about the university colleges which are loosely linked with the Uniting Church. These institutions have their own governing boards and are more influenced now by university and government regulations than Uniting Church ones.

The provision of chaplaincy services is recognition both of the expanded scope for ministry and the new role for schools.<sup>29</sup> The Victorian Synod magazine noted how state high schools are not what they used to be: they are now more than teaching places:

They have become community centres for young people trying to cope with life and society. Their agenda includes spiritual health and the churches are helping to staff them....

“If a kid has a problem” [according to Rev Graham Hall, a Uniting Church minister who is chaplain at Gisborne Secondary College], the school is the first port of call where that can be fixed. So they’re [State Government] putting more resources into schools. And chaplains are going to have to deal with life and death situations a lot more because of the risks kids are taking”.<sup>30</sup>

An organization that provides caring services and is willing to speak out on behalf of the clients has an advantage over the more research-oriented educational institutions: it has real knowledge of what is happening on the ground and a collegial atmosphere in which to test ideas.

Christianity has to get back to transforming society. Christianity has become too privatized. Professor Graeme Davison gave the Seventh F Oswald Barnett Oration in 2000. (Barnett, an accountant, was a Methodist layperson who voluntarily researched the Melbourne slum conditions of the Inter-War Years, and this led to the creation of the Victorian Housing Commission in 1938, on which he served as a Commissioner until 1948). Davison concluded:

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<sup>29</sup> “The people of England may be more and more secular, and much less interested in going to church, but they’re still putting a lot of their faith in schools...That’s probably why the British Methodist Church (27 primary schools) intends to increase its involvement in education...” “Faith Goes to Schools”, *Crosslight*, December 2004, p 5

<sup>30</sup> “School’s Back! Spirit’s In”, *Crosslight*, February 2000, p 3

We badly need a revival of the tradition of independent, voluntary, empirical and morally-purposeful social inquiry in Australia. It is unlikely in my judgement that it will come from the universities. They are at the moment too preoccupied with professional and institutional survival, and too dominated by managerial doctrines hostile to such enterprises. It certainly won't come from the consulting firms, government bureaucracies or right-wing think tanks. I would like to think that it might come from the young: that the yearnings which now find an outlet in the self-absorption of the New Age and charismatic Christianity, might regain a social dimension.<sup>31</sup>

A similar challenge is made in the doctoral dissertation of Rev Dr Ann Wansbrough:

On the whole the Australian churches appear to have little concept of the scholar as someone given less cluttered time for the purpose of thinking. Such uncluttered time is required to engage in the interdisciplinary work and praxis required by the hermeneutic circle. The churches tend to see theologians as academics who teach, and many church agencies focus on the most specific levels of policy analysis where theology makes least contribution... Staff see themselves as executives, bureaucrats, policy analysts, advocates or whatever, but rarely as scholars and theologians...

The churches at present do not provide the level of resources necessary for these different levels of work.<sup>32</sup>

My work at Trinity Peace Research Institute, based at Trinity Uniting Church Perth (1986-90) was an example of the scholar in residence.

The parishes in this scenario's Uniting Church know where the poverty is; they will be in touch directly with the people affected. They can speak whereof they know. They will be big enough to employ research persons and publicists who can make the most of the most of the research results.

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<sup>31</sup> Graeme Davison *The Compassionate Eye: Research and Reform: The Seventh F Oswald Barnett Oration*, Melbourne: Ecumenical Housing, 2000, p 26

<sup>32</sup> Ann Wansbrough "Speaking Together: A Methodology for the National Council of Churches' Contribution to Public Policy Debate in Australia", Vol I, University of Sydney Doctoral Dissertation, February 2000, pp 330-1

This professionalization of Uniting Church parishes would mean more resources being made available for training. Each parish would have a greater budget from which to finance the regular training of staff. They would be large enough to commission consultants to provide in-house training.

An example of this training possibility is the capacity to handle the media. I saw how Sir Alan Walker used to cultivate the media (much to the annoyance of the slow-moving bureaucrats at Methodist/ Uniting Church head office.) Walker in his memoirs recalled:

Cultivate the media. It is as eager to obtain real news as we are to give it. When I was president of the [Methodist] church I would ask a minister the name of the editor and the manager of local radio station. Frequently the answer was “I do not know”. Every minister should develop relationships with key reporters and press editors.<sup>33</sup>

Walker went on in his book to provide some tips on how he operated. This is now a new era and so some of the comments are now out of date. The key point is the Walker was self-taught and became a master of the game.<sup>34</sup> It is now possible to short-circuit all this effort by providing media training in-house. Additionally, the Internet now offers more opportunities for engagement via social networking – providing there are resources and a willingness to do so.

The blurring of boundaries means that the activities of these Uniting Church parishes may overlap. Instead of there being a neat patchwork quilt of allocated “territory” across Australia (with regional Presbyteries closely guarding the boundaries<sup>35</sup>), the emphasis is on Word and Deed priorities rather than church bureaucratic niceties. The Internet era makes boundaries irrelevant. Religious franchising means satellite congregations can be established anywhere on the globe. A large parish would be able to muster the resources necessary for such an operation.

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<sup>33</sup> Alan Walker *A Vision for the World: Alan Walker Tells His Story*, Wantirna, VIC: 1999, p 51

<sup>34</sup> This media work included writing anonymously for some decades the editorials for Christmas and Easter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Wesley Mission Sydney (in Sydney Presbytery) in the early 1990s wanted to develop Fairfield parish/ congregation in Sydney's west (in the Parramatta Presbytery) as the “western end” of Wesley's delivery of caring services – but this was blocked by the Parramatta Presbytery unfortunately.

## INDICATORS

- 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 (and so less public relations veneer)
- greater sense of crisis and a willingness to take action
- older members realize that they cannot maintain their existing congregations and are so are open to new ideas for alternative ways of operating
- death of older members who have been blocking reform measures
- influx of younger members with little or no denominational loyalties with a desire to create a balanced Word and Deed new type of parish
- willingness to learn from American megachurches
- training in innovative media techniques
- continued disposal of small, old Uniting Church buildings
- creation of modern multipurpose buildings
- creation of ad hoc ministry arrangements to cope with the shortage of ministers
- continued consolidation of congregations into larger congregations<sup>36</sup>
- continued development of “regional churches”
- favourable publicity for the regional churches model throughout the current Uniting Church
- increased belief that the regional church model/ parish mission might be the way to solve the current Uniting Church’s problems

## CONCLUSION

This scenario is the least challenging of the four. Regional churches and central missions already provide examples of how this could be done.

But I know from decades of sitting on Uniting Church bodies that some people in declining small congregations will still “fight for their corner” and so be unwilling to dispose of “their” building to assist someone else.

Perhaps it is time to just let small failing congregations fade away? This is the essence of the second scenario, to which we now turn.

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<sup>36</sup> A risk with consolidating parishes/ congregations is that some members resent the amalgamation and so leave the Uniting Church entirely

## **Chapter 6: SCENARIO 2: “SECULAR WELFARE”**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The second scenario is “Secular Welfare” – a Uniting Church providing extensive community services but without any congregations (or parishes). This simplifies governance, management arrangements and risk management capabilities, and reduces unnecessary duplication and competition between Uniting Church agencies.

The “Secular Welfare” scenario has one Uniting Church agency – possibly the current UnitingCare<sup>1</sup> – that will run all the community services. The congregations/ 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 parish missions with their own community services will have the services transferred to the central agency. Uniting Church schools – which already have a high level of autonomy – will be completely self-governing and responsible for their own affairs, as are Uniting Church university colleges, such as Wesley College, University of Sydney.

It may be a surprise to think of a Christian agency without a parish/ congregation. But many examples already exist (or have existed), such as:

- Town and Country Mission, formed in 1859, later known as Brisbane City Mission, which was the model for the 1862 Sydney City Mission<sup>2</sup>, which is now the Mission Australia network
- Sydney Ragged Schools movement (1860-1924), which provided inter-denominational Christian education and care for homeless children
- HammondCare, an independent Christian charity originally formed in 1932, which now provides various forms of aged care

The Uniting Church in this scenario 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

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction, see: UnitingCare Australia *Faith Foundations*, Canberra, (no date)

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused, of course, with Wesley Mission Sydney

business ideas and are able to exploit the emerging ideas of social entrepreneurialism

The new organization will benefit from bringing together the diverse, occasionally competing Uniting Church welfare agencies, into one organization which could develop a “co-operative mindset”. London Business School’s Lynda Gratton has identified a co-operative mindset and the capacity to span organizational boundaries as keys to helping an organization flourish.<sup>3</sup>

### DRIVERS

The drivers of this scenario are:

- **low Christian spirituality**
- **high government expenditure for social welfare.**

#### **Low Christian Spirituality**

In this scenario, there is little popular interest in Christian spirituality. The Christian “veneer” - which distorts our perception of the extent of the decline of the church in most Western countries - is now largely gone. For example, former Australian Jesuit, Dr Ian Guthridge has examined the rise and fall of the “Christian empire” and argues that one of the reasons for the decline is the church’s loss over the near-monopoly of education, and even within those schools that are Christian “...one senses that the teaching of traditional “Christian Doctrine” and of a distinctively Christian ethic may also have declined, if not disappeared, in recent times”.<sup>4</sup>

There may of course be an interest in other forms of spirituality (such as a growth of interest in “New Age”<sup>5</sup> religions) and a high level of secular humanitarian awareness; it is simply not directed through the Uniting Church as such.

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<sup>3</sup> Lynda Gratton *Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces and Organizations Buzz with Energy – and Other Don’t*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007, pp 43-100

<sup>4</sup> Ian Guthridge *The Rise and Decline of the Christian Empire – and Beyond 2000...?* Middle Park., VIC: Medici, 1999, p 223

<sup>5</sup> An interesting introduction to New Age religions and their implications for Christianity is: Ross Clifford and Philip Johnson *Jesus and the God of the New Age: Communicating Christ in Today’s Spiritual Supermarket*, Oxford: Lion, 2001

Another way of describing “low Christian spirituality” is the rise of secular humanism. This is the view that each human establishes their own moral values and determines their own destiny. They may follow God or gods, or some “higher power” - or they may not.<sup>6</sup> Essentially each person is free to make their own decision about their own life in their own way. There are no moral absolutes.

American religious commentators George Barna and Mark Hatch (without endorsing this perspective) sum it up as: “The predominant belief is that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you believe something and feel good about it”.<sup>7</sup> They even claim that the United States is now in a state of “spiritual anarchy” with the diversity of beliefs now prevailing and the tolerance for this diversity from Christians who in a previous era would have been outraged by some of these beliefs.<sup>8</sup> This free market of religious ideas means that “...new religious groups will gain ground by emphasizing their response to high profile felt needs such as positive relationships, self-improvement, integrity, good health, purposeful living, retaining control, achievement without stress and having fun”<sup>9</sup> – all factors that are less and less disturbing to traditional Christians and so provide a foothold for the establishment of the new religions.

American Christian writer Ed Dobson has complained about the spirit of individualism, rather than community, that dominates American culture (and I think Australian culture), which gives

...relativism a strong appeal: “You believe what you want, and I’ll believe what I want” is the spirit of our times.

If a couple on [television programme] Donahue says. “We’ve been married 60 years, and we’re still happy, the audience applauds. But if

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<sup>6</sup> Many “New Age” books allude to the existence of some “higher power”, with even divine intervention to assist believers, not least in the search for happiness and prosperity; for example Wayne Dyer *Manifest Your Destiny: The Nine Spiritual Principles for Getting Everything You Want*, New York: HarperCollins, 1997; Rhonda Byrne *The Secret*, New York: Atria, 2006; James Redfield and Carol Adrienne *The Celestine Prophecy: An Experiential Guide*, Sydney: Bantam, 1995

<sup>7</sup> George Barna and Mark Hatch *Boiling Point: Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001, p 186

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp 184-188

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p 201

they say, “We believe everyone should remain married for a lifetime,” they’ll get booed off the set.<sup>10</sup>

As a background to this scenario, there is a theological mismatch between what the Uniting Church stands for and the requirements of a modern and increasingly secular society. One example: the desire to avoid a lingering death.<sup>11</sup> Christianity is the way of the Cross: living fully in each stage of life, where facing death with courage is a requirement and allowing God in His own time to call a person “home”. Each person’s life is determined by God and so to cut short prematurely that lifespan interferes with God’s divine plan for that person. This reasoning therefore rules out suicide and voluntary euthanasia. However, modern secular society is a consumer model of living so that voluntary euthanasia is for when we have stopped “consuming” life. Apparently a majority of Australians now believe there should be an option of voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill patients.<sup>12</sup> In effect: “I have had a good life and now I want a good death” – and so avoid being warehoused in a nursing home with demented, exhausted shells of humans waiting for death.<sup>13</sup> “Euthanasia” literally means a “good death”.

Another example is that medical science can now prolong life for perhaps too long: that keeping a person alive in a vegetative state is not part of the divine plan either. The person has little (if any) consciousness but with “heroic measures” via modern equipment the vital organs can be replaced and so the person avoids death through artificial means.

There are not only the euthanasia issues but also the dramatic changes in what can be achieved in genetic engineering. IVF treatment is now conducted without fuss in Uniting Church hospitals, as are abortions. However, the next stage of controversy will be stem cell manipulation.

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<sup>10</sup> Ed Dobson “Opening the Closed American Mind”, *Christianity Today.Com*, June 12 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/global/printer.html?bcl/areas/missions/articles/061...> (accessed 14/12/2006)

<sup>11</sup> Death is now an anthropological growth area, for example, see: Timothy Taylor *The Buried Soul: How Humans Invented Death*, London: Forth Estate, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Roger Hunt “Enforced, Prolonged Life is a Fate Worse than Death”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 19, 2001, p 12

<sup>13</sup> Keith Suter and Steve England *Alternative Futures for Aged Care in Australia*, Sydney: UnitingCare, 2001, p 34



Another example is the question of whether Uniting Church aged care facilities should permit mind-altering drugs on the premises. Such drugs are largely outlawed in Australia.<sup>14</sup> But there is a widespread culture of the use of illicit substances and some Baby Boomers do not seem to have the same concern about them as they should given Australia's drug laws. Should future aged care centre managers turn a blind eye to their Baby Boomer residents when their children and grandchildren bring illicit substances for the personal use of the elderly relatives?<sup>15</sup>

### High Government Expenditure on Social Welfare

This driver has two components and I am putting them together as the “care economy”:

- First, governments provide funds to agencies (not-for-profit and for-profit<sup>16</sup>) to provide social welfare.
- Second, within this emerging care economy, charities are more business-like and businesses accept that they have a social responsibility to assist charities. The charities realize that the more businesslike they are, the more charitable they can afford to be. They have moved from being a “caring business” to a “business that cares”.

This is a capitalism of mercy, where each of the charities and for-profit companies compete against each other to obtain government contracts, public and corporation donations, and publicity.<sup>17</sup> It is also an economy where

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<sup>14</sup> Very controversially the NSW Uniting Church provides a so-called “safe injecting room/ medically supervised injecting facility” for drug addicts at King's Cross and in 2000 Rev Timothy Langley at Wesley Mission Melbourne caused problems for the Mission by trying to create a Melbourne equivalent (and the controversy helped end his ministry there).

<sup>15</sup> This is a far cry from the prevailing controversy of the 1950s: “It would be hard for young people today to realize what a controversy there was in the Methodist Church in the 1950s over whether there should be dancing in church halls”. John E Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, VIC: PenFolk Publishing, 2010, p 175

<sup>16</sup> This mixed economy is useful, if only for agencies to pick up the business of others if they should run into trouble. For example, ABC Childcare was at one time the country's largest single provider of childcare but then it financially over-extended itself and collapsed. UnitingCare Victoria (the largest non-profit childcare agency in the state) has picked up some of the business; see: “The Cost of Care”, *Crosslight* (Victoria), February 2009, p 7. Meanwhile the Southern Command of the Salvation Army got out of aged care and sold some its assets to the private sector.

<sup>17</sup> Publicity is vital to the Uniting Church in this scenario, such as for attracting donations. But the media as a rule are not interested in the standard “church” work of weekly services, sermons etc (unless there is a scandal or controversy) but the media are interested in the “human interest” stories that arise from social work, such as overcoming addictions. Therefore not having parishes/ congregations and instead concentrating on community services increases the chances of generating human interest stories.

charities become more entrepreneurial in how they conduct their work – and encourage their clients to become more entrepreneurial in how they live.<sup>18</sup> 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, whereby the client leaves all the major decisions to the charity.

### (i) Reinvention of Government Welfare

The first component of the care economy comes from the re-invention of government in the Western world during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, government was very small, government welfare services were virtually non-existent and so taxes were very low. Then during World War I (1914-8), the Great Depression of the 1930s and then World War II (1939-45) government expanded greatly to cope with the problems of war and peace. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, for example, has examined how the United States was transformed into a major shipbuilding nation via government contracts for “Liberty Ships”. With the men sent off to World War II, women were recruited to make those ships, as were women doing other industrial work in the role of “Rosie the Riveters”<sup>19</sup>. The US Government therefore became heavily involved in the country’s economic life. Similar developments took place in Australia at this time.

At the end of hostilities, US government expenditure remained high both to maintain the US’s new role in world affairs and to help countries rebuild for peace. As economist Robert Reich (a critic of the current New Right economic philosophy since the late 1970s) has remarked:

Under Republican president Eisenhower, top earners paid a marginal income tax rate of 91 per cent. That dropped to a still significant 78 percent under Democratic president Kennedy. High taxes did not seem

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<sup>18</sup> A very well known example from developing countries is “micro-lending”, pioneered by Muhammad Yunus in 1974, with minute loans to very poor people (usually women) in his native Bangladesh; the scheme has a 97 per cent repayment rate (virtually unheard of in commercial banking circles): the women clients use mutual social pressure in lieu of collateral to obtain and then repay the loans. Rebecca Costa *The Watchman’s Rattle: Thinking Our Way Out of Extinction*, Philadelphia, PA: Vanguard, 2010, pp 181-6

<sup>19</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp 318-9, 364-6

to constrain the economy, which continued to surge forward as productivity soared.<sup>20</sup>

The change in economic policy began around June 1978, with the historic Proposition 13 vote. In California, voters elect both politicians and policies which they are to implement. Proposition 13 was the landmark tax decision that froze property taxes in California, with voters knowing that more money in the pocket would mean fewer government services. They were willing to take that risk – and so triggered the “taxpayers’ revolt”. Political writers David Osborne and Ted Gaebler<sup>21</sup> argued that government should be re-invented to be smaller, nimbler and concerned with setting the overall direction of, for example, community services rather than actually providing them – an argument for out-sourcing and privatization.

Management writer, the late Peter Drucker argued that “The non-profit organizations spend far less for results than governments spend for failures”.<sup>22</sup> He argued that:

Federal, state and local governments will have to retrench sharply, no matter who is in office. Moreover, government has proved incompetent at solving social problems. Virtually every success we have scored has been achieved by non-profits.<sup>23</sup>

Drucker then made three recommendations: that the non-profit organizations must improve their business skills, become more adept at raising money, and government needs to do more to help them to provide services (such as increasing the tax deductibility for donations to non-profit organizations).

These developments have taken place:

In my 1969 book *The Age of Discontinuity*, I first proposed “privatization”, only to have every reviewer tell me that it would never happen. Now, of course, privatization is widely seen as the cure for modern economies mismanaged by socialist bureaucracies. We now need to learn that

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Reich *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy and Everyday Life*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2008, p 37

<sup>21</sup> David Osborne and Ted Gaebler *Reinventing Government – How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992

<sup>22</sup> Peter Drucker *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, London: Butterworth, 1995, p 240

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 239

“non-profitization” for modern societies may be the way of out of mismanagement by welfare bureaucracies.<sup>24</sup>

This is now a dominant paradigm in Western politics. It was initially introduced by Ronald Reagan in the US (1980-88), Margaret Thatcher in the UK (1979-90) and the Hawke-Keating governments in Australia (1983-96). All of their successors have broadly accepted that paradigm.

Major churches and secular charities now have extensive government contracts to provide community services. Therefore the wheel has turned yet again. For centuries, churches and secular charities used to provide what few community services existed. Then, in the early/ mid-twentieth century, government decided to provide many of the services. In the late twentieth century, government decided to step back and to finance churches and secular charities (and some for-profit companies) to provide services. The twentieth century government welfare state is here to stay in the twenty-first century - but not necessarily the actual government delivery of welfare services.

For example, in response to the Depression of the 1890s, the Sydney Central Methodist Mission experimented with a “labour exchange” to try to find jobs for unemployed people.<sup>25</sup> In the Great Depression the State and Commonwealth Governments provided some public works programmes and “sustenance food” for the unemployed. Formal departments to handle labour exchanges were also established. In the 1990s, the latest version of that department was scrapped, with the task of finding employment for the unemployed going to churches and secular charities (and some for-profit providers). Wesley Uniting Employment (WUE), for example, was the Wesley Mission-led Uniting Church agency bidding for the contracts.

### (ii) Greater Role for Charities

The second component of the care economy is the greatly enlarged role of charities (and some for-profit companies) in the provision of community services.<sup>26</sup> This, too, is seeing major changes for both charities and the business sector.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 243

<sup>25</sup> Don Wright *Mantle of Christ: A History of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission*, St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1984, pp 58-9

<sup>26</sup> For an introduction, see: Mark Lyons *Third Sector: The Contribution of Nonprofit and Cooperative Enterprise in Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001, pp 33-94

In this context, the care economy has four characteristics. First, charities have their own unique strengths – though they have yet to explain fully their economic benefits to the wider society. In short, it is not possible to put a price on passion and commitment. The for-profit sector are often surprised at how charities can mobilize volunteers/ low-paid staff for exceptional commitment. Altruism and voluntarism are qualities not normally found in the for-profit sector. Low-paid staff do not think any less of themselves – they only think more of other people. Therefore charities can mobilize people in a way that the for-profits cannot.

Second, philanthropy is an investment in a community's well-being. Charities contribute to social capital: they provide an essential role for the for-profit companies that often is not recognized by the for-profit companies (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. Billionaire businessperson Warren Buffett talks about winning the "ovarian lottery":

I've had it so good in his world, you know. The odds were fifty-to-one against me being born in the United States in 1930. I won the lottery the day I emerged from the womb by being born in the United States instead of in some other country where my chances would have been way different.

Imagine there are two identical twins in the womb, both equally bright and energetic. And the genie says to them, "One of you is going to be born in the United States and one of you is going to be born in Bangladesh... What percentage of your income would you bid to be the one that is born in the United States? The people who say "I did it all myself" and think of themselves as Horatio Alger – believe me, they'd bid more to be in the United States than in Bangladesh. That's the Ovarian Lottery.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in: Alice Schroeder *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and the Business of Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2008, pp 643-4

Charities 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

Third, there is a new generation of philanthropists emerging and so new sources of wealth are being opened up. Economists Matthew Bishop and Michael Green have written that, despite all the gloom about the global financial crisis, large fortunes are still being made. Some of these people are what the authors call “philanthro-capitalists”: very wealthy individuals who want some of their money to be used for good causes; for example Bill and Melinda Gates have created a foundation to fight, among other things, tropical diseases. Warren Buffett has recognized that he is better at making money than spending it and so he is donating much of his funds to the Gates’ activities.<sup>28</sup> The authors argue that these donors represent a new era in giving. For example, they concentrate their funding on a few large projects, rather than the old style of “spray and pray” of multiple small grants.<sup>29</sup> The new trend is far more obvious in the US than in Australia but we need to be alert to the possible existence of such people here.

The two authors also identify “celanthropists”: celebrities who use their name and brand to support causes, for example actor George Clooney and Darfur. As Angelina Jolie says of dealing with senior politicians: “People take my calls”: celebrities bring brand credibility, access and insight.<sup>30</sup> They can connect direct to the top of organizations to get support for their causes.

Fourth, there has been the rise of social entrepreneurs, who represent new ways of operating for churches and secular charities. The term was probably first used in June 1995 to describe the Bromley-by-Bow Community then headed by the Rev Andrew Mawson (now Lord Mawson). Mawson’s approach has challenged the conventional thinking of government, business and traditional churches and charities. Mawson arrived in the decrepit Bromley-by-

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew Bishop and Michael Green *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World and Why We should Let Them*, London A&C Black, 2008, pp 1-2

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p 154

<sup>30</sup> Quoted: Ibid, p 191

Bow, east London United Reformed Church parish in 1984, which had 12 eccentric elderly people:

I soon realized that I had three clear choices. Stay in bed every morning and become very depressed; hide away in my room and write a doctorate on inner city poverty; or wander the streets, observe the local community and try to understand what on earth was going on outside the solid oak doors [of the church] that, until now, had protected me from the world.<sup>31</sup>

He decided to experiment with innovative community-building activities. Looking back on his years of pioneering activities, he worked from the grass-roots and was empirically-based (not theory based). He decided to go for the “inside-out” approach (as distinct from “top-down”/ “bottom-up”) – getting a good idea inside the community and then encouraging others to follow suit. He started with one local person and their passion. He soon realized that the financially disadvantaged may have more skills than are immediately obvious because, after all, they do manage to survive in a difficult environment on very little money. He decided that he and his family would need to be in for the long haul (and not just provide drive-by welfare work). He was pragmatic: “building the road as you walk it”. He warned that it is not possible to have “one government plan that fits all”. He also warned about the need to avoid a culture of committees. He said you should be the change you wish to see: providing good quality facilities to lift the self esteem of people.

He also became sceptical of social work bureaucrats and their education:

The professionals I had come into contact with were not bad people, but they had little or no entrepreneurial nous. They all seemed to come from similar academic backgrounds, and possessed very little practical entrepreneurial ability at all. Clearly they had not been offered the opportunity to develop these skills, or had not been encouraged to value, respect or find interest in entrepreneurship and business. Many of the courses that prepared students for work in the social sector seemed to be divorced from the realities about which their tutors lectured. I was unaware that many of the senior business people I was meeting around this time had clearly also come to similar conclusions. Britain’s

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Mawson *The Social Entrepreneur: Making Communities Work*, London: Atlantic, 2008, p 17

educational establishment was out of touch and failing not only the needs of British business but also the needs of the poor.<sup>32</sup>

Mawson's redevelopment of Bromley-by-Bow helped the area become suitable for hosting the very successful 2012 London Olympics. Lord Mawson is now using his profile and contacts to encourage social entrepreneurship among charities, such as the Community Action Network (CAN).

Therefore 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.<sup>33</sup>

British management writer and social philosopher Charles Handy has included Andrew Mawson as one of his "new alchemists".<sup>34</sup> These people have "...each created something significant out of nothing or turned the equivalent of base metal into a kind of gold".<sup>35</sup> What is notable is that probably the only way a religious figure (except for the Alpha evangelism programme of Rev Nicky Gumble in west London) is going to get a mention in the context of innovation is through his or her contribution to social work. The worship side of churches seems to have little relevance for British life.

Also worth noting is Rev Nic Frances.<sup>36</sup> His father and grandfather were both millionaire businesspeople and he became a City of London stockbroker until the late 1980s. He had a breakdown in his health. When he recovered, he trained for the Anglican ministry in England. His first parish was in poverty-stricken Liverpool in the north of England, with its bleak housing estates. The local housing authority supplied "houses" rather than "homes" on those rundown estates. Tenants did not receive any assistance to obtain furniture. The accountants said that supplying furniture would be an expensive undertaking for people who had no commitment to any location: they move in, move out and move on.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p 83

<sup>33</sup> Chris Talbot, Peter Tregilgas, Kerrie Harrison *Social Enterprise in Australia*, Adelaide: Adelaide Central Mission, 2002

<sup>34</sup> Charles Handy (with photographs by Elizabeth Handy) *The New Alchemists*, London: Hutchinson, 1999, pp 159-164

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p 11

<sup>36</sup> Keith Suter "The Role of Business in Ending Poverty", *Radio 2GB News Commentary*, May 19 2000, <http://www.wesleymission.org.au/ministry/suter/19May00.htm> (accessed 18/10/2000)



Luckily (like Mawson) Nic Frances is a lateral thinker. He argued that if people had their own furniture they would have a greater sense of commitment to their home and a greater pride in it. Additionally any central organization buying furniture for that many homes would have immense purchasing power because of the number of orders that could be placed at any one time. He eventually got agreement for a scheme for buying furniture.

The scheme had a number of benefits. First, the people are staying longer in their homes and they are making more of an effort to keep the family together. Second, the scheme has actually saved money because the council houses now have a more stable population. Previously the houses would have a high rate of turnover and so there would be periods when they were empty, waiting for the next residents. Now the rent flows far more regularly. Additionally there is less vandalism because the houses are not standing empty. Third, the Anglican Church created a warehouse to handle the arrival and storage of the furniture. They employed people who had been previously unemployed for five or more years. Finally, furniture companies were drawn into a long-term relationship with the charity. Normally furniture companies have only a limited relationship with individual customers because people buy comparatively few items during their lifetime. Now the companies can ascertain what furniture is liked and what lines to discontinue. The scheme attracted national prominence and the Queen visited the site, much to the joy of the furniture manufacturers who do not normally get Royal visits.

Rev Nic Frances MBE came to Australia in 1998 to run the Melbourne-based (Anglican) Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), 1999-2003. He encouraged BSL's move into social entrepreneurship. BSL has now become one of the Australian foundations for this movement.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, charities are themselves changing with the introduction of business techniques, as journalist Adele Horin commented:

Australia's big charities are changing. With their mission statements and corporate plans, their government relations managers and business partners, they are ditching old words and old ways. Some are no longer charities or welfare agencies but "social enterprises". They embrace a new philosophy called "social entrepreneurialism"... Some believe, with the passion of religious converts, that "old welfare" is dead. And if you don't agree, you haven't seen the light. Mission Australia, the Smith

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<sup>37</sup> See: Nic Frances *The End of Charity: Time for Social Enterprise*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008

Family, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Benevolent Society are key converts to the “new welfare paradigm”.

“Social entrepreneurs tend not to talk about ideology”, said Anne Hampshire, director of the Benevolent Society’s executive strategy unit. “These people are doers, trying to make a difference on the ground”.<sup>38</sup>

These organizations are able to co-operate easily with the business community because they speak their language and know their techniques.<sup>39</sup> They have made it easier for the corporations to assist these charities. Almost all the large corporations now have schemes to enable their personnel to assist charities, for example, to take a day (with pay) painting and doing repairs to buildings run by charities.

Businesses like charities as a source of their corporate volunteering:

Corporate volunteering is growing fast. Almost unknown in this country five years ago outside of organizations such as the Body Shop – some of our biggest corporations are now employing co-ordinators and spending millions of dollars annually on programmes that send their people out to do good works

In doing so, the employers wring more from their relationships with not for profit organizations than if they had just written out a sponsorship cheque. And they get to demonstrate that their commitment to values is not just lip service.

They also improve staff attraction and retention, enhance the reputation of the company in the community, and boost employee engagement through team bonding and meaningful work.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Adele Horin “End of Charity”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 11-12 2001, p 29

<sup>39</sup> What cannot be explored in this dissertation is the reciprocal way that businesses are also changing as a result of getting involved in philanthropy; see: Michael Kinsley (editor) *Creative Capitalism: A Conversation with Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and other Economic Leaders*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008

<sup>40</sup> Fiona Smith “Business Puts Its People Where Its Mouth Is”, *The Australian Financial Review*, November 28 2006, p 60

## SCENARIO

### **Ethos**

#### (i) Vision

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.

#### (ii) Mission

This Uniting Church intends to be the country's largest provider of many community services, such as aged care.

#### (iii) Identity

This Uniting Church sees itself a professional provider, with a Christian heritage, of community services.

#### (iv) Profile

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.

### **Structure**

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.

### **Continuing Union – Who Will be Lost**

This Uniting Church has no parishes or congregations. For those mainly big parishes that are self-funding (such as St Michael's in Melbourne and the remaining big central Missions<sup>41</sup>), there is the prospect that they could

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<sup>41</sup> The welfare services of Perth Wesley have already been absorbed into UnitingCare West, and Melbourne Mission's are now largely controlled by the Victorian/ Tasmanian Synod.

continue to exist as independent parishes<sup>42</sup> – and could even form their own “union” (however, given their reputations for individualism they will probably prefer to operate on their own). Since the brand of the new organization is probably UnitingCare, they could still use the “Uniting Church” title.

Many current congregations have a limited future (given their declining membership) and so their properties could be sold and the proceeds transferred to the new UnitingCare organization.

There is of course the irony that some congregations may prefer their funds to go to the new “union” of remaining Uniting Church congregations. If they had agreed to this type of radical restructure of property in the lead up to the 1977 Union, the 1977 Uniting Church would have started life in a more robust form. This is the type of radical restructure that should have been carried out then.

There is the problem of where there will be baptisms, weddings and funerals (“hatch”, “match” and “despatch”). To some extent this problem is being solved by the declining demand for these rites of passage being held in a Christian context.<sup>43</sup>

Many adults now seem quite content not to have their baby/ child baptised – or will leave the child (as an adult) to make their own decision in due course. This is, of course, the preference of some other denominations which prefer adults to make their own decision. Rev Dr Barry Chant has examined how the issue of baptism/ re-baptism has troubled the spread in Australia of the Pentecostal Church: one Anglican rector alleged that by “re-baptising” there was a danger of “sending a soul to hell”.<sup>44</sup>

On marriage, the current Uniting Church is more liberal in marrying heterosexual couples than Catholic and some Anglican churches, for example, divorcees and members of other denominations. There will be a problem here, though no doubt other denominations may agree to take them. The large remaining independent Uniting Church parishes may well do such

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<sup>42</sup> The US experience is that much depends on the key leader and when that person goes the mega-church may slide into decline. For example, Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral in California went bankrupt in 2012 and the property sold off.

<sup>43</sup> One of the reasons that Rev Ted Noffs of Sydney’s Wayside Chapel got into trouble with Methodist and Uniting Church authorities was over his somewhat secular “naming” ceremonies instead of baptisms.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in: Barry Chant “The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870-1939”, doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University, 1999, p 305

weddings (St Michael's in Melbourne is already a very popular place for "society" weddings).

Weddings used to be very much part of the "community" of the local Uniting Church, for example, at least one of the partners may have also been baptized there or had some other family connection. Now the weddings are conducted for people who have little continuing interest in the Uniting Church: they are not members of it, are probably not regular attendees, and probably will not become regular attendees after the wedding. Therefore the church building is merely a "railway station" on the couple's journey through life – important for a moment but of no continuing relevance.

On funerals, there is no Australian legal requirement for a religious ceremony to accompany a burial or cremation.<sup>45</sup> State/ Territory legislation relates to the physical disposal of the body, such as the need to avoid contaminating the water table. Increasingly funeral ceremonies are being held at crematorium chapels, with a diversity of liturgies being used.<sup>46</sup>

On June 23 2011, while I was at the funeral service for Trevor Davies (1956-2011), a well-known NSW Uniting Church lay member, I reflected on a new business venture for redundant picturesque Uniting Church buildings. Davies' funeral was held at the historic Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney. The building was packed and there was a great sense of occasion. This is now a very rare occurrence at Pitt Street Uniting Church. Davies had been involved in various Redfern/ inner Sydney church and community activities and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Representatives from these diverse branches of his life were at the service and helped fill this very large building (including the rarely used upper horseshoe gallery). This scenario sees the steady decline of congregations and the buildings becoming redundant. A particularly attractive and historic church building (such as the Pitt Street one) could be sold, say, to a company set up expressly to conduct non-denominational/

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<sup>45</sup> This is very different from marriage, which can only be performed by a person registered as a marriage celebrant (all ministers of religion have to be registered by the Australian Government). Weddings are organized some time in advance. Deaths alas can occur at any time and in isolated of locations (eg desert mining areas) and so ad hoc arrangements may need to be made. The difference in legislation reflects this fact.

<sup>46</sup> I once had to conduct a funeral ceremony for a person from a communist family which did not want any religious ceremony. The funeral directors refused simply to put the body through the crematorium – and so there was a deadlock. A mutual friend of the family asked if I could conduct the service but without any reference to "God" or "religion". I found it surprisingly easy to compose a "secular" liturgy from the Uniting Church's standard book *Uniting in Worship*.

multi-denominational religious worship and civil celebrant services for weddings and deaths.<sup>47</sup>

### **Innovation**

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.<sup>48</sup>

### **Tenor of the Times**

This Uniting Church recruits from a wide range of professional people. For example, business people with a few decades in the harsh business world may well want to join UnitingCare to give something back to the community and derive the pleasure of knowing that they are helping people – rather than just serving the corporate shareholders whom they will never meet. They in turn will bring their management skills from the business world to make UnitingCare even more professional and business-oriented. Unlike the old Uniting Church's set of well-meaning volunteers, the new workforce is professional, well trained, and operating in a competitive labour market and so they know that in order to get a better job they need to do a better job of their current job.

The absence of congregations probably will not be missed.<sup>49</sup> Thousands of people currently attend Uniting Church services on Sundays and many are bored by the sermons, which have little relevance for their daily lives.<sup>50</sup> Sermons run for about 20-30 minutes: far too long for the average person

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<sup>47</sup> The following year the NSW Synod magazine carried a story of the disposal of St Andrew's Church, Dubbo: this building was sold to a local funeral home to have non-denominational funerals; see "Good News from Church Sale", *Insights*, October 2012, p 5

<sup>48</sup> The most obvious current example in the non-government hospital sector is the provision of a "full range of medical services"; this is a euphemism for abortion which cannot be offered by a Catholic hospital tenderer.

<sup>49</sup> There is the argument that one of the motivations for the lobbying in the 1950s for aged care capital funding was that the Churches wanted to keep their congregations intact; as the members got older so the tennis courts and other outdoor areas had less use and so some of the early aged care facilities were built alongside or near the parish churches on the now unused grounds. The need to maintain membership even then drove Church priorities.

<sup>50</sup> Ironically visiting speakers ("deputationists" in the old language) who speak for a few minutes in some Uniting Church worship services to explain the work of their agencies and seek donations, are often highly interesting because they do speak on the practical, helpful matters of welfare: these are the daily activities of this UnitingCare.

nowadays who has a much shorter attention span. The disappearance of the Uniting Church worship services will therefore fit in with the tenor of the times.

A wider implication for the other Christian churches in Australia is that this will mean a redefinition of “church”. “Church” has traditionally been defined as some form of congregation, with the implication that Christian service can only come from a congregation or from an agency linked to it. This UnitingCare will see itself in the Christian tradition but without congregations and places of worship.

### **Strategic Alignment**

This scenario means there is one agency with professional staff who have a clear focus that will ensure a greater sense of strategic alignment.

### **Fatigue**

There would be less fatigue if only because the nagging worries of how to sustain parishes/ congregations and cope with their decline have now all gone. Therefore disputes over theological interpretations etc (such as Resolution 84) will also have gone.

There will be other worries because of the competition for government contracts and other funding, coping with economic cycles, keeping up to date with new social and economic trends etc. But these are the normal concerns of any business.

### **Business Competency**

This Uniting Church will have solved a basic problem of the current Uniting Church because of the current governance mismatch between the congregations and community services.

The current congregations are largely aging and declining, while the community services are professionally managed enterprises and are growing in size, influence and ambition. The congregations are not really up to the task of running large community service businesses.<sup>51</sup> If a congregation has the right to ask how a community service is living out the Gospel as a part of the

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<sup>51</sup> Over the years, as a Uniting Church guest preacher, I have sat in on church meetings where “ideas committees” etc have tabled proposals. The proposals may have been fine but are usually too small and narrowly focussed to address the real issues facing the parish/ congregation; most church bodies do not have enough members with experience in running a medium-size financial concern (which is often what a Uniting Church parish/ congregation has become).

Uniting Church, so a community service has an equal right to ask whether a congregation has the necessary skills to run a modern business.

Ministers in particular have little or no formal management training. But, then, they did not see their role as being “managers” in the first place. This increased focus on managerialism (a by-product of the care economy) represents an additional burden that most ministers do not want. The “divorce” will be by mutual consent.

This new agency is therefore professionally run. No doubt it will have the usual run of “committee politics” that bedevils all organizations but it will at last be free from the problems that have characterized Uniting Church internal politics.<sup>52</sup>

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

This Uniting Church will be subject to the standard government criteria for assessing effectiveness in the delivery of welfare services.

### **Membership**

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 will avoid the previous problems encountered by, for example, insisting that all Lifeline counsellors be Christians.<sup>53</sup> That strict condition will be abolished.

### **Property**

This Uniting Church will own or rent fewer properties – and all of them will relate to the provision of community services. There will be far fewer 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.

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<sup>52</sup> Examples of these problems have already been encountered in the earlier chapters dealing with some of the major individualistic figures such as Walker, Moyes and Macnab.

<sup>53</sup> See: Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide: Openbook, 1997, pp 162, 188, 192, 204-6, 256, 263, 271, and 274



### **Restructures**

This Uniting Church will devote far less time to restructures. Too often the current Uniting Church has used restructuring as an alternative to making hard decisions about which operations ought to be wound up. The restructuring is a reaction to the continued decline in the Uniting Church's congregational membership and the reduced need for some activities.

This Uniting Church knows what it is about. It has a clear focus – community services. Doubtless there will still be a need for some restructures because that is in the nature of modern business life. But there will not be a constant air of restructuring. Staffing will be far more settled and able to concentrate on the main role.

### **Branding**

The current Uniting Church membership attendance is declining, while greater use is being made of Uniting Church community services. Therefore increasingly the services – such as aged care – are already becoming the “face” of the Uniting Church.<sup>54</sup>

Under this scenario, the branding problem could be sorted out. The “face” of the Uniting Church will become clear - possibly for the first time since 1977. All the services will carry the same brand: for example, UnitingCare.

A strong national brand will make it easier to obtain donations and grants from the corporate sector and general public. For example, it is difficult for a regional parish/ congregation to obtain donations from a local branch of a national corporation because the branch will often pass all such requests to the national corporate headquarters (which may be in the capital city of another State). Now this national organization can deal directly with a national corporation and pass on donations as necessary to its local branches.

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<sup>54</sup> The Salvation Army – which is smaller than the current Uniting Church – is more known for its social services than its worship services. It has long been active in the “care economy”. For example, World War I Australian soldier Marcel Caux had a hero's funeral. He was born a Methodist but the family decided the state funeral should be at Salvation Army Congress Hall, Sydney: “Like many soldiers who had been in action, Caux had great respect for the Salvos as they are known. No matter how appalling the weather, how difficult the terrain, or how fierce the fighting, whether in the depths of a European winter, in the searing heat of a Middle Eastern desert, or is in a tropical downpour in jungle-clad New Guinea, the Salvation Army was on hand, dispensing tea and biscuits comfort and compassion from its tent kiosks”. Lynette Ramsay Silver *Marcel Caux: A Life Unravelling*, Sydney: John Wiley, 2005, p 102

This provides a vision for the new Uniting Church – in a civilian context. This is the sort of public standing the scenario suggests this Uniting Church should aim for: “Christianity with its sleeves rolled up”.

The Australian Government prefers to deal with a small number of national entities, rather than a large number of small ones (which is one reason why the current Uniting Church is being obliged to examine the practicalities of incorporation for some of its entities).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITING CHURCH

#### Congregational Decline

The current Uniting Church is, in business terms, a diversified conglomerate. Since the late 1960s a number of techniques have been developed for examining a diversified company's operations as a "portfolio" of activities. For example, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) pioneered the Growth/ Share Matrix in which a company's activities may be divided into four quadrants:

- high growth/ high relative market share ("star")
- low growth and high market share ("cash cow")
- low growth and low market share ("dog")
- high growth and low market share ("question mark")

Under this reasoning, a company should ditch the "dog" and seek to cross-subsidize from the "cash cow" to the "question mark" quadrant of new growth areas.<sup>55</sup>

In this management technique, the current Uniting Church "dogs" are the congregations. Too much time is devoted to maintaining congregations. They are often the Uniting Church's "shop window" but most of the personnel and resources actually go into the community services. Winding up the congregations may seem a harsh assessment - but all organizations (even Christian ones) are subject to the winds of social and economic change.

As a background to this scenario, there is a geographical mismatch between congregations and community services. Ideally a community service should be anchored within a local parish – that is how many of the old Uniting Church services first evolved. But now much of the demand for community services - and the potential provision of government funding - is in areas where there is no Uniting Church congregational presence. For example, as the capital cities expand into the "green field sites" of former market garden/ light industrial zones around the edge of cities, so no Uniting Church parish exists in those areas but there is much demand for community services. New families on

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Porter *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*, New York: The Free Press, 1980, pp 361-4

housing estates may see little need for a congregation but they do see a need for childcare services etc.

Additionally, there is a financial mismatch between congregations and community services. The community services are no longer dependent on financial support from congregations because most of their income comes from charging for services (fees and charges), government grants, donations/corporate sponsorship and their own investments. Uniting Church community services no longer need the financial support of the congregations.

This is just as well because the congregations no longer have the wealth they used to receive from offerings and tithes. They may themselves rely heavily on their property investments, such as the rental income from the letting of spare manses and other church buildings.

Uniting Church membership (however defined and calculated) is currently in decline. This scenario will require the Uniting Church to face up to this fact and come clean about its declining membership. The sunny, upbeat mood of Moderators and other Uniting Church officials will need to be tempered. There will need to be a new note of realism in official statements, and congregations will have to start thinking about the unthinkable.

### **No Need to Recruit Ministers**

There is a shortage of Uniting Church ministers and this will get worse as the large cohort of Baby Boomer ministers (those born between 1946 and 1966) retire. There is also the related problem that there is no longer a large number of people coming forward for training in the ministry. This is a reflection of Australia's growing secularization and the declining interest in Christianity.

A minister's life is a stressful one (which is probably another explanation for the decline in the number of people coming forward for ordination). Peter Kaldor and Rod Bullpitt of National Church Life Survey (NCLS) examined the "burnout" among ministers in Australian denominations. The survey suggested:

Leaders from some faith traditions may be at a greater risk than others... Closer analysis suggested that this is in part because leaders from such backgrounds are more likely to work in congregations that are small or facing questions of viability.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Kaldor and Rod Bullpitt *Burnout in Church Leaders*, Adelaide: Openbook, 2001, pp 14, 59-66

This obviously applies to most Uniting Church congregations. Ministers in my experience often hold themselves personally responsible for the decline of their congregations. Some of this may be justified - but many other factors are outside their control (for example, they are based in a rural area and the area is being de-populated as people move into the regional centres).

Additionally the longer-serving ministers will have joined the pre-1977 Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches when they were flourishing and could never have imagined that they would finish their careers in a declining institution: was all their effort worthwhile? If the congregations disappeared, then this problem of ministerial recruitment would also disappear.

Meanwhile, partners of ministers nowadays have their own careers to think about. They do not take kindly to following their partner as the minister gets transferred from one congregation to another across the country. Given the comparative low pay of a minister, a partner in paid employment is now often a necessity and so has their own career priorities. If the congregations/ parishes were to disappear, then these ministerial personnel matters would also go.

### **No Need to Recruit Senior Ministers**

The abolition of parishes/ congregations within UnitingCare will also help solve the increasing problem of finding the right minister/ CEO for large Uniting Church agencies.<sup>57</sup>

The three-stage evolution of the parish mission superintendents is the best example of this challenge. As from 1884, with the first Central Methodist Mission in Sydney, mission “superintendents” were senior ministers who were also expected to have some business know-how, including how to raise funds. They were the CEO of both the pastoral and caring services.

Second, in Perth in the late 1980s/ early 1990s, the single superintendent role was replaced<sup>58</sup> by two ordained persons: a “minister to the parish” and a “minister to the mission”.

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<sup>57</sup> This is not unique to the Uniting Church: other denominations have CEOs who are not necessarily members of that particular denomination, for example, the Melbourne (Anglican) Brotherhood of St Laurence in 2004 appointed its first Catholic CEO: Tony Nicholson.

<sup>58</sup> There were also some personal problems in the senior management team in the late 1980s (which I noticed when I served on the Mission’s Board) which also triggered this decision.

## Chapter 6

The third stage has been to create a “minister to the parish” and to have a lay CEO to run the welfare services. This is now common for most large missions. (Melbourne, following the Timothy Langley controversy, has transferred its community services to an incorporated body which operates largely separately from the congregation).

WA is now on a fourth stage: almost all the Mission’s services have now been transferred to one central Synod-wide agency: UnitingCare West. Meanwhile, all three inner city congregations (Mission, West Perth ex-Presbyterian<sup>59</sup> and Trinity) have effectively been amalgamated in terms of ministerial resources.

Wesley Mission Sydney is now the only capital city mission to maintain the traditional combined position of superintendent/ CEO.<sup>60</sup> There is still a firm commitment to hold Word and Deed together. The separation of the minister from some form of CEO carries the risk of the welfare work going its own way (which is of course the basis of this scenario).

Rev Brian Lewis Smith was the last Superintendent of Parramatta Mission. He retired from that role in 2006 and in his final “Life with Brian” column in the Parramatta Mission’s *Newsletter* he reflected on his complicated and stressful role: “However the Superintendent’s role has grown to the point that the hours I work indicate that there are really two full time jobs, a Superintendent Minister as an additional role to the existing ministry placements within the congregations, and an executive officer to lead the community services, especially if leadership is to have the capacity to innovate and help all aspects of our life develop and not just simply turn the wheels and keep things as they are”.<sup>61</sup> A separate lay executive officer was first appointed in 2006. This separation has since been continued and is now common across most of the old central missions.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The former Presbyterian “mother church” – St Andrews on The Terrace – has been closed up because the building structure is unsafe. The adjoining office building (the former WA Synod office) – Westminster House – is on the market.

<sup>60</sup> I was a member of the 2005 selection committee to find the replacement of Rev Gordon Moyes and it was a very difficult task to locate a person who is both a good minister and with the capacity to run a \$100 million business; Rev Keith Garner was recruited from the British Methodist Church.

<sup>61</sup> “Life With Brian: Into the Future” *Newsletter of Parramatta Mission* (Parramatta), February 19 2006, p 1

<sup>62</sup> One of the by-products of the reduced enthusiasm for Christianity is the reduced fervent (if not fanatical) denominationalism: it is now possible to employ people from other denominations in one’s own Christian organization, for example, the head of the (Anglican) Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is a Catholic.

Another way in which some of the minister/ CEO recruitment problem will be solved under this scenario is that it is possible to pay a lay CEO a much larger salary package than a minister. These people are running multi-million dollar businesses and so it is unrealistic nowadays to expect to find easily people who will to do this on a base salary of around \$75,000.<sup>63</sup> But (as the Rev Timothy Langley/ Wesley Mission Melbourne controversy showed) there are still public expectations that ministers (and Catholic priests and nuns) should serve out of a sense of vocation and not to expect material rewards: “the pay is low but the rewards are divine” as the saying goes. (This expectation will increase in aging and declining churches like the Uniting Church whose reduced number of members are elderly pensioners eking out a living on an old age pension: there is no “prosperity gospel” for them).

CEOs of the major secular charities now regularly receive salaries in six figures.<sup>64</sup> This is the industry benchmark, given the large budgets for which they are now responsible. A much larger salary could therefore be paid to the new UnitingCare agency CEO foreshadowed by this scenario.

There is a much broader debate - which goes beyond this dissertation’s scope - of how non-profit organizations in general could be redeveloped for a broader, more aggressive economic and social role in society. While charities may be “non-profits”, they need to work hard to create a surplus each year because without it they would go bankrupt and the clients and residents would be homeless. Hints of that simmering debate have already been encountered in this chapter: notably, dropping the mindset of “charitable” handouts (and giving people a hand-up instead), rise of social entrepreneurialism and larger salaries for CEOs.<sup>65</sup> The Uniting Church foreshadowed in this scenario would be well placed for being a major Australian participant in that debate.

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<sup>63</sup> This was part of the problem with the appointment of Rev Timothy Langley to the Melbourne Mission. He inherited a very generous package from his predecessor the late Rev Kevin Green of around \$160,000 and he wanted a very expensive inner city manse (rather than the traditional suburban one). His opponents leaked the information to the media and he eventually quit. The welfare services were later separately incorporated and run by the Synod. See: “Langley Manse a Heavenly Sum”, *The Age* June 13 2000, pp 1 and 2; Harriet Ziegler “Money and Drugs: Wesley’s Woes” *Crosslight*, July 2000, p 7; “Heavy Loss Adds to Charity’s Woes”, *The Age* November 22 2000, p 3. \$160,000 (if that were the correct figure) would still be below the salary package of many CEOs of the major Melbourne secular charities.

<sup>64</sup> This Uniting Church will be larger than many ASX-listed companies. Other companies of comparable size pay salaries around \$2million; see Tony Featherstone “When Size Matters”, *Company Director*, May 2011, p 20

<sup>65</sup> For an introduction to this controversy, see: Dan Pallotta *Uncharitable: How Restraints on Nonprofits Undermine Their Potential*, Boston: Tufts University Press, 2009

Finally, it is not necessary to be a Christian to act like one. One of the current strands in innovative management education is “servant leadership”. This is particularly identified with Robert Greenleaf (1904-90).<sup>66</sup> At the age of 60 in 1964 he did what was then almost unheard of (but now is quite common): he took early retirement (from the US telecommunications giant AT&T) and created a second career as a consultant, with a particular concern to change the harsh, aggressive ego-driven business leadership models he had seen in his previous career.<sup>67</sup>

Greenleaf argued that true leadership arose from those whose primary motivation was a deep desire to help others (and not to add to their own self-aggrandizement). Greenleaf was a Quaker but he was not seeking to evangelize for the Quakers. Larry Spears, Director of The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, has listed ten characteristics of this new style of leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization (taking a broader view of each problem), foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.<sup>68</sup> Many if not all of those values could be found in traditional Christian texts.<sup>69</sup> What is interesting to note in this context is that they can be re-fashioned for a whole new strand in management thinking and be acceptable to all sorts of audiences, Christian and non-Christian.

### Easier to Recruit Lay Staff

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.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See: The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, <http://www.greenleaf.org>

<sup>67</sup> Robert Greenleaf *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, New York: Paulist Press, 1977

<sup>68</sup> Larry C Spears “Servant-Leadership”, *Executive Excellence* (Sydney), July 1998, p 11

<sup>69</sup> For example, Mary Beth Jones (an American who writes in innovative ways on how Christianity is of use to the business world) has said: “The principle of service is what separates true leaders from glory seekers. Jesus, the leader, served his people. Most religions teach that we are put here to serve God; yet in Jesus, God is offering to serve us. Picture the shift in thinking. Old Testament mentality looked at humanity as being indebted to God, trying to find countless ways to please him. Then along comes a man claiming to be the very son of God, who asks people “What would you like me to do for you?” Mary Beth Jones *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, New York: Hyperion, 1995, p 250

<sup>70</sup> This would also apply to company directors joining the boards of the new organization; directors are already making a major contribution to the charity sector: see “Directors’ Social Impact Study”, *Company Director*, March 2010, pp 50-1 Directors are also being encouraged by their membership body (Australian Institute of Company Directors) to join boards: Janine Mace “Embracing a Skilled Helping Hand”, *Company Director*, March 2011, pp 42-47; John  
*Footnote continued on the next page*

Employment criteria will be eased and a wider pool of labour would, in theory, become available (subject to the usual problems of continuing to pay too little).

Australian churches are having increasing difficulty recruiting explicitly “Christian” staff. In 1976, when I joined the Central Methodist Mission, all Mission staff advertisements carried the phrase “Applicants are to be Christians and one of the referees is to be a minister or priest”. It is now illegal to place such an explicit clause in an advertisement – and besides no mainstream newspaper would accept it as the text of an advertisement. All that an organization can now do is to expect a staff member to endorse the values of the organization.

Meanwhile, under this scenario, with more relaxed employment criteria, there is also the advantage of being able to recruit from a greater range of talented people. For example, Australia now has more people with higher degrees than ever before. Some of these may want to work for charities. In earlier years the “Christian” qualification would have excluded them but now – under this scenario - the employment net can be thrown far more widely.

Similarly, management magazines are now profiling senior staff who have left the business world to join charities.<sup>71</sup> As British management writer Charles Handy has pointed out:

I have learnt, for example, that to work for a cause can be wonderfully exciting, much more exciting than working for the shareholders...

Keeping the shareholders happy is a primary obligation of any commercial business. We neglect it at our peril. But it hardly ranks as a cause. Elevating it to a passion, making them indecently rich, doesn't help, unless you are one of the shareholders. We have to find something else.<sup>72</sup>

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Colvin “Raising the Profile of NFP Directors”, *Company Director*, August 2009, p 6; Tony Featherstone “Taking NFPs to the Next Level”, *Company Director*, August 2009, p 12

<sup>71</sup> For example: Richard Jones “Non-Profit Steward”, *Management Today* (Sydney), January 2010, pp 31-32; Andrew Cornell “Selling Out...In the Best Possible Way”, *The Australian Financial Review* *Boss*, March 2002, Tim Mendham “Not for Profit? All For Tech!”, *CIO* (Sydney) March 2011, pp 50-5

<sup>72</sup> Charles Handy *Beyond Certainty*, London: Arrow, 1996, p 189



### Appealing to a Broader Constituency

Works unite and teachings divide. In other words a group of people can be drawn to assist with a common cause (such as fighting a bushfire) and they will probably work well together. However, if they were later to discuss what motivated them to act in the first place, there would be differences over their religious beliefs (if any). For example, a survey was done looking at the work of UK faith groups on sustainable development:

Case studies contained in this paper (eg *Environments for All in Leicester*) demonstrate how environmental projects break down barriers between faiths, foster a shared sense of community, and improve local wellbeing for everyone. This is one good argument for more interfaith activity on sustainable development.<sup>73</sup>

This scenario means that UnitingCare can acknowledge its Christian heritage but not have any ambition, 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<sup>74</sup> – all traditional concerns of the Uniting Church’s predecessor Churches. These concerns could be waived and the money accepted.

### Changing Work Requirements

There are also changes in the nature of the workplace and so Uniting Church administrators need to be far more careful in what staff are expected to do and how the administrators treat them.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Sustainable Development Commission: *Sustainable Development and UK Faith Groups: Two Sides of the Same Coin? A Survey of UK Faith Communities’ Sustainable Development Activities and Next Steps for the Future*, London: October 2005, p x

<sup>74</sup> Bill Pheasant “A Charitable View of ‘Tainted’ Money”, *The Australian Financial Review*, November 14 2003, p 20

<sup>75</sup> The Uniting Church and its predecessor churches have no monopoly over institutional thuggery. The theme is also found in many studies of Australian Catholicism, in both non-fiction (for example John Hosie *A Lonely Road: Fr Ted McGrath msc*, Adelaide: ATF Press, 2010) and fiction (for example, Thomas Keneally *Three Cheers for the Paraclete*, North Sydney: Random, 2008 (1968))

Secular occupational health and safety laws have changed much of the nature of contemporary ministry. Memoirs of Uniting Church officials bring out the changed nature of employment conditions. For example, the pioneering post-World War II rip-roaring “wild west” NSW Methodist days are over. Stephanie Somerville is the daughter of the late Marjorie Somerville (nee Wilkinson) who trained as a Methodist deaconess<sup>76</sup> after World War II and she has written a memoir of her mother’s pioneering days.<sup>77</sup> Deaconess Somerville received basic theological and medical and dental training – and how to repair a former army truck (hers was called “Augustus”). In 1946 she was sent to the Far West of NSW for her duties, where she and her fellow Deaconess journeyed in “Augustus” hundreds of miles in (by our standards) hair-raising circumstances of rural isolation (if not desolation), hardship and potential danger.

I was at the March 2007 NSW Parliament House launching of the book and there was (among younger members of the audience) a general sense of amazement that two young women could be deployed in this way.<sup>78</sup> It could not be done nowadays in NSW (or anywhere else in Australia). 60 years previously of course, the standards were different: a war had just been fought and there was a greater sense of resilience in the face of danger. Unions, tort lawyers, enterprise agreements, and work practice legislation would all nowadays stop a repetition of such a ministry. Besides, government now provides the services in those areas.

Also 60 years ago standards were different regarding marriage for women. The then Shirley Garlick replaced Wilkinson in the Far West and she led much the same sort of rugged, hazardous life as the two previous Methodist deaconesses. But she fell in love with a local pastoralist, Lance Dunbar, and married him. That was fatal for her career. The men who ran the NSW Methodist Church blocked her ordination (“dedication”) and she was prevented from pursuing any further career in the ministry. She became active layperson, and served on the Wesley Mission Board for a third of a century. Decades later I re-opened this matter on Shirley Dunbar’s behalf, obtained her Methodist file from the Uniting Church Records and Historical Society, and

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<sup>76</sup> This was the equivalent of a male ordination; later on deaconesses were able to convert across to full ordination (such as the current Rev Noreen Towers)

<sup>77</sup> Stephanie Somerville *Angels of Augustus: Pioneers of the Living Inland*, Noosaville QLD: Elk and Ice, 2006

<sup>78</sup> Also see the book review: Sue Maplettoft “Angels of Augusts: Pioneers of the Living Inland” *Nursing Australia* (Sydney) Winter 2007, p 20

argued that there should be some form of apology for the way she was treated. In December 2005, the Moderator Jim Mein read out an Assembly Presidential apology for her treatment.<sup>79</sup> Again, such treatment of Shirley Garlick/ Dunbar would be illegal nowadays.<sup>80</sup>

### **Less of a Prophetic Role**

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. For example, “cause-related marketing” enables a charity to link up with a corporation for mutual benefit. In 1983 American Express campaigned to raise money to help renovate New York’s Statue of Liberty by donating one per cent of each cardholder’s transactions for three months. This enabled American Express to increase its public standing and it was a successful campaign for the charity renovating the statue. 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. This will reduce complaints about the Uniting Church’s “intervention” in politics.<sup>81</sup>

There will still be many opportunities to raise the Uniting Church’s public profile - but it will be done on “works” and not “words”, on positive actions and not controversial statements. Mark Scott (head of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) recalled an episode from his time at *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

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<sup>79</sup> The written apology was part of the ceremony “Recognition, Pastoral Concern Service and Reconciliation for Mrs Shirley Dunbar”, held at Wesley Mission, Sydney December 20 2005. “Uniting Church Rights an Old Sexist Wrong”, *Impact* (Sydney) Easter 2006, p 12

<sup>80</sup> Reading her church file it is interesting to note the lack of spiteful animosity; this was not a personal matter against Shirley Garlick as such – it was simply that Methodist deaconesses were not supposed in those days to have both a career and a marriage; the Methodist administrators made that decision for her. They did not see themselves in any way as acting wrongly; it was just the way things were done in those days.

<sup>81</sup> Rev Brian Edgar recalled a story of a minister in 1972 (before the ALP “It’s Time Election”) who wanted to keep party politics out of his sermon: “He preached carefully on the Christian responsibility to vote for a whichever party best exhibited social justice, cared for the poor and had a high regard for those in need. He thought he had done a reasonable job but as people left he was confronted by one irate gentleman who said “How dare you tell me to vote for Gough Whitlam!”” Brian Edgar “Public Theology in Australia, 2004: Address to Public Theology Network”, November 2004, Melbourne: Australian Evangelical Alliance (mimeo), p 6

Of course, there are wonderful examples when the media does discover someone whose faith has led them to do something that most of the rest of us could not imagine doing. Like the Salvation Army court chaplain, Joyce Harmer, who would sit, non-judgementally for months with those on trial for terrible crimes. The case that drew her into the public eye was Kathleen Folbigg the mother accused and later convicted of killing her four children...

But why the interest in Joyce Harmer? Why, suddenly, was she news?

Because she seemed like the real thing – and because her faith seemed to move her to a place where others wouldn't want to go. It had nothing to do with politics or money or institutions or power. Our readers – and our cynical reporters and editors – were simply so impressed by the genuineness of her faith and the simple strength and integrity of her actions.<sup>82</sup>

### **Incorporation**

All Uniting Church properties are vested in a State Property Trust. National agencies (such as Frontier Services) have their own property arrangements. There has been a slow move towards incorporation of some parish-based community services as provided for by the national Company Acts. Synod Property Trusts are not happy with this movement because it could foreshadow a further fragmentation within the Uniting Church. Reference has already been made to the Melbourne Mission incorporation following the Timothy Langley problems (which put the community services largely under Synod control).<sup>83</sup> In Adelaide for some years Helping Hand and Elder Care have been separately incorporated.

There is currently within the Uniting Church a much more systematic discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of incorporation. Under the care economy, government has allowed for-profits to compete with not-for-profits for funding, and some of the projects have collapsed. The government sometimes cannot find a "body" to prosecute (the usual question is "where is head office?") Therefore government is insisting that the not-for-profits and for-profits now be properly incorporated under the Company Acts. Charities

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<sup>82</sup> Mark Scott "Missing the Big Story: Reporting on Faith in a Cynical World: Wesley Mission Easter Breakfast 2006" (mimeo: available from Mark Scott, ABC, Sydney)

<sup>83</sup> A year after the Langley scandal, Wesley Mission became a company limited by guarantee and owned by the Victorian Synod: "Wesley: Phoenix Rising", *Crosslight*, October 2001, p 7

(including churches) have therefore been drawn into the incorporation problem because of the problems created by competitive tendering.

Whatever the cause, there could be some substantial issues for the Uniting Church (and presumably other denominations) if the full range of incorporation goes ahead. There are already debates within the Uniting Church over what separate incorporation has done for the Uniting Church schools. The schools were largely created to cater for the disadvantaged (like all the other community services of the predecessor Churches). But incorporation allowed each school to go its own way, and to a large extent they now cater for elite populations rather than the disadvantaged.<sup>84</sup> No doubt some Synod officials fear that if the large parish Missions were separately incorporated, then they too would go their own way. However, given the impetus within government for incorporation – and the need to obtain government funding – then Synod officials have little choice: if they want the community services work carried out then they need to operate on the terms laid down by government.

### INDICATORS

- continued decline in the size and number of Uniting Church congregations
- continued aging/ funerals of Uniting Church members
- inability to attract younger people into the Uniting Church
- increased openness in official Uniting Church meetings and statements about the declining state of Uniting Church congregations/ parishes (less public relations veneer)
- 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
- decline in the number of volunteers for Uniting Church congregational activities
- 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)

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<sup>84</sup> “Church and School: Talking in Line”, *Crosslight*, September 2007, p 3

- 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)
- spinning off of “consultancy services” by Uniting Church agencies leveraging their accumulated skills to acquire additional revenue eg bereavement counselling, retirement planning, funeral/ undertaker facilities
- amalgamation of community services agencies – such as the creation of UnitingCare West, in which WA’s Uniting Church services have almost all gone under the one umbrella<sup>85</sup>
- since 2005 no new Parish Mission has been established in WA, with all innovations being handled through the WA Synod/ UnitingCare
- incorporation of parish community services into incorporated bodies
- continued government philosophy of outsourcing welfare work to not-for-profit organizations
- appointment of “theologians in residence” in Uniting Church welfare agencies to help maintain the “Christian focus” of their work

## CONCLUSION

Flourishing examples of this scenario may be found outside the Uniting Church. Reference has already been made to the former Anglican organization now known as Mission Australia. Additionally, 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.

If the parish/ congregations continue to fade away while there is a continued willingness by government to outsource welfare work, then this could become the default possibility for the Uniting Church.

Alternatively, there could be a growing resentment against all the government social welfare red tape and a desire to get back to the basics of Christianity. This is explored in the next scenario.

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<sup>85</sup> “Care Agencies Band Together”, *Western Impact*, October 2005, pp 1,5; “New Care Agency Up and Running”, *Western Impact*, July 2006, p 6

## Chapter 7: SCENARIO 3: “RETURN TO THE EARLY CHURCH”

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### INTRODUCTION

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<sup>1</sup> while also claiming to help the lonely, least and lost.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

Interest in Jesus remains strong even if churches are not liked. Two faint signals of change are, first that as Dr Tom Frame has pointed out: “While there is no longer a stigma associated with being an unbeliever, it is significant that very few Australians choose to call themselves atheists.”<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Parents may send their children to Uniting Church schools for their children to make the right contacts for later in life and to get a good secular education; many parents have stopped attending church on a regular basis and have little interest in whether the children receive any formal Christian education.

<sup>2</sup> The 50+ schools can also create adverse publicity for the Uniting Church; for example, in late 2012 the Victorian Synod was embroiled over controversies to close the newish Acacia College in a socially deprived area, while at the other end of the social spectrum an industrial dispute involving the Principal of 130-year-old Methodist Ladies College alleged that she had extremely well paid; the November 2012 edition of *Crosslight* was dominated by these controversies.

<sup>3</sup> An example of how the Uniting Church (along with most other churches) have become “domesticated” and “respectable” is to re-read the Lord’s Prayer from a “revolutionary” perspective; see: John Dominic Crossan *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord’s Prayer*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Tom Frame *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia*, Kensington, University of NSW Press, 2009, p 296

churches may be in decline but this has not seen any automatic increase for atheists.

Second, in a survey of popular Sunday night Sydney radio religious programmes (ABC, 2GB and 2CH; I occasionally appear on them), a journalist noted: “The ratings of all three suggest while fewer Australians attend church these days, the public’s desire to discuss spiritual issues or connect on a deeper level is still strong”.<sup>5</sup>

### THE DRIVERS

The first driver is **low government expenditure** for the Uniting Church.

Government cannot finance the “religious” side of church work<sup>6</sup>, 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 community services.

The Uniting Church, it is worth repeating, 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 Ehrlich 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Sue Javes “That’s The Spirit”, *The Sydney Morning Herald: The Guide*, June 12 2006, p 5

<sup>6</sup> This provided the basis of the Australian High Court’s most important decision in 2012: Ronald Williams challenged the validity of the Australian Government’s school chaplaincy programme under Section 116 of the Constitution; the case was lost; for an introduction see the media statement “Ronald Williams v The Commonwealth of Australia & Ors”, Canberra: High Court of Australia, June 20 2012.



## Chapter 7

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.<sup>7</sup>

The church may be unpopular in Australia (and elsewhere) but there is a huge interest in Jesus himself. As US Christian leader Jim Wallis points out:

Yet for millions of people, religious or not, Jesus remains the most compelling figure in the world today. The church may not be more credible than the stockbrokers, the advertisers, the media, the special interests, or the politicians, but Jesus still stands far above the rest of the crowd. Somehow Jesus has survived the church and all of us who name his name but too often forget most of what he said.<sup>8</sup>

Monash's Professor Gary Bouma has argued that although some of the churches in Australia may be in trouble, there is an extensive interest in spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Secularism has not been as triumphant as sociologists were predicting back in the mid-twentieth century; there is still a role for religion. But it needs to be approached differently.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Ehrlich "Getting it Right" *Weekly Essay: Church Wellness Project*, August 18 2007, [www.onajourney.org](http://www.onajourney.org) (accessed 20/8/2007)

<sup>8</sup> Jim Wallis *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*, New York HarperCollins, 2008, p 300

<sup>9</sup> Gary Bouma *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

<sup>10</sup> In my sermons on church growth, I like to use the passage from Acts 17:16-28: Paul's ministry to a multi-faith city.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is often necessary to look for "green shoots" away from the mainline church sites; two inspirational surveys are Rudy Rasmus and Dottie Escobedo-Frank *Jesus*  
*Footnote continued on the next page*

### Low Government Expenditure

This scenario suggests that the funds are not stopped by government but by a resistance within the Uniting Church itself. It does not want government money. Seven explanations are provided. What is interesting to note is that the problems have emerged slowly. Under this scenario, if the Uniting Church had known then what it knows now, it might have been more hesitant about taking on some of its extensive welfare and corporate responsibilities.

#### (i) Government Funding has distorted the Church's Priorities

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 arrangements for the delivery of welfare services. Churches have of course provided some welfare services for centuries (examined in more detail in the next chapter) and government provided some funding.

The difference now is that government is asking the churches to deliver government programmes, such as labour market programmes. The Howard Government (1996-2007) abolished the Commonwealth Employment Services (CES). In 1998, the Melbourne-based Anglican Brotherhood of St Laurence warned:

The Howard Government's radical reform of employment services is arguably the largest experiment in social policy in Australia since the Second World War. On May 1 the government dismantled an infrastructure that had taken years to build and it changed, perhaps forever, the way the unemployed interact with government

The former system was based on the altruistic belief that government should help provide jobs for the unemployed and those on the margins of society. The new system is based on the profit motive and the belief that the fate of the unemployed should be put in the hands of organizations who will receive a cash bounty for each person they help place in employment.

The fundamental question raised by the Job Network is whether it is aimed primarily at meeting the needs of unemployed people, or whether

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*Insurgency: The Church Revolution from the Edge*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2012 (this is a remarkably raw book from a rather staid press); Christine and Tom Sine *Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002

it has been shaped by other factors: the government's budget parameters, its ideological predilection for the "market", or the profitability levels sought by those who will provide the services.<sup>12</sup>

The programme has been every bit as controversial as BSL foreshadowed. But the subsequent Labor Governments have not attempted to abolish it entirely and return to the CES. The essence of the 1998 reform has remained.

For those churches that decided to accept the invitation to tender (including the Uniting Church, in which Wesley Mission Sydney took the leading role) it has been a turbulent journey.<sup>13</sup> One example is the public turmoil provided by winning and then losing government contracts. Initially several contracts went to Wesley Uniting Employment but then many of the contracts were not won again in a later round of tendering, especially in the 2008 tendering round, and so staff had to be retrenched, buildings closed etc. Some of the turmoil was also due to some tenders being won by the for-profit providers.

Yet another dimension is that at the beginning of each process, government in effect entices charities to take on the work with the hint of large surpluses (as in aged care in the 1950s and 1960s, and more recently labour market programmes), and then as government auditors work through the financial records in the tendering rounds they see areas for clawing back the money and so the surplus is gradually reduced and the charities are left with a greater exposure to financial risk. In the meantime, of course, churches and other tenderers have built up an extensive infrastructure to provide the service.

The tendering process itself is part of the new sense of competition now being forced upon churches and other charities which had previously had their own informal co-operative arrangements – but which now carry a potential penalty because of collusive business behaviour.<sup>14</sup> For example, the NSW Uniting Church has two main childcare agencies: Wesley Mission's Dalmar and Burnside (accountable directly to the NSW Synod). For decades, Wesley Dalmar operated in north-west Sydney and Burnside operated in south-west

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Pickering *Altruism and Capitalism: Through the New Job Network? Social Tracts for Our Times No 1*, Brotherhood of St Laurence: Fitzroy, VIC, June 1998, p 9

<sup>13</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1, all the material in this dissertation is in the public domain.

<sup>14</sup> For example, there is a network of agencies looking after homeless people; for homeless people this seems like a bewildering array, when they might prefer to deal with one central government one (or at least one central non-governmental one); for the experiences of homeless people, see Andrew Byrne *Homeless: True Stories of Life on the Streets*, Sydney: New Holland, 2005

Sydney: a neat geographical arrangement which avoided duplication of effort. Now in competing for government contracts, both are obliged to tender for locations within the traditional areas of the other. A spirit of collegiality and sharing of ideas has been replaced by a spirit of competition.

Another 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.<sup>15</sup> (Ironically of course those delivering the services were best placed to observe the faults but were not allowed to go public with their knowledge)<sup>16</sup>.

The ruling seems to have been toned down but its effect became internalized as agencies decided to have in essence self-censorship. The Australia Institute in 2004 surveyed NGOs and reported a high rate of self-censorship; among the report's anonymous quotations were:

"We would be unwise to bite the hand that feeds us." "The perception is that you toe the line or you risk getting de-funded." "Peak bodies have had to tread very carefully in terms of retaining funding agreements during the Howard Government."<sup>17</sup>

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.

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<sup>15</sup> "Early Warning System Attacked", *The Age*, June 1 2001; "Stifling Critics is Dangerous Policy", *The Australian*, June 1 2001, p 5

<sup>16</sup> Much the same could be said about community legal centres; then Attorney-General Philip Ruddock withdrew the Australian Government's usual funding of the centres' annual conference in 2006 because the centres had been too outspoken on legal matters affecting their clients; Adele Horin "Barefoot Lawyers Find True Cost of Advice", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 7 2006, p 3

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Maddison et al *Silencing Dissent: Non-Government Organizations and Australian Democracy*, Canberra: The Australia Institute, June 2004, p x

“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”.<sup>18</sup>

The Archbishop’s admission is welcome. I wonder what else will be eventually revealed about the period through we are currently living and which cannot be discussed at present because of contractual obligations.

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 so-called “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.<sup>19</sup>

A more moderate problem is simply the amount of time officials of the Uniting Church (and others) waste serving on government committees, responding to government enquiries and surveys – especially when so little good seems to come out of all the effort. In the various “consultations” staff have to leave their workplace but there is no government money to pay for relief staff.

Another aspect is the accounting for government monies received. Ted Flack and Christine Ryan of Queensland University of Technology examined the complexity of financial reporting by Australian NGOs. They found:

As an example (and not an unusual one), one youth and family service organization in Queensland, receives \$4m in grants from Commonwealth, State and local governments. They report back on 37 separate grants – and the [sic] need to run a separate Excel spreadsheet alongside their main accounting system. The lack of

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<sup>18</sup> “Hickey Regrets Not Speaking Out”, *The West Australian*, August 15 2011 (circulated by Fr Claude Mostowik msc)

<sup>19</sup> This is not only an Australian tragedy. In June 2008 (four months after the Australian apology) the Canadian Government apologized for forcing about 150,000 Indigenous children to attend state-funded Christian schools (from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s) aimed at assimilating them. As at 2012, the tort litigation initiated by the alleged victims is still underway and handling the claims represents a major financial burden for the churches (mainly Catholic and Anglican) that undertook this work.

standardization within one level of government, let alone across levels of government means that the information being generated to government is of dubious quality and the compliance costs to the non-profit organization are larger than necessary. This lack of reliable base data, in turn, hampers the development of any realistic efforts to develop performance measures on the other more relevant dimensions of accountability.<sup>20</sup>

In short, the thinking in this scenario is that the Uniting Church would be better off without all the government entanglement.

### (ii) Church Members become tired of the Financial Problems

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.<sup>21</sup>

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"<sup>22</sup>, 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.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ted Flack and Christine Ryan *Financial Reporting by Australian Nonprofit Organizations; Dilemmas Posed by Government Funders*, QUTe-Prints, Brisbane: QUT, 2005, pp 7-8  
<http://eprints.qut.edu/archive/00003593>

<sup>21</sup> American sociobiologist Rebecca Costa has written a book warning of Earth's impending doom, not least through the excessive focus on economic growth, which also applies to church leaders: "The focus on the bottom line also extends to church leaders, who are judged and rewarded by bigger, more prestigious assignments according to the size of the donations they bring in." Rebecca D Costa *The Watchman's Rattle: Thinking Our Way Out of Extinction*, Philadelphia, PA: Vanguard, 2010, p 169

<sup>22</sup> For example, the Uniting Church becomes linked with a business: the business is able to exploit the Church's brand for a "feel-good factor" in marketing, while also making a donation to the Uniting Church.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Wesley Mission's elaborate "Darling Harbour Christmas" pageant in the 1990s contained an actor wearing the outfit of a dragon at the Bethlehem stable (the marketing logo of corporate sponsor St George Bank).

## Chapter 7

A second example is the problem of the cost of administration. Funding bodies usually do not recognize the full cost of providing a welfare service (some of which is the staff cost of accounting for the funds provided by that body). Private donors also have unrealistic expectations: they expect 100 cents in the dollar to go to a particular project, whereas some money has to be retained for the administration. Administration is a growing problem given all the increasing government requirements relating to documentation, occupational health and safety, workers compensation, diversity training etc.

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?<sup>24</sup>

A third example is therefore the need to create financial operations that raise money. Here again the Uniting Church could have problems if the members felt that the business activities were taking the Uniting Church away from its main mission. Gregory Dees of Harvard Business School set out the problem:

Like the proverbial tail wagging the dog, new sources of revenue can pull an organization away from its original social mission. Consider the YMCA. The association today generates substantial revenues by operating health and fitness facilities for middle-class families, but critics charge that the YMCA has lost sight of its mission to promote “the spiritual, mental and social condition of young men”.<sup>25</sup>

The Sydney diocese of the Anglican Church lost millions of dollars in the global financial crisis that began in August 2008. Archbishop Jensen admitted that “he has wondered whether God had decided to punish his diocese. Peter Jensen confessed yesterday to being grief-stricken by the size of the diocese’s \$160million financial loss and called on his faithful not to be panicked or paralysed by the money crisis but to turn to God in “active

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<sup>24</sup> Fiona Carruthers “The Good Life”, *The Weekend Australian Financial Review*, June 20-3 2007, p 30

<sup>25</sup> J Gregory Dees “Enterprising Nonprofits”, *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1998, p 57

faith”.”<sup>26</sup> The financial media were not only fascinated by the size of the loss but also the irony that the Anglican fund was prohibited from investing in gambling and alcohol companies – but evidently not financially risky investments.<sup>27</sup> The controversy rumbled on throughout 2010 and there were allegations that a “reckless “boys’ club” inside the Anglican Church” was to blame – and that Anglican committees would benefit from a 50:50 gender balance because women tend to more risk averse.<sup>28</sup> That proposal (like the even more sensitive perennial one of ordaining women) got nowhere.

But in fairness to that diocese, if it is going to run so many welfare and educational services, then it has to be ambitious in its financial activities.<sup>29</sup> In the notorious words of the late Archbishop Paul Marcinkus “You can’t run a church on Hail Marys”.<sup>30</sup>

The question posed by this chapter is: should any church be so heavily involved in running so many services that elaborate financial schemes are necessary? This scenario suggests that the Uniting Church could lose its appetite for such schemes and seek to return to the original vision of the church.<sup>31</sup>

### (iii) Church Members Rebel Against the “Corporate Church”

A third source of problems driving this scenario is that members of the Uniting Church become tired of the Church’s “corporate identity”.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the

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<sup>26</sup> “Jesus Saves, But Shattered Anglicans Regret Not Having that Luxury”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 20 2009

<sup>27</sup> “Borrowing Was Ethical: Archbishop”, *The Australian Financial Review*, October 20 2009

<sup>28</sup> “Macho Boys’ Club “Cost Anglicans Millions””, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 4 2010

<sup>29</sup> Wesley Mission Sydney has, for example, run Radio 2GB in Sydney and the Cottee citrus fruit orchard in South Australia.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in his *Guardian* (UK) obituary; Marcinkus (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 Marckincus”, *The Guardian*:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2006/feb/23/guardianobituaries.religion/print>

(accessed 9/22/2010)

<sup>31</sup> Wesley Mission eventually found running Radio 2GB too difficult and sold it, and has since avoided other grand secular financial schemes

<sup>32</sup> The problem of the corporation comes from its unique structure: “By design, the corporate form generally protects the human beings who own and run corporations from legal liability, leaving the corporation, a “person” with a psychopathic contempt for legal constraints, the main target of criminal prosecution”. Joel Bakan *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, London: Constable, 2004, p 79



members are alienated by the emphasis on “professional” qualities and efficiency that appeal so much to government. The “Church” is not just set of expensive buildings but people helping other people and there must be easier ways of doing this than via all the gloss of the big church offices.

Meanwhile, Debra Allcock Tyler CEO of the UK Directory of Social Change, in her 2010 tour of Australia, was scathing about the emphasis on “business lessons” for charities:

She says the constant comparison between practices in the business and Not for Profit sectors is ironic, as it was the failure of the corporate governance and banks that plunged the world into a recession.

Allcock Tyler rejects the notion that businesses are more transparent and accountable than NFPs – she says regulation and legislation, the scrutiny of funders, governmental and auditing bodies and mandatory reporting procedures mean that organizations are constantly being held to account.<sup>33</sup>

There is also a risk that Uniting Church senior officials will be closer to government (as funder) than the congregations (which are no longer the main provider of funds for Uniting Church welfare work). There will be a gradual growing apart: nothing malicious just a gradual separation of the ways. They just have different priorities. How can a church agency that is now essentially staffed by non-Christians be seen as a Christian mission by congregational members?

This separation could be exacerbated by secular industrial trends that might put the Uniting Church in a poor light. Former journalist with *The Australian*<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Wynhausen decided to go undercover as a “poor worker” scrambling for menial work.<sup>35</sup> This was similar to American journalist Barbara Ehrenreich’s undercover assessment of the 1996 Clinton welfare reforms.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “NFPs Should Not Be Business-Like: UK Expert”, Pro Bono Australia, <http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au/print/news/2010/09/nfps-should-not-be-business...>

(accessed: 10/16/2010)

<sup>34</sup> Ironically she later got retrenched and wrote about the impact of the global financial crisis on ordinary Australians: Elisabeth Wynhausen *The Short Goodbye: A Skewed History of The Last Boom and the Next Bust*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011

<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Wynhausen *Dirt Cheap: Life at the Wrong End of the Job Market*, Melbourne: Pan Macmillan, 2005

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich *Nickel and Dimed: Or [Not] Getting by in America*, New York: Metropolitan, 2002

Wynhausen's story of various workplaces included a period at two (unidentified) church aged care workplaces where she got badly treated. The fact is aged care workers are generally badly paid and the Australian Government will not provide enough funds for reasonable salaries. Much the same could be said by most other areas of social welfare. The Uniting Church, in doing government work, is spread thinly. Government exploits the good nature of churches and charities to do its work; they in turn are in effect obliged to exploit their workers because government does not provide enough funding.

Doubtless some church members could ask: Where are the "Christian values" involved for unskilled people working in a secular-controlled system that exploits their good nature or financial vulnerability and desperation? Let Caesar look after his own affairs.

#### (iv) Too Many Government Regulations

A fourth source of problems driving this scenario is that there are both too many government regulations and the regulations themselves often hinder the Uniting Church's work.

Modern Australian society is increasingly regulated. Even though the Australian Government (irrespective of who is in power) would claim that since the Hawke/ Keating Labor Government reforms beginning in 1983 the economy is now more market-driven, deregulated etc, in essence all that has happened is that the regulation process has changed; it has not been reduced. Yes: the economy is more market-driven but to ensure that the market is operating efficiently there are now greater compliance requirements than ever before.

As the QUT quotation above illustrated, there are additional financial compliance costs. Another source of compliance work<sup>37</sup> was reported by the Victorian Synod in 2007:

Many thousands of church-going Victorians will soon have to undergo mandatory police checks and apply for state authorization in order to work with or minister to children and aged people. It is estimated that more than 20,000 Uniting Church-related people in Victoria – all ministers, together with many members, agency staff and volunteers –

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<sup>37</sup> There is a procedural flaw with "background checks"; they are retrospective; they may show a person has no past criminal record but they cannot prevent a later criminal act. Much of this work is therefore just for show: to keep government, insurers and media satisfied.

will be affected by federal and state laws on work with young and old people... The total bill across the church for people to meet the legislative requirements may top half a million dollars.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, there is now a new national system for complaints investigation within residential aged care centres and mechanisms to encourage the reporting of suspected assaults.<sup>39</sup> No doubt all this regulation is required and worthwhile but it does represent yet another burden.

Meanwhile, in a much broader context, involving children in any activity in any church context is now much more complicated than when I was in the UK Covenanters youth group over half a century ago.<sup>40</sup> Somehow we managed to survive all the rough and tumble of post-war London childhood without much mishap but now society is evidently much more risk averse.<sup>41</sup>

Dr Stephen Judd, CEO of HammondCare, a major provider of aged care, has expressed concern about fire regulations in residential aged care facilities for people with dementia. Fire regulations require "...a corridor full of fire extinguishers. I have seen what a man affected by dementia can do with a fire extinguisher – and it isn't putting out fires!"<sup>42</sup>

NSW State National Party MP Adrian Piccoli in 2005 complained about yet another set of regulations: health and safety:

Volunteer sandwich makers in the country are under siege... Now, under new regulations, anyone who makes sandwiches for the Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade has to be licensed. That means Gladys, from the Berrigan CWA, a 50-year sandwich-making veteran, plus the raiser of four kids and 40 grandkids, with I can only assume no injury or death, doesn't qualify to make sandwiches for volunteers any more.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Checks on the Church", *Crosslight*, April 2007, p 1

<sup>39</sup> Sonia Bolzon "Compulsory Reporting of Offences – The New Complaints Regime", *Australian Aging Agendas*, Summer 2007, p 19

<sup>40</sup> For an introduction, see *ChildSafe: Risk Management System*, NSW Central Coast Business Centre: Scripture Union Australia, 2005

<sup>41</sup> "Risk" is now big business; see: Dan Gardner *Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2008

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Judd "Has Research Delivered Best practice?" *Australian Aging Agendas*, December 2010, p 53

<sup>43</sup> Adrian Piccoli "Gladys Rates the Rules a Few Slices Short of a Loaf", *The Daily Telegraph*, April 5 2005

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All large institutions attract litigation from plaintiffs, and churches are no exception – hence all the lawyers employed within churches and the extensive use of secular law firms.<sup>44</sup> Church members would be appalled at the extent to which churches have been drawn into secular modern litigious society. Some cases are not without their sardonic humour. For example, a charismatic Christian who was “slain in the spirit” at the Sydney Christian Life Centre and injured herself on the way down to the ground, sued that church for \$750,000 for not having people to catch others as they were slain in the spirit and fell to the ground. The case was lost.<sup>45</sup> But of course doubtless a lot of church administration time was consumed in preparing the defence.

This dissertation does not have the space to speculate on whether, thanks to tort liability, the legal system is increasingly now making social welfare too “risky” to conduct.<sup>46</sup> This is the implication from some of the discussions generated by the regular sessions of Wesley Mission Church Law Forum of church lawyers.

Finally, to end this part of the survey of government regulations, there are the ironies arising from government out-sourcing some of its basic functions (such as labour market programmes and childcare). If government has decided that it ought not to run a service, how can it be trusted to monitor the (contracted out) services? If government is “contracting out”, what are the implications of NGOs “contracting in”? To what extent can any government contract out its statutory responsibilities (such as the care of wards of the state)?

Having so many regulations (and opportunities for litigation) is bad enough, but what are the implications for the Uniting Church being yoked to government in an increasingly secular society? The overall impact is a change in the Uniting Church culture. Government (thanks to the Constitution) cannot regulate the “religious” side of the Church but it can erode the non-religious side.

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<sup>44</sup> Wesley Mission lawyer Bryce Bridges has had two decades of running the Church Law Forum for lawyers working with religious institutions (mostly Christian but not exclusively). I often attend (and move the vote of thanks). The presentations have been very useful for this dissertation.

<sup>45</sup> “Church Not Liable for Lord’s Early Fallers”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 19-20 2002

<sup>46</sup> A very basic example from aged care: in residential aged care the worker has one workplace and can be supervised; but now in the evolving field of community care (where care is taken to people living in their own homes) there are now several “workplaces” and the worker cannot be so easily supervised.

First, in this era of the “government steering but not rowing” (and the charities competing to do the rowing), there is the risk that charities will be seduced into accepting the agenda of government. The dilemma for the Uniting Church is, then, should it be providing welfare services in the image of the Gospel and how it interprets Christian service – or does it follow the instructions of the government paymaster? That latter route is what got some churches into trouble over the “stolen children”.<sup>47</sup>

Second, there is the danger of organizational fragmentation. The Uniting Church is a national organization whose property is vested in State Property Trusts controlled by Synods. The Uniting Church is a varied organization but its “skeleton” is provided by those trusts; no property can be sold and no contracts<sup>48</sup> entered into without going through the trusts. The trusts are an efficient quality-control system,

But from a government point of view, there is the problem of assessing who, in particular, is on the other end of the contract – the anonymous property trust or a particular parish/ congregation that will be delivering the contracted service? Government would prefer the service parts of the Uniting Church (and other service-providing churches) to be separately incorporated and governed by company legislation as are secular business entities. This is administratively neater for government but a problem for the Uniting Church, which could end up even more fragmented.

The Uniting Church (and all other churches) in 2013 are currently working through this problem (which has been partly triggered by the 2012 creation of the Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission: ACNC). If the incorporation route is not followed, then funding for welfare work will be jeopardized because of government’s increasing insistence of dealing only with incorporated bodies. On the other hand, a separately incorporated body, following secular corporation law, would eventually become organizationally and culturally separate from the more “religious” side of the Uniting Church.

Third, there is government failure to understand the special role of charities in modern society, such as the role of cross subsidies. In for-profit entities, cross subsidies are usually seen as inefficient and so are discouraged because they

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<sup>47</sup> There is of course the argument that these churches were willing partners in this arrangement: by the thinking of the times they really did believe that they were doing Indigenous children a favour by removing them from their families and so the churches were not entirely without blame.

<sup>48</sup> These are not just the more obvious large government contracts but also, for example, each tenancy agreement with every individual aged care resident in a Uniting Church facility.

could be underwriting business failures. With the rise of New Right economic rationalism, government has also accepted that logic and encourages the creation of separate business units so as to assess efficiency and facilitate self-sufficiency.<sup>49</sup>

But charities are not necessarily businesses; they do underwrite and cross subsidise operations. For example, the Lifeline telephone counselling service does not charge its callers; how could it because the core of the service is an anonymous telephone relationship? But government will not take “no” for an answer on this one and, for example, the issue has arisen in the various official enquiries into charities.

### (v) Eroding the Christian Character of Welfare Work

A fifth problem is the way that government intervention is eroding<sup>50</sup> the “Christian” character of the Uniting Church’s welfare services.<sup>51</sup> The essence of the issue is that Christian organizations provide a particular type of service which is valued by the community:

Investing one’s life in others was, after all, the pattern Jesus followed, He did not come, he said, to be served but to serve and to give his life sacrificially for others. He did this daily in his relationships with his friends and with the crowds that he ministered to; finally he did it to the limit on the cross.<sup>52</sup>

The organization’s Christian culture helps determine the quality of that service. Government recognizes the value of that service - hence the government funding.

On the other hand, there is a separate movement towards protecting human rights and outlawing discrimination, which the churches have generally

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<sup>49</sup> Aged care centre residents now get access to care centre budgets (as per government requirement) and some of them do not like their money cross-subsidizing poorer residents or the chaplaincy.

<sup>50</sup> The erosion is a gradual process. When I started at the Central Methodist Mission in 1976 the recruitment was explicitly for Christians and applicants needed a reference from their minister/ priest. In more recent years, applicants are advised that the Mission is “a Christian organization requiring staff to affirm the Mission’s values” (which no doubt an unemployed atheist anxious for work would be willing to do). In the long sweep of history, the trend is clearly towards secularization.

<sup>51</sup> For an introduction, see: Keith Suter “Church Groups Need “Religious Belief” as an Occupational Requirement”, *HR Monthly* (Melbourne), June 1998, pp 7-8

<sup>52</sup> David Hewetson and David Miller *Christianity Made Simple*, Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1993, p 104

supported.<sup>53</sup> But there is an increasing problem with churches being stopped from appointing staff with a specific Christian background.<sup>54</sup> Over time there is the risk that the unique Christian values and culture will be eroded, and the organization will eventually become similar to a bland secular public service department.

The Christian “difference” will disappear if they are required to look like government services. Donors to the Christian agency support its work because of its values; they may not be so generous if they thought they would be donating to a semi-government agency. Additionally, church agencies receive government funding to provide services to the community; they are not providing services to the community as a government agency. The different Christian agencies add to the intrinsic pluralism of society.

In the meantime having to defend the organization’s recruitment policy is time-consuming and costly. Christian life is based on a notion of service (or “ministry”) that applies to all people. The person who works in a caring agency (say), even as a gardener, is in a sense just as important as a person preaching on a Sunday. The legal system has problems grasping this concept (a reflection of the changing social attitudes to Christianity). The Constitution may have kept government out of religion but it has not kept religion out of the courts.

The secularization effect would not be immediate but as non-Christian staff gradually get promoted and work their way up the organization to senior positions, so the Christian culture will slowly dissipate. This is not a “Black

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<sup>53</sup> For example, Alan Walker was an early critic of the “White Australia” policy and was twice banned from South Africa because of his views on apartheid. See: Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide: OpenBook, 1997, pp 101, 111, 134-45, 183, 206, 251 and 269

<sup>54</sup> One of my first duties after having been recruited to the Central Methodist Mission in 1976, was to work with a coalition of churches to ensure that discrimination on religious grounds was deleted from Australia’s first human rights legislation: NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977. Premier Neville Wran agreed to the compromise of deleting “religion” as a ground of complaint and having the new Anti Discrimination Board appointed under the Act commission what was to become the then most extensive Australian examination of religious conviction. I gave evidence to the ADB as General Secretary of the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility on the particular issue of the recruitment of staff and argued that churches should be allowed to recruit their own staff.

My proposed formula is quoted in full: *Discrimination and Religious Conviction*, Sydney: Anti-Discrimination Board, 1984, pp 397-8. In essence I argued that a gardener may spend more time with a recuperating patient at a Christian hospital than a medical specialist or administrator and so the need for committed Christians ran throughout an organization and not just at the elite end of employment.

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Swan” sudden event but an example of change occurring in increments, whereby the full impact of the gradual changes will only become visible decades later.

Ironically, as Sydney lawyer Anne Robinson (who has been acting for some churches in this matter) pointed out, there is an element of hypocrisy in politicians creating one set of laws for churches and yet excluding their own organizations:

Do you see a Liberal Party politician being forced to employ a card-carrying Labor member? Or Greenpeace being forced to employ an ardent pro-woodchipping advocate? Or Microsoft an Apple devotee? Nothing will destroy an organization more quickly than allowing people to join it who have antithetical beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

The Uniting Church has been drawn into this matter because it accepts government funding to provide services for government. If it did not accept the funding to provide the services then this problem would not arise.<sup>56</sup>

Under Section of 116 of the Australian Constitution the Commonwealth is prohibited from “establishing” any religion or creating a religious test for holding a Commonwealth position.<sup>57</sup> “God” gets a passing reference in the Preamble but is otherwise absent from the Constitution. Government can fund welfare and other services provided by religious bodies but cannot regulate the “religious” work of those bodies. Therefore, a smaller, more “religiously” focussed Uniting Church – without government funded welfare services - would be more likely left alone by government and lawyers.

### (vi) The Burden of being a Church Board Member

Why would anyone want to serve on a church board? The Uniting Church is part of the not-for-profit landscape and it is being drawn into the increased regulation of business activities. In 2004 two Mckinsey staffers in San Francisco surveyed the way in which “The corporate-governance debate in the US (as well as Australia) is spreading from the for-profit to the non-profit

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<sup>55</sup> Anne Robinson “Challenge for Human Rights Champion” (letter) *The Australian Financial Review*, September 11, 2000, p 13

<sup>56</sup> The Catholic Church is in a similar bind: it obtained government funding for its schools (1981 Defence of Government Schools Case) and now it too is covered by secular human rights legislation.

<sup>57</sup> Nick O'Neill and Robin Handley *Retreat from Justice*, Sydney: Federation Press, 1994, pp 56-73



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world”.<sup>58</sup> In other words, effectively the only difference between a for-profit and not-for-profit is what you do with your profit/ surplus. Increasingly all the corporate governance regulations are the same.

The intention of the next few paragraphs is simply to give a taste of some of the governance issues, with the implication that perhaps a smaller and more “religiously” focussed Uniting Church would evade most of these issues. Most of the material is drawn from the pages of Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) publications.<sup>59</sup>

The nature of corporate governance has changed. As Professor Geoffrey Kiel has pointed out: “If you go back even a couple of decades, boards were often not making decisions – they were simply told of them by management, sometimes after the fact”, Kiel says. But since then, he says, there has been a governance revolution. “We now have more active boards”.<sup>60</sup>

This corporate governance revolution may be seen in a number of ways. Even the term itself “corporate governance” is fairly recent. One British writer claims that as recently as 1995 it was a largely unknown term.<sup>61</sup> Bob Garratt, says that the UK Institute of Directors (IoD) was founded in 1903 and granted a Royal Charter in 1906 – but it was not until 1995 that the IoD first explained what it thought what “a board actually does”.<sup>62</sup> There is a hint that, with the development of all the management schools and professional management bodies, the directors were the last amateurs: the general public had a lack of professionalism at board level which it would no longer tolerate among the managers.

Therefore, in the English-speaking world there has been a flurry of legislation and other activities to force directors to take greater responsibility in the

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Jansen and Andrea Kilpatrick “Making NFP Governance Profitable”, *Company Director*, May 2004, p 29

<sup>59</sup> I joined the then Institute of Directors in Australia in 1980 at the encouragement of Professor Alf Pollard who was a lay officer of Wesley Mission (I am now his successor but one), He could see the way the trend was evolving with increased corporate governance responsibilities of churches and charities and he thought it would be useful for the Mission’s senior staff to be members of the Institute. I was one of the foundation members of the new AICD in 1990 and have been a presenter at AICD training events, mainly dealing with corporate strategy.

<sup>60</sup> Giles Parkinson “Some Advice About Advisers”, *Company Directors*, September 2009, p 23

<sup>61</sup> Bob Garratt *The Fish Rots from the Head: The Crisis in Our Boardrooms: Developing the Crucial Skills of the Competent Director*, London: Profile, 2003, p xvii

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p 7

organization they were supposed (and were paid) to be “directing”.<sup>63</sup> Gabrielle Upton, then Legal Counsel at AICD, estimated in 2009 that “There are more than 600 state and territory laws in Australia imposing personal liability on directors and officers for corporate misconduct”.<sup>64</sup> The implication is that many directors were unaware of this rapid evolution and the consequent growth of their responsibilities.

Meanwhile the difference between directing for-profit and not-for-profit bodies was rapidly eroding. Then AICD CEO Ralph Evans reminded AICD members serving on boards of not-for-profits of the words of a Victorian Supreme Court judge: “There is nothing in the (Companies) code to suggest that the standard expected of a part-time non-executive director of a not-for-profit company is different from the standard expected from a profit-making company”. Evans continued: “While many do not realise it, not-for-profit directors – even if they are working unpaid for noble causes – face serious personal liability if the bodies they govern become insolvent”.<sup>65</sup>

There is a risk that NFP directors are not up to the task. AICD has reported:

A problem is looming in Australia’s social economy: board standards are not keeping pace with the rising complexity of the \$33billion not-for-profit NFP sector. If boards cannot improve faster, they will miss an opportunity to accelerate the sector’s transformation and produce better social outcomes for millions of Australians.<sup>66</sup>

A survey had shown that: “...NFP board directors had inferior financial management and strategy skills, were often driven by self-interest, did not understand their legal responsibilities and lack the right skills”.<sup>67</sup>

Some NFP board members agree to serve to “make up the numbers”.<sup>68</sup> They have little idea of the responsibilities they are taking on. But, as suggested by

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<sup>63</sup> A graphic example of this is the standard corporate governance publication by Bob Baxt. It was first published in 1982; it is now up to its 20<sup>th</sup> edition: each edition being larger and more complex than its predecessor: Bob Baxt *Duties and Responsibilities of Directors and Officers*, Sydney: AICD, 2012

<sup>64</sup> Gabrielle Upton “AICD Welcomes Finding on Director Liability”, *Company Director*, February 2009, p 58

<sup>65</sup> Ralph Evans “Challenges of Not-For-Profit Boards”, *Company Director*, March 2007, p 4

<sup>66</sup> Tony Featherstone “Below the Bottom Line”, *Company Director*, March 2008, p 16

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 16

<sup>68</sup> In other words, the regulations of an organization state there should be a set number of persons on a board/ committee and people agree simply to make up the numbers – without thinking through the potential consequences of their generous gesture.

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Evans, many NFP directors are not paid (unlike those on company boards) and evidently hope that their high-minded voluntary service will excuse them from any legal problems later on. No: they may not necessarily receive any special treatment by the legal system.

There is also a tension between the well-meaning amateur “making up the numbers” by serving on a board and the usually young people with a proper director training who have come from the corporate sector and would like to contribute something to the community. They serve on church and other NFP boards, and often (in my experience) find this an unhappy experience as they clash with the prevailing amateur culture of some church and other charity boards. They usually do not stay for long.

Perhaps NFP directors should be paid – to give them a greater incentive to serve and accord the role more seriousness?<sup>69</sup> No:

The issue is taboo in Australia. Rightly or wrongly, having unpaid directors creates more public confidence that charity boards are giving back to the community and getting more funds to people who need them.

Also, director pay might not sit well with the many volunteers who join charity boards out of a deep commitment to the cause. Surely, becoming a charity director is a chance to give rather than take?<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile there is the haunting memory of the damage done to directors by a single media release. A long running corporate governance saga concerns the James Hardy company.<sup>71</sup> Hardy is a successful, originally Australian-based, company that makes building products. In its distant past it was involved with the asbestos building products but it got out of that line in 1986. Over the years new generations of directors were recruited. They had heard of asbestos but none had any direct experience of it. There were continuing company liabilities arising from those people who had died or were dying of asbestos-related injuries. In February 2001 the directors passed a resolution

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<sup>69</sup> I was a consultant in the 1990s/ early 2000s to Health Services Association NSW, the peak body for members of state hospital boards. The NSW State Government tried to change the culture of the boards by paying members. The payment was not much but it did give some leverage over them in terms of their being more obligated to attend meetings and our training sessions.

<sup>70</sup> Tony Featherstone “A Question of Charity”, *Company Director*, October 2009, 14

<sup>71</sup> See: Gideon Haigh *Asbestos House: The Secret History of James Hardie Industries*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2007

approving a media release saying that an asbestos compensation fund was “fully funded”. Over a decade on, the implications of that single decision continue to trundle through the courts, and the careers of directors have been wrecked.

The significance of this matter here is the warning that an apparently minute decision can have immense implications. AICD has followed this case through all its twists and turns.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly no Hardy director had evidently thought it was important enough to retain a copy of the “company transforming” media statement in their files. But, then, for those people who serve on church boards, how many of the papers do they retain and for how long? Uniting Church meetings generate much paper so that not everything can be retained. The bit of paper thrown away may come back to haunt a person later on.

Finally, there is the original question: why would anyone want to be a director:

It will surely go down as the governance comment of 2011. In an extraordinary admission, former Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC) chairman Tony D’Aloisio said Australia’s regulatory regime could be imposing too many obligations on non-executive directors (NEDs), and called on the Federal Government to re-examine the law applying to directors’ duties. “There are concerns out there as to whether or not it [director liability] is going to discourage good people from becoming directors,” D’Aloisio told *The Australian* in late March.<sup>73</sup>

There was widespread AICD support for this comment.<sup>74</sup> It was interesting that it was the former ASIC Chair himself who made it.

A smaller Uniting Church, divorced from many of the elaborate corporate governance responsibilities, would be free from many of the troubling issues raised in these paragraphs.

### (vii) Competition from the For-Profits

If the Uniting Church’s work is becoming more complicated because of the expansion of corporate governance regulations flowing in from the for-profit sector, so there is the additional problem of the for-profits moving in on the work of the not-for-profits. In this era of New Right economic rationalism and

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<sup>72</sup> AICD *Directing Tomorrow Today: The Essential Directors’ Update*, Sydney: 2009, pp 4-15

<sup>73</sup> Tony Featherstone “Weighed Down by Regulation”, *Company Director*, June 2011, p 26

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, pp 26-31

competitive tendering, the for-profit-sector is being encouraged by government to provide services that were traditionally provided by the church and charitable sector.<sup>75</sup> The for-profit sector's experience has not always been profitable – but it has certainly been disruptive.<sup>76</sup>

Harvard's William Ryan has explained how the entry of US for-profits into US social service provision raises fundamental questions about the mission and future of the NFP sector. Lockheed Martin makes defence equipment and in 1996 said that it would tender for the provision of American welfare services. Its critics claimed that it was "poverty profiteering":

To non-profit observers, Lockheed Martin's crossover proved that for-profits would do anything for a buck, including reinvent themselves as providers of social services. Companies that treated the social services as a business proposition – or so the argument went – merely underscored a fundamental difference: non-profits and their government funders invest in people, and for-profits invest in profits...

The real message of Lockheed Martin's move into non-profit work is that just about everything affecting the provision of social services – the government agencies that award contracts, the political environment in which they operate, and the preferences of clients – has profoundly changed. To simply attribute these new developments to the entrepreneurial initiative (or greed) of a few companies misses the significance of the new competitive realities at hand.<sup>77</sup>

In the Australian context, this change has occurred mainly in childcare and aged care. In healthcare and education, state and private ventures have co-existed since the beginning of European settlement.<sup>78</sup> But the financial pages of the media have noted the changes occurring in childcare and aged care (not always successfully for the for-profits).

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<sup>75</sup> Noting in this section constitutes financial advice.

<sup>76</sup> From a New Right economic rationalism perspective, this disruption is to be welcomed as it keeps organizations on their toes and avoids complacency; this is a world of perpetual competitive struggle and survival of the fittest.

<sup>77</sup> William P Ryan "The New Landscape for Non-Profits", *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 1999. p 128

<sup>78</sup> The for-profit provision of higher education (with private universities and colleges) is perhaps a new development and reflects the opportunities created by the Dawkins education reforms of the 1980s. NSW also has one privately-run prison.

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From an investment point of view, childcare and aged care – being based on stable populations – provide a strong cash flow because the parents of children and age care residents tend to stay for a long period (unlike, say, the entertainment, fashion or music industries, where tastes change quickly). Childcare and aged care may lack the glamour of some other industries but, handled well, they can be “nice little earners” at the high end of the market.

The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) has monitored this development. In 2005 the then NCOSS Director Gary Moore issued a media statement:

“We are witnessing unprecedented interest and activity by big private firms in attempting to gain a sizable stake in many parts of human services,” said NCOSS Director Gary Moore.

“In childcare, ABC Learning Centres has been vigorously expanding its position through purchasing many smaller for-profit operators.

“In residential aged care, the Salvation Army announced last week it has sold, in four States, the majority of its residential aged care facilities to a private consortium, led by Macquarie Bank.

“In the funeral industry, major firms such as Invocare are dominating the market through removing competitors and pressuring governments to adopt greater industry self regulation.

“And, under the recently signed US free trade agreement, it has just come to light that major Commonwealth funding contracts for human services provision may have to offer US firms the opportunity to bid”.<sup>79</sup>

ABC Learning was at one point the country’s largest provider of childcare (pushing the Uniting Church into third place behind the Kindergarten Union). It has since fallen into bankruptcy. The saga’s final lesson may well be that the business model was not in itself at fault but that the company expanded too quickly.

Aged care has also had its ups and downs<sup>80</sup> but the for-profit providers remain optimistic that Australia’s aging population offers new opportunities at the high

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<sup>79</sup> “Consumers Warned about New Big Business”, Media Statement, Sydney: NSW Council of Service, March 16 2005

<sup>80</sup> “Turning Grey Power into Profits”, *The Sydney Morning Herald Money Section*, July 5 2006; “Macquarie Injects Profit Motive into Aged Care”, *The Australian Financial Review*, July 20 2006; “Aged Village Players Feeling Unsteady”, *The Australian*, May 5 2007

end of the market, for example, many Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1966) have large homes whose sale can finance the private provision of aged care:

“In Australia, there had been no residential asset [investment] class at all”, says Rod Fehring of Lend Lease PrimeLife Group, which was quick into the breach in acquiring Babcock & Brown’s communities group last year to become the largest provider of managed retirement living options in the country...

The sector, previously dominated by not-for-profits, churches and small individual operators, has given way to the likes of PrimeLife that can provide the scale, says Fehring, to service these ongoing segments of the markets.<sup>81</sup>

The article went on to explain how the recent changes in aged care legislation have enabled the for-profits to create this new asset investment class. Thus demographic change, Baby Boomer personal asset accumulation, and changes in government legislation had all combined to create a new investment opportunity for one of Australia’s largest companies.<sup>82</sup>

The changes also represent new problems for the Uniting Church, as the country’s largest provider of aged care. The high end of the market often provides the surplus that helps finance the low end of the market (the “financially disadvantaged” to use Commonwealth Government language). Now some of that cream is being taken away by the for-profit providers.

### **High Christian Spirituality**

#### ***Introduction***

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

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<sup>81</sup> “Earnings in Ageing”, *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*, May 2009, p 14

<sup>82</sup> Naomi Klein has argued that at the global level, natural and human-made disasters represent a new branch of economic opportunities for the for-profits, Naomi Klein *The Shock Disaster: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York: Metropolitan, 2007

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### (i) Continual Change

In 1942, with World War II underway, American Episcopalian Rev Bernard Iddings Bell reflected on the gloomy state of world affairs, not least the church's own problems. But he offered some hope:

The world has been in a bad way several times before in Christian history – times when the church has looked as conventional, emasculated, insignificant as it seems to most observers nowadays; and over and over again it has received new vigour as the world's need grew critical.<sup>83</sup>

He then quoted the example of the reforming work of Francis of Assisi, which was done at a time of particular corruption within the Catholic Church and the way that this work has inspired so many Christians down the centuries.

So it has been again and again in the nineteen Christian centuries. In times of world emergency there has emerged a leadership sufficient to ensure an utterance of Jesus' wisdom, a necessary challenge to the dying civilization, a new outpouring of the power of God bestowed on those intent to do His will rather than merely to follow a self-blinded humanity. Why not again?<sup>84</sup>

This chapter's scenario is of a Uniting Church very different from the current Uniting Church in 2013. But, then, there has never been a "standard" Christian church.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> Church historian FF

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<sup>83</sup> Bernard Iddings Bell "Will the Christian Church Survive?" *The Atlantic online*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/42oct/bell.htm> (accessed 12/03/03)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Much the same could be said about teaching theology. In 1993, three of the Uniting Church's main theological teachers retired; they had almost a century of accumulated teaching experience between them. All three short memoirs noted that they had to revise their material on a continual basis. Nigel Watson, for example, said that every lecture he gave had to be thoroughly revised every two or three years. See: Robert Anderson, Harry Wardlaw, Nigel Watson *The Way We See Things Now*, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1993, p 42.

<sup>86</sup> Former Catholic priest Matthew Fox has reminded readers of the diversity of the Early Church and argued for the revitalization of the Christian Church by rediscovering the early home church movement; see Matthew Fox *The Pope's War: Why Ratzinger's Secret Crusade has Imperilled the Church and How it Can be Saved*, New York: Sterling, 2011, pp 181, 204, 210, 215-7



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Bruce recalled the way that 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.<sup>87</sup>

Historian JH Hexter noted the Early Church's evolving growth:

The forms of worship of the church developed slowly and with considerable variation from place to place. This was inevitable, since the body of Christians, scattered through the cities of the Roman world, were effectively bound together only by a common faith in Christ as Lord, and the faithful in each city made their own arrangements for worship. What was true of worship was also true of organization: a common organization emerged only gradually as a result of similar experiences.<sup>88</sup>

Paul, for example, wrote to the church at Corinth, a place of turmoil, as Garry Wills has noted:

Of all the gatherings Paul addressed, those in Corinth were the most refractory... Factions spawned in Corinth. There were problems of doctrine, discipline and vision, problems of class, of gender or personalities.<sup>89</sup>

In the fourth century Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and so changed again (as explained in chapter 8). 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"?<sup>90</sup> The imperial faith had to sort out its doctrine and stamp out heresy, such as the decree in 381 of Theodosius about the Trinity.<sup>91</sup>

From the 6<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries 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

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<sup>87</sup> FF Bruce *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English*, Exeter, Devon: Paternoster, 1958, pp 104-5

<sup>88</sup> JH Hexter *The Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p 75

<sup>89</sup> Garry Wills *What Paul Meant*, New York: Penguin, 2006

<sup>90</sup> Sydney D Bailey *Prohibitions and Restraints in War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972

<sup>91</sup> Charles Freeman *AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Christian-State*, London: Pimlico, 2009

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.<sup>92</sup> The Inquisition was instituted to keep its form of faith pure. But new movements for reform continued.

Early Protestant reformers opposed Rome's corruption, the Catholic Church's taste for Baroque's grandeur and its monopoly over Biblical knowledge and interpretation. The western European church eventually split, and the violent Thirty Years War (1618-48) saw the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire and the creation of the modern nation-state system.<sup>93</sup>

Eventually the Reformation resulted in the creation, from the fifteenth century onwards, of different Protestant churches, such as the German Lutheran Church and the Presbyterians in Scotland, with the Church of England separately established from Rome. The English Civil War in the 1640s in its turn also gave rise to new ways of doing church (especially based on Acts 2 and the sharing of wealth), such as Gerrard Winstanley (1609-1676), who instituted a form of "Christian communism"<sup>94</sup> (the "True Levellers" in the 1650s). He ended his days as a wealthy merchant and a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

But then religious controversy in England burned itself out. The old Catholic/Protestant violence, for example, died away. Historian Liza Picard has recalled the somnolent nature of religion in London at the time of Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-84):

But religion was no longer a burning issue. It was part of the mental equipment of anyone born in the eighteenth century more than it is now perhaps, but it did not occupy the forefront of their minds... Everyone was obliged to attend their parish church on Sunday, but the extent to which this obligation was observed is hard to tell, in the face of the crowds streaming out of London to the countryside on the only day off they had.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Within the vast Roman Catholic administrative empire, there were also pockets of scholars who tried to adhere to an earlier form of the faith, see: Helen Waddell *The Wandering Scholars of the Middle Ages*, New York: Dover 2000 (1926), pp 35-6

<sup>93</sup> Keith Suter *Global Order and Global Disorder: Globalization and the Nation-State*, Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003, pp 17-20

<sup>94</sup> Thomas N Corns, Ann Hughes and David Loewenstein (Editors) *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010

<sup>95</sup> Liza Picard *Dr Johnson's London*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2001, p 182

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However bubbling away underneath this tranquillity was the next religious upheaval. The Industrial Revolution (beginning around 1750) transformed Britain and its churches. Working within the decaying Church of England, brothers John and Charles Wesley were impatient with what they saw in that Church and decided that there should be a reform movement to respond to the surrounding economic upheaval. The Enclosure Movement meant the poor tenant farmers were driven off their land and went into the cities, where the new factories of the Industrial Revolution needed the cheap labour desperate for any work. The Church of England sided mainly with the wealthy landowners; some (led by the Wesley brothers) sought to assist the underclass.<sup>96</sup> Eventually (after the death of the Wesley brothers) the new Methodist movement itself fragmented both within England and elsewhere, such as the United States.<sup>97</sup>

In due course, Methodist William Booth decided the Methodist Church was itself now too tame and decided to go back in effect to the model of the Franciscans: simple preaching to the poor and uneducated and a simple theology aimed at creating a church for working people in the slums.<sup>98</sup> He formed the Salvation Army. The English mood of reform continued via the Nonconformist movement.<sup>99</sup> British churches continued to change throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>100</sup>

As Christianity expanded around the world, so it absorbed local cultures.<sup>101</sup> Syncretism is an inevitable fact of life. Without absorbing new ideas, the faith would become fossilized. Christianity has had to adapt to local conditions. For example, pews were invented about a thousand years ago for people to sit on (rather than having to stand during services, as still happens in most Orthodox

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<sup>96</sup> John Kent *Wesley and the Wesleys: Religion in Eighteenth Century Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002

<sup>97</sup> John Wigger *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

<sup>98</sup> Roy Hattersley *Blood & Fire: William and Catherine Booth and Their Salvation Army*, New York: Little Brown, 2000

<sup>99</sup> Dale A Johnson *The Changing Shape of English Nonconformity 1825-1925*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999

<sup>100</sup> Keith Robbins *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales: The Christian Church 1900-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

<sup>101</sup> Much the same could be said about the church's absorption of technological change: the use of personal Bibles is derived from the fifteenth century invention of printing; radio and television evangelists are using twentieth century inventions; in the early twenty-first there is extensive use of the Internet and social media.

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services); printing enabled people to sing from hymnbooks; and overhead displays more recently have meant the removal of hymnbooks and singing with the words on the screen. The strict dietary laws of Leviticus are no longer followed.

The Catholic Church throughout the centuries has also had its own reform movements within it and the controversies continue to this day, including in Australia. One of the most exciting churches at which I have ever preached was in 1985 at Fr Peter Kennedy's St Mary's, South Brisbane.<sup>102</sup> Alas, he has since fallen foul of the Catholic hierarchy because of his (for the hierarchy) radical views and he has been evicted from that parish.<sup>103</sup>

To conclude, 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.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ironically, some of the best known and most loved Catholic priests have been ones working on the margins of society (rather than with the "respectable" middle class), such as Fr Ted Kennedy at Redfern, NSW; see: Edmund Campion *Ted Kennedy: Priest of Redfern*, Melbourne: Lovell, 2009

<sup>103</sup> Martin Flanagan et al *Peter Kennedy: The Man Who Threatened Rome*, Melbourne: One Day Hill, 2010

<sup>104</sup> Diana Butler Bass *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 308

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

### (ii) Rediscovering Jesus

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.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup>

One of the themes of a recent book by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch is that the focus on the church is in the wrong order.<sup>107</sup> They argue, instead, for a new priority: first Christology (the exploration of the person, teachings and impact of Jesus Christ) should determine missiology (Christian purpose and function in the world), which will only then determine our ecclesiology (the forms and functions of the church). Therefore there is a need to go back to Jesus.

The purpose here is simply to show the diversity of some of the renewed interest in Jesus in both scholarly and popular circles.<sup>108</sup> It does not attempt to adjudicate on the individual disputes mentioned but simply to note the overall sense of direction. The intention is simply to argue that there is now an explosion of interest in Jesus, which is very slowly trickling down to the average person in the pew.

### (iii) Inadequate Teaching on Jesus

It is interesting to note now how some of the people who delve into the person, teachings and impact of Jesus admit that much of what they were

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<sup>105</sup> My former Wesley Mission colleague Martin Johnson left to handle communications for the NSW Bible Society, which spearheaded the 2004 "Jesus. All About Life" campaign. The preliminary research confirmed that the church (not just Uniting Church) is virtually the last image that should be used to attract followers to God; hence the emphasis on Jesus. Sarah Price "Christianity is Fine, But Please Don't Mention the Church", *The Sun-Herald* (Sydney), September 12 2004, p 11

<sup>106</sup> This chapter does not have the space to review the discussion over the new, wider interpretation of what constitutes "Christian texts"; for an introduction, see: Bart D Ehrman *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, Elaine Pagels *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, New York: Vintage, 2003

<sup>107</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure and Courage*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011, p 21

<sup>108</sup> For an introduction, see Rachael Kohn *The New Believers: Re-Imagining God*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003, pp 26-42

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originally taught was later found to be incorrect (or, more charitably, later updated by more recent scholarship). Rev Peter Burnham, commenting on the Victorian Synod's newspaper's coverage of the Jesus Seminar controversy (examined below), reflected on his own journey:

I grew up in a very conservative evangelical church, and it wasn't until I began theological studies for the ministry in my late 20s that I even thought there could be alternative views to the Christian faith that I held to so passionately...

Perhaps in our zeal to please our congregations and so preach what they wanted to hear, some of us from that generation of ministers left behind the views of academia and settled for an experience of not wanting to "stir the pot".

My point is, and my concern is, that there has always been this gap between what we [ministers] were exposed to in theological college and the view and experience of the person in the pew.<sup>109</sup>

One of the themes in my MA Dissertation touched on a similar point: the problem for Uniting Church personnel (ministerial and lay) in dealing with the economic justice issue when so much of what we had to say seemed to be alien to our congregations.<sup>110</sup>

The irony here, of course, is that people like Mr Burnham are the best placed to deal with this problem: they have a captive audience (so to speak) at least once each week (and possibly more often if there are congregational Bible study classes) to deal with this problem.<sup>111</sup> In fairness to him, his very long letter does go on to describe what he had been doing recently to correct this problem. But many other ministers are not. Indeed, some ministers would probably claim that sermons are supposed to be inspirational rather than formal teaching opportunities.

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<sup>109</sup> Peter J Burnham "Gap Between Pew and Pulpit" (letter) *Crosslight*, July 2007, p 11

<sup>110</sup> Keith D Suter "The Uniting Church and Economic Justice: The Changing Australian Controversy", University of Sydney (dissertation), March 1990

<sup>111</sup> Not examined in this dissertation is yet another controversy: that generated by the profession of Biblical criticism. Oxford's John Barton has acknowledged (but not accepted) that there is the complaint that "...the critics have taken the Bible away from the church" via the modern examination of texts. John Barton *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p 137. In 1604 King James commissioned a new Bible translation (published in 1611); the politics behind it has been the subject of a BBC television programme and book, including how the word "ecclesia" (the core of this dissertation) should be used: Adam Nicolson *When God Spoke English: The Making of the King James Bible*, London: HarperCollins, 2003, pp 75-6.

Burnham is in good company. Two of the best-selling contemporary writers on theology have had similar learning journeys. *Christianity Today's* Philip Yancey, who notes that "...more has been written about Jesus in the last twenty years than in the previous nineteen centuries",<sup>112</sup> reflected on how much of what he had learned about Jesus in his early years had conveyed the wrong impression and how he had to come afresh to Jesus.<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile, Karen Armstrong originally trained as a British Catholic nun but later left to work in the wider world, where she has become a popular speaker and writer. In her autobiography she recalls that her post-nun reading took her to a more modern field of Christian scholarship: "It gravely undermined many of the theological assumptions of my Catholic years. I had realized that much Christian theology was man-made, but I had not appreciated how shaky were its very foundations".<sup>114</sup>

To conclude, there are only three ways to respond to the modern scientific research on such matters as the origins of the universe, the evolution of humankind, and whether illness is a form of punishment for disobeying God: reject the Bible entirely; reject modern learning (for example, oppose the teaching of the theory of evolution); or modify the interpretation of the Bible to fit modern developments in knowledge. This section deals with people who are following the third option.

### (iv) The Quest for the Historical Jesus<sup>115</sup>

We are now, according to Professor Mark Allan Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, in the third wave of modern scholarship for the quest for the historical Jesus. The first wave took place in the nineteenth century

...but was derailed by the work of Albert Schweitzer, who seemed to demonstrate the futility and irrelevance of such research. The movement was taken up again in the 1960s in a chastened and more critical movement called the "new quest".<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Philip Yancey *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000, p 20

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, pp 13-25

<sup>114</sup> Karen Armstrong *The Spiral Staircase*, London: HarperCollins, 2004, p 263

<sup>115</sup> A useful diagram of the main authors (only some of whom are mentioned in these paragraphs) is contained at: Josh McDowell *The New Evidence That Demand a Verdict*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999, p 560

<sup>116</sup> Mark Allan Powell "Issues in Jesus Research and Scholarship", 2001  
<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/jesusresearch.htm> (accessed 13/01/2008)

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The current “third quest” is taking off in directions that were not pursued previously:

One noteworthy facet of this third quest is its interdisciplinary character: scholars draw on resources of archaeology, literary criticism, cultural anthropology, sociological analysis, and even psycho-historical study in ways that were not possible in previous generations.<sup>117</sup>

Powell’s essay is a very good introduction to the new quest. He summarizes the area where there is most agreement among scholars: Jesus’ ethical teaching:

Almost all historical scholars accept the authenticity of this material (eg the bulk of what is in the Sermon on the Mount). Most stress that Jesus proclaimed a social ethic in addition to personal morality, and many insist that this was geared specifically to the context of Israel’s crisis as a puppet state of Rome.<sup>118</sup>

But Powell ends his comprehensive summary with this warning:

It is no doubt obvious that church leaders must approach this topic with the utmost sensitivity. Parishioners rightly perceive that what is being said about the historical Jesus has implications for the legitimacy of Christian doctrine and popular piety. Academic distinctions between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith” are artificial and unconvincing to the average churchgoer who hears whatever the academicians say about Jesus as applicable to the One they worship as Lord and Saviour. A degree of humility is warranted – and perhaps attainable – by emphasizing the operative word: quest.<sup>119</sup>

New Zealander Rev Dr Lloyd Geering is a good example of a Christian leader who ran into trouble by running too far ahead of the opinions of his Presbyterian colleagues.<sup>120</sup> He was the subject of a Presbyterian trial for heresy in 1967.<sup>121</sup> He was cleared of the charge but criticism from the pews

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> An Australian forerunner in the 1930s and early 1940s was the controversy over Rev Dr Samuel Angus, which only ended with his death; see: Ja Kyung Kim “The Impact of Samuel Angus on the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales from the 1920s to the 1940s”, *Church Heritage*, 14, 2 (September 2005, pp 70-87

<sup>121</sup> Geering is the subject of the TVNZ 2008 broadcast documentary: *The Last Western Heretic*, which can be viewed on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).



continued. The governing Presbyterian Assembly in subsequent years did not tackle the theological substance of the complaints but rather how to limit the perceived damage to the Presbyterian Church being generated by the controversy. Eventually Geering left Knox Theological College and went to Victoria University, Wellington.

In a series of lectures examining recent scholarship Geering claimed: “We can now say with confidence that Jesus had no intention at all of founding a church – certainly not the kind of church that emerged in his name – any more than he claimed to be the Messiah or the only Son of God.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, Jesus is to be seen more as a great teacher rather than a divine figure; the Bible was not divinely inspired. “In short, Jesus was a sage; and the role of a sage, as the earlier sage Ecclesiastes so well put it, was to be a goad, prompting his hearers to think for themselves and escape from the mindset in which they were imprisoned”.<sup>123</sup> “The mission of the church is not to proclaim that God has saved us through the sacrifice of his Son, but to help its people live up to Jesus’ teaching and to challenge others to do likewise.”<sup>124</sup>

Geering and others<sup>125</sup> over the decades have also asked whether God made humans - or whether humans have made God? Many, more traditional parishioners are presumably still influenced by the standard view (as shown for example in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling) of God as an elderly man peering down on humanity and intervening when necessary. There is certainly theological ferment underway but I wonder how much of its trickles down to the average person in the pew.

Here are two more examples of that debate. Australian theologian Dr Val Webb has warned, “We need to be constantly vigilant as to whether our human God-talk says more about us than the Divine”.<sup>126</sup> She goes on: “Many traditional images of God and their accompanying doctrines are crumbling today because people realize that many of the metaphors used and

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<sup>122</sup> Lloyd Geering *Rediscovering Jesus*, Wellington, NZ: St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, 2010, p 16

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p 41 (In secular terms, this is also a good description of scenario planning!)

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p 45

<sup>125</sup> For example: Robert Banks *And Man Created God: Is God a Human Invention?* Oxford: Lion, 2011 (This received a very favourable review by Gordon Preece in *Zadok Perspectives*, Autumn 2012, pp 18-20); but I am not sure the book would be of much use to the average person in the pew).

<sup>126</sup> Val Webb *Like Catching Water in a Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine*, New York: Continuum, 2007, p 15.

explanations offered were formulated within outdated cosmologies using obsolete philosophical arguments and based on theological assumptions now proven incorrect.”<sup>127</sup> Towards the end of her book she claims: “A new Christianity is evolving, uncovering the human Jesus so long buried under centuries of dogma that celebrated only supernatural virgin births, miracles, and a bodily resurrection as evidence of the Divine with us.”<sup>128</sup> Webb has been a popular presenter at Australian (and overseas) seminars but she is not without her critics.<sup>129</sup>

British author and retreat leader Margaret Silf speculates on some common images of God: “strict parent”, “the fireman” who rescues us; “the Santa Claus who delivers the items on our wish list”; “God who fights on our side in every battle”, and “the demanding employer”.<sup>130</sup> She notes that all these images have one thing in common: God is seen as a person like us only bigger and more powerful. She asks if “..our image [can] grow up a bit, now we are grown up ourselves?” She lists some alternative images: “The word who calls creation into being”, “energy of all life”, “deep wisdom underlying all that exists”, “spirit that holds us in being and guides us”.<sup>131</sup>

This has echoes of the controversy stirred up in the UK by the *Honest to God* controversy half a century ago.<sup>132</sup> Historian Larry Witham looked at the controversy, with the book having sold more quickly than any new book on serious theology in world history.<sup>133</sup> The difference now is that that book was then surrounded by much coverage in the mainstream media (albeit of varying value), whereas nowadays academic theological debate is largely ignored by the mainstream media.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p 15

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p 206

<sup>129</sup> Geoff Thompson ““Well, That’s Just Your Perspective”: Guarding and Declaring the Right Understanding of the Faith in a Relativist Culture”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 17, No. 2, December 2011, pp 17-32; Webb’s Response is at pp 33-38 and Thompson’s Rejoinder is at pp 39-43

<sup>130</sup> Margaret Silf *Simple Faith*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011, p 7

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p 8

<sup>132</sup> John AT Robinson *Honest to God*, London: SCM, 1963

<sup>133</sup> Larry Witham *The Measure of God: Our Century-Long Struggle to Reconcile Science and Religion*, New York, 2005, pp 224-6

<sup>134</sup> This is perhaps a sign of the church’s decline in saliency: such disputes are no longer worth reporting because most consumers of the media are no longer interested in church affairs.

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Two other sources of public controversy, from the United States, are the Jesus Seminar<sup>135</sup> and Bishop John Shelby Spong. The Jesus Seminar, based at the Westar Institute, Santa Rosa, CA, began in 1985 with a group of scholars brought together by Robert Funk<sup>136</sup> to try to assess the authenticity of Jesus' sayings, especially via a close study of the basic documents. Many of Jesus' recorded statements got deleted.<sup>137</sup> Despite Funk's death in 2005, the project has continued, with a number of support groups across the US.<sup>138</sup> The Jesus Seminar can perhaps be seen more as a forum of ideas rather than providing a single view of Jesus; the writers associated with it have each had their own views. The importance, then, of the Jesus Seminar is that it has helped ventilate non-orthodox views that have circulated around theology departments for decades and put them outside academe.

Fellow member of the Jesus Seminar Marcus Borg has set out two paradigms of Christianity.<sup>139</sup> The "earlier paradigm" (which is still followed in most western mainstream churches):

...views the Bible as the unique revelation of God, emphasizes its literal meaning, and sees the Christian life as centred in believing now for the sake of salvation later – believing in God, the Bible and Jesus as the way to heaven. Typically, it has also seen Christianity as the only true religion.

The "emerging paradigm" is about a century old and can be found in grass roots reform movements within the mainline denominations:

...it is the product of Christianity's encounter with the modern and post-modern world, including science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity. Less positively, it is the product of our awareness of how Christianity has contributed to racism, sexism, nationalism, exclusivism, and other harmful ideologies.

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<sup>135</sup> A good introduction is by WA theologian Professor William RG (Bill) Loader *The Historical Jesus Puzzle*, <http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/hJesus.html> (accessed 15/12/2003)

<sup>136</sup> Another key member has been Marcus Borg; see: Marcus J Borg "Me & Jesus – The Journey Home", July 1993; [http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R\\_Articles/Borg\\_bio/borg.html](http://www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/Borg_bio/borg.html) (accessed 13/01/2008)

<sup>137</sup> Robert W Funk, Roy W Hoover and the Jesus Seminar *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York: Macmillan, 1993

<sup>138</sup> [www.westarinstitute.org](http://www.westarinstitute.org)

<sup>139</sup> Marcus J Borg *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life of Faith*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p xii

Borg emphasises the importance of Jesus' politics:

We as Christians participate in the only major religious tradition whose founder was executed by established authority. And if we ask the historical question, "Why was he killed?" the historical answer is because he was a social prophet and movement initiator, a passionate advocate of God's justice, and radical critic of the domination system who had a following. If Jesus had been only a mystic, healer and wisdom teacher, he almost certainly would not have been executed. Rather, he was killed, because of his politics – because of his passion for God's justice.<sup>140</sup>

Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong is a prolific, controversial and confrontational writer. Unlike most of the academics associated with the Jesus Seminar, he has been willing to court publicity. His Australian tours have been very popular. Spong sees Jesus as a fully human teacher who did not perform miracles or have a physical resurrection (these features were added later to his story to make him more attractive to potential followers). Indeed, he challenges much standard Christian teaching.

For example, Spong believes that Jesus' view of women was downgraded by later generations of male Christian leaders:

It is a shame that by denigrating the woman called Magdalene during Christian history, the church destroyed the healthiest female symbol in ancient Christianity. There is no evidence in the Bible to support the familiar claim that Magdalene was a prostitute. That charge was fabricated beginning in the second century of the Common Era, when Greek dualism portrayed flesh as evil. This flesh-and-blood woman at Jesus' side was perceived by the dualists as a threat to his holiness. So the church set about trashing her reputation.<sup>141</sup>

He is also critical of some later church documents:

The words of the Apostles' Creed, and its later expansion known as the Nicene Creed, were fashioned inside a world view that no longer exists. Indeed, it is quite alien to the world in which I live... Indeed I am one of a countless host of modern men and women for whom traditional religious undertakings have lost most of their ancient power. We are the silent

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, pp 91-2

<sup>141</sup> John Shelby Spong *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2005, p 108

majority of believers who find it increasingly difficult to remain members of the church and still be thinking people.<sup>142</sup>

He writes with urgency because:

...we have no more than one generation left, in my opinion, before the dying embers of the values that were based on Bible reading and a biblical view of life will be cold....If we do not succeed in this last opportunity, the ignorance of mainline Christians will increase and the absurdity of fundamentalist Christians will reach a new crescendo. The result will be a revulsion that will accelerate the total secularization of the life of this society, putting an end completely to the religious traditions to our past.<sup>143</sup>

In his memoirs he argued:

The church of the third and fourth millennia will inevitably not look like the church of our day. So I urge my successors in faith to embrace, not to fear, the changes necessary to enable the church of the future to be born, for its birth pangs are being felt at this moment. I think a radical reformation is on our doorstep.<sup>144</sup>

In a sense, outspoken people like Spong give “permission” or “space” to others to also reveal their doubts. For example, Rev Dr Noel Preston (my predecessor as General Secretary of the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility) has mentioned Spong specifically in the chapter of his memoirs recalling his “...becoming more at home on the margins of orthodoxy, outside the church rather than inside it...”<sup>145</sup> He found an ally in Fr Peter Kennedy at South Brisbane (mentioned above) and Preston was able to secure my opportunity to preach at South Brisbane. Preston reflects:

Entering the new millennium our generation lives in a post-modern world, where everything is possible and nothing is certain. Yet we are

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<sup>142</sup> John Shelby Spong *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, New York: HarperCollins, 1999, p 4

<sup>143</sup> John Shelby Spong *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991, p 247

<sup>144</sup> John Shelby Spong *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality*, New York: HarperCollins, 2000, p 460

<sup>145</sup> Noel Preston *Beyond the Boundary: A Memoir Exploring Ethics, Politics and Spirituality*, Burleigh, QLD: Zeus, 2006, pp 277-8

the first generation able to reflect on the nature of life and the universe with a fair degree of accuracy.<sup>146</sup>

Taking all these writers together, there is, then, a flourishing debate on the Christian faith. Some of this is gradually percolating into the pews.

### (v) New Thinking on Jesus and the Church

It is possible for alterations in small steps to accumulate over the long-term into major changes. For example, international finance is now very important. Some of that edifice goes back to a UK banker in the 1960s who considered the possibility of integrating European capital markets and the need for West Europeans to work together on making the most of the US dollars moving into European investments. Siegmund Warburg's initiative began in a small way but:

Today Eurobonds comprise around 90 per cent of international bond issue. The Eurobond market is one of the world's biggest and freest sources of long-term public funds. The fact that around 70 per cent of all Eurobond issuance and secondary trading is in London is no accident of history but the result of conscious effort by Siegmund Warburg and his associates in the 1960s.<sup>147</sup>

Warburg died in 1982 (aged 80) but his Eurobond financial creation continues to flourish and the City of London is the world's financial centre. Thus, what begins in a small way can accumulate by increments into a major change.<sup>148</sup>

The argument in this chapter is that there are various tentative, uncoordinated attempts at understanding Jesus afresh. As Yancey (above) has noted there is extensive scholarship in trying to understand Jesus for the modern day using current scholarship techniques. This may not be percolating down quickly into the pews but it is at least underway. An incremental change could take place.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p 304

<sup>147</sup> Niall Ferguson *High Financier: The Lives and Times of Siegmund Warburg*, London: Allen Lane, 2010, p 232

<sup>148</sup> Much the same could be said about Methodism. The movement did not start out with the idea of forming a new denomination but simply to revive the Anglican Church (initially via the "Holy Club" at Oxford in 1729). Gradually a new denomination emerged.

Here is my own summary of how a new picture of Jesus could be presented. This is just speculation - as a way of stimulating scenario thinking:

- Jesus was an inclusive Jewish sage: he was born in poverty with an acute sense of how the prevailing poverty in his part of the Holy Land contrasted with the wealthy elite.
- Jesus mixed with all types of underprivileged people and others who would normally be excluded from public male Jewish contact (including women and traditional foes like Romans and Samaritans); his followers came from a cross-section of his country (including women).
- Jesus did not provide a set of specific doctrines but talked in parables to encourage his listeners to think for themselves.<sup>149</sup>
- Jesus' favourite term was the "Kingdom of God", which was a revolutionary statement because the Romans thought they had their own kingdom to which all their subjects should pay allegiance.
- Jesus looked forward to a time when God would liberate the Holy Land from the Roman invaders and allow ordinary people to live in peace and plenty.
- Jesus' crucifixion was a political punishment for a political crime: he was a political revolutionary.
- Jesus' message was one of great subtlety and of trying to do things differently; he did not for example, support armed violence against the Romans: he spoke in effect of the power of love (not vengeance).
- Jesus also sought to liberate people from oppressive aspects of the Jewish religion (with its complex laws) and so instead convey basic essential tenets: for example, love your God and love your neighbour
- Jesus was critical of the Temple elite and the religious establishment.
- Jesus' message was one of personal transformation rather than seeking a dramatic overthrow of secular institutions.
- Jesus sought to overcome human-made boundaries (religion, tribe, race etc) and focus on a common humanity; he wanted his followers to make disciples of all people (and not just the Jews).
- Jesus stayed with his message despite all the opposition; for example, he could have fled from the Garden of Gethsemane at night but he stayed to confront his accusers and go on to his inevitable punishment;

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<sup>149</sup> A good introduction to these parables is: John Dominic Crossan *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus*, New York: Harper Collins, 2003. (Crossan reminds us, p 95, that each parable can be read in only a few minutes and yet probably took about an hour at the time to elaborate as Jesus conducted participatory pedagogy)

he paid a great price for supporting the underprivileged and having integrity in his public statements.

- Jesus believed in an Afterlife but most of his attention was on how we are to live in this life, in the here and now.
- Jesus' Resurrection is still not fully understood; clearly something occurred on the third day because a group of scared disciples were suddenly transformed into a determined and inspired group of people who wanted to convey the Good News to as many people as possible and they knew they would suffer for their faith (if Jesus had died and stayed dead, then his followers would have simply gone elsewhere and looked for another messiah).
- Jesus' radical message and ministry have continued to attract followers for two millennia; they remain radical even by today's standards (even if some church figures have sought to tone them down).

### (vi) A New Way of Being Church

"Church" was not in the vocabulary when Christianity began. As Catholic Bishop Geoffrey Robinson reminds us: "The gospels speak rarely about the church, and frequently about a greater reality, the 'kingdom of God'".<sup>150</sup> Rev Dr John Bodycomb notes:

Some church historians argue that the ascent of Constantine was the worst thing that ever happened to Christianity, establishing by imperial fiat gross perversions of the pure gospel. They say that the "Constantinian legacy", advancing per arm of the state, neutered the exquisite spiritual genius of Jesus – and even the lofty ethic of the apostle Paul.<sup>151</sup>

This chapter has noted how the form of church has changed considerably over the centuries; there is no standard model. John Montgomery is a management consultant working with churches. His vision of the church is:

The church of God is not a building or a denomination, but is the Body of Christ, people who follow Christ. The Church cannot be put into a neat little box and told what the government thinks we should do. The Church must be a dynamic force, functioning in a viable way throughout society.

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<sup>150</sup> Geoffrey Robinson *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2007, p 77

<sup>151</sup> John Bodycomb *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey*, Richmond, VIC: Spectrum, 2010, pp 46-7



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We do not always meet in grand buildings; some of us meet in homes or in storefronts.<sup>152</sup>

He says the focus should be on Jesus:

The hurting world needs to hear the simple gospel of Jesus Christ. Not hype about how great a ministry is, or how big a church, or how much is needed to keep the ministry on air, or that they can receive a nightlight in the shape of a cross for sending in a “love gift”.<sup>153</sup>

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.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>155</sup>

Rev Brian D McLaren founder of Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington-Baltimore, and now a full-time speaker and writer<sup>156</sup>, is one of the

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<sup>152</sup> John M Montgomery *Money, Power, Greed: Has the Church Been Sold Out?* Ventura, CA: Regal, 1987, p 97

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p 108

<sup>154</sup> Robin R Meyers *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 226

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, pp 13-223

<sup>156</sup> His extensive website is: [www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net)

spokespeople for the “emerging church” movement. In one his books, a character points out:

...too many of us have lived with the name “church” or the name “Christian”, but not with deep passion as Christ’s revolutionary community of faith and mission. Christianity has been little more than a belief system for us, not a way of life. It has been an institution, not a mission for our lives. It has made us nice people with confidence of heaven after this life, not world-changing revolutionaries with hope for justice and peace in this life. It has given us the identity of religious people, not the identity of courageous rescue workers.<sup>157</sup>

Another thought leader in the emerging church movement is Rev Leonard Sweet. This scenario of the new Uniting Church contains references to “risk” and “fluid”; these are also favourite terms of Sweet. For example:

The biggest risk of all is to embrace the future. It’s a lot easier to live in the past. The church’s low risk tolerance and fear of post-modern cultural situations is debilitating to the church’s witness. This unholy predicament that the church finds itself in today – fear-ridden, safety-fixated, immunity-seeking, risk-averse approach modern culture – can be reversed only if the church abandons its risk-free approach to ministry and mission and rediscovers the gangplank.<sup>158</sup>

In short, there are indications of a different type of church emerging. It is now necessary to see the implications of this trend for the Uniting Church.

## SCENARIO

### Ethos

#### (i) Vision

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.

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<sup>157</sup> Brian D McLaren *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p 133

<sup>158</sup> Leonard Sweet *Aqua Church: Essential Leaderships Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today’s Fluid Culture*, Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999, p 94

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### (ii) Mission

Its mission is to spread the good news in a Post-Modern world.

### (iii) Identity

This Uniting Church has become smaller to become more Biblical. It sees itself like 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. It does not enter into theological or doctrinal debates with other churches or compete with them; the members focus on their own concerns

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.

### (iv) Profile

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.

## **Structure**

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).

### **Continuing Union – Who Will be Lost**

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 Uniting Church.

### **Innovation**

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.

In a Post-Modern world, it is Pre-Modern, with its model derived from the Early Church. It has no Constantinian pretensions to a special role or status in Australian society.

Its members are involved because they want to be; and not to keep up appearances or to please the relatives. It sees its role as providing “salt” and “yeast” in society; not to govern it.

Its members are distinctive by how they conduct themselves throughout the week in their daily activities (and not just for an hour on Sunday).

Its membership operates as a ministry of all believers; with each person called to ministry.

Its membership does not see itself as simply a Sunday audience for some form of religious spectacular.

Its members do not think less of themselves – only more of others.

This Uniting Church is also making a great deal of use of new information technology. *Wired* magazine’s Chris Anderson has argued that the Internet now provides a new way of reaching people. Instead of the old Pareto Principle (of 20 per cent of customers, say, providing 80 per cent of business; therefore concentrate on that key small number), the Internet provides a “long tail”. The “mass market is turning into a mass of niches”.<sup>159</sup> The niche market has always existed but it was very expensive to locate and then to advertise products or services to it. Now the two billion (and eventually three billion) people on the Internet can find you. The niche might be very small but a very

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<sup>159</sup> Chris Anderson *The Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand*, London: Random House, 2007, p 5

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small percentage of three billion people can still be very large in absolute numbers.

### **Tenor of the Times**

This Uniting Church is operating in a multi-faith mission field. Christianity is no longer the dominant religion in Australia.

People working outside this Uniting Church are used to different organizational models and so they are not surprised to see this Uniting Church's fluidity.

Traditional church thinking was based on continuity and reassurance (such as the three-year lectionary). This Uniting Church changes all the time because the times keep changing.

### **Strategic Alignment**

This Uniting Church accepts the fluidity and diversity of the times.

Membership matters come late in the piece; people come and go and return (or not). This Uniting Church recognizes that different people have different needs for the church at different times.

### **Fatigue**

There is less fatigue. Activities are focussed on mission and outreach.

### **Business Competency**

This Uniting Church does not see itself as a "business" at all. 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.

### **Assessing Effectiveness**

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.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Brian Turner "The Power of Small", *Touchstone*, August 2008, p 5

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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.

It is not interested in the “prosperity gospel”.

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).<sup>161</sup>

### Membership

“Membership” as such is no longer such a keen concern. People move in, move out and move on. This inclusive church mirrors the local community and so each Uniting Church community will be diverse.

Members are notable for their equality of enthusiastic commitment, not necessarily equality of skill.

Christians cooperate across denominational lines for common goals; the traditional rivalries are very much a thing of the past.

Six decades ago, Rev J Winston Pearce, US Baptist pastor and prolific author, set out his basis of the Christian faith. He argued for a priesthood of all believers as found in the Early Church:

Nowhere in the New Testament do the apostles claim that they are the authority of the church. Instead, the assumption is that the authority rests with the entire membership of the church, under the headship of Christ.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> As Anglican Archbishop William Temple pointed out: “Nine-tenths of the work of the church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks which in themselves are not part of the official church at all”; *Christianity and Social Order*, London: SPCK, 1976 (1942), p 39

<sup>162</sup> J Winston Pearce *I Believe*, Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1954, p 84

Elsewhere in the book Pearce speculates on the need for more time to be spent learning about the Bible<sup>163</sup> (a necessary implication for a ministry of all believers) and the problem of finding that time in a busy era. Pearce (who died in 1985) did not live long enough to see the rise of flexible, ubiquitous learning via the Internet: people able to learn in their own way in their own time.<sup>164</sup> A new world of learning is emerging; this is very different from the church's monopoly of knowledge in the Middle Ages.

### **Property**

This Church has left the building. Or at least it owns very few buildings. (The Early Church also had very few buildings; formal church buildings came with the Constantinian Era in the fourth century). 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.

The seating in each building is not fixed. Getting the right technology (wireless connectivity etc) is more important than bricks and mortar. Uniting Church communities may not have many buildings but they do have websites.

Additionally, this Uniting Church makes a lot of use of house churches (as did the Early Church).

### **Restructures**

Formal restructures are now over. The structure is fluid and so permanently in a state of flux.

### **Branding**

This Uniting Church does not worry about the Uniting Church brand; that is a corporate concern of a previous era.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p 92

<sup>164</sup> One of the joys in writing this dissertation (which I did not have with the previous two PhD dissertations or the MA) is that of being able to Google the writers of the books cited and watch them on You Tube or listen to the radio/ sermon podcasts.

## IMPLICATIONS

Some of this new Uniting Church is not all that “new” – hence the title of the chapter. Some of the ideas have been around for centuries, not just in the Early Church itself but also in how aspects of that model persisted through the ages. For example, Sue Spindler (then Vice President of the NZ Methodist Church) recalled how Susanna Wesley (mother of John and Charles) created a home church: her husband was away in London and the curate’s preaching was uninspiring and so she set up a house church which sometimes attracted as many as 200 people.<sup>165</sup>

US Methodist minister Rev Robert Raines endorsed the value of small gatherings by referring back to the origins: “It is no coincidence that there were 12 disciples, not 120 or 1200, but 12 – a small group of men with whom Jesus could share deep fellowship”.<sup>166</sup> John Wesley followed the same model “of the small-group fellowship for conversion and continuing growth in faith”.<sup>167</sup> Raines also reminded readers that John Wesley “...was in the habit of purging the Methodist Societies of nominal members... Wesley was less impressed with numbers and more impressed with the quality of commitment than are many of his twentieth-century followers”.<sup>168</sup>

Additionally, this new Uniting Church scenario has borrowed ideas from the emerging church movement. There is a growing literature on this movement.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, Uniting Church newspapers have given it some coverage. Many aspects of this chapter should be no surprise to people who are already monitoring changes in the current Uniting Church, such as the growth of the “Café Church” trend (as at Glebe, NSW<sup>170</sup> and the Bondi Beach, evening service).<sup>171</sup> The Assembly of the Uniting Church has also examined

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<sup>165</sup> Sue Spindler “Thank God (and the Wesleys) for Lay Preachers”, *Touchstone*, September 2011, p 5

<sup>166</sup> Robert A Raines *New Life in the Church*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p 69

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p 69

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p 58

<sup>169</sup> A good introduction is: Michael Frost *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006

<sup>170</sup> “Project Maps Fresh Expressions of Church”, *Insight*, June 2006, p 15

<sup>171</sup> I have spoken here; it has a delightful slogan: “If you are tired of organized religion then try disorganized religion.”



this matter<sup>172</sup> (though to what extent this work has filtered down to the congregational level is not clear).

As the current Uniting Church continues to shrink in membership, consideration will need to be given to the sale of buildings. Rather than keeping the proceeds as cash, perhaps the money should be used to fund new Uniting Church ventures. The new thinking about Jesus sees him as a political revolutionary and so perhaps the extensive funds involved in selling off Uniting Church physical assets could be used to fund Christian social justice activities in protecting human rights and the environment etc.

An example of one Uniting Church Synod grappling with this challenge is from NSW, where Jim Mein as Moderator began a three year visioning process. The final Vision Statement “Moving With God Transforming Communities” was adopted by the September 2005 NSW Synod, with the Church being challenged to be “courageous, inclusive and generous”.<sup>173</sup> I was involved in some of the prior consultations.

The vision has been continued by his successors. Evidence of the vision being applied can be seen in the involvement with the Sydney Alliance<sup>174</sup> (an alliance of community organizations, unions and religious organization to assist people have a say in decisions that affect Sydney) and the Messy Church movement<sup>175</sup> (which began in the UK in 2004 to assist churches to find innovative ways of reaching out to local families). It is notable that both organizations encourage Christians to work across denominational lines for common purposes.

Finally, Diana Butler Bass has reminded readers that the Early Church was very different from the current fixation on credal purity:

For the first three hundred years of church history the followers of Jesus worshipped God, served others, preached, taught, baptized, and evangelized the world without the benefit of formal, universal doctrine statements. The creeds developed in the context of a living

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<sup>172</sup> For example, the Report for the Eleventh Assembly (2006): “Being Church Differently” (on the Uniting Church website: <http://nat.uca.org.au/TD/resources.htm>) dealt with the formation of new congregations and faith communities.

<sup>173</sup> *Moving With God: 2006 Report to the People of the Uniting Church in Australia New South Wales Synod*, Sydney, 2006, p 7

<sup>174</sup> [www.sydneyalliance.org.au](http://www.sydneyalliance.org.au)

<sup>175</sup> [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)

transformative, prayer-filled, risky and active spiritual life – and not the other way around.<sup>176</sup>

She has also pointed out that the early Christians were not called “Christians” but people of “the Way”:

Members of the community were not held accountable for their opinions about God or Jesus; rather the community measured faithfulness by how well its members practiced loving God and neighbour. Not offering hospitality was a much greater failure than not believing that Jesus was “truly God and truly human”. Early Christians judged ethical failings as the most serious breach of community, even as they accepted a significant amount of theological diversity in their midst.<sup>177</sup>

### INDICATORS

- 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 dissatisfaction with the current state of the Uniting Church
- 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)
- resignation/ death of existing conservative Uniting Church members
- removal/ resignation/ death of long-standing Uniting Church paid and voluntary officials whose names recur on membership lists of Uniting Church bodies
- increase in the number of young members with a love of Jesus (and not necessarily with any denominational ties)

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<sup>176</sup> Diana Butler Bass *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, New York: HarperCollins, 2012, p 131

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, p 149

- 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; it is all too fluid for some bureaucrats
- 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

## CONCLUSION

This Uniting Church is very different from the current one. It would be small, fluid and flexible (or chaotic, disorganized and faltering – depending on one’s point of view).

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”.<sup>178</sup> 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.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> “The First Steps in a Business Turnaround”, *The Boardroom Report*, Sydney: Australian Institute of Company Directors, October 2011, p 5

<sup>179</sup> Gil Cann “Going Out With a Bang or a Whimper”, *Working Together* (Melbourne), Issue no3 2005, p 3

## Chapter 7

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

This Uniting Church is also operating within a wider context of great change. For example, a surprise hit in 2007 was a movie with virtually no speaking: *Into Great Silence*, set in the Grande Chartreuse (mother house of the Catholic Carthusian Order) in the French Alps.<sup>180</sup> It somehow tapped into a desire from movie goers for a mystical experience. Gregorian Chants are also popular with music buyers.

The wider context also includes the looming environmental crisis (such as the controversy over “peak oil”). There is a growing desire not to allow one's possessions to possess oneself.

This Uniting Church is equally concerned not to have an edifice complex. Dr Robert Coleman (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois) has asked why Early Christians did not erect special buildings for their corporate meetings, especially after leaving the synagogues. The first recorded building was not created until the end of the second century. Early Christians had evidently decided they could do without them and instead to meet in each other's homes.<sup>181</sup> This is the vision of this Uniting Church.

American Church leader Tom Sine has called for the re-imagination of being church:

Since the Western church is likely to face a serious decline in resources, large Christian institutions will soon discover that top-heavy models of corporate organizations will be simply unsustainable. We are going to need to create less expensive networked organizations like emerging leaders are doing.

We are also likely to see growing numbers of bi-vocational pastors and Christian workers who work on the side to support their ministries. Soaring land and construction costs and declining resources will likely mean less new church construction and probably more churches planted in homes, or where people work or gather for recreation.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> “Into Great Silence”, *Insights*, May 2007, p 30

<sup>181</sup> Robert Coleman *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998, pp 57-8

<sup>182</sup> Tom Sine *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time*, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008, p 208

## Chapter 8: SCENARIO 4: “RECESSIONAL”

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter<sup>1</sup> examines the scenario in which the Uniting Church fades out of existence.<sup>2</sup> “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.<sup>3</sup> Many familiar institutions have disappeared<sup>4</sup>: why should the Uniting Church be any different? Human institutions rise and fall.<sup>5</sup>

Australian Anglican Bishop Tom Frame has predicted: “Unless there is a turnaround in the fortunes of all community organizations, by 2025 the Christian Church will be a marginal player in Australian life with a few surviving remnants”.<sup>6</sup> He then goes to make predictions about the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Reformed, and ethnic Orthodox churches. There is no explicit mention of the Uniting Church but there is the ominous warning:

Left-leaning, cause-driven, liberal Protestant churches that lack doctrinal rigour will be the first to go. Their place will be taken by secular advocacy groups with tightly defined constituencies and social policy expertise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the argument was set out in Keith Suter “The Decline of the Christian Church in Australia”, *Contemporary Review* (Oxford), June 2004, pp 331-6

<sup>2</sup> Such an event seems “unthinkable” but the journal of Oxford’s Bodleian Library has a recent example of something equally “unthinkable”: the disappearance of London bookshops. In 2004 the Library acquired a set of papers including the Diaries of writer William Godwin. The diaries (covering 1788-1836) “...make it possible to trace patterns of sociability which help to open up a largely lost culture based in London booksellers’ shops”. David Fallon “Booksellers in the Godwin Diaries”, *The Bodleian Library Record*, Volume 243, Number 12, April 2011, p 25. The city now has few bookshops.

<sup>3</sup> Some of this is examined in Keith Suter *Global Change: Armageddon and the New World Order*, Sydney: Albatross, 1992

<sup>4</sup> One of the standard studies is: Robert Putnam *Bowling Alone*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000

<sup>5</sup> For example, a retired academic has recalled the “good” years of university teaching in the 1960s: Ralph Berry “Remembering Academia’s Golden Age”, *Contemporary Review*, June 2011, pp 208-211

<sup>6</sup> Tom Frame *Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009, p 298.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 299

The implication is that the Uniting Church will be largely gone by 2025. This prediction can be reinforced by seeing the age of the members: it is an aging church. Dr Ruth Powell (National Church Life Survey) warned the NSW Synod in October 2007:

The Uniting Church was one third of the size it was 15 years ago; had experienced a 17 per cent decline in attendance since 2001, and based on current trends would probably see half in current membership dead by 2002 [sic 2020?].<sup>8</sup>

Since the Australian population continues to grow, so a stable Uniting Church membership figure (which the Uniting Church does not have) would mean a reduction as a percentage of the total population. Demography is against the Uniting Church. As a proportion of NSW population, the Nonconformists reached their zenith between 1891 and 1911: “Counted together, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Congregationalists comprised over one-fifth of those in the State considering themselves Christian, around 98 per cent of the population”.<sup>9</sup>

The chapter begins with examining the two drivers of change. Then the next two main sections deal with the overall rise and fall of the Constantinian paradigm. Then there is the Recessional scenario: Uniting Church’s gradual demise. This is derived from the lack of demand for the Uniting Church’s spirituality and the end of the Uniting Church’s special relationship with government. This scenario is more one of a slow collapse rather than a dramatic disappearance; large institutions do not suddenly vanish overnight (even if they seem to do so).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Revival Call for Church with One Foot in the Grave”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 12 2007, p 4

<sup>9</sup> Simon Sleight “Public Spaces? Sydney’s Wowzers and the Spatial Concentration of Decency 1901-1912”, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, June 2004, p 77

<sup>10</sup> This point goes well beyond the dissertation’s scope, such as the debate over how and why the Cold War ended and the USSR collapsed, for example: Keith Suter “How the Cold War Became an Expensive Irrelevance” in Ralph Summy and Michael Salla (Editors) *Why the Cold War Ended: A Range of Interpretations*, Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1995, pp 187-203; for a study of how companies collapse see: Andrew McRobert and Ronnie Hoffman *Corporate Collapse: An Early Warning System for Lenders, Investors and Suppliers*, Sydney: McGraw-Hill, 1997; for an examination of the 2008- Global Financial Crisis, see: Randall Lane *The Zeroes: My Misadventures in the Decade Wall Street Went Insane*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2010; and for non-profits: Stephen R Block *Why Nonprofits Fail*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005. Collapses can also be traced in biographies: for example, banker Siegmund Warburg detected the early signs of decline of both the British Empire and US national railway network in the 1920s; Niall Ferguson *High Financier: The Lives and Time of Siegmund Warburg*,  
Footnote continued on the next page

This dissertation has kept referring to the need to listen for faint signals of change.<sup>11</sup> A good example of “faint signals” is the “list” (though the author would probably not accept that term) contained in John Mavor’s memoirs<sup>12</sup>. Mavor began as a probationary Methodist minister in 1954 and was the eighth President of the Uniting Church 1997-2000; few people have had such a long career in the Methodist/ Uniting Churches. Buried deep in the 700 pages are the following signals:

- reduction of the Uniting Church staff dealing with evangelism (pp 507-10, 522)
- continual Uniting Church restructures (pp 520-1)
- decline in the number of people coming forward for ministry (pp 648-50)
- reduction in staff for youth work (p 411)
- growing Australian secularization and indifference to religion (p 477)
- perhaps the Uniting Church was structurally flawed from the outset with too many congregations (496) and an unwillingness to make major changes (p 497)
- NSW Methodist Book Depot, Sydney became the Unichurch Bookshop; now wound up (pp 399-400), Queensland’s went in 2002 (p 433), as indeed are now most of the other Synod bookshops
- NSW Uniting Church campsites/ conference centres are being sold; tastes have changed and litigation makes it difficult to run some outdoor operations (pp 392-5, 398-9)
- demise of Christian Education (p 318)
- Methodist Order of Knights (a male youth fellowship; girls joined the Girls Comrades) which were very active in Mavor’s youth, p 191; now wound up
- decline of the effectiveness of Billy Graham Crusades, which Mavor had examined in his MA dissertation (pp 514-5)
- perhaps there is “no simple solution” to the Uniting Church’s decline (p 490)

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London: Allen Lane, 2010, pp 42, 47-8. The bottom line in each case was that warnings did exist - if only people were alert to them!

<sup>11</sup> One indication would be the reasons why a minister quits the Uniting Church or finds ways of taking early retirement; I have not been able to find any comprehensive survey of this trend; a public explanation from the US is from an Episcopalian minister: Barbara Brown Taylor *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007, pp 97-209

<sup>12</sup> John E Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, VIC: PenFolk Publishing, 2010

Mavor is an old Uniting Church colleague. Perhaps the pair of us were suffering from “wilful blindness”<sup>13</sup>: we were unwilling to see in 1977 the Uniting Church’s slow death, even though the warning signs may have been there.

### THE DRIVERS

The drivers are:

- **low government expenditure for churches**
- **low Christian spirituality.**

Both drivers have been encountered separately in earlier chapters. Their combination in this chapter takes a different form.

**Low government expenditure** in chapter 7 was derived from Uniting Church people not wanting to continue to receive government funds for what they see as a secular, business-like church and so seek to re-create the Uniting Church on more explicitly “religious lines”.

In chapter 8 this driver is examined as 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.

**Low Christian spirituality** in chapter 6 was derived from Australia becoming an increasingly secular society.

In chapter 8, the end of the dominant Constantinian paradigm means an even more dramatic shift: 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 chapter’s early pages. 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.

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Heffernan *Wilful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious At Our Peril*, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2011



## THE CONSTANTINIAN PARADIGM<sup>14</sup>

### Introduction

In 313 Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. Or perhaps, more accurately, he converted Christianity to the Empire. There continues to be a debate among historians as to why he made the conversion and the depth of the conversion.<sup>15</sup>

Christianity was thereby 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. However, this chapter will examine the scenario that speculates on the paradigm's ending.

This section will examine the Constantinian paradigm in three ways. First, it looks at how the new church had to reinvent itself as the imperial faith. Second it will examine how the Constantinian paradigm became embedded in the minds of the Uniting Church's antecedent churches and their members in the UK. Finally it looks at the paradigm's impact on Australia. Information is taken from a variety of sources to illustrate how far-reaching the paradigm became.

### The Imperial Faith

The Constantinian paradigm started around the fourth century and ran well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (albeit with declining significance). Historian Peter Calvocoressi<sup>16</sup> recalled that "...medieval universities were mostly ecclesiastical foundations and in them theology was queen..." As other branches of learning emerged so the theologians tried to blend them with Christian theology. As the European period of global dominance emerged (beginning with the journeys of exploration of the Portuguese and Spanish in

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<sup>14</sup> 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

<sup>15</sup> Michael Grant *The Emperor Constantine*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993. pp 221-7

<sup>16</sup> Peter Calvocoressi *Threading My Way*, London: Duckworth, 1994, p 67 He was an Old Etonian and recalled the way that a boy could enter Eton and then move on to King's College, Cambridge "...and then, after taking Holy Orders, relax for the rest of his life in one of the vicarages in the gift of Eton or King's." (p 37)

the 1490s) so the faith was taken to all other parts of the world.<sup>17</sup> Christianity is now more geographically widespread than any other faith.

Rev John Bodycomb has argued that under Constantine

...Christianity formally took to itself two terrifying powers. One was the definition of correct thinking for the faithful, and by implication the authority to brand any deviation as heresy...The other was to present itself as “normative”: that is as the religion with a divine right to extinguish other faiths and replace their truth claims with its own.<sup>18</sup>

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). Indeed, as historian David Gress explained, in the first three centuries, “Technically, Christianity was a treasonable and therefore illegal religion, punishable by death, but in practice persecutions were, until the 290s, few and far between”.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, have Jesus' teachings been used for purposes for which they were not designed? The imperial faith needed an imperial creed to justify the new role of the church. Historian Philip Jenkins<sup>20</sup> has examined the “Jesus wars”: the doctrinal battles over key questions for believers: “Who do you say I am?” “What is the church?” “By what authority do you do this?” “What must I do to be saved?” This is virtually an introduction to early medieval political science with the contending forces advocating for their respective points of views and using a variety of methods. For example, bishops became the new power brokers: “Bishops were now vital channels of government and were active in political and economic affairs as much as the strictly religious”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For a study of the British Empire and the Church of England, see: Rowan Strong *Anglicanism and the British Empire 1700-1850*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

<sup>18</sup> John Bodycomb *No Fixed Address: Faith as Journey*, Melbourne: Spectrum, 2010, p 75

<sup>19</sup> David Gress *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and its Opponents*, New York: The Free Press, 1998, p 43

<sup>20</sup> Philip Jenkins *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p 108

## Chapter 8

Australian theologian the Rev Lorraine Parkinson lamented this development: "Experience shows that the worst thing which can happen to religious dogma is that it becomes linked with the power of the state".<sup>22</sup> 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 a Jew to the end of his life".<sup>23</sup> 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!"<sup>24</sup>

A more optimistic assessment comes from historian JH Hexter:

The conquest of the classical civilization by Christianity is one of the wonders of history. Most religions that have spread rapidly have relied on force as a means of making converts or of gaining support of the ruling classes, but in the first three centuries of its existence, with no organized support from the ruling class, Christianity converted a large part of the population of the Roman Empire by persuasion alone.<sup>25</sup>

Whichever assessment is made, the faith had to devise new ways of running the empire. Here are four examples of how the faith was reinvented: wealth, welfare, conversion, and the development of papal power.

First, the imperial religion became a wealthy institution. The church therefore confronted dilemmas of how Christians were to handle their private wealth. Jesus did not endorse the accumulation of wealth. For example, in Matthew 19:21 Jesus gives advice to the rich young man: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me". The young man went away very sad because he had many possessions. There is no evidence that the rich young man was gaining or spending his money in inappropriate ways. It is simply that the wealth was getting in the way of his full spiritual development. Wherever your treasure is, there will be your heart also.

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<sup>22</sup> Lorraine Parkinson *The World According to Jesus...His Blueprint for the Best Possible World*, Melbourne: Spectrum, 2011, p 62

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 128

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 180

<sup>25</sup> JH Hexter *The Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, p 50

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Later on the Constantinian paradigm required reconciling the new ideas of private enterprise (capitalism) with the traditional need for individuals to see themselves as part of the community. US historian Barbara Tuchman wrote about these problems as they appeared in the fourteenth century:

Capitalist enterprise, although it held by now a commanding place, violated by its very nature the Christian attitude towards commerce, which was one of active antagonism. It held that money was evil, that according to St Augustine: "Business is in itself an evil", that profit beyond a minimum necessary to support the dealer was avarice, that to make money out of money by charging interest on a loan was the sin of usury, that buying goods wholesale and selling them unchanged at a higher retail price was immoral and condemned by canon law, that, in short, St Jerome's dictum was final: "A man who is a merchant can seldom if ever please God".<sup>26</sup>

An important part of the church's teaching on economics was the concept of the "just price": the principle that a craft should supply each person a livelihood and a fair return to all, but no more. Therefore prices should be set at a "just" level, meaning the value of the labour added to the value of the raw material. To ensure that no one gained an advantage over anyone else, church law prohibited innovation in tools or techniques, under-selling below a fixed price, working late by artificial light, employing extra apprentices or wife or under-age children, and advertising of wares or praising them to the detriment of others. As restraint on initiative, this was the direct opposite of capitalist enterprise.<sup>27</sup>

A second example was how all that the wealth was used. 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Tuchman *A Distant Mirror*, London: Macmillan, 1979, p 37

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp 37-8

<sup>28</sup> In an era when there were limited career options for independent-minded women, some women could find fulfilment in convents; for a more intriguing and upbeat assessment of such life (and different from the usually dour perception of convent life), see Silvia Evangelisti *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007

## Chapter 8

The church ran orphanages. The work began before the conversion of the Roman emperor. Children under Roman law had no rights and so parents could throw babies away after birth if they did not want to keep them. Early Christians rescued dying babies from rubbish tips because they believed that all human life should be respected. This work continued after the fourth century. Church-run childcare facilities continue to this day.

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.

American theologian Max Stackhouse has argued that the roots of many professions were also laid down by the church during the Constantinian period:

Wherever the church has gone, it has promoted the development of schools, and with them the profession of teaching...<sup>29</sup>

Law is a second professional area that has been deeply influenced by theology and the church, and its modern elaborations have been decisive for many of the structures of modern societies...<sup>30</sup>

A third professional area influenced by the church is medicine. There are witch doctors and healers in every culture, but historically hospitals have been established by the churches...<sup>31</sup>

A third example concerns conversion. Rev Dean Drayton examined how the creation of the imperial faith changed the Christian notion of "conversion". The Early Church (before the Constantinian paradigm) had preached for conversion and tried to bring people into the faith. But once Christianity became the faith of the empire, people were deemed automatically to become "Christians" upon birth and so infant baptism was the norm:

Some places did require catechetical instruction as the child grew older. Gradually though it was believed that the socialisation process of

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<sup>29</sup> Max Stackhouse *Public Theology and Political Economy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987, p 167

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p 168

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p 169

## Chapter 8

Christendom itself through worship and participation in a Christian society was sufficient for the person to be Christian.<sup>32</sup>

After the upheaval of the Reformation there were differences in the type of Christianity (Catholic, Anglican, Protestant) but essentially being a Christian of some sort was the norm (unless a person was a Jew or Muslim and so had a second class status in the European Christian world).

Finally an imperial faith required a territory, a system of government and a military force. The Catholic Church gave a vision across Europe of how people should be ruled. Historian Richard Tarnas has written:

Having consolidated its authority in Europe after the tenth century, the Roman papacy had gradually assumed a role of immense political influence in the affairs of Christian nations. By the thirteenth century, the Church's powers were extraordinary, with the papacy actively intervening in matters of state throughout Europe, and with enormous revenues being reaped from the faithful to support the growing magnificence of the papal court and its huge bureaucracy.<sup>33</sup>

For centuries therefore the Catholic Church ruled parts of Europe and popes had their own military forces.<sup>34</sup> The power began to erode with the Reformation and the Thirty Years Wars, with the consequent 1649 Westphalian legal arrangement.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, Italy itself was a patchwork of local regions, some of them directly controlled by the pope as his own territory. From 1870 until 1929 the newly united Italian state struggled to create a sense of national identity – in the face of papal opposition. After all, Rome was the capital of the Catholic empire – it could not also be the capital of an ordinary nation-state. American historian David Kertzer has written about the 1870 turning point when Italian anti-clerical nationalist forces rose up against the pope and called for the creation of a new modern unified state:

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<sup>32</sup> Dean Drayton "The Greening of Evangelism", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 13, No 1, March 2007, p 21

<sup>33</sup> Richard Tarnas *The Passion of the Western Mind*, New York: Harmony, p 196

<sup>34</sup> See: James Corkery and Thomas Worcester (Editors) *The Papacy since 1500: From Italian Prince to Universal Pastor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, Press, 2011

<sup>35</sup> The international law significance of the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, the 1648 Westphalian Treaty and the rise of the modern nation-state are set out in: Keith Suter *Global Order and Global Disorder: Globalization and the Nation-State*, Westport., CN: Praeger, 2003, pp 17-30

## Chapter 8

The new religion was to be the worship of science, the new creed, a faith in progress. The Catholic religion represented the hand of medieval superstition and inequality, faith in the supernatural rather than in reason.<sup>36</sup>

For Kertzer the late nineteenth century's political machinations, involving most of the western Europe's governments, represented a new era. It was when

...the Middle Ages was finally laid to rest. Europe's last theocratic government was ended and with it a model of government based on a mixture of Church law and civil law, of discrimination against those practicing minority religions, of a Church monopoly over education and social services, and the use of police powers to enforce religious observance.<sup>37</sup>

In 1929 Italian dictator Mussolini in the Lateran Treaty created the Holy See's current status. He wanted to create a centralized dictatorship and the Holy See could have been a political rival. The Holy See is now a small piece of territory at Rome with a unique international legal personality (not quite a state and yet more than an international religious NGO like the Geneva-based World Council of Churches).

In short, the Constantinian paradigm transformed Europe (and later the world beyond Europe<sup>38</sup>) over the past seventeen centuries.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Constantinian Paradigm in the UK**

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.

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<sup>36</sup> David Kertzer *Prisoner of the Vatican: The Popes' Secret Plot to Capture Rome from the New Italian State*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004, p 111

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p 286

<sup>38</sup> A York University (Toronto) professor has compared the early competing brands of "Christianity" with the contemporary "Cola" soft drinks "wars", with the Constantinian brand pulling off "the marketing coup of all time"; see: Barrie Wilson *How Jesus Became Christian*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2008, p 254 (emphasis in original)

<sup>39</sup> It also banned criticism of the faith; see: David Nash *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

In 1611, the UK produced one of the world's greatest best-sellers: the King James Bible. King James hoped that his Bible would be a unifying publication for the new UK (with the amalgamation of Scotland with England and Wales).<sup>40</sup> Writer Melvyn Bragg, noted that "Even in England, now seen to be at an ebb tide of formal Christianity, this book can still arouse passionate eloquence".<sup>41</sup> As elsewhere in Europe, the church was the major provider of welfare services. Schools, universities, hospitals and childcare facilities were all run by the church. In England (as suggested by the Drayton quotation above) everyone was (after the Reformation) deemed to be an "Anglican" unless they specified to the contrary.

Glimpses of the Constantinian paradigm's impact may also be seen in biographies of some of the major British cultural figures. For example, seventeenth century diarist and government administrator Samuel Pepys had a "form of theatre" he "thoroughly admired and that was the spectacle of divine worship. He enjoyed church music as much as any other kind of music, and he appreciated a well-delivered sermon in just the same aesthetic way as he took pleasure in a fine soliloquy on stage."<sup>42</sup> Church affairs dominated UK life at that time. Pepys witnessed the 1666 Great Fire of London, which destroyed Old St Paul's church in the City of London. London had to be rebuilt, and as a matter of priority<sup>43</sup> it was decided that a great cathedral (the current St Paul's) should be at the centre in the rebuilt city.<sup>44</sup> Much the same could be said about the important role of cathedrals in other English locations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> As a prelude to the next section (on post-Constantinian developments) it is worth noting that the four-hundredth anniversary of the Bible did not attract an anniversary stamp from the UK Royal Mail; "Thunderbirds" and "Tommy the Tank Engine" did however do so; see: Timothy Smith "Significant Stamps?" (letter) *This England*, Summer 2011, p 69

<sup>41</sup> Melvyn Bragg *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611-2011*, London Hodder & Stoughton, 2011, p 10

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Bastable *Voices from the World of Samuel Pepys*, Cincinnati, OH: David & Charles, 2007, pp 113

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p 211

<sup>44</sup> See: James Campbell *Building St Paul's* London: Thames & Hudson., 2008; Leo Hollis *The Phoenix: St Paul's Cathedral and the Men Who Made Modern London*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008

<sup>45</sup> See: Jon Cannon *Cathedral: The Great English Cathedrals and the World that Made Them 600-1540*, London: Constable, 2008



Writer Samuel Johnson was unclear about what he wanted to do with his life. Local landowners often owed church “livings” where a member of clergy could do minimal work for a stipend (and in Johnson’s case he could have continued his real love – writing). All he had to do was become a clergyman (much as one would nowadays think of becoming a public servant). But: “...Johnson declined, partly because he believed his “temper and habits” were unfit for a clergyman”.<sup>46</sup> Matters of belief did not enter into his considerations.

The pattern continued into the nineteenth century. Novelist Anthony Trollope examined the intricacies of local church politics in a successful set of novels set at Barchester, thereby showing that there was a market for such books. Indeed his biographer Victoria Glendinning summarised his mother’s views on the value of a church career for men of limited inherited wealth: “...while many men of gentle birth became clergymen, a clever non-gentleman [that is, without an inherited income] could advance himself in society by becoming a clergyman; and that the Church as an institution, provided a gilded ladder with clearly marked rungs”.<sup>47</sup> Once again, the church was a standard career option.

Actor Laurence Olivier was the son of an Anglican minister. His biographer noted the particular attraction of the Anglican Church as a career option a century ago: “An established ministry can be a passport to esteem, and a man of no particular spiritual bent but zealous for social approbation can aim to attach himself to an aristocrat, or perhaps even a member of a royal family”.<sup>48</sup> His father (who would have liked to have been an actor himself) was as a successful performer in the pulpit as he was chaplain at Olivier’s school<sup>49</sup>, and the implication is that these performances helped shape Olivier’s appetite for the stage.

Some more glimpses can be seen in the world of twentieth century British light entertainment. These examples are mentioned because the authors were not setting out to do evangelical texts; they were simply recording how their life evolved. In theatrical terms, the church played a “walk on” role: always around and never a surprise when someone alluded to it; it was simply a standard feature of the British way of life. For example, comedian Eric Sykes recalled

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<sup>46</sup> David Nokes *Samuel Johnson: A Life*, London: Faber and Faber, 2009, p 171

<sup>47</sup> Victoria Glendinning *Trollope*, London: Hutchinson, 1992, p 56

<sup>48</sup> Donald Spoto *Laurence Olivier: A Biography*, London: Fontana, 1992, p 8

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p 15

the family going to church in their Sunday best clothes<sup>50</sup>, while Norma Farnes, Spike Milligan's manager, recalled: "Religion played a large part in my mother's life. She said her prayers every night until she died so it was not surprising that I was sent to Sunday School from an early age".<sup>51</sup> Wendy Cook (Peter Cook's widow) recalled that:

The fifties saw some of the old Victorian values return for a brief last hurrah; they were something to grasp onto in response to the disruption of the war years and to all the change that was clearly coming. Churchgoing was part of this search for reassurance and a new crusading phenomenon from America appeared in the form of Billy Graham who, with his good looks and punchy evangelical style, was recruiting millions.<sup>52</sup>

Sheila Hancock mentioned Christianity a few times in her autobiography as a standard feature of her life.<sup>53</sup> Comedian Ronnie Corbett recalled fondly that he was an active member of his Church of Scotland youth group, especially its amateur entertainment events, and that it was the parish minister who first suggested that he was good enough to become an actor. "This single event changed my life. I knew now what I wanted to be. I wanted to be an actor".<sup>54</sup>

### **The Constantinian Paradigm in Australia**

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. As Australian historian Kenneth Cable has pointed out:

...this reflected the common belief that Christianity was the promoter of a moral life, the upholder of good conduct, the cement of society and if this were true of the well ordered countries of the old world how much more was it required amid the confusion and depravity of an open air gaol in the new world. Such a religion it was believed in enjoining obedience

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<sup>50</sup> Eric Sykes *If I Don't Write it, Nobody Else Will*, London: Harper Perennial, 2005, p 43

<sup>51</sup> Norma Farnes *Spike: An Intimate Memoir*, London: Harper Perennial, 2004, p 10

<sup>52</sup> Wendy E Cook *So Farewell Then: The Untold Life of Peter Cook*, London: HarperCollins, 2006, p 50

<sup>53</sup> Sheila Hancock *The Two of Us: My Life with John Thaw*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, pp 148, 151, 152, 249-50

<sup>54</sup> Ronnie Corbett *The Autobiography of The Two Ronnies*, London: Penguin, 2007, p 21

and respect for authority should be associated with that authority itself, with the state, that is, the established church.<sup>55</sup>

As in England, it was not unusual for a clergyman to also be appointed as a magistrate and so hand out punishment. Rev Samuel Marsden became known as the “flogging parson”. He also did well in the new land as a landowner, farmer and breeder of sheep. He made the most of the church’s dominant role in society. He also clashed with some of the free settlers but was undeterred from his Christian mission.<sup>56</sup>

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.

The church also shaped Australian culture. For example, historian Geoffrey Blainey has pointed out that Sunday was the distinctive day of the week because no employer could demand staff to work on it.<sup>57</sup> By 1850 it was the only regular holiday for Australians. Almost every shop was closed, as were the theatres. Melbourne, which was the temporary federal capital city from 1901 to 1927, was one of the few capital cities in the world not to have a Sunday newspaper. The temperance movement was also highly effective – despite (or because) of Australia’s image as a country fond of alcohol. Meanwhile, the “best sellers” of the day were often hymnbooks. Lines from them appeared on posters, tombstones, and in school reading books.

Indeed, different religious views were so fervently held that the framers of the Australian Constitution decided to stay clear of religion in the lead up to federation in 1901. There is a separation between church and state. There is no “established” church in Australia and the government is prohibited from creating one.

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<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Cable *Religion in Colonial New South Wales*, Eastwood, NSW: Baptist Historical Society, 1993, p 2

<sup>56</sup> See: Keith Clouten *Reid’s Mistake*, Spears Point, NSW: Lake Macquarie Shire Council, 1988, pp 25-6 (The book is also notable for an illustration from 1884 showing the Cooranbong police station, Church of England and public school all alongside one another in one set of buildings)

<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey Blainey *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Melbourne: Viking, 2003, pp 176-8

There is a similar split in the US Constitution but for a different reason. Many key Americans two centuries ago were deists<sup>58</sup>: they believed that there was a God but God was not a present factor in human life; God was away elsewhere in the universe doing other things.<sup>59</sup> This helps explain all the references to “God” in US public affairs and the far less attention to “Jesus” and “Christianity”.

But a century later, when the Australians started work on their own Constitution, their religious views were bitterly held and there were tensions between the denominations.<sup>60</sup> The constitutional architects decided to avoid religion as a way of minimizing the potential range of troublesome matters to be addressed; there were already plenty of other controversies threatening the federation process.

You could tell a lot from a person’s denomination in those days. Indeed, some government departments were notorious for only recruiting their own kind (and everyone avoided employing Jews). Catholic journalist Cliff Baxter has written a history of the NSW Knights of the Southern Cross. The Knights were a Catholic reply to the power of the then Protestant Masons and his book has many examples of Catholic resentment against the Masons and the need for an organized Catholic response.<sup>61</sup> For example, the “Masons had the whip hand in the Education Department”.<sup>62</sup> “Sectarianism and bigotry were rife in government departments and particularly the police force”.<sup>63</sup> Almost all the conservative prime ministers between 1901 and 1972 were Masons, and many state governors were also Masons.<sup>64</sup> Even as recently as 1969 (the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NSW Knights), there were still complaints: “There never

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<sup>58</sup> See: James Sire *The Universe next Door: A Guide to World Views*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977, pp 45-56

<sup>59</sup> See: Clifford Longley *Chosen People: The Big Idea That Shaped England and America*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, pp 19-33; and Tom Sine *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy: You Can Make a Difference in Tomorrow’s Troubled World*, Waco, TX: Word, 1981, pp 74-6

<sup>60</sup> Richard Ely “Andrew Inglis Clark on the Preamble of the Australian Constitution”, *The Australian Law Journal*, Vol 75, January 2001, pp 36-43

<sup>61</sup> Cliff Baxter *Reach for the Stars 1919-2009: NSW Knights of the Southern Cross: Bold Men of Faith, Hope and Charity*, Ballan, VIC: Connor Court, 2009

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p 63

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p 91

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p 125

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was a time in Australian history when sectarianism was not evident in one form or another”.<sup>65</sup>

Two examples from Australian literary memoirs also reveal the dominant role of the church in Australian life. John (“Jock”) Shaw Neilson was a late 19<sup>th</sup> century “bush poet” and his biographer recalled how the life of Neilson’s sister Margaret revolved around church: she joined the Salvation Army and was already attending three other denominations: Bible Christian Church, Wesleyan Church and the Scots Church.<sup>66</sup> Churches were at the centre of isolated rural life. Contemporary writer Penny Nelson went to Kambala School, Sydney soon after World War II. The school assemblies began each day with the recitation “I honour my God, I serve my King, I salute my flag”.<sup>67</sup>

To conclude, the Constantinian paradigm has dominated many aspects of life for a long time. For example, many local histories include a mention of the community effort involved in building and maintaining churches<sup>68</sup>; they were seen as important buildings for the locale.

It seems hard to imagine that such a paradigm could fade away. It is now time to start “thinking about the unthinkable”.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p 178

<sup>66</sup> Cliff Hanna *Jock: A Life Story of John Shaw Neilson*, St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1999. p 92

<sup>67</sup> Penny Nelson *Penny Dreadful*, Sydney: Random House, 1995, pp 41-2

<sup>68</sup> For example, *Temora Yesterday and Today 1880-1980*, Temora: Temora Historical Society, 1992, pp 140-2

## THE DECLINE OF THE CONSTANTINIAN PARADIGM

### Introduction

This section 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 institution has been slowly sinking. Instead of a sudden “Black Swan” event, like hitting an iceberg (such as the *Titanic*), the vessel has been wounded by a series of small holes which cumulatively have meant that the vessel is slowly sinking.

Six factors are analysed: (i) decline of cultural Christianity (ii) “triumph of secularization” (iii) nationalization of compassion (iv) church’s message now falls on barren soil (v) church has less public profile compared with the prominence it has enjoyed in previous eras and (vi) church is now a figure of curiosity, rather than as a central concern for life.

### Decline of Cultural Christianity

The Constantinian paradigm provided a common culture for citizens. Whether or not they were “fervent believers” (however that term might be verified), they lived within a Christian culture. Dr John Molony (who once trained for the Catholic priesthood) has commented on his growing up in Victoria:

Catholicism as a faith and as a central component of daily life was at the heart of our home. No one thought of it as a “religion”. It was woven into our life...<sup>69</sup>

There was attention above to the King James Bible. A useful starting point in this context is the decline in the book’s status. British writer Adam Nicolson produced one of the anniversary publications for the book’s four-hundredth commemoration. Towards the end of his book, he lamented the changes:

The churches and biblical scholarship have, by and large, abandoned the frame of mind which created this translation. The social structures which gave rise to it – rigid hierarchies; a love of majesty; subservience; an association of power with glory - have all gone. The belief in the historical and authentic truth of the scriptures, particularly the Gospels, has been largely abandoned, even by the religious.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> John Molony *Luther’s Pine* Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004, p 94

<sup>70</sup> Adam Nicolson *When God Spoke English: The Making of the King James Bible*, London: Harper, 2011, p 238

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More generally fellow historian Andrew Marr in his survey of modern Britain devotes a few pages to the important role of Christianity in the UK in the 1930s-1950s.<sup>71</sup> In 1955, for example, Conservative Government minister Lord Salisbury warned that he would resign if Princess Margaret were permitted to marry Group Captain Peter Townsend, an innocent party in a divorce case, which his lordship claimed would be a “flagrant breach of Anglican principles”.<sup>72</sup> Then Christianity slips away from the author’s attention and by implication it has had little relevance in recent decades. Meanwhile, of course, her nephew (Prince Charles) did marry a divorced person in 2005 with little fuss.<sup>73</sup>

Earlier it was noted that the church had a “walk-on” role in the biographies/ autobiographies of British performers. A sign of the post-Constantinian era is the dispute over Cliff Richard’s 1999 “Lord’s Prayer” sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”, which eventually went on to be popular. But many radio stations refused to play it (BBC Radio 2 claimed it didn’t have “broad enough appeal”).<sup>74</sup>

Some of the indicators that this Constantinian paradigm is now ending are the following:

- 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<sup>75</sup>; now people may 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.
- Constantinian era architecture put churches in the middle of villages and towns, a cathedral made a European location a “city”, and their

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew Marr *A History of Modern Britain*, London: Macmillan, 2007, pp 56-7

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p 59

<sup>73</sup> It may well that while English secularization had deep roots the acceleration took place in the “swinging sixties” of 1960s; see: SJD Green *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularization and Social Change 1920-1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

<sup>74</sup> Steve Turner *Cliff Richard: The Biography*, Oxford: Lion, 2005, pp 343-5

<sup>75</sup> This helps explain the large number of small church buildings that the Uniting Church has had (chapter 2): in the previous era buildings in the inner cities were an easy walk for local residents.

spires dominated the skyline; now the new church architecture is rarely so distinctive, and many old church buildings are being knocked down or being converted to other uses; business buildings now often dominate the skyline in the cities. The loss of specific church buildings represent a loss of “permanent advertising” of the church’s presence.<sup>76</sup>

- 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. Meanwhile church service times get disrupted by political marches, “fun runs”, Sunday trading, and repairs to public transport infrastructure (and so people cannot get to church by train).
- Religious views were once firmly held and meant a lot to people but not now. As the late nineteenth century British historian James Anthony Froude commented:<sup>77</sup> “Imagine, if you can, a person being now put to death for speculative theological opinion”.<sup>78</sup> A current growth area in Shakespeare studies is the search for his Catholic links, which he felt obliged to obscure in the interests of furthering his career (and possibly saving his life)<sup>79</sup>; modern playwrights do not have those concerns.
- There is also now far less theological literacy. Most Uniting Church members, for example, are unaware of the *filioque* controversy<sup>80</sup> 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;<sup>81</sup> they may have

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<sup>76</sup> Social media are not necessarily helping: Mary Spence (British Cartographic Society) warned that the culture-free digital maps of Google etc by ignoring feature such as churches, art galleries and historic sites are “demolishing thousands of years of history”; see: “We’re in real danger of losing what makes maps so unique, *New Scientist* (London), September 6 2008, p 27

<sup>77</sup> James Anthony Froude “The Times of Luther and Erasmus” in John Coleman (Editor) *Froude Today*, London: New Europa, 2005, p 123

<sup>78</sup> Tragically some people are being persecuted nowadays (such as Salman Rushdie) – but usually by Islamic extremists (rather than Christian ones).

<sup>79</sup> Ralph Berry “Shakespeare and the Catholic Network”, *Contemporary Review*, April 2005, pp 233-8

<sup>80</sup> 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



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”.<sup>82</sup> The church is no longer where people develop their paradigms/ worldviews on values, ultimate meaning, purpose of life and justifications for their beliefs etc.<sup>83</sup> 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.
- Constantinian society had few competing attractions on a Sunday; nowadays people can stay at home and watch television or computers for something more engaging than staid church services.
- People are more individualistic and no longer feel obliged to be seen “doing the right thing” in going to church. They don’t care what their neighbours think about their religious beliefs (if any).
- On the contrary, agnosticism is on the rise. People are not so much against religion or God; they simply don’t know what or whom to believe. Canberra poet Geoff Page has not so much “lost his religion” as “found my agnosticism”: “What did seem clear to me, however, was the probable non-existence of the soul. Why should anything that can’t be located physically survive death in order to be saved or punished? Why should humans have a soul but not other animals with whom we share much of our DNA?”<sup>84</sup>
- Even something as basic as city housing architecture may work against local evangelism because some people live in high-rise buildings with a security front door to keep out visitors; doorknocking evangelism was much easier when people lived in free-standing houses.

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<sup>81</sup> In my presentations on church growth, I talk about the need for people to wear name tags. Parishioners usually respond “But we already know each other” – however the visitors don’t. Refusing to wear name tags (for me) suggests that a parish doesn’t expect to get an occasional visitor who needs to be welcomed.

<sup>82</sup> Kjell A Nordstrom and Jonas Ridderstrale *Funky Business*, Stockholm: Bookhouse, 1999, p 72

<sup>83</sup> 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.

<sup>84</sup> Geoff Page “Tom Frame’s Losing my Religion: A Personal Response” *Zadok Perspectives*, Summer 2009, p 13

### **“The Triumph of Secularism”**

This title comes from a chapter in the magisterial historical review by Richard Tarnas looking at the changing patterns of Western thinking over the millennia<sup>85</sup>. Originally the church in Europe provided places of learning and so there was an “early concord” between science and religion. But gradually that amiability gave way to conflict, beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the time (1859) of Darwin’s published research on evolution, there was a profound split:

The tenor of Christianity no longer suited the prevailing mood of man’s self-sustained progress and mastery of his world. Modern man’s capacity to understand the natural order and to bend that order to his own benefit could not but diminish his former sense of contingency upon God. Using his own natural intelligence, and without the aid of Holy Scripture’s divine revelation, man had penetrated nature’s mysteries, transformed his universe, and immeasurably enhanced his existence.<sup>86</sup>

Former Australian Catholic priest Paul Collins has claimed that the churches “did not deal well with the challenge of modernity in the nineteenth century”.<sup>87</sup> They tended to retreat into the attitude of the past and by implication made themselves irrelevant to the new debates over science. Right up to the 1960s the Catholic Church was unwilling to admit that it had something to learn from the world. In the late nineteenth century churches had become a matter of ridicule when they tried to take on “Darwin’s bulldog”: Thomas Huxley.<sup>88</sup> They were no longer seen as relevant in intellectual matters.

In a more general sense, members of the clergy were no longer seen as the fountains of wisdom. In much of the Constantinian era they were often the only people who could read and write and so they had a monopoly on learning. They provided the Christian cultural worldview mentioned above.

Increasingly, since the Industrial Revolution (beginning in the UK around 1750), people learned to read and write, and so have been able to think for themselves. They could also read the Bible in their own language and draw their own conclusions. They prefer to do their own thinking; they may be as

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<sup>85</sup> Richard Tarnas *The Passion of the Western Mind*, New York: Harmony, 1991, pp 298-323

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p 319

<sup>87</sup> Paul Collins *God’s Earth: Religion as if Matter Really Mattered*, Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1995, p 32

<sup>88</sup> See: Adrian Desmond *Huxley: The Devil’s Disciple*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1994

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well educated as the minister. The religious figure of authority is now only one of several, such as a social worker, medical professional, or radio/ television counsellor.

They can also read books critical of the Christian worldview, such as by one of the fathers of the American Revolution Thomas Paine, author of the *Age of Reason*. Paine wanted an overthrow of European monarchs, most of whom were supported by Christian leaders.<sup>89</sup> The church was seen as the supporter of the old conservative ruling order in European society. There was also the rise of “social contract” thinking:

This was a revolutionary idea at a time when the right to rule had been considered God-given, and the ruled had the obligation to obey. The new idea of contract became the foundation of liberal democracy; for it was father to the view that government required legitimacy through the consent of the governed.<sup>90</sup>

In the Constantinian era the ruler was seen as God’s representative on earth and so subjects owed their allegiance to the ruler. Now – thanks to the growing demand for democracy – people wanted to make their own decisions and not be beholden to a ruler who claimed some mystical right to govern.<sup>91</sup>

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have drawn attention to the role of pluralism:

Modern pluralism has undercut the monopoly enjoyed by religious institutions. Whether they like it or not the religious institutions are suppliers in a market of religious options... Membership in a particular church is no longer taken for granted, but rather the result of deliberate choice. Even those who decide to remain with the confession of their parents are making such a choice: they could, after all, have changed confessions or religion or simply left the church altogether.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Samuel Edwards *Rebel! A Biography of Thomas Paine*, London: New Library, 1974, pp 216-5

<sup>90</sup> Robert Harvey *The Return of the Strong*, London: Macmillan 1995, p 46

<sup>91</sup> Early 20<sup>th</sup> century verificationism/ logical positivism (for example publicized by AJ Ayer’s classic *Language, Truth and Logic*) argued that to say “God exists” is a meaningless proposition because there is no method for proving if it is true or false, and so considerations of God became irrelevant for some people in modern debates.

<sup>92</sup> Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann *Modernity, Pluralism and the Crisis of Meaning: The Orientation of Modern Man*, Gutersloh, Germany, Bertelsmann: 1995, p 46

The impact of globalization means that the variety of religion available is not limited solely to the more obvious Christianity and Judaism but may also now include Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and a range of others from outside Europe. There is no longer any social pressure to conform to a set Christian identity.

Australian political institutions are becoming increasingly secular<sup>93</sup>. The Australian Parliament still begins with prayer but few parliamentarians attend, and some local government councils are dispensing with prayer entirely.<sup>94</sup> Much the same could be said about international organizations such as the United Nations; there is no reference to “God” in any of its international human rights treaties, though people are guaranteed freedom of belief; whatever they choose to believe (if anything) is their own affair. Meanwhile “Holy Days” have become “holidays”, and Christmas is less of a Christian event and more of a celebration of consumerism.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, there has been a change in the perception of death; this current life is the only one humans get; there is nothing beyond it. Bishop Spong has pointed out:

This shift in conviction was visible even in our religious institutions. A century ago Christian funerals asserted the ability of God to overcome the power of death. Today Christian funerals are more likely to be memorial services intended to remember and to extol the virtues and the example of the deceased.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Nationalization of Compassion**

In the Constantinian era, churches provided most welfare services outside of the family. Such services were not seen as a responsibility of the state but were seen as a outworking of the Christian faith. The state’s traditional functions were defence of the realm and the provision of law and order.

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<sup>93</sup> It is also notable that the new European Constitution does not contain any reference to Christianity (even though the previous western European national political institutions all had some form of Christian heritage).

<sup>94</sup> For example: “God Gets Thrown Off Waverley Council”, *The Wentworth Courier*, November 2 2011, pp 1 and 10

<sup>95</sup> See: Ian Stronach and Alan Hodkinson “Towards a Theory of Santa: Or the Ghost of Christmas Present”, *Anthropology Today* (London) Vol 27 No 6, December 2011, pp 15-19

<sup>96</sup> John Shelby Spong *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, New York: HarperCollins, 2009, p 118

But by the mid-nineteenth century the needs of a modern society could no longer be met by local churches funded by offerings. First, the needs of an industrial society were beyond the financial resources of the churches. A modern industrial state, while potentially generating far more wealth than an agricultural one, also creates, for example, more pollution and associated health issues, social dislocation and homelessness (people having to move in the search for employment), and the need for infrastructure to move goods from one location to another. This type of “nation-building” was beyond any church.

Second, local assistance, varying from one locality to another, was an ad hoc matter and so out of step with modern ideas of standardization and uniformity. The push for democracy and equality meant that services should be provided in a uniform way across the state.

Third, religious charity was seen as patronizing – it was more “acceptable” coming from a public servant. It also had to become more “professional”. People with a caring nature no longer need to work in the church; they can find outlets in social welfare departments. The church no longer has a monopoly over the provision of care.

The church was losing a vital connection with the local community. It was no longer seen as the place to go when in trouble and in need of assistance. Its scope of operations was being narrowed down.<sup>97</sup>

This process has continued with the creation of non-religious versions of previously Christian services. The most obvious end of a Christian near-monopoly is the decline in the number marriages being performed by ministers and priests. In 1908, ministers and priests performed 97.4 per cent of the marriages in Australia, with civil celebrants doing only 2.6 per cent. Half a century later, the figures were still holding up with ministers and priests conducting 88.9 per cent of the marriages in 1958. But by 1998, the percentages were almost even: ministers and priests 50.5 per cent and civil celebrants 49.5 per cent. In 2000, for the time in Australian history, figures showed that church weddings were in a minority.<sup>98</sup> As the Victorian Synod magazine commented:

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<sup>97</sup> As this is being written the so-called Arab Spring is underway. It is notable (especially in Egypt) that as freer elections are now being held, so the welfare-providing Islamicist political parties are doing well; as in pre-Modern western societies they were the main providers of welfare and the people to whom voters owe most loyalty.

<sup>98</sup> “Devoutly Secular: Couples Shun Church”, *The Australian*, September 22, 2000, p 3

Church weddings in Australia are now in the marriage minority. And they're continuing to decline in popularity. Weddings in parks, gardens, backyards, beaches - and the occasional sky-diving or underwater experience - are now preferred.<sup>99</sup>

Another example comes from Victoria. The International Commission of Jurists (coincidentally I am the NSW Chair but not involved with the Victorian initiative) has pioneered the development of a secular Opening of the Legal Year. This ancient ceremony (in England the link between church and legal system goes back over a millennium) is traditionally performed at major Christian and Jewish locations. The Victorian Bar now has an additional secular event, at which speeches are provided (rather than hymns and prayers). This is widely supported by the profession.

### **The Church's Message Falls on Barren Soil**

What the church has to say is out of kilter with modern values and so the message falls on barren soil. The message does not make much sense to a secular society. British evangelist Os Guinness has bemoaned the reinvention of marriage:

Fifty years ago, people said to each other "till death do us part". It was for the duration. It was for a lifetime bonded by the glue of covenant commitment. Then came serial monogamy – commitment "until further notice". And then came "living together" - "Let's see how this works out". The latest European relationships are called SDCs, or "semi-detached couples" – "people who are together when they want to be together, but not together when they don't want to be together". In other words, ours is a world without firm ties and bonds, in which the institution of marriage is melting down.<sup>100</sup>

The rise of New Right economic rationalism and the making of a virtue out of selfishness have encouraged people to look out for number one. Money is the measure of all things and supermarkets are the new cathedrals. American writer Laurie Beth Jones, in seeing Jesus as a "chief executive officer", talks about his visionary leadership capturing the hearts and minds of people and so dropping their fishing nets to become fishers of people.<sup>101</sup> This is very

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<sup>99</sup> "They'll get Married...Somewhere" *Crosslight*, February 2006, p 5

<sup>100</sup> Os Guinness "The Dark Side of Globalization", *Zadok Perspectives* (Melbourne), Spring 2006, p 9

<sup>101</sup> Laurie Beth Jones *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, New York: Hyperion, 1995, pp 177-9

inspiring but in today's consumerist society most people would more likely ask "what's in it for me?" The thriving "prosperity gospel" churches talk of happiness and wealth, and not of self-denial, obedience, suffering and being ready to sacrifice oneself for others.

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 have a Bible, and those that do, leave it unread.<sup>102</sup> Few major Australian politicians would quote from the Bible (unlike, say, in making sporting references) because the references would probably not be understood.<sup>103</sup>

Additionally, there is not the same number of people coming forward in Australia and other Western countries for Christian careers.<sup>104</sup> Mention has already been made of the courageous Methodist women after World War II who ran the Methodist nursing service in the NSW Far West. Modern occupational health and safety legislation, as well as the risk of tort litigation, would stop the Uniting Church nowadays from trying to repeat such a service, and today's Frontier Service is a different type of work.

Similarly, the Christian church is growing rapidly in China. It is worth recalling the sacrifices made by people like Hudson Taylor (1832-1904) and the nineteenth century China Inland Mission. He faced dangers from the lack of law and order and he lost members of his family to poor health conditions. However he and his 1866 team were undeterred because they believed their work mattered to God:

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<sup>102</sup> In 1986-90, while at the Trinity Peace Research Institute in Perth I did some presentations in the Uniting Church's schools in the religious instruction classes. It was evident that most parents had sent their children to these elite schools to receive a good secular education and to make the right contacts, rather than insisting on a specifically Christian education as such.

<sup>103</sup> Lay Catholic Gerard Henderson complained that Catholic leader Eric D'Arcy's death was ignored by the media: "Despite his important role in Australia there was no obituary in major Melbourne newspapers. It was as if one-time religious leaders are not as important as deceased authors or sporting stars." Gerard Henderson "Time for Non-Believers to Hear the Word", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 2006, p 11

<sup>104</sup> It is worth recalling that many of the Apostles (like Jesus himself) suffered appallingly for spreading their radical views; similarly most of the early church leaders had a violent end – this is all very different from Australia today, where the problem is more indifference than hatred.

They had no one at home to guarantee them support; they had no one in China to welcome them; they had no home ready to receive them; there were no unmarried European woman anywhere in China away from the ports; and yet there were nine unmarried women in the party, and all were destined to the interior of an anti-foreign country. It was a daring adventure, without precedent, and certain of criticism.<sup>105</sup>

That type of evangelism could not be carried out today. Europeans cannot just travel into hostile countries without permission. Besides their partners might have their own, more commercial, career ambitions.<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile families would not allow their children to undertake such dangerous trips. As Tom Sine has commented:

The number one reason Christian college students in the US give for not considering a vocation in missions is their Christian parents. Their parents typically tell them when the subject is broached, “Look we didn’t spend \$60,000 on your college education for you to go bopping off to a refugee camp in Africa. You get your careers under way, your pension scheme started, then after you are established, if you want to have your holidays in Africa that is up to you!”<sup>107</sup>

This is now a far cry from the much quoted statement from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple: “The Christian church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of its non-members”.<sup>108</sup>

### **The Church has Less Public Profile<sup>109</sup>**

In the last sixty years, there have been significant changes in the place of churches in the Australian public square. Some public voices insist that Christian views are merely private opinions, which should no longer be privileged, for Australia is no longer a Christian country. It is secular.

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<sup>105</sup> Marshall Broomhall *Hudson Taylor: The Man Who Believed in God*, London: Religious Tracts Society, 1929, p 127

<sup>106</sup> In the Constantinian era, married Anglican and Protestant clergy often meant that a parish paid one stipend and got the wife for free; the wife could not separate herself from the demands of her husband’s ministry; for a case study, see: Howard Le Couteur “Honorary Curates: Piecing Together the Story of the Wives of Anglican Clergy in Early Queensland”, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol 94, Part 1 (June 2008), pp 23-37

<sup>107</sup> Tom Sine *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld*, London: Monarch, 1999, p 228

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in: Susan Kaldor “Reaching Out – Some Ideas and Principles” in Peter Kaldor et al (Editors) *Green Shoots in the Concrete*, Sydney: Pan, 1985, p 133

<sup>109</sup> Ironically, with Sunday used in most Australians shopping locations as a trading day, Monday is increasingly the “day of rest” for the hard-worked staff.



## Chapter 8

The churches no longer need to think that they have the right or duty to speak frankly about their convictions in any public forum, whatever they may have done in the past. The Uniting Church's "Message to the Nation" in 1977 can thus be regarded as anachronistic.<sup>110</sup>

Church historian Ian Breward's assessment has, in effect, been supported the Rev Alan Nichols:

Thirty years ago the public statements of archbishops and bishops received considerable attention. This was before the scandals of abuse by clergy. Journalists still knew how to address senior clergy. Clergy were among the most trusted professionals in the community. Most bishops were seen as politically conservative, so when they challenged the Government (as Marcus Loane did on poverty in 1972) it was big news...We are in a different world.<sup>111</sup>

Around this time, pressure from the Rev Alan Walker, a few blocks away at the Central Methodist Mission, delayed the introduction of legalized casinos.<sup>112</sup> Milton Morris, a member of the NSW Government, said that "...when the Coalition government of Robin Askin was considering sensitive social issues the premier often asked him how Walker was likely to respond to particular proposals and that he took notice of the reply."<sup>113</sup> Australian religious figures rarely have that type of political clout today.

Walker's "Pleasant Sunday Afternoon" (a Sunday afternoon current affairs public meeting at the Mission) was often controversial. Former ALP politician Tom Uren recalled in his memoirs the 1972 speech he gave soon after becoming a member of the Whitlam Government in which he criticized Nixon's "Christmas bombing" of Vietnam. He was grateful to Walker for providing the platform. His speech generated international coverage.<sup>114</sup> The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon has long gone. Rarely does any Uniting Church political meeting receive much media coverage.<sup>115</sup> Similarly clergy used to be

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<sup>110</sup> Ian Breward "Calvin in the Public Square", *Uniting Church Studies* Vol 17, No 1, June 2011, p 15

<sup>111</sup> Alan Nichols "Movers and Shakers in Ethics and Public Policy in Australia" *BriefCACE: Public Morality Monthly*, Melbourne: Centre for Applied Christian Ethics, September 2005, p 1

<sup>112</sup> Don Wright *Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation*, Adelaide, OpenBook, 1997, p 209

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, pp 212-3

<sup>114</sup> Tom Uren *Straight Left*, Sydney, Random House, 1994, pp 200-2

<sup>115</sup> Rev Tim Costello recalled the old era: "My church, Collins Street Baptist in central Melbourne, has a pew nominated for the press. Sunday's sermon had the potential to set  
*Footnote continued on the next page*

distinctive by their clothing at political rallies (such as the campaign in favour of the 1967 amendment to the Australian Constitution on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders); now they are rarely seen.

On the contrary, there is now no automatic expectation that the churches have anything worthwhile to contribute to public debate. The churches are more notable by their absence. The Rev Chris Budden reviewed a book on social policy: “Interestingly, given the agenda, there were no church representatives invited”.<sup>116</sup>

Similarly in 2006 I was the facilitator for the Australian Government’s national series of public meetings (in all state and territory capitals and some regional cities) on how the built environment should be altered to cater for an aging population.<sup>117</sup> At no point did any person enquire about the role of churches or make suggestions about the role of churches in this matter (which is ironical given that churches provide many aged care facilities and still own many public buildings). If the Uniting Church does get approached by the media it is usually in the context of commenting on sex and drugs: the Uniting Church is rarely asked for its views on wider social issues.

Meanwhile, the church is losing its own publication outlets. John Waterhouse used to publish Albatross Books (which published some of my titles) and in 2001 recalled how many Australian publishing houses (including his own) had been wound up. But the demise has attracted little attention:

It is a national scandal that, to the best of my knowledge, no denominational leader in this country has addressed. The Christian church has been further marginalized in its own culture and another point of access to the wider society denied it.<sup>118</sup>

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Monday’s news agendas, much like Channel 9’s Sunday programme does today”. Tim Costello “If the Church Rediscovered its Saviour, the Rest will Take Care of Itself”; reprinted: <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9321.htm> (accessed 23/08/07)

<sup>116</sup> Chris Budden “Review of Hard Heads, Soft Hearts: A New Reform Agenda for Australia”, *Insights*, November 2003, p 28

<sup>117</sup> Keith Suter *The Report on the Findings and Recommendations of the National Speakers Series – A Community for All Ages: Building the Future*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006

<sup>118</sup> John Waterhouse “Christian Publishing in Trouble”, *Tasmanian Anglican*; [www.tasmaniananglican.com/ta200103-15](http://www.tasmaniananglican.com/ta200103-15) (accessed 1/14/12)

This is very different from nineteenth Christianity, when hymn-writing was a major activity and people knew their hymns by heart. Christian publishing was a growth industry<sup>119</sup>. Nowadays, in keeping with the church's decline, the Uniting Church has wound up most of its "book depots" and resource centres.

In media terms, Christianity is no longer an automatic item for intensive coverage. By contrast, the 1845 conversion to Catholicism of Oxford theologian John Newman (1801-90) was a matter of national controversy, with even politicians getting involved.<sup>120</sup> It seems hard to imagine any such controversy being generated today.

The most recent UK prime minister with an interest in religion was Tony Blair (1997-2007). Alastair Campbell was a key member of Blair's media staff and was notable for trying to reduce his boss's flair for talking publicly about religion. For example, his diary entry for April 6 1996<sup>121</sup> ("more God trouble") recalls his anger at Blair dealing with God in a newspaper article. Campbell recalled his standard three pieces of advice for politicians, one of which is "Never talk about God" (because it can be so divisive). But Tony Blair's eventual 2007 conversion to Catholicism (after he ceased being Prime Minister) generated little controversy.

The most intensive recent media coverage has mainly been on the abuse of children, mostly by Catholic clergy.<sup>122</sup> The Uniting Church has not been embroiled to the same extent.<sup>123</sup>

Owing to the status of the church under the Constantinian paradigm, the church was often providing services for government, some of which it now regrets, such as the confiscation of Indigenous children ("stolen children"). Meanwhile, the payment of compensation to victims of abuse has been a

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<sup>119</sup> Ian Bradley *Abide With Me*, London: SCM, 1997

<sup>120</sup> See: John Cornwall *Newman's Unquiet Grave*, London: Continuum, 2010

<sup>121</sup> Alastair Campbell *The Blair Years: Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries*, London: Hutchinson, 2007, p 112

<sup>122</sup> Protestant sex scandals have dogged some American evangelists, such as Jimmy Swaggert, Jim and Tammy Bakker and Ted Haggard; Catholics have no monopoly over sexual abuse!

<sup>123</sup> Generally speaking, Wesley Mission Sydney did not do adoptions or get involved with Indigenous "stolen children". But the Mission's Superintendent Rev Dr Frank Rayward (1938-58) did get involved in the confiscation of a baby girl of an "unmarried mother" (Judith Wilson) and her transfer to another family; 41 years later I was asked by the daughter (Karen Clinch) to help locate her mother: see my *Radio 2GB News Commentaries*: "Family Reunion" (February 4 2000) and "All in God's Time" (February 1 2002).

major burden on the churches involved, such as the US Catholic Church<sup>124</sup> and the Canadian Anglican diocese of Cariboo which voted to disband in 2000 (probably "...the first Anglican diocese world-wide ever to be faced with bankruptcy"<sup>125</sup>) to pay compensation to victims of abuse. The various court cases in several countries reveal a consistent pattern of church officials not involving the police in investigating the allegations but instead conspired to move the alleged offender to another parish (which is in itself a crime).

Human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson QC has more recently argued that the Vatican should be held accountable by the International Criminal Court.<sup>126</sup> The essence of the scandal is not that child abuse occurred within the Catholic Church (tragically abuse occurs in all walks of life) but that the Church failed to deal with the allegations at the time and so was involved in a "cover-up".<sup>127</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) ran the church's doctrinal watchdog office (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1981-2005) when some of the allegations were being made but his office was allegedly slow to act against the priests.<sup>128</sup>

The overall impact of these tragedies on the Uniting Church means that it gets tarred with the same broad brush. All Christian institutions (whether or not involved with child abuse scandals) are often viewed with suspicion. The Uniting Church no longer enjoys the social status it once had.

To conclude, Budden has suggested that the Uniting Church is sliding towards a general irrelevance for society:

The Uniting Church is still shaped by traditions that developed when it was assumed that our society was Christian, and that nearly everyone was a Christian. There was little distinction between being a good disciple and being a good citizen. Worship was a public expression and

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<sup>124</sup> "Can a Church Go Broke?" *Time*, June 3 2002, pp 50-2

<sup>125</sup> Ferdy Baglo "Bankruptcy Road to Reconciliation", *National Outlook* (Sydney) November 6 2000, p 6

<sup>126</sup> Geoffrey Robertson *The Case of the Pope: Vatican Accountability for Human Rights Abuse*, London: Penguin, 2010

<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, the Vatican is a party to a surprising number of treaties (even the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) but it has avoided being bound by the International Criminal Court's Treaty.

<sup>128</sup> Ironically, the legal status of the Holy See which makes the Pope a "head of state", with the Vatican enjoying diplomatic relations with 178 other states, is derived from the old Constantinian paradigm, updated via the 1929 Lateran Pact with Mussolini's Italian Government.

celebration of the story that underpinned both society and church. Indeed one of the roles of the church was to provide a religious blessing to many public and civic events. The church sought to provide attractive worship and other activities for those who still saw the church as important.

This is no longer so. The church is a relatively minor social institution. More importantly, few people think about the church even when they wish to consider significant ethical and spiritual issues. The church is not the natural place for people to think about life and faith.<sup>129</sup>

### The Church as a Figure of Curiosity

What, then, is the role of the church in the post-Constantinian society? Tom Frame at the beginning of this chapter suggests that most Australian churches will have declined by 2025. Chris Budden, immediately above, sees the Uniting Church sliding towards irrelevance. The omens are not good.

This section ends with speculations about four developments: the church as a source of “events”; “musical pews”; the church as a source of material for novels and movies; and the church as a source of historical buildings.

If you think it's hard convincing young people to become accountants or tax lawyers or take up other in-demand jobs, try selling a lifetime of chastity, obedience and poverty.<sup>130</sup>

A journalist from *The Australian Financial Review* visited the World Youth Day Vocations Expo at Sydney and reported on the difficulties Australian Catholic orders experienced in exploiting (my word not theirs) the interest in the Pope's 2008 Australian visit and the impending (2010) canonization of Australia's first Saint Mary MacKillop (1842-1909). I covered both the Pope's visit and the canonization event for Channel 7 and can attest to the high level of popular interest in the events.<sup>131</sup>

But both events were, for most Australians, “celebrity entertainment events” rather than religious ones. Cultural historian Fed Inglis has commented: “Celebrity is also one of the adhesives which at a time when the realms of

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<sup>129</sup> Chris Budden “Issues Facing the Uniting Church in the Next 25 Years, *Ministry* (Sydney) Autumn 2002, p 26

<sup>130</sup> Caitlin O'Toole “Gen Y Not Taking Orders”, *The Australian Financial Review*, July 18 2008

<sup>131</sup> In my remarks on MacKillop I was able to get our viewers to identify with her because of her running battles with the male Catholic hierarchy, her status as the “patron saint of the battlers” and the value of role models today (rather than any comments on her religion).

public politics, civil society, and private domestic life are increasingly fractured and enclosed in separate enclaves, serves to pull those separate entities together and to do its bit towards maintaining social cohesion and common values.”<sup>132</sup> Both events conformed to this pattern: there was no doctrinal Catholic-Protestant Christian dispute (very different from Australia’s religious atmosphere a century earlier); instead both events brought Australians temporarily together in celebration.<sup>133</sup>

In fact, both “events” passed without much lasting impact on the Australian Catholic Church, not least in their failure to generate a large number of new recruits either as lay members or to join religious orders. The larger, more substantive issues remain, such as papal views on the ordination of women and married clergy, the frenetic pace of life for laity with so many competing weekend activities, and scepticism that the Catholic Church has much to offer people. In due course, other “events” also took place, such as the visit of the Dalai Lama (again with no dramatic increase in long-term interest in his form of religion, either).

Christianity as a source of entertainment events means that there is a form of “musical pews”, where newcomers sample churches but often do not stay for the long-term. Visitors come and go. This may also be a sign of the times where people lack loyalty (be it for marriage, membership of organizations or employment).

An “event” may draw people into a church but they find little there to encourage a long-term commitment. Thus, tragedies like the death of Diana Princess of Wales may see an outpouring of grief and attendance at church services but the grief soon passes. British journalist Libby Purves noted this ambiguity:

An affluent age wants something beyond the material, but has the confidence to reject the fustiness of pews and Sunday’s dreary sermons...Yet note also how any disaster, any shocking loss, fills the cathedrals in a twinkling. The [1997] funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, the central role of the Dumblane Cathedral after the [1996 shooting] massacre, the open-air service after Paddington [1999 London railway

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<sup>132</sup> Fred Inglis *A Short History of Celebrity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p 4

<sup>133</sup> A similar comment could be made about the national and international popularity of Hillsong music: the sales are booming but I doubt that the music will have the lasting widespread cultural impact of hymns during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it just sounds good.

crash], all prove that, when it comes to confronting tragedy, the idiom of religion is still necessary.<sup>134</sup>

In short, the church is an important gathering point for individual celebratory events or for responding to tragedies – but it is no longer the continuing central focus of life.

A third role of religion is as a source of material for novels and movies. The most famous recent example is Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*<sup>135</sup>, reputed to be one of the best-selling<sup>136</sup> hardback novels of all time.<sup>137</sup> The novel argues that the Holy Grail was not the cup used at the Last Supper but was in fact Jesus' "wife" Mary – the "lost goddess" – who was carrying his baby daughter at the time of the first Easter. She then fled to Marseilles in the south of France, where her secret has been maintained by the shadowy Priory of Sion (one of whose later members was Leonardo Da Vinci, whose "Last Supper" painting 1495-8 has Mary – not the youthful John – on Jesus' right).<sup>138</sup> There are various explanations for the novel's success: it is a good mystery story (for example the Catholic Church's attempt to destroy the Priory of Sion); it exploits the lack of historical literacy of most readers<sup>139</sup>; it is a sympathetic New Age story of a woman (Mary) wronged by male clerics; the Early Church reduced the role of women in the Gospel (the book was aimed at women, who

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<sup>134</sup> Libby Purves "Is God Still No 1"? *The Times* (London), November 30 1999, p 7

<sup>135</sup> Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code*, London: Corgi, 2004

<sup>136</sup> Brown was amazed to hear from his Australian publisher that "one in 20 of the [Australian] population have bought your book"; see: "Big Read", *Australian Author* (Sydney), August 2005, p 5

<sup>137</sup> I was introduced to this phenomenon in December 2004, when I was back in London for Christmas and encountered eager Americans on the "Grail Trail" trooping around the UK sites mentioned in the novel. I exploited the emerging publicity in my Wesley Mission sermon in January 2005; I recycled my sermon several times in 2005 in other Uniting Church parishes. Also, see my interview: David Adams "Code-Breaker: Disputing Claims of a Conspiracy", [www.sightmagazine.com.au/stories/Features/davincicode.19.1.04.php](http://www.sightmagazine.com.au/stories/Features/davincicode.19.1.04.php)

<sup>138</sup> My first reading of the novel suggested it was an elaborate hoax based on another (supposedly non-fiction) best-seller: Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, London: Arrow, 1996. For example, the dying curator at the Louvre on page 1 is named Sauniere; coincidentally the priest at the centre of this other book is also called Sauniere (1852-1917); his grave had to be reinforced in 2004 to protect it from the diggings of "Grail Trailers". Those authors must have had a similar thought because there was in 2006 (unsuccessful) litigation against Brown. By the way, Brown's character "Teabing" is an anagram of Baigent; "Sophie Nevue" can also mean "wisdom New Eve"; the Priory of Sion can only be traced back as far as the 1950s. The list goes on...

<sup>139</sup> The novel has an introductory page on "Fact" claiming that the novel contains true information; the first error is in the first paragraph: the murdered curator Sauniere is aged 76 (and so too old to be still employed in France).

buy most books nowadays); it is an attack on the Catholic Church's tradition of celibacy; it is a conspiracy story; it portrays the Catholic Church as a sinister, violent organization (easy to do given the prevailing child abuse allegations and the scandals associated with the Vatican Bank); and Opus Dei (the sinister Catholic organization portrayed in the novel) is regarded with a little suspicion even by some Catholics because of its very conservative Spanish links.<sup>140</sup> Overall, then, the novel was based on the right formula for a success.<sup>141</sup>

But the novel's success also shows, first, the lack of theological knowledge among readers. Churches have failed in their basic educational task. That the novel could contain so many errors and yet be believed by the gullible public (and even some book reviewers) shows the extent to which the church has failed to convey basic information.<sup>142</sup> It is not in itself a novel argument; it taps into a large literature of neo-feminist Gnostic writings but these have not been as attractively marketed as Brown was able to achieve. The church is the only adult institution that has a weekly audience attuned to hearing some form of formal message; that Brown's novel should do so well in Australia (and other countries) is a terrible indictment of what has been said (or not said) in those weekly teaching moments (and parish Bible study sessions).

Second, although scholars may try to identify Brown's errors, readers want the "truth" contained in the novel and not what the scholars have to say. In the "post-Modern" era, "facts" are two-a-penny; what counts is the ability to spin together a good narrative. As the American political campaigner Frank Luntz has advised: "It's not what you say, it's what people hear".<sup>143</sup> Ironically,

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<sup>140</sup> It could be argued that there are now double standards at work. It is all right to portray the Catholic Church as a sinister violent organization but a similar portrayal of a Jewish organization could carry a prison sentence in some countries (or get a foreign author banned under Australian immigration law). Similarly a book perceived as anti-Islamic could also engender a violent response (as was seen in the Salman Rushdie *Satanic Verses* affair).

<sup>141</sup> It has also created a minor "Da Vinci industry"; for example, Michael Haag and Veronica Haag *The Rough Guide to The Da Vinci Code*, London: Penguin, 2004; Lisa Rogak *The Man Behind the Da Vinci Code: An Unauthorized Biography of Dan Brown*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2005

<sup>142</sup> But, then, if I reflect on how many sermons I have heard over the decades dealing with the Early Church, then I would have to say that I too haven't had much of a Christian education; sermons leap from biblical times straight to the modern day; Protestants in particular skip about 1500 years of history. Now we are paying for it.

<sup>143</sup> Frank Luntz *Words That Work: It Not What you Say, It's What People Hear*, New York: Hyperion, 2007. How this plays out in modern American politics can be seen in James Moore and Wayne Slater *Rove Exposed: How Bush's Brain Fooled America*, Hoboken NJ: John Wiley, 2006 and Kerwin Swint *Dark Genius: The Influential Career of Legendary Political Operative and Fox News Founder Roger Ailes*, New York: Sterling, 2008



scholarship in the last two decades has increased considerably our knowledge of the historical Jesus. But as Jean-Pierre Isbouts has explained: "...especially in the fields of historical, anthropological, archaeological, psychological, socioeconomic, and literary research. Unfortunately, most of these discoveries were published in scholarly journals not readily available to the general public."<sup>144</sup> Brown's popularity also says something about the failure of academics to communicate to a wider audience.

Finally, in keeping with church affairs as a source of ephemeral celebrity events, the controversy did not last.<sup>145</sup> The caravan moves on. The novel reinforced negative views about the Catholic Church but did little lasting damage (especially when compared with the continuing problems around child abuse cases).

The fourth development is the church's growing heritage function. Church buildings are an interesting reminder of a previous era. They are a monument to the aspirations of earlier generations. They are a bit like European castles and stately homes, American homes of people who became President, and the celebrity homes of the "rich and famous". There is an economic argument to support this trend: tourism is part of the "experience economy": as people get richer so they spend proportionately less on the basic necessities and have more money for elaborate services.<sup>146</sup>

For example, I was intrigued to hear about the book *England's Thousand Best Churches* and assumed it was a study of thriving churches and church growth. In fact, the author<sup>147</sup> has compiled an architectural survey which received a glowing review in *The Economist*: "The English parish church is often the only public monument to celebrate the lives of those who reside in small country villages far from the capital, court or Parliament... readers will marvel at such a diverse marriage of art, architecture and faith."<sup>148</sup> I used to write for *The Contemporary Review* journal at Oxford and its book review section regularly

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<sup>144</sup> Jean-Pierre Isbouts *Young Jesus: Restoring the "Lost Years" of a Social Activist and Religious Dissident*, New York: Sterling, p 2008, p v

<sup>145</sup> Brown has continued to publish novels and have his earlier work reprinted in the hope of using his name to sell the novels, for example, Dan Brown *Angels and Demons*, London: Corgi 2001 (For my advice to the Vatican on how to handle this novel, see [www.keithsuter.com/2009/03/30/angels-and-demons](http://www.keithsuter.com/2009/03/30/angels-and-demons))

<sup>146</sup> Joseph Pine and James H Gilmore *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999, p 2

<sup>147</sup> Simon Jenkins *England's Thousand Best Churches*, London: Penguin, 1999

<sup>148</sup> "Moreover" *The Economist* (London), October 23 1999, p 40

had books on church history and buildings. As English churches decline, so apparently there is a growing interest in the church as history.<sup>149</sup>

Former Australian politician James McClelland, recalled visiting Ely Cathedral and noted how the “The great churches of England (numbering 30 or so) are now really museums and theatres where lovely choirs provide great concerts.”<sup>150</sup> Ely Cathedral, he calculated, provided pews for about worshippers in about one-fiftieth of its space: “The rest is for show business.”<sup>151</sup>

## THE UNITING CHURCH’S GRADUAL DEMISE

### Introduction

This section examines two warning signs that the Uniting Church is headed for demise. The Uniting Church and its three antecedent churches all benefited from the dominant Constantinian paradigm.<sup>152</sup> As that paradigm declined, so it was inevitable that the Uniting Church would also decline. But there are also (i) the problem that the Uniting Church’s spirituality no longer appeals to Australians and (ii) the way that the Uniting Church is losing its special relationship with government.

Changes which seem dramatic in retrospect do not necessarily happen dramatically. British historian AN Wilson, writing about British history 1901-1953, recalled:

Religion, in its organized forms, was on the verge of near-extinction. A vast change was preparing itself for British society which would only fully become clear in the 1960s.<sup>153</sup>

But the change did not come via violent political revolution. It was a peaceful social one which transformed many aspects of British life, including the role and status of churches. As the Baby Boomers (born 1946-66) left school, their parents saw less need to go to church; the parents found they no longer had

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<sup>149</sup> The English Methodists are also involved: John Wesley’s Chapel is now part of the “Destination Bristol” tourist programme: “Ministry and Tourism Go Hand in Hand in Bristol” *Momentum* (London) Autumn 2009, p 5.

<sup>150</sup> James McClelland *Stirring the Possum*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1989, p 230

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, p 230

<sup>152</sup> Bishop Bruce Wilson sounded an early alarm for Anglicans and others, Bruce Wilson *Can God Survive in Australia?* Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1983

<sup>153</sup> AN Wilson *After the Victorians 1901-1953*, London: Hutchison, 2005, p 519

much need for it and their children had little appetite for it. Sunday schools did not create a sense of continuing loyalty.

Perhaps future historians may see something similar in the disappearance of the Uniting Church: nothing violent or dramatic: just a fading away.

### **Uniting Church Spirituality**

The argument here is that there is little market demand for what the Uniting Church is offering. As Rev Dr John Bodycomb argued in 1998:

The single main reason why organised religion has a shrinking clientele is that fewer and fewer people feel any need for what is on offer – except perhaps on special occasions like birth, deaths, marriages and major catastrophic events.

Over the past 30 years, an enormous amount of scholarly enquiry has found words such as “urbanisation”, “pluralism” and “secularisation” to explain religious decline. All are useful. But they distract attention away from this main issue.

The general public is not hostile towards organized religion. Rather, the general public is politely indifferent.<sup>154</sup>

Bodycomb went on to predict “Unless some change agents are able to radically alter the direction and style of the Uniting Church, it will be largely a memory in 20 years’ time...” Frame warned about 2015; Bodycomb here mentions 2018; the warnings are there.

Meanwhile, Australians now have the right to be indifferent. In other words, whereas in a more conformist era (notably the 1950s) people may have felt obliged to go to church simply to keep up appearances (and take the children along to show they are one happy family), now they have no obligation to do so.

The issue of the Uniting Church’s spirituality will be examined four ways: (i) it is not always clear just what the Uniting Church stands for theologically (ii) if the theology is clear then it may be seen as too demanding (iii) there are many alternatives and (iv) science may disprove the need for any type of God

First, chapter 2 mentioned the Uniting Church’s problem with branding. An aspect of this is the Uniting Church’s theology. There are, as noted in that

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<sup>154</sup> John Bodycomb “No Need! That’s Why Religion is Shrinking”, *Crosslight*, April 1998, p 16

chapter, formal theological statements, but in reality the Uniting Church has had problems of sorting out just where it does stand.

Bodycomb in a 2008 article argued that there was a problem with faith of the ministers. He recalled that four decades earlier there was the beginning of an exodus of clergy. The arguments given then were inadequacies in training, confusion over their “roles”, and a lack of support systems. The morale problem has since deteriorated even further and is seen in increased stress or burnout.

But Bodycomb argued that the real problem “... is unbelief, or to put the matter more neutrally, inability by clergy to believe much that they think they should believe”. This problem has not been fully explored because he claims:

- The very enormity of the issues generates avoidance mechanisms
- The desire to remain within one’s social network (the church) precludes risking what could be grossly unacceptable disclosures
- There is an inherent need to locate the causes of problems outside oneself where possible
- The notion of apostasy [falling away from the faith] carries heavy moral and value connotations
- To concede unbelief is an implicit acknowledgment that one’s personal and professional life have been grounded in mistaken premises.<sup>155</sup>

This is a remarkable assessment. Bodycomb makes it on the basis of decades of conversations with ministers and ex-ministers. The problem now is one of seeing where this assessment could take the Uniting Church: the implication is that some of its key staff are no longer sure just what they ought to be saying.

*Crosslight* continues to carry stories and letters dealing with the problem of where the Uniting Church stands theologically. A recurring phrase is the “messy middle”. Rev Brian Edgar, for example, has claimed the variety of theological beliefs within the Uniting Church now means “...it is getting difficult to recognize the Uniting Church as part of the wider, catholic church”.<sup>156</sup> The “messy middle” phrase was popularized by Rev John Mavor in his 1997 Uniting Church presidential address at a time of dispute over what is now

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<sup>155</sup> John Bodycomb “A Little Problem of Faith...” *Crosslight*, December 2008, p 15

<sup>156</sup> Brian Edgar “The Messy Middle That is the Uniting Church”, (letter) *Crosslight*, August 2011, p 13

known as Resolution 84 on homosexuality, where the Uniting Church was – and remains – deeply divided.<sup>157</sup>

A different example of this problem is the question: can an Australian flag be draped over a coffin in a Uniting Church funeral service? This dispute brought forth threats of violence against the Uniting Church minister at the centre of the controversy: Rev Dr Wesley Campbell.<sup>158</sup> In 2005, Campbell, then the minister at the Essendon Uniting Church, was asked to conduct the funeral of eighty-one-year old George Vipond. The deceased's family wished to have the Australian flag on the coffin during the service. Campbell refused.<sup>159</sup> An Anglican parish then performed the service elsewhere. The Uniting Church press<sup>160</sup>, theological journals<sup>161</sup> and secular media<sup>162</sup> all ran hot. I make no assessment of the dispute. It is raised simply to suggest that a person outside the Uniting Church (and perhaps elsewhere within it) may have had difficulty understanding what all the fuss was about.<sup>163</sup>

The Uniting Church's predicament is different from that of the antecedent churches, where there was strong agreement on core matters, such as alcohol, gambling, not marrying Catholics and not wasting one's time.<sup>164</sup> An

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<sup>157</sup> John Mavor *Come On! Come On! A Journey in Ministry*, Blackburn, VIC: PenFolk, 2009, pp 570-635

<sup>158</sup> I worked with Campbell in the 1980s, when I was at the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility and he was the Victorian Synod secretary for social justice; I have had little contact with him in recent years; I remain convinced that he is not the bad person described on the virulent Victorian websites (which can be accessed via Google "searches").

<sup>159</sup> A web leaflet is available explaining Campbell's views: Wes Campbell "Flags, Funerals and Faith: Theological/ Political Reflection on a Pastoral Event", *Conversations: An e-journal from the Uniting Church*: [ucaconversations@ctm.uca.edu.au](mailto:ucaconversations@ctm.uca.edu.au) (Vol 2, No2)

<sup>160</sup> For example: "Funeral, Flag and Follow-up", *Crosslight*, May 2005, p 11

<sup>161</sup> Robert Bos "No Flag on the Coffin: Christianity and Australian Civic Religion – A Case Study", *Uniting Church Studies*, August 2006, Vol 12, No 2, pp 19-36; Katherine Abetz "A Response to 'No Flags on the Coffin'", *Uniting Church Studies*, August 2007, Vol 13, No 2, pp 62-70

<sup>162</sup> For example, Steve Waldon "The Flag Versus the Cross", *The Age* (Melbourne), March 14 2005, p 11

<sup>163</sup> People relying on newspapers may not be particularly well informed about religion according to one informal study: Dean Drayton "Religion in the Public Press: August-September 2007 survey", *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 14, No 2 December 2008, pp 25-37

<sup>164</sup> A biography of pioneering Methodist Joseph Orton recalls the importance of reading serious books and not "indulging in a mental intoxication [of]... licentious ideas"; two hours of reading novels over 50 years would "waste eight years and four months that would have been better spent acquiring 'useful knowledge'". The point of reading is to read to the point. Alex Tyrrell *A Sphere of Benevolence: The Life of Joseph Orton, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary (1795-1842)*, Melbourne: State Library of Victoria, 1993, p 28

ironic by-product of the new era of reduced denominational fanaticism is that tolerance reduces the incentive to know more about your own faith. You are no longer being challenged to defend it and so you have less interest in learning more about it.<sup>165</sup>

Second, where the faith is known it may be assumed by many people to be too demanding. This is not a Uniting Church problem alone but is a general challenge for all churches arising from this current era when popular culture and lifestyle are seen as more important than matters of faith. As Bodycomb points out above, Christianity is not hated; it is simply treated with indifference. Values change and so do the priorities of people.

Modern tastes are often about enjoying oneself and feeling good about oneself. There is little interest in self-sacrifice or suffering.<sup>166</sup> Jesus' message in Matthew 25:31-46 on the need to help fellow human beings, for example, is out of keeping with Australia's emphasis on maximizing personal wealth.<sup>167</sup> Besides, focussing on "negative" matters gets a person nowhere; hence (according to this reasoning) the need for positive thinking.<sup>168</sup>

Another example comes from the cultural contrast between Christianity and modern consumer values. There has been a rewriting of the "deadly sins".<sup>169</sup> Pope Gregory in the sixth century provided the following list of sins which were most at odds with divine love (but which were not "crimes" and so murder and robbery, for example, were not included) Pride, Selfishness, Lust, Greed, Laziness, Jealousy and Anger (with the *Virtues*: Faith, Charity, Hope, Prudence, Work, Persistence and Temperance).

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<sup>165</sup> For a Catholic insight into the past sectarian era, see: Edmund Campion *Rockchoppers: Growing Up in Catholic in Australia*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1982

<sup>166</sup> Missionaries overseas may be at greater risk; one of the most inspiring people I have ever met is Gladys Staines, whose husband and two sons were burnt alive by Indian Hindu fanatics; see; Vishal Mangalwadi et al *Burnt Alive: The Staines and the God They Loved*, Mumbai: GLS, 2005

<sup>167</sup> I have been to a number of secular Sydney "wealth creation" seminars (Dale Beaumont and John Demartini, for example) and it is notable how they contain a "religious" fervour: appeals to seek guidance from "the universe" or "higher self", commitment to change your life, inspiring music and videos, calls to "come forward" to sign up for longer courses. It is almost an "old style religion" in a new guise.

<sup>168</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich has done a study of how Americans went from being negative Calvinists to believers in "positive thinking", Barbara Ehrenreich *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*, London: Granta: 2009

<sup>169</sup> Keith Suter "Turning Sins into Virtues", *Executive Excellence* (Sydney), August 1999, p 19; Keith Suter "The Seven Deadly Sins", *Radio 2GB News Commentary*: <http://www.wesleymission.org.au/ministry/suter/050218.asp> (accessed 19/02/2008)

Ironically, many of the “sins” are now seen as modern “virtues”, for example, people are encouraged to be selfish, to make a lot of money (and it is the basis of Christianity’s “prosperity gospel”), Hollywood encourages lust, and the media’s celebrity-obsessed culture fosters jealousy and pride (while the virtue of temperance is certainly out of fashion).

A 2005 BBC survey suggested that Britons would list the following “sins”, which are now more a matter of harming other people: Cruelty, Hypocrisy, Selfishness, Wastefulness, Bigotry and Adultery.<sup>170</sup> In short, in Britain’s (and Australia’s) secular society we tend to judge people on social morality (how they treat others) rather than personal morality (how they conduct themselves). Traditional sermons on “sin”, for example, will have little effect.

American theologian Marcus Borg has even argued that traditional Christian words like “sin” no longer have the same connotations for modern audiences.<sup>171</sup> This could be another reason for the indifference: most people no longer share the same “Christian” language and so do not understand what Christian sermons and liturgy are about if they were to visit churches.<sup>172</sup>

Third, for those Australians with an interest in spirituality<sup>173</sup> there is no need now to be limited solely to the Uniting Church or indeed even to Christianity. Interest in religion is not dead<sup>174</sup> - but perhaps the staid form of the Uniting Church’s is on the way out. Here are three examples. Religious commentator Dr Rachel Kohn opens her survey of new religious trends: “Religion has the singular effect of dividing people; yet its aim is the exact opposite”. She goes on to look how the essence of religion “...has proved remarkably adaptable

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<sup>170</sup> BBC Press Office “Cruelty is now Britain’s Deadliest Sin”: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/02\\_february/06/sin/shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/02_february/06/sin/shtml) (accessed 11/02/2005)

<sup>171</sup> Marcus J Borg *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can be Restored*, New York: HarperCollins, 2011, pp 143-152

<sup>172</sup> This problem can be contrasted with the success of “prosperity gospel” preachers whose message of financial success is very accessible; see: Alan Matheson “Gospel Entrepreneurs: Jesus is Good for Business”, *Online Opinion*, November 30 2005; <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=3891> (accessed 5/01/2006)

<sup>173</sup> A sidelight on this matter is the growth of roadside memorials; see: Keith Suter “Roadside Memorials: Sacred Places in a Secular Era”, *The Contemporary Review*, Spring 2010, pp 51-9

<sup>174</sup> An example of its growth is the academic development of “religious studies”; a British newspaper obituary of Professor Ninian Smart recalled his pioneering role: “It is difficult now to recall that the emergence of Religious Studies as a higher-education subject was then controversial.”

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/professor-ninian-smart-728834.html?s>.



and resilient despite the extreme pressures on religion to disappear.”<sup>175</sup> She looks at recent scholarship trends, not least concerning Jesus, including the Jesus Seminar and John Shelby Spong. She also looks at how the other faiths have themselves been through changes (and so it is not just Christianity that is in turmoil). She thinks that each can learn from the others.

Another ABC<sup>176</sup> presenter, Peter Kirkwood, has written an interfaith survey, covering key individuals such as Stephanie Dowrick<sup>177</sup> (one of whose preaching locations is the Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney); pioneering local interfaith communities; and pioneering international inter-faith organizations. As he says, “This book is just an introduction to a new and vital area of religion that is in the process of being formed, that is emerging, and in many ways is still somewhat vague and nebulous.”<sup>178</sup>

A rising star<sup>179</sup> in the interfaith movement is Karen Armstrong, a former Catholic nun turned religious historian, who is now campaigning for an interfaith approach to compassion, by seeking to draw out the unifying aspects of all the world’s major religions.<sup>180</sup>

To conclude this survey of why Australians may be indifferent to what the Uniting Church has to offer, there is the impact of science and technology. Chapter 3 mentioned the importance of science and technology in transforming modern life. It is important to listen for the faint signals of change here as well.

It is possible that the need “religion” is simply part of the brain’s make-up, such as a link between “religious emotionalism” and epilepsy (Karen Armstrong found late in life that she is an epileptic). “Neuro-theology” and “spiritual neuroscience” are now growing research areas.<sup>181</sup> Ray Kurzweil has

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<sup>175</sup> Rachel Kohn *The New Believers: Re-Imagining God*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003, p 1

<sup>176</sup> ABC religious programming is itself a sign of the new era: it does not have a specific “Christian” focus and so it is not an evangelical station, more a (shrinking) department of religious studies.

<sup>177</sup> Stephanie Dowrick *Seeking the Sacred: Transforming Our View of Ourselves and One Another*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011

<sup>178</sup> Peter Kirkwood *The Quiet Revolution: The Emergence of Interfaith Consciousness*, Sydney: ABC Books, 2007

<sup>179</sup> I was at her January 2010 University of Oxford lecture and can attest to her popularity.

<sup>180</sup> Karen Armstrong *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, London: The Bodley Head, 2011

<sup>181</sup> David Bielko “Searching for God in the Brain” *Scientific American*, October 3 2007 [http://www.sciam.com/print\\_version.cfm?articleID=434D7C62-E7F2-99DF-37CC98](http://www.sciam.com/print_version.cfm?articleID=434D7C62-E7F2-99DF-37CC98) (accessed 26/10/2007)



written about the “God nodule”, a tiny locus of nerve cells in the frontal lobe that appears to be activated during religious experiences.<sup>182</sup> Meanwhile, Oxford’s Baroness Susan Greenfield has speculated on this century’s development of trans-human beings and in effect the reinvention of humans.<sup>183</sup> All of this again goes well beyond what this dissertation can cover; it is included simply as a reminder that there could be a “Black Swan” event of major significance that changes humankind’s approach to spirituality.

There is also the research into the origins of the universe via cosmology<sup>184</sup>. Leaving aside the aggressive atheists<sup>185</sup>, we may also see a return to Deism: a belief that there is a God who created the universe but who has no personal interest in humans. According to this approach, the universe is too big and too complicated for the attention of the Supreme Being to worry about a lump of rock in one solar system in one galaxy among billions of them. For the Enlightenment’s adherents (such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers of the Republic), Deism was a neat way of reconciling the new ideas in science with the old religious faith. God has set the universe in motion and then let it run on. He now has other matters to attend to elsewhere. Deism may again become a convenient point of compromise between Christians and sceptics.

### **The End of the Uniting Church’s Special Relationship with Government**

It is now necessary to see how the post-Constantinian era has been evolving in Australia. The twentieth century saw the invention of the modern Australian state. Australia and all Western societies underwent major changes to cope with World War I (1914-8), Great Depression (1930s), and World War II (1939-45). Health and social welfare, which had traditionally been a family and charity matter, now became a government responsibility. By 1977, at the time of the Uniting Church’s creation, government had become the major player in many of services which the antecedents of the new Church traditionally provided.

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<sup>182</sup> Ray Kurzweil *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Sydney Allen & Unwin, 1999, p 152

<sup>183</sup> Susan Greenfield *ID: The Quest for Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London: Sceptre, 2008, p 102

<sup>184</sup> For a useful (if hostile to religion) introduction, see: Lawrence M Krauss *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing*, New York: Free Press, 2012

<sup>185</sup> For example, Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*, Sydney: Bantam, 2006; see: Keith Suter “The God Delusion” *Radio 2GB News Commentary* July 27 2007 [www.wesleymission.org/au/archives/suter/070727.asp](http://www.wesleymission.org/au/archives/suter/070727.asp)

The special relationship – derived from the Constantinian era - between government and Uniting Church (and all other religious bodies) is now ending. The relationship is not being eroded out of any deliberate government hostility towards churches (as in, say, the Soviet Union 1917-1991). It is more a matter of administrative tidying up: the reinvention of Australia for the modern secular era.

There are three major strands. First, there has been the global human rights revolution, which began in December 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>186</sup>. As the human rights regime has gradually expanded and become more enforceable (that is moving beyond “declarations” to legally-binding treaty commitments), so churches have been caught up in the net (like all other aspects of Australian society). Very few special provisions have been made to cater specifically for the Christian churches (and other religious institutions). Therefore, the application of broad human rights legislation to church procedures has been eroding the essential “Christian” character of organizations in a move towards a more secular society.

Government wants the high quality of service that religious organizations can provide but is now making it increasingly difficult for churches to provide those services. It is imposing secular human rights conditions on their operating procedures. Australia’s first official enquiry into religious discrimination (and one of the first in the world) took place in the early 1980s via the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board<sup>187</sup>. In my submission, I argued that churches should be allowed some latitude in the recruitment of their staff to maintain core values<sup>188</sup>. I was hoping to ensure that churches could still be allowed to recruit only Christians throughout all of their caring services.

In retrospect, I made a futile rearguard action because at both State and Commonwealth levels, the anti-discrimination legislation and cases brought under it generally have gone against churches. As the years roll by it will be increasingly difficult to maintain a specific “Christian” culture within an organization. No doubt the churches and other religious organizations will be staffed by good decent humanitarian people willing to work at sacrificial salary levels. But they will not be specifically Christians (let alone solely from one’s

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<sup>186</sup> Keith Suter “Human Rights: The Sixtieth Anniversary”, *Contemporary Review*, Winter 2008, pp 429-436

<sup>187</sup> The fact that it was one of the world’s first was indicative that governments had attempted other (possibly less sensitive) issues before tackling religion.

<sup>188</sup> *Discrimination and Religious Conviction*, Sydney: NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 1984, pp 397-8

own denomination). The distinctive Uniting Church culture will gradually disappear.

The second development has been government trying to understand the diversity and complexity of the “third sector”<sup>189</sup> (that is, not “first” sector government bodies and not “second” sector for-profit companies). This has included the attempt to clarify the legal status of charities, public benevolent institutions, organizations created by royal charter, and organizations created by acts of parliament (such as the Uniting Church). Government is taking greater control over the sector.

In the Constantinian era, government left these organizations alone (providing they did not carry out criminal actions – which would then be covered by the criminal code). Now government is attempting to regulate them and bring them within the expanding provisions of administrative law.

The NGO concept existed well before the 1648 Westphalian nation-state system came into existence; churches go back two millennia. The rise of the modern state therefore had to take account of the pre-existing NGO concept. But government in Australia has had little understanding of the not-for-profit sector and so has spent recent decades trying to make sense of it to suit its own nation-building agenda. For example, UTS Professor Mark Lyons has been a pioneer in researching this sector and has often complained that government does not understand much about it.<sup>190</sup>

In fairness to government, the size and variety of the sector is quite bewildering. Here are the startling opening sentences of an ABC Radio National documentary:

What’s the world’s eighth largest economy? Think about it, the eighth largest economy in the world.

I’ll give you a clue. There are 700,000 of them in Australia...

The answer is: Non Government Organizations.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Mark Lyons *Third Sector: The Contribution of Nonprofit and Cooperative Enterprises in Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001

<sup>190</sup> Mark Lyons “Value for Our Charity Dollar”, *The Australian Financial Review* May 3 1995; Mark Lyons “The Invisible Sector: Australia has a Large Not-For-Profit Force that is Little Understand by Governments”, *Business Review Weekly* (Sydney), June 29-July 5 2006, p 49

<sup>191</sup> Stan Correy “Background Briefing: 28 March 2004 – NGOs Watching NGOs”, ABC Radio National <http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl?http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks> (accessed 5/04/2004)

That radio programme was occasioned by the Howard Government's controversial decision to contract one New Right NGO (Institute of Public Affairs: IPA) to review the NGO advocacy field. The decision was controversial because IPA had a clear political agenda and one that was not shared with social justice-oriented NGOs such as OXFAM and Greenpeace.<sup>192</sup> In fact that initiative to examine that one thin slice of NGOs faded away without much consequence.

Indeed, one would have to say that government attempts generally to come to terms with NGOs have been fairly unsuccessful. The first big attempt was the Industry Commission inquiry. The Commission began as a government agency to protect Australian businesses<sup>193</sup> but then, with the rise of New Right economic rationalism, it moved across the spectrum to dismantling the protections and paved the way for the decline of much Australian manufacturing.<sup>194</sup>

In the early 1990s it turned its attention to charitable organizations.<sup>195</sup> Given its record, the enquiry into charities was treated with hostility by those organizations (I did some of the media campaigning). I drafted three submissions, appeared before it to give oral evidence, and had a private meeting with Commissioner Bill Scales to discuss the draft report.<sup>196</sup> As expected, it recommended greater government control over charities.

A recurring concern in the Commission's work was "transparency". For example, a number of charities (including churches) did not pay local government rates and taxes; the proposal was that they should pay the rates and taxes, keep the receipts and claim the money back from the Commonwealth. This would be overall revenue-neutral but it would enable government officials to get a better understanding of the NGO sector's

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<sup>192</sup> Greg Barnes "The IPA is Not a Suitable Body to Conduct a Review into NGOs", *Online Opinion*, 5 August 2003 [www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=596](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=596)

<sup>193</sup> Peter Roberts "Industry Commission – Looks Different but Sounds the Same", *The Australian Financial Review*, October 31 1995, p 12

<sup>194</sup> For an insider's account of this era, see: Martin Feil *The Failure of Free-Market Economics*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2010

<sup>195</sup> Keith Suter "The Industry Commission Inquiry into Charitable Organizations", *Australian Health Review* (Canberra), Vol 19 No 1 1996, pp 17-26

<sup>196</sup> Scales was a Catholic and so was familiar with the importance of voluntary work in his private life but admitted that his Commission's methodology and economic modelling had problems trying to account in economic terms for a situation where so many people gave their labour away (that is, volunteer); in the economic rationalist world everything is done only for a price.

finances. However it would also require more NGO administrators to keep the receipts, make the claims etc. In the end, the Commission made the fatal mistake of publishing its final version near a federal election and no politician then wanted to be seen being hostile to charities, and so nothing directly came of that report.<sup>197</sup>

Government grinds on slowly but remorselessly. The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) has long wanted to drop its involvement in the complicated area of regulating charities. The new Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission (ACNC) has begun work. It will take on the task of regulating the sector and dealing with the issues that have proved so hard for government.

The Uniting Church now has to reconcile its legal structure to fit modern corporation law and ACNC requirements. Uniting Church property is vested in Synod Property Trusts (groups of people who convene to execute documents). The actual work is done through the local congregation (or parish mission such as Wesley Mission Sydney). Each congregation or parish has custodial and autonomous responsibility for the administration and management of the properties and for the operation of all the programmes and services conducted on those properties. With whom, to use a colloquial expression, does the buck stop? Should the entities be individually incorporated? In which case, this would lead to the Uniting Church's fragmentation.

The bottom line is that government is determined to regulate a sector that had flourished largely unregulated from 1788 to the late 1980s. That era has ended. It is impossible to predict what will emerge from the new era but it will certainly mean more government intervention and regulation in the third sector's affairs.

The Uniting Church, especially by virtue of its social welfare programmes, is one of the largest single components of the third sector. It is inevitable that its work will be more regulated, standardized and made to conform to government methodology and economic modelling. It will cease to have so many distinctive characteristics.

The third development comes from third sector representing a large slice of the modern Australian economy. But government is in a dilemma: charities provide services which government might need to provide if they were no longer in existence. The Australian Government, for example, has had to

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<sup>197</sup> Keith Suter "Charity Lobby Victory" *ASA Update* (Sydney), November 1995, pp 1-2

balance “revenue leakage” (money foregone via charity tax-exemptions) with the need to ensure that charities continue to provide vital services.

Charities have a large economic role<sup>198</sup>. A *Sydney Morning Herald* finance writer commented:

Which well-known outfits rake in \$300 million a year, are the size of ASX companies, but won't be fronting up to investors this profit season? They're part of a \$75billion sector that employs 1 million people, yet rarely rate a mention in these business pages. The Salvation Army and Mission Australia, two of the country's biggest charities, would both be correct answers. They are thought to be worth \$1 billion each...<sup>199</sup>

The background to this special status goes back a very long way. The church in England in the Middle Ages was regarded as a charity and it contributed little direct revenue to the Crown. Its extensive lands and other wealth were free from the taxes required to support the Crown's military forces. But, then, it was providing most of the institutional educational, health and welfare services of that era; the Crown had its responsibilities and the church had its. The first UK Income Tax Act, 1799, also exempted charities. Thus, the tradition emerged that government left charities alone. This reasoning flowed through to the colonial settlement of Australia.

However, we are now in the era of the modern Australian state and changes are underway.<sup>200</sup> One is the lack of accounting transparency in trying to make sense of the accounts of each charity (a problem the Industry Commission also tried to address).<sup>201</sup> How is a person's donation actually spent? How much money is spent on “administration”? How much is even spent in raising each dollar?<sup>202</sup> How can a donor compare the efficiency of one charity with

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<sup>198</sup> For a critical introduction, see: Max Wallace *The Purple Economy: Supernatural Charities, Tax and the State*, Elsternwick, VIC: Australian National Secular Society, 2007

<sup>199</sup> Clancy Yeates “Fixation on Competition Threatens Charity Sector”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 29, 2009, p 7

<sup>200</sup> From mid-1950s onwards the Australian Government provided funding to residential care and then increased its regulation of the industry so that the industry claims it is now over-regulated.

<sup>201</sup> “Concern Over Charities Bookkeeping” *The Canberra Times*, December 7 2000, p 11

<sup>202</sup> For example, young “street ambassadors” [“chuggers”: charity muggers] approach the general public in crowded thoroughfares; but it has been alleged that 95 per cent of the first year's donations go to the collection organization and its young people; only 5 per cent goes to the nominated charity; “Charities Hand Over up to 95% to Street Marketers”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 26 2009, p 3

another? Meanwhile, the media can often find examples of inappropriate spending.<sup>203</sup>

Another problem is what can be done to reduce duplication and inefficiency within and between the charities? Does a country of only 23 million people really need 700,000 NGOS generating (in 2006) \$80 billion?<sup>204</sup> Why are there, for example, twenty charities assisting children suffering from cancer? Why are there so many competing NGOs looking after the visually impaired? Why are there so many providers of residential aged care: why not force them to amalgamate?

Yet another problem has arisen since 1983 with the Australian Government (irrespective of party in power) being committed to free-market economic reforms (New Right economic rationalism). To what extent can this philosophy be imposed on NGOs, such as in the competition for government contracts? Churches which previously worked together are now obliged to tender against each other and any co-operation may be viewed “collusion”.<sup>205</sup> A free-market mentality erodes the Christian welfare tradition of working together for the sake of the community.

Then there is the problem of NGOs and for-profits competing in the same space but where there is not a level playing field because the NGO does not pay the same rates and taxes. The technical term is “competitive neutrality” – government is obliged to create a level playing field for all businesses operating in the same space. But Seventh Day Adventist’s Sanitarium does not pay the same level of tax as its traditional rival Kellogs<sup>206</sup>.

More generally, journalist Frank Gomez has argued:

Every time you pay tax or rates you are subsidising other people’s religions... Australia is one of the few nations that make all investments

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<sup>203</sup> During the 1995 Industry Commission Inquiry, CARE Australia was unfortunately embroiled in a number of scandals: “CARE Paid \$20,000 for Fraser Charter Flight”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4 1995, p 5; Tom Dusevic “Give and Take”, *The Australian*, March 6 1995, p 3

<sup>204</sup> Adele Ferguson “Costly Compassion”, *Business Review Weekly* June 29-July 5 2006, p 50

<sup>205</sup> A useful early warning of the new era was: David de Carvalho *Competitive Care: Understanding the Implications of the National Competition Policy and the COAG Agenda for the Community Services Sector*, Canberra: Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, 1996

<sup>206</sup> Dr John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) was an SDA who invented some breakfast cereals; he later fell out with the church and went on his own commercial way; SDA also make breakfast foods and have been commercial rivals ever since.

earnings by religious bodies tax free, regardless of whether these are spent on charitable activities. And all the property they own is free of rates and land tax. If they sell these assets for a profit they pay no capital gains tax. And often these are properties that were gifted to them many years ago by government.<sup>207</sup>

In the Constantinian era, Gomez's argument would have been ignored because (the argument would have gone) we were then living in a Christian society and you could trust the churches to operate for the benefit of all society. The fact that they enjoyed some financial benefits simply aided their work; it was a form of commercial fundraising. Now in a post-Constantinian society, with allegations of child abuse and other misdeeds, churches no longer enjoy the same high public standing they once did, and so they are now an open target.<sup>208</sup>

There is also "mission drift", a term New Zealand PhD student Michael Gousmett (who is researching the history of the charity sector) uses to describe the changed role of NGOs: "When there's been no scrutiny of the trust deeds, you'll find what the charities are doing today is not what their trust deed says."<sup>209</sup> In other words an NGO is set up for one purpose but then expands its role into other areas.<sup>210</sup>

To sum up, in the post-Constantinian era, the Uniting Church (like all other charities) faces an uncertain future. It will (under this scenario) gradually fade away.

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<sup>207</sup> Frank Gomes "Rich Men in the Tax-Free Kingdom of God" April 18 2006 [www.thepunch.com.au/articles/rich-men-in-the-tax-free-kingdom-of-god/](http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/rich-men-in-the-tax-free-kingdom-of-god/)

<sup>208</sup> Adele Ferguson "God's Business", *Business Review Weekly*, June 29-July 5 2006, pp 42-46

<sup>209</sup> Quoted in Sally Blundell "The God Dividend", *New Zealand Listener* (Auckland), February 2 2008 [www.listener.co.nz/commentary/the-god-dividend/print/](http://www.listener.co.nz/commentary/the-god-dividend/print/)

<sup>210</sup> For example Wycliffe Bible Translators is an evangelical religious charity; it owns Word investments which ran a commercial funeral business (to raise money for the evangelism); should this also be a charity? For an introduction to the *Word* Federal Court case, see "Charities Conducting Commercial Activities", Cutler Hughes + Harris Business Law in Australia [http://www.cutlers.com.au/resources\\_detail.cfm?id=131006627](http://www.cutlers.com.au/resources_detail.cfm?id=131006627) (accessed 25/10/2008)



## SCENARIO

This Uniting Church 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”. For example, the development of Master Planned Estates on the greenfield sites around Australian cities make little provision for Uniting Church buildings.

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.

An inwardly focussed church becomes obsessed with comparatively small matters (not doctrine) but...”types of buildings, styles of worship, youth work. If not that, then they argue over the flower rota.”<sup>211</sup>

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 the current state of this Uniting Church.<sup>212</sup>

This Uniting Church has little interest in social justice matters. Members may have an interest in the subject but no longer have the passion and energy for it.<sup>213</sup>

Members are unable to encourage their children or grandchildren to attend services.

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<sup>211</sup> “Petty Squabbles Cause Empty Pews”, *The Times*, August 25 2005, p 5

<sup>212</sup> For example, Canadian Thomas Bandy has done some lecture tours of Australia; his ideas are very stimulating but probably too labour-intensive for the Uniting Church; Thomas G Bandy *Christian Chaos: Revolutionizing the Congregation*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999

<sup>213</sup> Macquarie University’s Marion Maddox provides a picture of the Methodist Earlwood parish in the 1950s in which John Howard was raised: vibrant, liberal, progressive and critical of many of the prevailing government policies; it is a reminder of what Methodism could be like; Marion Maddox *God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp 1-26

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The accumulated assets of the three antecedent churches are running down. There may even be threats of people trying to seize the Uniting Church's assets.<sup>214</sup>

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.<sup>215</sup>

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, and complaints about a "lack of consultation".

Presbyteries are amalgamated.<sup>216</sup>

Membership of church committees shows a recurring list of the same old names. There is little new blood coming forward.

Congregational amalgamations are difficult to achieve because some parishioners prefer to leave the Uniting Church entirely rather than worship at a different location.

Meanwhile this Church cannot afford the maintenance of its buildings. There is less government sympathy for heritage funding being made available for them.

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<sup>214</sup> This is where people join a declining NGO with a view to seizing the property assets; the NSW Humanist Society, for example, was embroiled in one such controversy; see "Ageing Idealists Begin to See Vultures", *The Sydney Morning Herald* June 26, 2010, p 4

<sup>215</sup> John Bodycomb "Why They Don't get Ordained", *Crosslight*, October 2002, p 6

<sup>216</sup> The new Synod of Tasmania in 1977 had three Presbyteries; in 1996 they were amalgamated into one; in 2002 the entire entity was merged into the new Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

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Evening services and 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.

Where Uniting Church institutions remain in existence, such as schools and colleges, they become increasingly secularized: heads of institutions are no longer required to be Ministers of the Uniting Church; fewer regular Christian events (such as chapel services) are held; fewer of the traditions are observed (eg alcohol being made available in former Methodist institutions).

The Uniting Church brand becomes less and less visible and people no longer know what it stands for.

Few non-members attend services.

Synods boards of finance and property are unable to derive as much income from investments as in past years to provide resources for the wider ministry.

A reduction in Uniting Church finances means a reduction in Uniting Church donations to para-church organizations/ NGOs etc

This Uniting Church is working within a wider environment of reduction and retrenchment of Christian organizations<sup>217</sup> which are also undergoing decline.<sup>218</sup>

There is more of a market for books and other materials on “church history” rather than “church growth”. There is a lot of interest where it all went wrong.<sup>219</sup> Meanwhile church members like to reminisce about the “good old days” when the parish was flourishing.

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

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<sup>217</sup> Two formerly very active UK Christians NGOs with which I have been associated for many years have fallen on hard times are: Alliance of Radical Methodists (wound up in 2006) and the William Temple Association for Anglican laypeople (which is now down two branches).

<sup>218</sup> An interesting study in decline in the UK (which echoes some of this chapter’s analysis) is: David M Thompson “The United Reformed Church in a New Millennium”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol 15 No 2 December 2009, pp 61-8

<sup>219</sup> For example, Robin Boyd *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church*, Adelaide, Australian Theological Forum, 2007; Renate Howe *A Century of Influence: The Australian Christian Movement 1896-1996*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009; Australian SCM has also fallen on hard times; in the post-War period it was a good conduit through which ministers were recruited. It was also a manifestation of ecumenical co-operation, which itself has now fallen on hard times as well.

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offence. Once a public Christian event is suspended temporarily it is very difficult to reinstall it.

It is a church full of remorse and anguish: thinking about where it has all gone wrong. Why weren't the warnings heeded? For example, social commentator Hugh Mackay warned in 1997: "The Boomers might turn out to have been the last generation of Australians to attend Christian Sunday School in large numbers. Certainly, they are the generation who have created something of a free-fall in church attendance".<sup>220</sup>

Dr Ruth Powell of the National Church Life Survey warned in 2003:

"This generation of school-age children are the first where the majority won't have attended church.

"This is an astounding moment in Australian history because children will grow up with no reference point or belief framework.

"They won't understand biblical reference points to things that are embedded in our language and culture. That is a very big change".<sup>221</sup>

American church leaders Tim Celek and Dieter Zander have warned:

It's been said that Christianity is always one generation away from extinction.<sup>222</sup>

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

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<sup>220</sup> Hugh Mackay *Generations*, Sydney: Macmillan, 1997, p 112

<sup>221</sup> Quoted in: "Christianity's Toughest Test of Faith", *The Australian*, December 27 2003, p 4

<sup>222</sup> 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

## INDICATORS

- congregations lose their will to live
- Christianity generally is seen as simply a cultural artefact with no real significance<sup>223</sup>
- 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
- reduction in broader social exposure to the Bible; general public lack a general Biblical literacy<sup>224</sup>
- reports of wider church activities being wound up<sup>225</sup>
- 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
- growth in the use of “neutral” locations for events such as wedding (eg gardens) and funerals (crematoria)
- 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 people coming forward for ordination
- reduction in the number of Synod/ Presbytery meetings to save time and money

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<sup>223</sup> For example: the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that displaying crucifixes in schools in Italy does not breach the rights of non-Catholic families because there was no evidence that “...a crucifix hung in a classroom would influence pupils”; “School Crucifixes “Do Not Breach Human Rights””, BBC News Europe ([www.bbc.co.uk/world-europe-127910](http://www.bbc.co.uk/world-europe-127910)...), (accessed 18/3/2011)

<sup>224</sup> “The greatest loss, of course, has been the knowledge of the Bible; it is not rare these days to find professors of English literature missing allusions that humble people would have picked up 150 years ago” Richard Jenkyns “Do We Need a Literary Canon?” *Prospect* (London), December 2007, p 46

<sup>225</sup> For example, “Vale Christian Endeavour!”, *Insights*, June 2012, p 3 (Christian Endeavour began in Australia in 1883 as a child/ youth activity)

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- reduction in the number of people willing to volunteer for committees etc; no “new blood”, same old names reappearing in official documents
- innovative ways of coping with the contraction of the Uniting Church<sup>226</sup>
- reduction/ consolidation in the number of Presbyteries<sup>227</sup>
- concern that the Uniting Church is morphing into some form of real estate agency (with declining use of its buildings for Uniting Church services and increasing use for community purposes, such as yoga, meditation, other religious groups, political groups)
- reduction in the number of adult fellowship groups
- reduction in the provision of services and programmes
- reduction in the number and amount of bequests
- reduction in Uniting Church agencies/ boards
- controversies over sackings/ redundancies of Uniting Church staff
- reduction/ abolition of church publications<sup>228</sup>
- 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<sup>229</sup>
- 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 contributions to the Uniting Church
- younger Uniting Church members have competing claims on their wallets and so provide less money to the Uniting Church in offerings than previous generations

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<sup>226</sup> For example, in 2005 the five Presbyteries in WA agreed to form one Presbytery: “WA Pulls Together” *Western Impact*, November 2005, p 1

<sup>227</sup> The Uniting Church had 54 Presbyteries in 1977; by 2005 the number had contracted to 40; “Regional Diet, Slimmer Church”, *Crosslight*, November 2005, p 6

<sup>228</sup> For example, the monthly WA Synod magazine *Impact* was abolished after three decades of publication and replaced by the quarterly *Revive*; “Farewell *Western Impact*”, *Western Impact*, February 2007, p 4

<sup>229</sup> For example, outgoing Assembly President Rev Alistair Macrae was asked in 2012 about the highlight of his time as President; he said it was the new Preamble but he recognized “The level of awareness of the Preamble around the Church is low”; “A Presidential Chat”, *Crosslight*, July 2012, p 20

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- increase in non-denominational loyalty; willingness to “shop around” looking for a spiritual home
- religion increasingly seen as a “barrier” to modern life and “out of touch” (such as controversies over euthanasia and stem cell research)
- 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 not 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
- little civic pride in Uniting Church buildings
- increased opportunities for volunteers to do work previously done by paid staff
- discussions over how the Uniting Church’s surplus assets (from the sale of properties) could be used (such as funding Christian projects in the Global South)
- controversies over allegations that secular organizations view the Uniting Church’s surplus wealth as a “cash cow” from which to siphon off funds for their own campaigns and priorities
- increased number of funerals of members being conducted
- increased resentment that Uniting Church officials had failed to “read the signs” of the Uniting Church’s impending demise

## CONCLUSION

This has been another challenging chapter. It seems hard to imagine that a large organization formed with such optimism in 1977 should be headed for its demise within only a few decades. But perhaps the signs were there but were ignored. For example, almost three decades ago – January 1984 – journalist Deidre Macken opened an article:

In Australian town planning it would be virtually impossible for seven butcher shops to open in the same street. First, local government guidelines would prevent three or four from opening their doors and, second, even if the guidelines were ignored, the pressures of competition would force half out of business...

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The over-supply of churches is largely a legacy of the pioneering days of last century when a community was only considered viable if it had a post office, hotel and church.<sup>230</sup>

She then went to look at the number of surplus church buildings – particularly mentioning the Uniting Church (then aged only seven).

The challenge for the Uniting Church under this scenario would be to devise an exit strategy and not to just let matters drift.

What lessons have been learned by other declining NGOs? There is no shortage of case studies.

There could also be a discussion of options. For example:

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

At this point the scenario planning process is starting to go beyond its normal remit (and on to “preferred futures”). But the initiation of such a set of discussion possibilities would at least confront the Uniting Church with the possibility of its looming demise.

The final chapter addresses this task.

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<sup>230</sup> Deidre Macken “Too Many Churches, Not Enough People in Them”, *The Age*, January 30 1984, p 11



# Part 3

## Chapter 9: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

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### INTRODUCTION

It has been a long journey. It began with the hope contained in the 1977 inauguration of Australia's first home-grown church, and the dissertation has ended Part II with the fourth scenario that would see the Uniting Church's disappearance. At the very least, the Uniting Church will have to confront major challenges which mean that the Uniting Church (if it is to survive) will be very different from the current one (even under chapter 5's "Word and Deed" scenario).

It is not - to repeat - the scenario planner's role to pick winners (that is, to help the client focus on the most attractive scenario). To do so would move from "possible futures" to a "preferred one". Therefore this dissertation does not advocate one scenario over the others (though of course my links with Wesley Mission Sydney would mean that I would feel most comfortable with the "Word and Deed" scenario in chapter 5).

At this point in the usual scenario planning process, the four scenarios would be presented to the client. Creating recommendations for the "downstream" process could begin: what do the scenarios mean for the organization and how does the organization move from scenario planning to strategic planning?<sup>1</sup> (By the way, it is important not to confuse an "objective" with a "strategy": for example, "increasing the size of this congregation by 10 per cent" is an "objective" and not a "strategy": what they need to do is work out *how* they will achieve that increase to make it a reality).

That process cannot be followed in this dissertation. First, strictly speaking there is not a formal "client" in the Uniting Church commissioning this work (unlike, say with the 2001 aged care study). The scenarios cannot be formally tabled at any Uniting Church meeting to get an official response and so provide a basis for developing recommendations for action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is even a growing debate over the value of formal extensive strategic plans in being able to cope with the pace of change: "Although at one time five-year strategic plans were a necessity, today far fewer companies and countries take this exercise seriously, and many have abandoned it altogether. Being opportunistic, nimble and able to react quickly to changing market conditions has become the name of the game in the twenty-first century". Rebecca D Costa *The Watchman's Rattle: Thinking Our Way Out of Extinction*, Philadelphia, PA: Vanguard, 2010, p 171

<sup>2</sup> Once the dissertation has gone through the University examination process, then it will certainly be well publicized.

Second, more fundamentally the Uniting Church lacks a central guidance system to push through any thoroughgoing reform and so this dissertation returns (in the next section) to the basic problem of the Uniting Church's structure.

Third, there is a lack of a sense of standing on a "burning platform". "Burning platform" stories create a sense of urgency "...that gets people's attention, shakes them out of their complacency, and forces them to begin thinking of alternatives".<sup>3</sup> The metaphor is derived from encouraging people to think that they are standing on a burning platform (or burning raft) and there is a need for urgent action to save their lives. Throughout this dissertation, I have been critical of the lack of the underlying sense of urgency, not least in official Uniting Church statements and publications. The dissertation therefore concludes with two sections, one providing some suggestions for a communications plan to explain the four scenarios and then some suggestions for a change management process.

## BACK TO THE STRUCTURE

### Introduction

This has been a voyage of discovery for me. While I was at the national Assembly office (1982-5), I often spoke at Uniting Church events on the Uniting Church's structure as being a "church of the future" (as distinct from the more old-fashioned governance styles of the Catholic and Anglican Churches). But I was blinded by my own optimistic worldview.

The Catholic Church, I then argued, was old-fashioned in its centralization of power at the top (Rome)<sup>4</sup>, while the Anglican Episcopal model placed power at the level of bishops. The Uniting Church, I then argued, was more "modern" and flexible by devolving power down to the parish/ congregational level and by not having a strict hierarchy. It involved more people in the decision-making.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Denning *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, San Francisco, John Wiley, 2005, p 237

<sup>4</sup> For a scathing critique of the Pope's use of power, see: Matthew Fox *The Pope's War: Why Ratzinger's Secret Crusade has Imperiled the Church and How it Can be Saved*, New York; Sterling, 2011

## Chapter 9

Theologian and current Assembly President Rev Dr Andrew Dutney sees this as a central component of the Uniting Church. In his explanatory booklet on the Uniting Church, he points out that:

Decisions are made by councils, not individuals. In the reformed tradition of church organization it has always been recognized that decision-making in the church should be corporate and not individual.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, I now think the Uniting Church's structure may be one of its greatest liabilities. There is no one single central component to drive the reform process.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 2 noted the Uniting Church's continued focus on restructuring (in 2012 the NSW Synod, for example, decided on yet another and even more ambitious one).<sup>7</sup> But it is a worthy focus because clearly there is a fundamental problem with the structure.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately given the Uniting Church's structure, there is no one central authority to drive the sort of fundamental restructure that is probably required. Consequently all the "restructures" have been a tinkering at the edges and not the root and branch reform that is probably required.

Additionally, 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Dutney *Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia*, Sydney: Assembly of the Uniting Church, 2008, p 25

<sup>6</sup> The Uniting Church's focus on committee-based decision-making (derived from its fear of centralized individual power of a pope or bishops) may be a disadvantage; American historian Alan Axelrod, in his study of Winston Churchill as a leader, has referred to the "curse of the committee", which dilutes responsibility and dissolves authority; see: Alan Axelrod *Winston Churchill CEO: 24 Lessons for Bold Business Leaders*, New York: Sterling, 2009, p 60. A committee, under this reasoning, dilutes the sense of personal responsibility for getting something done.

<sup>7</sup> "Structural Change and Financial Future", *Insights*, September 2012, pp 4-5

<sup>8</sup> It seems that the post-2012 General Secretary will be explicitly a CEO (traditionally he/ she was only "first among equals" of the other General Secretaries, with the General Secretary of the Board for Social Responsibility [Rev Harry Herbert] having acquired too much power over the decades); this should have been done in 1977; it may now too little too late.

### Turnaround Organizations

It would be pleasant to end the dissertation with a study of how large organizations have been turned around and their potential lessons for turning around the Uniting Church. There is a growing literature on how corporations have evaded death and been revamped via determined leadership and a fresh culture.

For example, IBM was a household name for decades. But it became lazy and complacent. It should have used scenario planning in the 1980s to think about the potential competition to its dominant position in the computer industry.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the 1980s it was near bankruptcy. Lou Gerstner – the archetypal “burning platform” illustration - is credited with dramatically saving IBM from collapse in the early 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In his memoir he noted: “I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn’t just one aspect of the game – it *is* the game”.<sup>11</sup> The new CEO stopped the intended break-up of the company into local profit centres and instead created a strong central culture, with one central brand “one voice, one agency” (then the largest advertising consolidation in history).<sup>12</sup> Still on computers there is the legendary Steve Jobs (1955-2011) who revived Apple.<sup>13</sup>

Tenneco, a Fortune 500 company, went through a dramatic restructure which saved its life. As the CEO responsible for this transformation recalled in his memoirs:

By the close of 1998, Tenneco was so different that 80 percent of the assets that were part of the corporation in 1992 had been sold or divested. Two-thirds of the employees on Tenneco’s 1992 payrolls were no longer part of the organization. In turn, through 29 acquisitions made

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<sup>9</sup> Clem Sunter *The High Road: Where Are We Now?* Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg, 1996, p65.

<sup>10</sup> This is still a classic case study: Yves Doz and Mikko Kosonen *Fast Strategy: How Strategic Agility Will Help You Stay Ahead of the Game*, London: Wharton School, 2008, pp 36-51

<sup>11</sup> Louis V Gerstner *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance? Inside IBM’s Historic Turnaround*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2002, p 182 (emphasis in original)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 90

<sup>13</sup> Alan Deutschman *The Second Coming of Steve Jobs*, New York: Broadway, 2008; Walter Isaacson *Steve Jobs*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011

since mid-1994 in automotive parts and packaging, 20,000 of our 50,000 employees had been part of the new Tenneco for less than four years.<sup>14</sup>

A reader might well ask since Tenneco had been through such a drastic overhaul, to what extent was it still “Tenneco”?

Mead recalled the lesson Andrew Grove of Intel who, with Intel co-founder Gordon Moore (of “Moore’s Law” fame) made the 1985 fundamental decision to move from memory chips (where it made its name in 1968) to microprocessors (the electronic brains of personal computers). The drastic move saved Intel.<sup>15</sup>

It would, then, be interesting to see the “lessons” for the Uniting Church from companies that have been reformed via drastic actions. There seem to be a three-point approach (i) a CEO sets a compelling vision (ii) the vision is thoroughly communicated (iii) ruthless changes are made to implement the vision.

But it would all be a waste of time.

First, the Uniting Church lacks a strong central CEO (or any type of national office holder) to drive the type of radical change that may save a company such as IBM, Apple, Tenneco or Intel. The Uniting Church’s devolved and diffused authority means that there is no central engine of change. Even the “restructures” that have been carried out since the early 1980s, have been one-off and spasmodic. For example the Synods have been virtually taking it in turns to make changes, rather than one centralized push for a national and well-coordinated restructure.

Second, there is a lack of corporate ruthlessness in the Uniting church. Certainly staff have been treated badly by senior personnel or parish committees (not least when they have been made redundant). But the systemic nastiness that is necessary to behave as some corporate leaders have done is lacking in the Uniting Church’s fundamentally gentle philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Modern CEOs are often brutal people in how they run their organizations (as colleagues of the late Steve Jobs at Apple have explained).

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<sup>14</sup> Dana G Mead with Thomas C Hayes *High Standards, Hard Choices: A CEO’s Journey of Courage, Risk, and Change*, New York: John Wiley, 2000, pp xxi-xxii

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp 20-1

<sup>16</sup> This ruthlessness has of course been present in other denominations, such as the Catholic Church’s Inquisition process to hunt down heretics. Perhaps it was a key to their success across the centuries?

### A Way Forward

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 dissertation has been about the first two stages.

The third stage goes from "possible" futures to a "preferred" one and so is beyond the dissertation'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

## COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

### Introduction

Ideally this dissertation will receive widespread (unofficial) circulation to encourage the debate on the first two stages set out above.

This section sets out three talking points to help stimulate that debate.<sup>17</sup> The talking points can be picked up by anyone with an interest in the Uniting Church, such as at parish level for a discussion group or the editor of a Synod newspaper. They could also be used as the basis of discussion at congregational, Presbytery, Synod or Assembly gatherings.

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<sup>17</sup> While the NSW scenario planning process was underway on the future of aged care, I wrote a monthly "Talking Point" newsletter that was circulated throughout UnitingCare facilities etc to talk up the project; they are reprinted in Keith Suter and Steve England *Alternative Futures for Aged Care in Australia*, Sydney: UnitingCare, 2001, pp 63-74. A video (of my being interviewed by the CEO of UnitingCare) was also filmed for circulation in the Uniting Church aged care system.

They are designed to encourage Uniting Church members to think more deeply about the current state and possible “futures” of the Uniting Church: to think about the unthinkable. They are designed to unfreeze the thinking of Uniting Church members, to stimulate debate, for example, for a congregation/ parish to surrender its surplus assets (such as the sale of spare parsonages) to be used for the wider work of the Uniting Church (or to go to overseas churches in the Global South).

The three themes are:

- God *Is* At Work in the World
- An Era of Rapid Change
- Asking Fundamental Questions about the Uniting Church

### **God *Is* At Work in the World**

“*The modern experiment to live without religion has failed*, and once we have understood this, we know what our “post-modern” tasks really are”.<sup>18</sup> EF Schumacher (of “small is beautiful” fame) almost four decades ago controversially argued what is now more commonplace: religion is a major force in world affairs.

*The Economist* magazine in its Millennium edition published “God’s obituary”; the Editor and one of his colleagues have now admitted they were wrong<sup>19</sup> (and by implication Schumacher was right). Of course, instead of acknowledging that “God is back”, it would be more accurate to say God never went away (except as a field of study in some sections of post-1945 Western academic life). Deeply-felt religion of one sort or another has been around for all of recorded history; the exception has been the occasions when authorities have tried to scrap it (as with the attempts in the Soviet Union, 1917-1991).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> E F Schumacher *A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Abacus, 1977, p 159 (Italics in original)

<sup>19</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World*, London: Penguin, Allen Lane 2009

<sup>20</sup> I travelled extensively in the Soviet Union during the Cold War years and was often told by Russian Orthodox members that on a per capita basis more people were in church on Sundays in Soviet Moscow than in London.



## Chapter 9

A risk for Uniting Church members being so narrowly focused on the daily challenges of congregational survival is that the “big picture” of global church growth can become obscured.<sup>21</sup> We should not judge the state of the global Christian Church by what we see in Australia (let alone the particular problems of the Uniting Church). There are now more Christians in more countries than ever before. Christianity is now, for the first time, a truly global movement.

A good survey is by Patrick Johnstone (of WEC: Worldwide Evangelisation for Christ and Operation World), which provides a global overview.<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, the book has a little vignette which is a warning for the Uniting Church.

Johnstone recalls preaching in full religious garb in a humid Colombo, Sri Lankan parish (the clothing was of course designed for an unheated medieval church building in north-west Europe). The author reflects “Isn’t this a parable of what has happened so often in the history of the church? It has held on to the forms and let go of the principles”.<sup>23</sup>

Australian media tend to focus on the negative stories such as clergy child abuse (“bad news” sell newspapers). But the “good news” of the Good News is that the church is expanding and this often gets neglected in the mainstream media.

The challenge for Uniting Church members (and others) is to recognize that the growing church is different from what many in the Uniting Church might assume. Philip Jenkins of Penn State University has argued that Christianity’s centre of gravity is shifting from the developed Western world to the Global South<sup>24</sup> (which explains why Johnstone was sweltering in clothing unsuitable for Tropical religious services).<sup>25</sup> The Global South are interpreting Christianity for their own local conditions.

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<sup>21</sup> Going well beyond this dissertation’s scope is the literature on the bigger picture of religious upheaval; two useful books are: Stephen Prothero *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter*, Melbourne: Black Inc, 2010; Phyllis Tickle *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Johnstone *The Church is Bigger Than You Think: The Unfinished Work of World Evangelisation*, Gerrards Cross, Bucks, UK: WEC, 1998

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 156

<sup>24</sup> Philip Jenkins *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing in the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007

<sup>25</sup> There is a similar economic and political story: the developed Western countries from the 1490s onwards conquered much of the rest of the world; that “European era” (with an American tailpiece), is perhaps now coming to a close as the economic and political centre of

*Footnote continued on the next page*

Additionally, migrants from the former colonies are now heading to the old imperial powers with their religious enthusiasm. In 2008, the President of the UK Methodist Church, while touring New Zealand, commented that “In London the Methodist Church is now basically a Black majority church and we celebrate that”.<sup>26</sup> *The Economist* magazine (still repenting for its foolish obituary of God) noted in 2005 how the Black churches are bringing new life and new disagreements to British Christianity. Bishop Joe Aldred, a Jamaican-born Pentecostalist, in responding to enquires about the secrets of church growth success replied: “We tell them it’s because we are prepared to make sacrifices and stand firm on doctrine”.<sup>27</sup>

Global church growth does not necessarily mean that the Uniting Church itself has a guaranteed future. It could be just left to fade away in a shallow tributary as the mainstream of global church growth flows by elsewhere in the world. It is numerically small, insular in outlook<sup>28</sup>, and somewhat doctrinally isolated from what is happening in the Global South (such as its liberal views on homosexuality).

Professor Gary Bouma of Monash, in addressing the challenge for the Australian aged care industry (and the need for more cultural diversity) pointed out:

In Australia today there are more Buddhists than Baptists, more Muslims than Lutherans, more Hindus than Jews, and more followers of Nature Religions than Brethren. The longstanding dominance of British Protestants has waned and is largely replaced by Catholics, those declaring no religion and then a great diversity of religious and spiritual groups.<sup>29</sup>

A point to ponder is whether, given all the Uniting Church’s assets being held for a declining number of members, it would be better global Christian

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gravity moves away from the Atlantic region to Asia, Pacific and Latin America; see: Niall Ferguson *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, London: Penguin, 2009, pp 284-341

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in “British Methodists Seek Fresh Expressions of Ministry”, *Touchstone*, September 2008, p 1

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in: “Christianity: Shades of Black” *The Economist* (London), June 18 2005, p 50

<sup>28</sup> If this seems harsh, then a person should sit through a few Presbytery meetings and so see how they operate!

<sup>29</sup> Gary D Bouma “21<sup>st</sup> Century Religious and Spiritual Challenges to Aged Care” *Australian Aging Agendas* (Sydney), April 2009, p 10

stewardship for more of those financial assets (spare parsonages etc) to be sold and the proceeds sent to where the church is growing: the Global South.<sup>30</sup>

### **An Era of Rapid Change**

Since joining Methodist/ Uniting Churches in 1976, I have been giving presentations and writing books<sup>31</sup> and articles<sup>32</sup> on the technological and other challenges confronting the church. I first became interested in this subject from Alvin Toffler's trail-blazing 1970 book *Future Shock*.<sup>33</sup> (Ironically although Toffler listed a number of revolutions – technology, race, youth, gender, economic, etc – he did not mention a “religious revolution”; evidently even the best of forecasters have their blind spots and were subject to the then Western dominant paradigm that religion was in decline).

The pace of technological change, for example, has continued to increase. NASA's Voyager 1977 satellite is speeding through Outer Space with a gold phonograph record in case it encounters any extraterrestrial life; the record contains a number of musical items; ironically if the record were to land back on Earth most homes no longer have the gramophone technology to play it.

The impact of Moore's Law (as an illustration of the importance of information technology) has many years yet to run. On the one hand, the Internet enables people to communicate across national borders and to learn quickly about far more matters than they could do from a library of printed books.

It challenges the institutional structure of information distribution. The Uniting Church's Rev Paul Emerson Teusner has compared the impact of print technology five centuries ago (enabling Protestants to have a “priesthood of all believers” via equal access to reading books), with the current spread of information to all people via the Internet:

As life online becomes an increasingly important part of our lives offline, and as we are given greater permission to share our own views about

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<sup>30</sup> Perhaps in due course the Global South will send missionaries to Australia; after all in the first century West Asian churches sent their missionaries to Europe: The “Macedonian Call”: Acts 16:9

<sup>31</sup> For example, Keith Suter *Global Change: Armageddon and the New World Order*, Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1992

<sup>32</sup> For example, Keith Suter “The Church, Science and Technology”, *Word in Life* (Sydney), February 1980, pp 15-22; “Technology and Change – The Role of the Church” *Human Resource Management Australia* (Sydney), Autumn 1980, pp 47-52

<sup>33</sup> Alvin Toffler *Future Shock*, New York: Random House, 1970

God and the world in Web 2.0, theologies developed in the cloisters of the seminary will have little relevance. Instead, questions of how God is and acts in the blogosphere and out of it will produce new conversations and directions for religious expression and action.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, we could be “rewiring” the brain and so changing the way that people think and learn.<sup>35</sup> Is the church’s standard 20 minute sermon still the right way to communicate? Can people in the young “click and flick” generation concentrate that long? Do their parents still want to? Meanwhile, the Facebook website in 2013 probably has more members (I am not one of them!) than all the global Protestant Churches combined. Its membership total could rival the Catholic Church’s in the next few years (providing Facebook is not beaten by an even more modern technology).

One implication for the Uniting Church is that the pace of change will continue to increase. There will no smooth plateau on which we can rest to catch our breath.

Second, in a time of great change, tradition is among the first casualties of change. Just because an organization has a magnificent history of achievement, is no guarantee of its future. Old ideas that once worked so well may not now be applicable.

Third, economist Frances Cairncross has warned: “Most people overestimate the effects of change in the short term, underestimate them in the long term, and fail to spot where change will be greatest”.<sup>36</sup> As this dissertation has argued, I do not believe the Uniting Church has done enough to think about the big picture of change. It spends too much just responding to problems (or even trying to ignore them).

To conclude, two related phenomena of watching movies and the rise and fall of cinemas over the past century provide a warning for the Uniting Church. Watching movies remains a popular activity. Their content is different but they are still basically recognizable as movies despite all the changes in the past century or so.

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Emerson Teusner “Religion 2.0”, *Zadok Perspectives* (Melbourne), Autumn 2008, p 13

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Carr *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Read, Think and Remember*, London: Atlantic, 2010, p 10

<sup>36</sup> Frances Cairncross *The Company of the Future*, London: Profile, 2002, p 193

Meanwhile, people used to go to cinemas on a regular basis; sometimes to see movies; sometimes to get away from parents; sometimes to be with friends (or hope to make new ones). But cinemas are now in decline; some have become supermarket sites or office buildings; some cinema chains have gone out of business or merged.

However, movies are still being made in large numbers: India now makes more than Hollywood; television productions with lavish budgets make mini-movies; with the decline in cinemas, movies used to be available at video shops and now they are downloaded.

The lesson here, I suggest, is that the Uniting Church with its fixation on bricks and mortar is like the old cinema chains trying to preserve their industry. While the consumers are still very interested in movies, they are no longer attending the old cinema buildings in the same numbers as they were decades ago. They can watch movies in other ways (including in the privacy of their own homes).<sup>37</sup>

### **Asking Fundamental Questions about the Uniting Church**

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.<sup>38</sup>

The omens for reform, then, are not good. Scenario 4 (Recessional) may fall into place simply because the other three scenarios receive insufficient action by Uniting Church members.

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<sup>37</sup> A variation on this speculation is by Dr Thom Rainer (CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention) who in January 2013, warned that large US church buildings could go the way of the large shopping malls: Baby Boomers liked urban sprawl and large buildings; their Generations X and Y children prefer intimacy and smallness (hence the growth of Starbucks): [www.christianpost.com/news/the-death-of-the-mall-and-the-future-of-church-buildings-88150](http://www.christianpost.com/news/the-death-of-the-mall-and-the-future-of-church-buildings-88150) accessed 13/1/2013)

<sup>38</sup> "Consider the Possibilities for 'Rebirth', *Insights*, May 2004, p 18

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? As Sarah Sladek CEO of XYZ University has pointed out:

Younger generations are your toughest consumers, and they want to associate themselves with a cause. They want to be inspired to make a difference. So does your association represent independent gas companies (yawn) or is it helping bring cheaper gas to the United States quicker (wow!) Does your chamber of commerce connect businesses (yawn) or does it bring in an average of \$25,000 in new business to members each year (wow!)?<sup>39</sup>

- 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 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.

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Sladek *The End of Membership as we Know It: Building the Fortune-Flipping, Must-Have Association of the Next Century*, Washington DC: Centre for Association Leadership, 2011. p 11

## THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

### Introduction

Along with communicating the four scenarios and encouraging reflection on their implications, it is also necessary for all parts of the Uniting Church to start thinking about how the process of change should be handled.

Machiavelli, over five centuries ago, warned that change was difficult to achieve:

It should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a state's constitution. The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new. Their support is lukewarm partly from fear of their adversaries, who have existing laws on their side, and partly because men are generally incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience. In consequence, whenever those who oppose the changes can do so, they attack vigorously, and the defence made by the others is only lukewarm. So both the innovator and his friends come to grief.<sup>40</sup>

Updating for the inclusive language, Machiavelli would feel at home writing about the Uniting Church today.

This dissertation therefore concludes with two sets of suggestions about how change could be managed: the need to learn about change management and the value of a “lateral thinking” technique to handle discussions.

### Learn about Change Management<sup>41</sup>

The Uniting Church has been undergoing a continuous series of changes and yet the changes have been handled so badly. There seems to have been little institutional learning.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli *The Prince* (translated by George Bull), London: Penguin Classics, 1981, p 51

<sup>41</sup> For an introduction, see Esther Cameron and Mike Green *Making Sense of Change Management: A Complete Guide to the Models, Tools and Techniques of Organizational Change*, London: Kogan Page, 2004

<sup>42</sup> Peter Senge has been a pioneer in this subject: *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, London: Random House: 2006 and *The Fifth Discipline*  
Footnote continued on the next page

Chapter 2 recalled the way in which the Uniting Church was embroiled in controversy well before Union in 1977, with some members opposed to the proposed Union. Those struggles, especially among the continuing Presbyterians and the former Presbyterians now in the Uniting Church, continued (especially over property) for some years after 1977. Then came the “restructuring” controversies beginning in the early 1980s. Third, throughout all the years since 1977 there have been incidents where changes have generated localized parish/ congregational controversies, such as over choices of music, styles of worship and the “calling” (that is, appointment) of new ministers. People will change – but they often resent being changed.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Uniting Church should have recognized in the 1970s that change management would be an important factor in church life and therefore taken steps to educate people. For example, in the early years of Union some former Methodist ministers had problems with some of the traditionally more congregationally-empowered former Presbyterian and Congregational parish/ congregations.

The secular management literature on mergers and acquisitions is often focussed on the “cultural” issues of the new combined organization and the challenges of getting staff to work together. The Uniting Church had the additional challenge of so many lay members from the previous denominations also having to get accustomed to working together.

Yet another potential problem was the extent of engagement. In companies, wages control motives and so there is a great financial incentive to making changes work. Among Uniting Church lay members there may have been basic sympathies for change management but they also had their own individual competing interests (their own family and employment priorities, not least). They often lacked the same extensive sense of engagement as could be expected within companies.

This failure to think through all the challenges of change management is indicative of an even deeper problem: the failure to recognize that the new Uniting Church constituted a vast “business” in its own right, and so lessons should have been sought from the secular business world on how it ought to conduct its affairs. Some personnel have since undergone such educational courses in secular institutions.



This observation suggests that the training should have been more formal and conducted for all ministers while going through theological colleges, with follow-up “refresher” training for veteran ministers. This would have been an expensive operation and yet perhaps “cheaper” in the long run, given all the change management issues the Uniting Church has had to confront since 1977. There should have been change management literacy.

New ministers (and veteran ones) were, in effect, heading out to run “local branch offices” of a large organization. They might have felt that the “business” side of a parish/ congregation could be left to lay leadership – but that lay leadership would also not necessarily be equipped to handle start-up “local businesses”.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps more accurately some of the “local offices” did have some talented lay leaders but they became frustrated in dealing with fellow committee members who lacked those same skills; hence one of the thematic causes of conflict: conflicts between people with different skillsets. Parish ministers, mostly lacking any business training, would not necessarily be able to adjudicate between the competing claims; this too may have contributed to local tensions.

There now are, of course, some management training facilities for Christians. For example, in 2002 the Queensland-based Christian Management Association (modelled on the US CMA) was launched by Wesley Mission Sydney and the Melbourne-based Evangelical Alliance (I have been a presenter at CMA conferences). But this is a comparatively small organization when viewed in the wider context of all the “business activities” conducted by all the Australian churches. Its comparative smallness is yet another reminder that Australian churches (not only the Uniting Church) have failed to recognize the extent of their roles as “businesses” requiring professional skills.

The least painful time to start organizational change is when the organization is going well - not when it has started declining. Back in 1977, the Uniting Church could have set people aside specifically to deal with the challenges of organizational change. Perhaps the leaders at that time were too buoyed with enthusiasm and optimism to think about this issue.

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<sup>43</sup> There is an interesting issue here on the continuing financial viability of the Central Missions (such as Sydney’s) – it may be their success over the decades, if not centuries, has been partly due to their capacity to recruit to leadership roles significant businesspeople who brought their own skills, contacts and wealth to the Missions; most local parishes have lacked the opportunities for such access to the “big end of town”.

Ironically, Christians have been in the “change management” business from the outset. Jesus himself called on people to repent (“change”). Evangelism is based on that premise. Ongoing parish/congregational life is based partly on the skill to avoid alienating the “old timers”; it is necessary to bring the more established members along on the change journey. There is always a temptation to stay in the “comfort zone”. Jesus knew this. In John 21 Jesus appears again to his disciples – after the trauma in Jerusalem they had gone back to what they felt most comfortable with: fishing. Once again he reminds them to get out of their comfort zone and “feed my sheep” (v 17).

Going back even further, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua are all books on change management: a reluctant Moses had to be prepared for leadership; the Jews had to be encouraged to leave Egypt; they found Sinai too challenging and so wished to return to the slavery in Egypt they knew; they had to be encouraged to keep going; and they had to be settled with a new instruction manual in the new land. Moses, then, was a pioneer “transition manager”. For example, Moses was skilled at “reframing”: the capacity for “...putting old facts into new bottles, at reconceptualizing the familiar so that new solutions leap up”.<sup>44</sup> He translated the idea of the Promised Land into a picture of a Land of Milk and Honey; he didn’t just tell the Jews about the Promised Land but portrayed the Holy Land in such a way as to engage their imagination.

The new Uniting Church, then, Biblically had a rudimentary knowledge of change management – but lacked the imagination and will to use it. The suggestion, therefore, is that belatedly the Uniting Church starts to address the need for widespread explicit formal training in change management. There is no shortage of literature on the subject or training opportunities by organizations such as CMA, Australian Institute of Management and the Australian Institute of Company Directors. There are also many university courses.

### 6 Thinking Hats

The dissertation ends with a suggestion about process. The Uniting Church uses a type of decision-making that seeks to build consensus. The *Manual for Meetings*<sup>45</sup> is fifty-page detailed instruction manual which provides for participants to have three coloured cards (“yes”, “no” and “expresses

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Handy *Waiting for the Mountains to Move: Reflections on Work and Life*, London: Arrow, 1995, p 115

<sup>45</sup> *Manual for Meetings*, Sydney: Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2012

## Chapter 9

concern”). The iterative process aims to have matters turned over and over until there is approval by consensus. This means that a small number can repeatedly block a proposal. Eventually, if necessary, a vote can be taken by formal majority. This is not necessarily a bad system of discussing matters; though it is a time-consuming one.

There is, I believe, a better method.

Chapter 3 mentioned Edward de Bono’s “lateral thinking” work and the common starting point between de Bono and scenario planning on the importance of perception.

One of his books I use in my corporate work is his *Six Thinking Hats*.<sup>46</sup> Traditional Western thinking is based on argument and debate. Instead, de Bono has suggested parallel thinking: a willingness to work together to explore ideas rather than score points off each other.

The format is different from the cut and thrust of most committee discussions. In essence: everyone “wears” the same hat at the same time as we go around the table and each person is invited to contribute under each “hat” (that is, in each round); the intention is to get a variety of responses.

There are five rounds followed in this order:

*White*: Information: question to each participant: what additional information is required to understand the particular question or proposal?

*Red*: Feelings: having studied the proposal, how does it make me feel?

*Yellow*: Optimism: what is good about the proposal? What are the best benefits of it?

*Black*: Caution/ risk: what is wrong with the proposal? What are the biggest risks?

*Green*: Creatively: what else is required? This is where the discussion takes place: how do we deal with the “Black” points? How do we make the most of the “Yellow” ones?

The 6<sup>th</sup> Hat is *Blue*: control by the facilitator: is the process working?

Majority voting only takes place, if required at that meeting, after the final (fifth) round.

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<sup>46</sup> Edward de Bono *Six Thinking Hats*, London: Viking, 1986

The process tries to keep out some of the aggressive cut and thrust of the deliberations. It avoids people too early putting themselves into a corner. It gives scope for new ideas to emerge.

Besides being, in my experience, a better method of decision-making, encouraging Uniting Church bodies to use this process may add to the sense of “burning platform” urgency: the Uniting Church’s situation is now so dire that it even requires a new style of decision-making.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has applied the business management technique of scenario planning to the future (or “futures”) of the Uniting Church in Australia. Four scenarios have been developed: (i) a Uniting Church of a small number of large parishes offering seven day a week activities (ii) a Uniting Church with no parishes/ congregations and concentrating on the delivery of welfare services (iii) an “emerging church” version of the Uniting Church with no corporate welfare work (iv) and the Uniting Church’s demise,.

While being so concerned about the future, we can take heart from the past and be reminded of the Christian capacity for survival. As American theologian Harvey Cox reminds us:

During the first three centuries, the Age of Faith, Christians constituted a minority among worshipers of Isis and Osiris, Mithra adepts, and those who venerated the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons and participated in the cult of the divine emperor. Today, both in the world at large and in the places where they are spreading fastest, Christians are once again minorities and will continue to be for the foreseeable future.

In those early centuries, as today, there was no central hierarchy, no commonly accepted creed, and no standard ritual practice. In those first centuries Christianity was not yet “Western”; today it is no longer Western. Christians then were united by their celebration of Jesus as Lord, by the exchange of visitors, gifts and letters, and by a vibrant confidence in a shared Spirit.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> While it will be novel for most Uniting Church members, it won’t be for their children or grandchildren. After my having introduced this system at a training sessions for the senior staff of one of Australia’s largest corporations, the CEO as chair said he now understood what his children were being taught at their Melbourne schools.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey Cox *The Future of Faith*, New York: Harper, 2009, p 174 (emphasis in original)

# Appendix

## **APPENDIX: SCENARIOS ON THE FUTURE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

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This Appendix consists of: (i) a summary of remarks I make regarding the future of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) when working with NGOs and (ii) a comment on how an NGO can respond to “Recessional” indicators

### **SUMMARY OF REMARKS**

Is there is a slow death of the community spirit? Non-governmental organizations (such as religious bodies, service clubs and advocacy groups) maintain the fabric of society. But can they maintain their own fabric? Many NGOs are reporting a decline in membership and have financial problems.

Creating scenarios is a way of helping us to think about the unthinkable and reduce the risk of our being taken by surprise. Here are two<sup>1</sup> scenarios on the future of volunteering: "Recessional" and "Tango".

#### **“Recessional”**

The "recessional" is a hymn sung as the clergy and choir withdraw at the end of the church service. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are in the "recessional" scenario.

Membership is literally dying off. These organizations often draw their membership pool from the people born before the end of World War II in 1945. These people (the "Depression Generation") know the value of contributing to the community because they saw how well it worked in the Depression and wartime.

Additionally charity work gave some affluent middle class women (who in the old days were not expected to do paid work<sup>2</sup>) a sense of purpose when marriage frequently meant the end of their careers. It gave them an opportunity for wider engagement with society. But now many women are

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<sup>1</sup> As noted in chapter 3, either two or four scenarios can be drawn up.

<sup>2</sup> Australian writer Penny Nelson has recalled the scandal created by her middle class mother who worked in the media: “In the Fifties, a married middle-class woman who was not in dire need of cash faced disapproval if she held a paid job. No one criticised servants or factory workers for working; that was the expected fate of the working class. No one criticised women of leisure who acted as volunteers or fundraisers for charity, even if the time they put into those efforts equalled or exceeded the normal office hours.” Penny Nelson *Penny Dreadful*, Sydney: Random House, 1995, p 50

obliged to work or want to have to their own careers. They are no longer around as a potential reserve army of middle-class volunteer labour.

The “Depression Generation” value loyalty and tradition and they have a high regard for institutions of all sorts. They saw NGO membership as a major part of their life and they treated membership of one or more NGOs as a form of self-identity. They were proud to belong.

But they are often not being replaced. They often cannot get their children (the “Baby Boomers”, those born between 1946 and 1966) to join organizations to the same extent as they did.<sup>3</sup>

Sydney journalist Deidre Macken complained that the Boomers are not behaving like their elderly parents, who provided the backbone of churches and other NGOs:

Many of them are now in their 50s and they should be volunteering to do the bingo call, they should have a drawer full of long white socks [for lawn bowls] and they should be vying for the chairmanship of the local Rotary club.

But where are they? They’re still surfing, underpinning the biggest boom in longboards in history. They’ve gone on backpacking trips with intrepid tours. They’re dating online, running marathons on weekends and vying for volunteer work in environmental groups.<sup>4</sup>

An even less optimistic note comes from the UK, where the pressure of work is blamed:

Middle-class people have traditionally been the mainstays of district, town and parish councils, for example. They have sat as magistrates and as school governors, they have run youth or sports clubs and Guide, Scout, Brownie and Cub packs. Today there is a desperate shortage of volunteers in all of these areas, brought on - I suggest – not because of a decline in the sense of community, but by the ever-increasing demands at work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Journalist James Button toyed with the idea of following his distinguished father John Button into the Australian Labor Party (ALP); eventually he decided against doing so because he saw the ALP in a depressing decline; see: James Button *Speechless: A Year in My Father's Business*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012, pp 84, 101, 102, 106, 231, 238

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Macken “Today's Youth in into Role Reversal”, *The Australian Financial Review*, April 16 2005, p 12

<sup>5</sup> Andy Bull *Downshifting: The Ultimate Handbook*, London: HarperCollins, 1998, p 5

Meanwhile, the Depression Generation's grandchildren ("Generations X" and "Y") do not join organizations, either. They may turn up for a specific event on a particular day (if they feel like it) but they will not commit themselves to being involved on a regular basis (such as by serving on committees).<sup>6</sup>

Sarah Sladek, CEO of XYZ University, has explained:

The values of Generations X (1965-1981) and Y (1982-1995) tend to be focussed on three primary objectives: the opportunity to lead, the opportunity to learn, and the opportunity to make a difference. Another way of describing their key drivers is this: younger generations (individuals age 46 and younger) will invest in a membership if, and only if, the membership benefits them personally and professionally and also benefits their community or industry.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, for NGO office bearers, life is also becoming more difficult because of the blurring between between "staff" and "volunteers". The recruitment of volunteers is now a sophisticated process and almost as time-consuming as recruiting staff (for instance: application forms, training, "agreements" specifying what will be required of a volunteer if they do join). Also, if there is work with children involved, then each person (staff or volunteer) needs to have a police check.

Meanwhile as voluntary work becomes more regulated, so people may well feel resentful that they are working alongside staff members who are being paid money for doing similar work.

Additionally government red tape and tort lawyers are making it difficult for NGOs to operate because of the cost of insurance. There are just too many legal liabilities involved and not enough money for the insurance cover.

If "Recessional" is coming into play then it is necessary to create an exit strategy to ensure that the orderly winding up of the organization takes place. This may include counselling the last lot of office bearers who will hold

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<sup>6</sup> Writing about a peace movement conference, UK peace activist Valerie Flessati has lamented that "About 80 people came each day [of the conference] – mostly of a mature generation - some pacifists and some not, but all interested in the abolition of war. Despite much effort we have not yet found the formula which will bring in more young people to hear about the forgotten prophets of peace". Valerie Flessati "Pioneers and Prophets – Peace History Conference 2011", *Abolish War* (London), Summer 2011, p 7

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Sladek *The End of Membership As Know It: Building the Fortune-Flipping, Must-Have Association of the Next Century*, Washington DC: Centre for Association Leadership, 2011, p 50



themselves responsible for the death of the NGO (when it is probably not their fault). Care has to be taken with the disposal of the surplus funds.

Perhaps it is possible to create another mechanism whereby the original aims of the NGO can still be carried out but without having to rely on paid-up members. In other words, to retain the original vision - but find new ways of achieving it.

### **“TANGO”**

“TANGO” is the alternative scenario: “Third Age Non-Governmental Organization”. The starting point is again demographic. People in western countries have gained as much life expectancy in the last century as they did in the previous 5,000 years (about 25 years).

There is a new "age". Previously people were young, middle aged and then getting ready for death. Now there is a new age – “third age” - after the formal middle age paid working stage (around aged 60) in a person's life and before people are ready for their fourth age (the “compression of morbidity” when their health fails in the final six months or so of their lives).

In this "third age", many people are still in good health, have access to superannuation funds, and have expectations about a long life. People now have their basic needs taken care of, and now they are looking for a deeper purpose in life. Retirement is a health hazard. They want more than just the 4Gs: golf, gardening, grandchildren and grand-touring. Being involved in NGOs is good for a person's health because it gives them a sense of purpose and a way of being useful to the community.

Alternatively, they may have been down-sized out of full-time employment and so like voluntary work as a change from the fast pace of their part-time consulting work. It may also appeal to unemployed people as a way of networking in the search for further employment.

The Baby Boomers are now entering their 60s. Will they rediscover their sense of social justice and rebellion that characterized the 1960s/1970s? NGOs could be good vehicles for them to relive their exciting days of youthful struggle. There is no shortage of good causes to attract them.

Meanwhile, the largest transfer of personal wealth in world history is getting underway. As the Depression Generation die off, they are leaving their assets to their Baby Boomer children. Will the Boomers donate some of the money to good causes? There could be a new golden age of philanthropy coming.<sup>8</sup>

If TANGO comes into play, what plans does an NGOs have to attract the Baby Boomers looking for good causes in which to "make a difference"? The Boomers will be entering the organization after a hectic career in business or the professions. They will not be keen on "old-fashioned" committee-based rituals that their parents liked. They will be more results-oriented and less process-oriented. They will not be there out of any intrinsic sense of loyalty and so they will move on if they are dissatisfied.

Some of the younger Baby Boomers may be retrenched middle aged executives looking for a good cause as a source of employment. They will bring two decades of management experience with them. They will know how to revitalize organizations with the latest management thinking.

Will existing members be ready to make the changes necessary to accommodate the new members? For example, in churches it is sometimes the case that the families that keep the church doors open, are the same families who keep the church pews empty. Their dedication to the local church keeps the church ticking over. But they are reluctant to accept new members because they will want to make changes to the liturgy, type and time of worship etc, and so the newcomers become disenchanted and go elsewhere. How will such families learn to "let go" and become reconciled to the fact that a new generation wants to do things differently?

To conclude, scenario planning helps us to rethink our perceptions. It encourages us to think about the future differently. NGOs ought to be taking a strategic look at their future to make the most of the new opportunities for volunteers.

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<sup>8</sup> See: Amanda Gome "Trends: Rich, Retired and Restless", *Business Review Weekly* (Sydney), June 9 2005 <http://www.brw.com.au/fearticle.aspx?relld=14110> (accessed 14/6/05)

## HOW CAN AN NGO RESPOND TO “RECESSIONAL” INDICATORS?

There are broadly three responses.

### 1. Ignore the Warnings

The first way is to ignore the warnings and try to carry on regardless. A notable failure in my scenario planning work came with a very old organization opposed to alcohol: NSW Drug Awareness Council (DAC), formerly the NSW Temperance Society formed back in the 1830s.

I had a number of meetings (beginning in 2001) with the executive committee, while it was still haemorrhaging funds. It seemed clear to me that the NGO was on the Recessional track. I had further meetings with DAC until 2006, by which time most of the funds had gone. The NGO just financially bled to death and no longer exists. The office-bearers could not bring themselves to make a specific decision to wind it up and use the remaining funds in a different way.

Another example: in 1971 I was a member of a UK UN Association task force looking at the declining membership figures and whether the UN Association should retain its branch structure. Those of us who were pressing for a more ambitious reform were defeated and instead the UN Association decided to persevere with the branch structure. The membership continued to decline.

I was intrigued to see in the national magazine in 2008, a fresh call to examine the membership structure<sup>9</sup> with the following options: a think tank model (with no branches – the model I argued for in 1971); a campaigning model like Greenpeace or Amnesty (but the UN Association’s remaining members are too old for such a campaigning mindset in my opinion); a social networking model (a whole new model taking advantage of the new information technology).

No changes have been made and the UK UN Association continues to decline.

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<sup>9</sup> “Modernizing UNA-UK’s Membership (Letter to the Editor) *New World* (London), Winter 2008, p 21

## **2. Perform Drastic Reforms**

The second way is to take drastic action to reorganize the NGO. I have chaired the International Humanitarian Law Committee of Australian Red Cross (NSW) for two decades but I have not done any scenario planning for the NGO and so there is no inside information mentioned here.

It is obvious from media reports over the past two decades that Australian Red Cross (ARC) has been going through a traumatic reorganization to avoid the Recessional fate. Most of the volunteers have gone, as have many local branches, and many of the iconic services such as the Voluntary Aid Detachment and the volunteer groups who provided make-up services for women patients in hospitals (“cosmetic care”).

ARC has now changed its focus. It has become far more reliant on paid staff and government funding, and it has moved into new areas (such as the work in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders). Using new thinking on corporate governance, ARC forced the state branches to accept a single central national structure, with previously powerful state boards reduced to the status of divisional advisory boards. It has been a turbulent process.

ARC is now a very different NGO from the one that had existed about two decades ago. Its future is more assured.

## **3. Create an Exit Strategy**

The third way is to heed the Recessional warnings and devise an orderly exit strategy. For example, the NSW Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) decided in 2008 to do this. I had worked with WCTU for some time and the executive committee decided to create an exit strategy. The assets have been sold and a new trust fund is being created to continue in different ways what the WCTU set out to achieve 126 years before. I am one of the trustees of the new organization which will fund projects to oppose alcohol.

The process has gone well. Rev Neil Reid, NSW Uniting Church Moderator, was at the final event at NSW Parliament House: “I was impressed by the courageous decision not to allow the WCTU simply to wither away, but rather, by dying to an old way of being, creating a new way ahead to ensure the continuation of its mission”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Neil Reid “Focus on Our Spiritual Imprint”, *Insights*, May 2008, p 2

Another successful example (I was not involved in the process but know the woman, Yvonne Gorrell, who led the change process) concerns the Manly, NSW Chapter of the Order of Eastern Star (female version of the Masons). Gorrell and her colleagues realized that the branch was in decline after 72 years of operations. In 2001 they sold their property for a \$1 million and gave the money to 19 organizations, among them Wesley Mission Sydney and the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst, NSW.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Manly Chapter's Stellar Gift", *Genescene* (Sydney), September 2001, p 6

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All the material used in this dissertation is in the public domain.

No in-house Methodist Church/ Uniting Church documents have been cited - though with an “insider’s” experience dating from 1976 I have benefited considerably from being within the Methodist/ Uniting Churches.

I have also benefited considerably from being regularly supplied with information on churches outside the Uniting Church. This information has been useful for the purposes of contrast and comparison.

On the New Zealand Methodist Church – especially the monthly Methodist *Touchstone* magazine – I am very grateful to Methodist layperson Mrs Margaret Knight of Te Awamutu.

Another (virtually daily) source of information has come from the e-mail service of Father Claude Mostowik msc, Director, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Justice and Peace Centre and President, Pax Christi Australia. Most of his material is of a social justice nature but he also includes published information on the wider Catholic Church and the continuing discussion over its reform.

I am also grateful to ex-Shell manager Dr Graham Galer (mentioned in chapter 3) for giving me his collection of Clem Sunter books and some other publications.

The WA Synod Resource Centre has been wonderful in tracking down theology books for me.

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## JOURNALS AND MAGAZINES

The best journal for understanding the Uniting Church is *Uniting Church Studies*, published twice yearly by the United Theological College, North Parramatta, NSW.

Another helpful journal was *TOP: Trinity Theological Papers*, published by Trinity Theological College, Brisbane. *TOP* has been replaced by *Uniting Church Studies*.

The Uniting Church Records and Historical Society was formed in 1977 (I was the first treasurer). *The Recorder* is the current newsletter of The Uniting Church Historical Society (NSW/ACT). It also publishes a *Journal*. I have also benefited from membership of the Royal Australian Historical Society in Sydney, which provides public lectures, a newsletter and a *Journal*.

Each Synod has its own magazine. I have read regularly (and occasionally written for) the magazines of the NSW, Victorian and WA Synods. My filing system goes back over two decades and in that time the titles have changed (as have formats etc): hence the changing titles in the dissertation.

To provide continuity of geography, here are the permutations in titles as they have appeared in this dissertation:

NSW: *Forward, Journey, Insights*

Victoria: *Church and Nation, Crosslight*

WA: *Western Impact, Revive*

There is also the official newsletter of the Uniting Church Assembly: *Assembly Update* (available as e-mail)

Another useful magazine has been *ARCVoice*, the publication of the NSW-based Association of Reforming Catholics. This has no official status within the Catholic Church.

The New Zealand Methodist magazine is *Touchstone*

The magazine of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), now based at Chiang Mai, Thailand, has also been helpful: *CCA News*.

Reference was made in chapter 1 to my involvement in Global Business Network Australia (GBN). The monthly magazine (that ran for much of the 1990s) has been most helpful: *The ABN Report*.

## Bibliography

For corporate governance and developments in business, I have made a great deal of use the monthly *Company Director* published by the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and *Harvard Business Review*.

*The Contemporary Review* (Oxford) began in 1866 and so was one of the longest running reviews in the English language of international politics, the environment, current literary issues and theological controversies. I have written for it for almost four decades. Alas, it too has become a victim of the Internet and its final edition appeared in December 2012.

IT multimillionaire Ray Kurzweil issues free daily updates on scientific and technological breakthroughs (especially on artificial intelligence in the lead up to the “year of singularity”) via [newsletter@kurweilai.net](mailto:newsletter@kurweilai.net)

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