

Uniting Church History and Heritage

Uniting Church National History Society: Vol. 1 No. 1 December 2019



Society President, Rev. Dr Glen O'Brien (L) and Past President, Rev. Dr William Emilsen in conversation at the recent conference.

Second national conference

The second national conference of the Uniting Church National History Society was held from June 7 to 10, 2019, at the U.C. Centre for Theology and Ministry. Keynote speakers were Professor Graeme Davison AO, Dr Meredith Lake (presenter of *Soul Search* on Radio National) and Dr Joanna Cruickshank (Senior Lecturer in History, Deakin University).

Twenty papers were presented by individuals on a range of topics under the general theme of 'finding a home in the Uniting Church', including Glen O'Brien's intriguing "The clouds through the aperture of the helmet: reading the life of Ned Kelly as a Christian life" and Margaret Reeson's "A knitting pattern for an octopus: a view of the many changes and challenges experienced by Uniting World since 1977".

★ First edition

This is the first edition of the Uniting Church National History Society's newsletter, circulated to all members of the Society by email or post. It has also been made available to the members of the U.C. state-based societies for distribution with their local mailings.

★ Proceedings of the 2019 UCNHS Conference

The Proceedings of the UCNHS 2019 conference, held at Melbourne's Centre for Theology and Ministry in June, will be produced in the near future. Members of the Society will automatically receive a copy, and additional copies at a cost of \$15 (plus postage \$7) will be available from the Secretary of the Victorian Society, Miss Lorraine Sage, c/- UC Synod Archives, 54 Serrell St, Malvern East, Vic. 3145.

President's report



Welcome to the first newsletter of the Uniting Church National History Society (UCNHS). We hope you find it of interest and that it contributes to maintaining an interest in the Uniting Church's history and heritage. In this first communique as the newly elected President of the Society, I would like to pay tribute to the work of our outgoing and inaugural President, Dr William W. Emilsen. William has contributed to our historical understanding of the Uniting Church in several very significant ways, including as Lecturer in History at United Theological College, as author and editor of numerous books on Uniting Church history, and as editor of the journal *Uniting Church Studies*. In 2017 he became the inaugural President of the newly formed UCNHS during the UCA's 40th Anniversary celebrations which included our first Biennial History Conference held at Pilgrim Uniting Church, Adelaide. Over the following two years he led the Society with the wisdom and grace for which he is so well known. Thank you for your leadership William, and we are very pleased that you remain seconded to our Committee and will have continued involvement in our work.

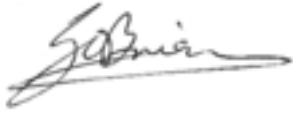
This newsletter stands in direct continuity with *Church Heritage*, the historical journal of the Uniting Church NSW/ACT Historical Society. The journal ended its previous incarnation with its March 2019 issue (vol. 21, no. 1), after the Society was dissolved and, in effect, merged into the National History Society. The journal was founded by the Rev. Eric Clancy in 1978, then from 1993 until 2019, Dr Malcolm D. Prentis served as editor and developed the journal with excellence, leaving behind a valuable repository of Uniting Church history that will serve researchers and the interested public for generations to come. Several of the editorial board members of *Church Heritage* currently serve on the Executive of the UCNHS. Though this newsletter is quite different in format from the earlier journal it will continue with the aim of publishing news items, articles, and book reviews on the history of the Uniting Church and its precedent churches.

Some may wonder what the formation of a national society means for the existing synod-based societies. Historical societies still exist in the Vic-Tas, and South Australian Synods, and an exciting new society is being birthed in the Queensland Synod. The UCNHS is not in competition with any of these societies and many people share membership in both their synod societies and the national society. The national society belongs to this network of societies but has the additional responsibility and scope of reporting and being accountable to the Uniting Church Assembly. The Executive of the UCNHS has representatives from all Synods and is well positioned to keep history on the agenda as a matter of national concern. Our biennial conferences (Adelaide 2017, Melbourne 2019, Sydney 2021, and the Northern Synod in 2023) are one means of keeping interest in Uniting Church history and heritage alive on a national basis. We also hold annual lectures alongside our Annual General Meetings and run these in connection with various Synod and Assembly gatherings on a rotating basis. The Sydney conference in 2021 will make a concerted effort to draw in younger people in the UCA both as participants and as history makers.

A little bit about myself is probably also called for. I am married to Lynda and we live on Warundjeri country in the suburb of Mernda nestled in the beautiful Plenty Valley at Melbourne's northern extremity. I am a Uniting Church minister in the Yarra Yarra Presbytery of the VicTas Synod and I serve in an ecumenical placement to The Salvation Army as Research Coordinator at Eva Burrows College, a college of the University of Divinity. An Associate Professor of the University, I teach Christian history and theology, have a special interest in Methodist history and have published several books, essays, and journal articles in that area. My relevant professional memberships include Vice President of the Religious History Association, Member of the Australian Historical Society, and Research Fellow of the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research. Other ways in which I have served the Uniting Church include being a member of the Standing Committee of the Yarra Yarra Presbytery, of the former Christian Unity Working Group, of the Uniting Church / Salvation Army Dialogue and of the 15th Assembly, as well as preaching and leading worship regularly in the Mernda congregation. (*Continued next page*)

(President's report: continued)

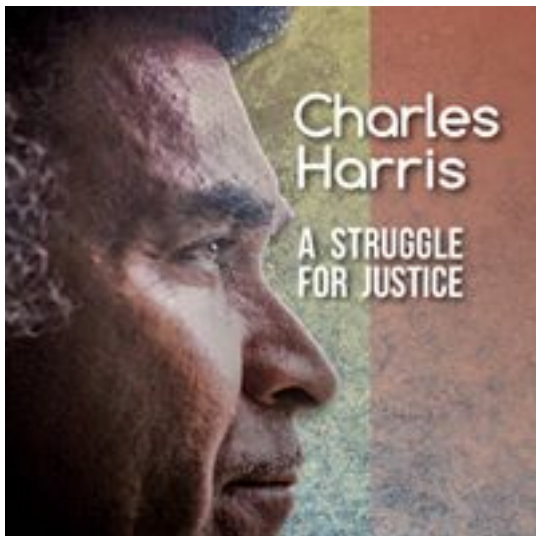
As it enters its fifth decade, the Uniting Church in Australia has a rich history and heritage to draw upon and the UCNHS also wishes to remind the Church of the role that historical study plays in addressing present challenges to the Church's witness and mission. The Society does not exist only for professional historians (though it does include some of them) but for all people interested in the UCA's history and heritage. If you haven't yet 'friended' us on Facebook or 'followed' us on Twitter, please do that to ensure you receive regular and up to date news items. You are warmly welcomed to join us in remembering, recording, and, most importantly, *making* Uniting Church history.



(Rev. Professor Glen O'Brien, President, UCNHS)

Book review

William W Emilsen, *Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice* (Unley, SA: MediaCom, 2019), 243 pp., ISBN 9781925722208. RRP: \$27.



William Emilsen has done a great service in reminding us of the key role Charles Harris played in the founding of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UIACC). Charles is not nearly as well remembered as he deserves but this scholarly yet readable biography hopefully will inform and inspire not only Uniting Church members, but all who seek to understand why it is so important to hear the voices of Australia's first peoples. Charles Harris stands out in four ways.

First, his life is a story of struggle – a struggle to survive. On the one hand a struggle against the odds, given the appalling assimilationist and dubious protection policies for Aboriginal and Islanders in Queensland; and having to struggle to maintain his aboriginality in a white dominated church. On the other hand, it was a struggle for rather than against: he awakened the church to listen to the voice of Indigenous peoples; he responded to the presenting historical issues such as land rights; he reminded all Australians of the cruel dispossession of his peoples when white settlers justified their claims to a land that was supposedly empty; and he transcended the disparate voices of his own Indigenous community when it was divided within itself. On a grand scale, Charles struggled for the recognition of the longest living culture in the world.

Second, Charles is an exemplar of true servant leadership, one who humbly advanced the purposes of God and created history. Anne Patel-Gray said in her Foreword, "Charles was before his time, a pioneer with vision and extraordinary leadership". All who think that leadership is the essence of ministry should read this book. True leaders never forget their origins no matter how humble. Charles finished school at sixth grade but went on to fulfill all the requirements for ordination. He knew that a leader respects difference, is patient enough to convince others to embrace a larger vision, and knows when to say no despite the pain of having to stand aside colleagues who choose alternative paths. Above all Charles led the way forward after listening to others and then empowered them to journey with him along new paths. His was the driving force behind the extraordinary "March for Truth Freedom and Justice" of over 30,000 people on 26 January 1988 as part of the bicentenary celebrations.

Advance Notice

2020 Annual General Meeting

The Society's next Annual General Meeting will be held in Queensland at the Alexandra Park Conference Centre (13 Mari St, Alexandra Headland) on the Sunshine Coast. It is anticipated that it will occur during the Queensland Synod meeting between 23 and 26 October 2020. More information later.

The **Annual Public Forum** will be held in conjunction with the AGM; at this stage we are still exploring the options for the Forum, but we are hoping that it will relate to truth-telling and the role of history and historians in redressing trauma such as that arising from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse.

Third Biennial Conference

The Third Biennial Conference of the Society will be held at the Centre for Ministry, North Parramatta, N.S.W., 11–13 June 2021. The theme is "Growing Up Uniting". Mark in it your diary!

Annual Fees 2020

Members are reminded that the annual fee is \$20, and that 2020's fee will be due very soon. The preferred method of paying is by bank transfer: BSB 032-828 A/c 301985. Please remember to add your name so that your payment is identified, and please send an email to Bob Coote (bandybc@gmail.com). Alternatively, please send a cheque to the Treasurer, PO Box 2, Wentworth Falls, NSW, 2782, including your details.

(Book review: continued)

Third, Charles' leadership style enabled him to be a consummate networker as he shared his dream of a "fellowship of Aboriginal congregations" first across Queensland and then across the nation. This larger vision coalesced when he spent time at Nungalinga College in Darwin and witnessed the vibrant Christian presence of communities in Arnhem Land. He then inspired the emerging Indigenous leadership around Australia to speak with a clear voice. Thus was born the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

Fourth, Charles always knew when to move on. He readily transitioned from ministering in a rural environment to the complexities of an urban society. He heeded the need to be more thoroughly equipped as a Minister of the Gospel but never abandoned his evangelical roots. He flowered as an advocate for justice, especially after being tested in the fire of the Noonkanbah confrontation and was perhaps the first to talk of 'holistic evangelism'. Charles Harris was indeed a man of abiding faith, infectious hope and all-embracing sacrificial love.

I strongly commend this book to all. It is available from Mediacom. (PO Box 610, Unley 5061, S.A.: toll free: 1-800-811-31; Email address: admin@mediacom.org.au)

Jonathan Barker

(Reproduced with permission from the South Australian Uniting Church Historical Society's publications.)

News from the Northern Territory

Darwin-based historian and retired lecturer from Nungalinga College, Rev. Dr John Kadiba has published his latest work through Charles Sturt University, *People's Man: The Life Story of the Rev. Sir Leslie Tanaboe Boseto*. It is the story of the first Melanesian Moderator of the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, a pastor, a prophet, and a politician. Kadiba uses Sir Leslie's own words in sections. As part of Sir Leslie's story, Kadiba also relates the history of the Methodist mission in the western Solomon Islands that grew into a region of the United Church.



Rev. Steve Orme

Two reviews are available at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=oRvIxQEACAAJ&sitesec=reviews>. One is by the Rev. Professor Dean Drayton from Sydney, and the other by Nick Thompson from Feilding in New Zealand. (From Steve Orme, Society Board member from the N.T.)

News from Queensland



At the Queensland Synod held in May 2019, the Rev. Kaye Ronalds, former Moderator and currently Minister at Stanthorpe, and the Rev. Dr Julia Pitman, Minister at St Paul's and Armitage, Mackay, and Queensland representative on the Board of the UCNHS, called for interested people to join a new history group for the

Queensland Synod. A group of about 35 people is the result. The group will provide a forum for networking, discussion, and collaboration about the history and archives of the Uniting Church in Australia and its antecedent churches, particularly in the Queensland Synod, but also about topics in church history beyond the Uniting Church as well. The group has promoted the UC national history society conference and will provide occasional information about church history, including opportunities to share projects, and to promote activities, events and publications. Current projects by members include:

- Julia Pitman and committee on the St Paul's, Mackay, sesquicentenary (150 year) history, 1872-2022
- Kaye Ronalds on Norma Spear, the only woman Methodist minister in Queensland
- Noel Adsett OAM on the honour rolls of St Andrew's, Brisbane
- Kath Warner on the history of Shannon Memorial Park Youth Camp, Toowoomba, 1954-98, Presbyterian Church of Queensland, and
- Simon Gomersall, Lecturer in Historical and Contemporary Mission and Director of Activate (Gap Year Program), Trinity College Queensland, who has published an article, 'Postcards from the Past' in *Journey* (magazine of the Queensland Synod), 23 August 2019.

Recent publications include:

Julia Pitman and Peter Bentley, 'Women Ministers Before 1977: An Update', *Church Heritage: historical journal of the Uniting Church in Australia – NSW / ACT*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2019, pp. 21-41.

Kaye Ronalds and Julia Pitman, 'Triumph over Isolation: the Rev. Norma Spear, the only woman Minister in the Methodist Church in Queensland', *Church Heritage: historical journal of the Uniting Church in Australia – NSW / ACT*, vol. 20, no. 3, March 2018, pp. 173-88.

Julia Pitman, 'The ordination of Constance Coltman in international perspective', *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, November 2017, pp. 16-28.

News from Victoria

The UC Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Historical Society inherited the mantle of the Methodist Church's historical society and was established by the Rev. Dr Max O'Connor and the Rev. Professor Ian Breward. Max O'Connor was the Methodist Church's Archivist and Ian Breward became the Archivist for the Uniting Church later.

The Society publishes twice a year the *Proceedings* of the Society, and this is its 26th year of publication by the same editor, the Rev. Robert Renton. Prior to the *Proceedings*, the Society published a number of single topic booklets. The Society has also published a number of books, including:

Dancing to Damnation: Harold Wood and John Woodhouse in the fight to lift the ban on dancing on Methodist Church property (Noel Jackling)

Aboriginal People and the Church: A collection of documents of the early years of the 20th century from the Uniting Church Archives (Ed. Robert Renton)

Art and Religion in North East Arnhem Land (Edgar Wells)

Kuanua Stories: Stories of events, customs and fables from the New Guinea district (Collected by the Rev. Wesley Sutton and translated by Rev. Dr Phyllis Gorfine)

Missionary Memories (Phyllis Gorfine)

The Society runs four activities a year, usually three lectures and a guided tour of worship places in and around Melbourne. The tours have become quite a highlight of the year, and have attracted people from across Melbourne and suburbs who are not members of the Society.

We also have some interstate members.

Not the first national UCA history society

Working at the Victorian Synod Archives I was interested to discover that there was an earlier national UCA history society established in 1988. What happened to it I don't know, as I couldn't find any records of it meeting. Perhaps it was one of those committees of the Assembly that died a natural death due to lack of interest or membership? (Editor)

The Rev. (later Dr) T. Max O'Connor, who was the Victorian Synod's Archivist, sent the following memorandum to the "member or delegates, Assembly Historical Committee".

"A meeting of the Assembly Historical Society will be held, Monday, May 23 1988, between 2.45 pm and 7.15 pm in the Stafford Room, Dining Hall, Queen's College, Parkville. The College is providing a buffet meal for those attending the meeting.

The purpose of the meeting will be to advance the historical and archival activities of the Uniting Church through the work of the Historical Committee. The agenda will therefore be deliberately flexible but should include the following items:

- a) The Constitution of the Committee, its relationship to the Assembly including future location within the Assembly agenda and business sessions.
- b) Finance and membership.
- c) Rotation of the Executive of the Committee.
- d) Preparation of a programme for the 1988–1990 Triennium.
- e) Create a mechanism for the preparation and publication of church history at Assembly level; the co-ordination and cataloguing of historical and archival material in the possession of the denomination; liaison for the Uniting Church with government bodies funding historical activities.

Advice of your attendance at the meeting and any further items for the agenda will be appreciated".

Parramatta Mission



Elizabeth de Reland graduated in December 2018 with a PhD from the School of Theology at Charles Stuart University. Her thesis topic was on the 200-year history of Parramatta Mission. Elizabeth's study paid particular attention to the Mission's

commitment to social activism stemming from its Wesleyan–Methodist roots and explored the relationship between the church and civic authorities as both sought the 'common good' for Australia's second oldest European settlement. She is currently preparing her thesis for publication under the title 'Holiness and Hard Work: A History of Parramatta Mission, 1815–2015.'

Western Australia news

Nine people met on 6 August 2019 for the first gathering of the WA Network of the Uniting Church National Church History Society (UCNHS). Synod Archivist Sheena Hesse spoke about the recent UCNHS Conference, including the very interesting presentation by Steve and Judy Orme "After the war, peace finds a home in Darwin Uniting Church", accompanied by their PowerPoint presentation.

We agreed to meet from 2-3 times a year.

The next gathering will be held on Thursday 14 November from 3.00–4.30pm in the Ron Wilson Room, Uniting Church Centre, Edward St, Perth

Judith Amey will speak about her research into the men named in the memorial window at St Aiden's

Uniting Church in Claremont. This was published in 2017 as *The Men in the Window: World War 1 memorial window, St Aidan's Church, Claremont.*



Enquiries to the Rev. Dr Alison Longworth at

longw@iinet.net.au or 0488 935 666.

News and Notes

Selina Countess of Huntingdon and 18th century Methodism



Glen O'Brien presented a paper on Selina Countess of Huntingdon at the Australian Collaborators in Feminist Theology Conference on *Power, Authority, Love* held at the Centre for Theology and Ministry in Parkville on 11-12 October. Surveys of Christian History and the textbooks that support them are normally told from the perspective of male actors with women consigned to the footnotes. How might the teaching of Christian history be different if this pattern were reversed? Could the fourth-century Christian period be studied through St. Monica with Augustine in the background or the Medieval period through Julian of Norwich or Catherine of Sienna with Aquinas and Abelard in the footnotes? Dr O'Brien's paper attempted one chapter in such an alternative history through an exploration of the life and work of Selina the Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791) who formed and led an eighteenth-century Methodist Connexion distinct from that of John Wesley. It sought to explain Methodism as a religious movement through the agency of one particular woman with male protagonists viewed only in relation to and as subsets of women's agency and to explore the power, authority, and love that operated in eighteenth-century Methodism through a case study of one its most prominent women leaders.

Meredith Lake wins Prime Minister's prize



ABC RN [Soul Search](#) presenter and academic Meredith Lake collected the Australian History prize for her book *The Bible in Australia: a cultural history*. Lake said when public debate about the national history curriculum was in full swing she decided to write the book as an antidote to the so-called culture wars.

She said the phrase "Bible basher" had been coined in Australia and her research revealed Australians still held passionate and varied opinions about the Bible.

"[There exists] the idea of Australia as a somehow Christian nation adrift from its Judeo-Christian moorings, a nation whose freedoms may be somehow under threat. On the other hand, the idea of a Godless or secular nation in which religious belief has been at best weird and is best now put behind us [also prevails]," she said.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-23/emily-rodda-gail-jones-books-win-prime-ministers-literary-awards/11630426?section=arts-culture>

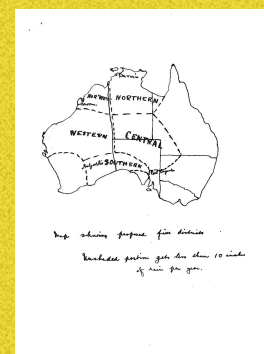
John Flynn's letter

On June 25 in 1912 the Rev. John Flynn wrote an eight page letter to a Mr Rolland as he steamed back to Melbourne from Adelaide where the Presbyterian General Assembly of Australia had been held. The following is an extract. At the end of his letter was his drawing of how he envisaged Australia being divided into five districts for the Bush Mission.

"I feel that the next Assembly is to be very critical as far as Bush Mission is concerned. We have now:

1. Report from myself re N.T. I am now commissioned directly by Australian H.M.C., and at any rate a partial report is to be included in the White Book by then.
2. Forward overture from S.A. for man at Oodnadatta.
3. Representation by S.A. for man or men at Port Augusta and East-West Railway.
4. Overture from W.A. re man for their end of East-West Railway.
5. Recommendation from you, as I understand already requested re North West of W.A.

Now what I have urged at the Aust. H.M. Executive is that these affairs will have to be harmonised or they will clash...."



★ The Board

The Society has a Board that consists of the Rev. Dr Glen O'Brien (President, Vic.), Dr Judith Raftery (Secretary, S.A.), Mr Bob Coote (Treasurer, N.S.W.), the Rev. Dr Julia Pitman (Qld), the Rev. Steve Orme (N.T.), Dr Patricia Curthoys (N.S.W.), the Rev. Dr Alison Longworth (W.A.), the Rev. Dr William Emilsen (Past President, N.S.W.), and the Rev. Robert Renton (Vic./Tas.).

We meet via telephone conferencing approximately every two months.

★ Membership

Membership of the Society is open to all interested in history and the history of the Uniting Church and its preceding denominations in particular.

As a member you support the preservation and promotion of the history of the UCA and facilitate further research and reflection into that history.

Cost is \$20 annually, paid directly into the Society's account BSB 032-828 A/c 301985 (remember to include your name) or sent to the Hon. Treasurer, PO Box 2, Wentworth Falls, NSW 2782.

Why Uniting Church history matters: the Gordon Rowe lecture for 2014 (William W. Emilsen)

We plan to publish with each newsletter articles or stories that are relevant to people across Australia. Our first selection is a lecture that was given at the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, Brooklyn Park, South Australia, during the Presbytery/Synod meeting, Friday 31 October 2014. It was published by the Historical Society of the Uniting Church in South Australia, and has been reproduced with permission.

Let me begin at the end. Let me say that you cannot be a Christian without history, you cannot 'do' Christianity apart from the history of the Church, and you cannot effectively pass on the faith to the next generation without knowledge of your roots. Warwick Hadfield, one of my favourite sporting commentators, said recently on Radio National that "a sporting club that loses its history loses its soul". The Church is not a sporting club but I am inclined to believe that Hadfield's comment holds true for the Uniting Church as well.

When I started teaching at United Theological College in Sydney 22 years ago, there was no subject on the Uniting Church's history being offered in any of our colleges. In one sense, this was not surprising: the Uniting Church was then not quite sixteen years old. However, I discovered that many of the students coming into the college had almost no knowledge of the Uniting Church's brief history or of its three predecessor churches. Among them, for example, were Anglican women disillusioned with the Sydney Diocese's attitude to women's ordination, students with almost no church background at all other than being 'touched' by the Charismatic Movement, and Methodist students from Tonga, Fiji, Samoa and elsewhere in the Pacific, and Korean Presbyterians whose home churches were very different culturally from the Uniting Church. In more recent times there are students entering college from Africa, the Middle East and the United States with little or no knowledge of the Uniting Church.

In 1994, therefore, we developed the subject "Uniting Church Studies". The following year, we established the journal of the same name to support the teaching of the subject and to foster thoughtful scholarship on the Uniting Church. Without giving it a great deal of thought at the time, I virtually stumbled on what has become the major research focus of my career. It was then that I committed myself to being a historian *for* and *of* the Uniting Church.



I was not unaware that there would be criticism for taking such a decision. The first and most obvious criticism was that the Uniting Church was only half-way through its second decade and it was not considered wise to work on the history of such a young church. It is obviously true that writing about recent events, as well as being a participant in those events, raises difficulties of obtaining proper perspective. That is the risk you take when you attempt to write near or contemporary history, history that goes up to the present. When you are immersed in the life of the Church, often it is difficult to distinguish what is important from what is not—little matters can loom big and great matters can be overlooked. It is no accident that the first full-length history of Anglicanism in Australia was not written until 2002—well over two hundred years after the first Anglican chaplain, Richard Johnson, landed on these shores.

There were other criticisms as well. Uniting Church history could very easily be seen as a kind of ‘identity history’. Identity history is history which tells the story of oppressed peoples because of their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, race or religion. Usually, the aim of identity history is to promote liberation, generate pride and reinforce loyalty. As someone who had made a conscious decision to join the Uniting Church and who was ordained soon after the Church was established, there was the perceived danger that my teaching and writing might offer a less critical perspective than it should. The distinguished European historian, Eric Hobsbawm, says that there are two cardinal sins for a historian: the first is to lie or knowingly suppress the truth; the other is to “isolate the history of one part of humanity—the historian’s own, whether by birth or choice—from a wider context”. (See Eric

★ The objectives of the Society

To promote and advance the study of history of the UCA and its predecessor churches.

To encourage and facilitate research into and publication of the history of the UCA and its predecessor churches.

To organise conferences, public lectures and workshops.

To establish connections with other national and international history organisations.

To award prizes and scholarships which advance public knowledge of UCA history, including the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize for excellence in church history.

To draw to the attention of the Assembly significant dates, events and people in the history of the UCA and its predecessor churches, with the aspiration that appropriate resources may be provided for the celebration of or reflection on their relevance to the contemporary life of the UCA.

To do all things necessary, including fund-raising, to enable the UCNHS to meet these objectives.



Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) 276

Hobsbawm argues rightly, I believe, when he says that a professional historian has a duty to the whole of humanity which overrides his or her group loyalties. “A history which is designed *only* for Jews (or African-Americans, or Greeks, or women, or proletarians, or homosexuals [or, for that matter, Uniting Church people]) cannot be good history, though it may be comforting history to those who practise it”. (Hobsbawm, 277) The challenge was to write history of and for the Uniting Church without ignoring its bigger context.

Even within the Uniting Church there were similar concerns about the value of focusing on Uniting Church history. These criticisms were never directed personally at me but, nevertheless, they went with the ecumenical climate of the time. In the afterglow of Church Union there was considerable prejudice against writing denominational history; it was seen as working against the ecumenical spirit of the age. T.V. Philip, a Brisbane-based church historian committed to doing history from an ‘ecumenical perspective’, expressed the prevailing view: “The denominational or confessional approach to history is essentially a communalistic and not a catholic one. It is a distortion of history, exaggerated and often triumphalistic”. (T.V. Philip, “Church History in Ecumenical Perspective”, in *The Teaching of Ecumenics*, ed. Samuel Amirtham and Cyris H.S. Moon (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1987), 46–47) It is easy to forget that the early 1990s was a time when there was a real questioning of denominationalism in ecumenical circles. Denominational distinctiveness was said to be fading and denominational loyalty loosening. The National Christian Life Survey regularly published statistics at that time showing the extent of denominational defection. Within a church that was committed to ecumenism, denominational history was not readily welcomed nor highly regarded.

Despite these difficulties, we decided to go ahead and foster studies on the Church’s history. The first part of my lecture will trace the development of the discipline and is somewhat personal. The second part has something of an apologetic tone as it seeks to outline the reasons why I have come to believe that the study of Church History, and more particularly, Uniting Church history, matters very much.

The development of Uniting Church Studies

When we started out teaching about the Uniting Church we were entering uncharted waters. Unlike subjects such as Early Church History or Reformation History or Australian History, where there are scores of excellent books that one could be recommended to first-year students, there was almost nothing on the Uniting Church—apart from the considerable amount of scholarly work on the Basis of Union. (See my “Engaging the Basis: An Overview”, *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, December 2011, i–viii.) There was the Brisbane journalist, John Harrison’s *Baptism of Fire* (1986), some reflections from the time of the tenth anniversary, and David Merritt’s immensely popular booklet, *Understanding the Uniting Church in Australia*, but there was very little else. There were no established landmarks, no recognised turning points, no theorising—scarcely any analysis of the Uniting Church’s life.

In a first attempt to remedy this situation urgently, in 1995, we set about preparing a two-volume collection



of "Sources for Uniting Church Studies". They consisted of letters, sermons, articles, pamphlets, interviews, verse, reports, prayers, statistics, jokes and even cartoons. The first volume dealt with the pre-union period: the distinctive characteristics of the three predecessor churches, church union discussions, the formation of the Basis of Union, and the events leading up to and surrounding 22 June 1977. The second volume covered events after Church Union and the sources for it were more difficult to select: it dealt with the debate over whether or not the Uniting Church ought to celebrate the bicentenary of Australia, the formation of the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, the emergence of the Uniting Church as a multicultural church, the *Bulletin* controversy in January 1983 which arose from an article claiming that various left-wing leaders of the Uniting Church, heavily influenced by liberation theology, were leading the Church astray. The second volume also included documents on various controversial topics such as bishops in the Uniting Church, the ordination of women, and the then popular slogan "Risking the Way of Jesus".

Two years later, just in time for the 1997 Assembly in Perth, we edited *Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977–1997*. (Please forgive me if I draw mostly upon examples from my own work, but that, after all, is the thing I know best.) *Marking Twenty Years* rose out of a symposium held in May of that year to 'mark' the first twenty years of the Uniting Church. It asked: What had the Uniting Church learnt and achieved in its first twenty years? What were the critical issues now facing the Church? What were the possible futures of this so-called 'Australian' Church? *Marking Twenty Years* covers all the areas that the Assembly then had responsibility for: indigenous affairs, education, multiculturalism, women, worship, heritage, social responsibility, ecumenism, mission, evangelism and doctrine, plus a couple of others that lay beyond its direct focus such as children and youth. *Marking Twenty Years* contains many valuable insights into and much information about the early Uniting Church, especially in the twenty-year overviews on the history of mission, ecumenism, multiculturalism, education, worship and doctrine and the nuggets to be found in Davis McCaughey's keynote address titled, "If I had known then what I know now" and Ian Breward's challenge to the church not to leave the next generation debt-ridden and spiritually malnourished.

The first attempt to write a critical history of the Uniting Church came six years later, in time for the Melbourne Assembly in 2003, with the publication of *The Uniting Church in Australia: The first twenty-five years*. There are eight chapters in this book: one on the Assembly and one each on the then seven synods. All the authors are active participants in the Uniting Church. Most wrote as 'onlookers', but a couple of them might be more accurately described as 'axe-grinders', intent on scoring some personal or theological point. (One reader of the chapter on the Queensland Synod was so enraged that he rang and threatened to sue me as editor of the volume.) This was a timely book, completed just before the synods of Victoria and Tasmania combined, and just before there were huge changes in several synods. It showed how the synods had developed quite different identities within such a short space of time.

Let me jump over to the most recent book on the Uniting Church that I have edited and written for. It is called *An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the beginning of the twenty-first century*. This book was launched by the Assembly President about three months ago. Its title comes from paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union and expresses the hope that the Uniting Church will value literary, scientific and historical scholarship as part of its mission. The subtitle "The Uniting Church at the beginning of the twenty-first century" is an attempt to lay down a 'marker' for the Uniting Church as it sets forth on its pilgrimage into the twenty-first century.

An Informed Faith is an attempt to deal with new topics in the life of the church that have not previously been discussed or even thought about a decade ago. For example, ten years ago, the new Preamble to the Church's Constitution did not exist; Progressive Christianity was only beginning to gain a foothold; the new Evangelical body, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations had not come into being; CALD, the acronym for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities was not part of the Uniting Church's lexicon; and the Church's ecological engagement was just gaining momentum.

There are thirteen chapters in *An Informed Faith*. Each chapter deals with a 'big' theme (such as those just mentioned) and in many cases are the first time ever that the topic has been seriously discussed. For example, Katharine Massam, Professor of Church History at the Uniting Church Theological College in Melbourne, has a chapter on Uniting Church spirituality. As far as I am aware it is the first time that this topic has been addressed. Drs Miriam Pepper and Jason John's chapter on the Uniting Church's ecological engagement is also a first. Professor Marion Maddox from Macquarie University and a well-known author of *God Under Howard* (2005) and *Taking God to School* (2014) has written a chapter on Uniting Church schools, an important topic that has not received much scholarly attention. With the enormous interest on Islam at present, my own chapter on the Uniting Church's relations with other religions was screaming out to be written.

One of the distinguishing features of *An Informed Faith* is that many of its chapters are supplemented with up-to-date data from a nation-wide survey of Uniting Church ministers and leaders that Professor Rodney Smith and I conducted in the second half of 2012. Rodney Smith's chapter on the Uniting Church's engagement with politics is a good example of his use of the survey. There he highlights some of the reasons why the left-leaning tenor of Uniting Church's political statements has failed to impact on the voting patterns of Uniting Church people.

It is clear that the works published on the early history of the Uniting Church thus far are, to use the American historian Barbara Tuchman's image, like wine made from "the first pressings of the grapes". (Barbara Tuchman, *Practising History* (London, Macmillan, 1983), 28.) They have character and colour and a goodly mixture of sugars and acids, sometimes a little fizz, but it has not been aged or matured. The hope is that they will capture some of the characteristics of a generation and make them comprehensible to future generations. But more than that, I wanted to show why I believe that the study of Church History, and Uniting Church history in particular, is important to the life and mission of the Church in the present; in other words, why Uniting Church history matters.

Why Uniting Church history matters

Of course, there is a part of me that resists having to put forward a defence of one's own discipline. Some historians, I know, would object to the very idea that history should have to be useful. History, they say, is like art or religion—an activity that any civilised society should sponsor for its own sake, not because it serves some purpose. Some, like British historian A.J.P. Taylor, believed that history is an enjoyable exercise which had no use whatsoever beyond helping us to understand the past. To defend Church History on utilitarian grounds is to accept the ground rules of the bean counters or to lock horns with those who are hostile to the preservation of Church's memory. However, in times of economic stringency, Church History must fight for its continued existence, otherwise the field will be left open to those who abuse history. For me the most convincing arguments for Church History, and more particularly Uniting Church history, centre on four key ideas: building Christian identity, expanding one's theological resources, developing cultural sensitivity, and theological accountability.

Church History builds Christian identity

Firstly, history is fundamental for forming personal and corporate memory: it tells us who we are. As you are aware, the Uniting Church consists of many cultures. It proudly proclaims itself a multicultural church. Although it is a mosaic of cultures, subcultures and heritages, the study of the Church's history helps students and others to understand that beneath the Church's celebrated diversity there are core beliefs and practices that we hold in common. Uniting Church history asks fundamental questions for and of the denomination: Who are we as Uniting Church people? Where did we come from? How did we get to this place? And, 'Where are we headed?'

The study of Christian history is very important for developing and transforming Christian identity. It helps

us to understand how institutions evolve and work. It inculcates a sense of ecclesial literacy.

Without a shared identity the Church soon falls apart. The splitting away of the O'Connor parish in Canberra from the Uniting Church in 1994 illustrates the dangers of a lack of identity. O'Connor was the largest and best-known Charismatic congregation in Australia. Instinctively, I felt that something very important was happening at the time. My late wife Susan and I decided to drive to Canberra to speak with the leaders of the two groups, the majority group who had left the Uniting Church and the rump who had stayed. They both agreed to us writing the history of the O'Connor church leading up to the split and gave us unfettered access to their excellent archives. The short history that resulted clearly demonstrated that the Uniting Church's identity was too fragile at that time to cope with the full force of the Charismatic Movement. History doesn't necessarily repeat itself, but one of the many lessons that can be learnt from the O'Connor story is that identity is vital to the well-being of the Uniting Church. (See Susan Emilsen and William W. Emilsen, *O'Connor: Exploring the History of a Uniting Church Congregation* (North Parramatta, UTC Publications, 1997). In a very fine article written shortly before the O'Connor split, Ian Breward warned, "Without that capacity for thinking historically, we lose our community memory. Our identity becomes shaped solely by the present and, like people who lose their memory, we become confused and disoriented". (Ian Breward, *Enhancing Our Memory* (Melbourne, Uniting Church Historical Society, 1993), 1)

Of course identity is not a fixed thing; even a cursory examination of the Uniting Church's history shows that it has defined and redefined itself over time as it has responded to internal developments like the Charismatic Movement and the growth of migrant-ethnic congregations, or to outside pressures like the Global Financial Crisis. One very clear example of this changing identity is the Assembly's decision in 1985 to name the Uniting Church a 'multicultural church'; such a change would have scarcely been dreamt about in 1977.

At the core of the Uniting Church's identity is the *Basis of Union*. It is shown to be the real heroine in *An Informed Faith*. For example, Katharine Massam, in her exploration of Uniting Church spirituality, describes the *Basis* as a "spiritual manifesto" whose vision continues to provide "zest and energy" to the Church. Michael Owen holds up the *Basis* as the foundation stone for the Church's life, unity and mission. And Tony Floyd challenges the Church to "hold its nerve" and "catch again the vision of hope and trust" that is in the *Basis of Union* in order to recognise the gifts already present in its culturally and linguistically diverse peoples.

Church History expands one's theological resources

Uniting Church history not only helps to establish identity, it is also important for expanding one's community and access to the knowledge and wisdom of other Christians. The study of Church History generally broadens our experience of Christian community as we come to know our brothers and sisters from different nations and across the centuries. Church History makes the Communion of Saints real. An important part of Uniting Church history is the study of other united and uniting churches around the world; we draw on the experience of other ecumenically-minded people. When the Church is faced with difficult decisions, such as those over baptism, leaders can, if they know their history, draw upon the Church's wisdom for guidance and help. The study of Christian history also helps us when there are no clear answers to difficult questions and where no consensus exists. It prevents us from taking hasty decisions and making harsh judgments, realising that there are some contentious issues within the tradition that have never been resolved. The study of Christian history helps us to live more effectively in our own church community and introduces us to a larger and richer treasury of wisdom than we could possibly imagine. Our history nourishes our minds and lifts up our souls. It gives us confidence and great resources in a post-modern and uncertain world.

Church history develops cultural sensitivity

The study of Church history not only endows us with a sense of who we are and provides us with access to the treasures of the Christian tradition, it also stretches our imaginative capacity to understand

others. The forces of globalisation which threaten the survival of ethnic, national and local communities, also increases the need for intercultural understanding. The skills required to cross the border between the past and the present are similar to those needed to transcend cultural differences. "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" the English novelist L.P. Hartley once wrote. History forces us to examine our own values and achievements and not to assume arrogantly that our values, methods and achievements are better than theirs. Every historian recognises the thrill and the challenge of stepping into a past world where suddenly all our preconceptions about right and wrong, up and down, are overturned. For example, it is not possible to understand Aboriginal culture without some appreciation of skin names. Discerning patterns from incomplete data, reconstructing motives and ideas from hints and gestures, looking for unstated assumptions behind the words—these are the skills of the historian, but they are also indispensable for leaders in a multicultural church.

Church history makes us theologically accountable

Finally, church history helps us to be theologically accountable. Almost everyone has heard of George Santayana's famous dictum, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Santayana's line is over-quoted by those who want to sound profound, but the saying is essentially true, because it alerts us to situations that have caused problems in the past. Theological knowledge of the past gives the Church direction: without history people are left wondering what the way forward is, or even if there is a way forward. Church history helps us to challenge dogmatic statements and dominant ideologies; and it helps us to think more clearly. History, generally, inculcates a healthy propensity to question ourselves and our leaders. Sometimes it is like a judge. It not only vindicates when the Church keeps in mind that it does not exist for itself; it can also judge when the Church is carried away with hubris and a sense of entitlement cloaked in rectitude. There is a real danger that the Church will find itself "stranded in the present". (Peter Fritzche, *Stranded in the Present* (Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 2004).) This simply means that there is an assumption in the Church that change means progress. My students who have done studies of the Moderators' column and General Secretaries' newsletters, for example, are astounded at how often the word 'change' is mentioned. Uniting Church people are constantly being urged to 'change'. Is there not a risk of cultural relativism here? Change does not necessarily mean progress, nor does it mean direction; and forward motion does not necessarily mean upward motion to a better vantage point or to a place where there is more light. "Stranded in the present" means amnesia, the loss of any meaningful connection with what has gone before. The past merely becomes a strange and distant country, full of odd beliefs and quaint customs.

Conclusion

Christianity is a religion of history, a religion of time. The Christian faith has its sources in the wellsprings of history. Much of what the Bible expects of us can be comprised in one word: 'Remember'. Remember the Christ who died for you. Remember the tradition from which you have sprung. Remember the well-trodden path of our forebears. Remember the living God.

History is the arena in which revelation and divine providence occurs. It is the arena in which we seek to be attentive to God's way of drawing near to us: we are called to 'remember' and to do so for the sake of a covenanted future.

Uniting Church people have an inheritance from centuries of Christian belief and practice. The Church cannot afford to ignore or lose this history. Davis McCaughey, first President of the Assembly, understood this perfectly well. He concluded his sermon at the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Sydney in 1977 with the opening words from Jurgen Moltmann's preface to *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*: "This book is intended to help the Church to find its bearings ... The fundamental questions have to be answered afresh: Where do you come from? Where are you going? Who are you?"

McCaughey then goes on to say:

“Union means nothing, absolutely nothing, unless it drives us back to those questions. Where do you come from? From the hand of the living God who engaged with men [*sic*] in a new way through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of his Spirit. Where are you going? To make disciples of all nations; to fulfil the commission with which we have been charged. Who are you? A people with whom the same Christ has promised that he will be present to the close of the ages. Are you and I prepared to find our bearings afresh? They are not too difficult to discern. They are not far from us; but they provide far-reaching indications of the way in which we should walk. To that pilgrimage we are committed.” (J. Davis McCaughey, “Christ’s Commission”, 22 June 1977, *Inaugural Addresses, The Uniting Church in Australia*, 1977, reprinted in *Sources for Uniting Church Studies*, Volume 1, (Enhancing Our Memory, United Theological College, 1995), 225–226.)

McCaughey’s questions, where do you come from? where are you going? who are you? show us the value of history. To adapt the words of Warwick Hadfield mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, if the Uniting Church were to lose its history and its corporate memory, it could lose its soul.

William W. Emilsen is an Associate Professor in Church History and World Religions at Charles Sturt University and a Principal Researcher with its Public and Contextual Research Centre.

His most recent publication is a biography of the Rev. Charles Harris —*Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice* (Unley S.A., MediaCom Education Inc, 2019).



At the 2019 conference

The history of St Philip's College

Rev. John Lamont

Many people throughout the Uniting Church have a special love for central Australia and the work of the church throughout northern Australia; be it through the work of Frontier Services or its predecessors the Federal Methodist Inland Mission and the Australian Inland Mission of the Presbyterian Church.



I count myself among them, my association with the inland beginning when our family first went to Alice Springs in 1980 after I accepted a call to be the minister of the John Flynn Memorial Church. During my time there I also served on the council at St Philip's College and continued to maintain an association with the college after leaving the Northern Territory to continue ministry in Victoria.

A little over 10 years ago my wife Alison and I were commissioned by St Philip's to write the college history, the school receiving a grant from the Northern Territory Government to help fund the project. The history is now published and was launched in Alice Springs on 15 March with subsequent launches in each capital city.

St Philip's College is a Uniting Church secondary school and is one of the truly great stories of the church's mission in the north in its endeavour to provide educational choices for outback children. St Philip's was established as a hostel in 1965, providing accommodation for bush kids from right across the north who were then able to attend schools of their choice in Alice Springs. But this mission had its origins even earlier than 1965. Griffiths House was built by the Methodist Church in 1940 and following World War 2 became a hostel for bush kids wanting to attend school in Alice Springs. It would morph into St Philip's in 1965 and its history is including in the St Philip's story. One of the houses at St Philip's is named Griffiths.

Three great figures of the church were involved in the establishment of Griffiths House and St Philip's: the Rev Harry Griffiths, the Rev. Dr John Flynn and the Rev. Dr Fred McKay. Griffiths came to Alice Springs in 1933 and built the first church in the town and apart from his town ministry he established a far reaching patrol ministry throughout the north that made him famous. Together with his wife Dorothy they once travelled from Adelaide to Wyndham and across to Mt Isa before returning to Alice. Dorothy, in particular, had a passion for education and often conducted classes for station children on their patrol visits.

It was not, however, a vision for education that led initially to the establishment of Griffiths House hostel. It was for young single workers in town in need of accommodation. However, no sooner had it been built the war intervened and it became an army welfare club for the many troops stationed in Alice en route to Darwin. By the time the war ended there had been numerous inquiries from parents in remote areas to use Griffiths House to board their children for schooling. It was for this purpose that it operated as a hostel for the next 20 years until the establishment of St Philip's which was on a bigger site.

The development of St Philip's was a co-operative venture between the three participating members of the United Church in North Australia (Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational), a fine example of ecumenical co-operation occurring in the north long before the establishment of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977.

The Rev. Dr John Flynn, the founder of the Australian Inland Mission of the Presbyterian Church, was a household name during his lifetime and his image is on our \$20 note. He is widely credited for breaking down the barriers of isolation in the inland. His so-called “Mantle of Safety” across the outback helped establish medical services, hospitals, radio communications and the Royal Flying Doctor. His first patrol padres went out on camels to make contact with people who very often did not have contact with anyone from the wider world for months on end and sometimes years. It fired Flynn’s imagination to bring services to these people, especially medical.

So what has John Flynn got to do with St Philip’s College? Well not much really, for he died in 1951 some 14 years before St Philip’s was established, but it could be argued that without Flynn there would be no St Philip’s. While he understood the need for medical services, communications and reliable transport for bush people, he also understood the need for parents to have their children educated and their frustrations that there were no facilities available.

While there was little he could do in practical terms during his lifetime, Flynn had established such a great reputation for the work of the church among bush people that his mantle was able to be taken up by his successor as Superintendent of the AIM, the Rev. Dr Fred McKay. McKay was the driving force behind the establishment of St Philip’s as he had been in the building of the Flynn Memorial Church in Alice. Among his many great attributes, Fred McKay was a practical man, an entrepreneur, who knew how to inspire people to help with a given task. During the construction stage of the new college he camped on site and organised almost 300 volunteers from around Australia to come and work in order to have it ready to commence at the beginning of 1965. This work party tradition has continued and there are still groups of volunteers who travel to St Philip’s each year during the mid-year semester break to help out with general maintenance of the facilities.

McKay’s vision was that St Philip’s would be known as a college, not a hostel, and that it would eventually become a full boarding school. Late in his life he was able to witness that when it began as a secondary school in 1989 under the leadership of Chris Tudor. Chris came to St Philip’s in 1986 and three years later was able to open the college as a school with an initial intake of over 140 students. Chris stayed 30 years and in that time St Philip’s has grown to over 700 students with a reputation both nationally and internationally as a school of excellence.

Many people throughout the church have been associated with St Philip’s and Griffiths House. Some have worked as staff and on work parties and have contributed financially. The initial vision of the church to provide educational choices for bush children living in isolation, should never be forgotten. It was often at great financial cost, particularly in the early years, but the church was prepared to do so to maintain its commitment. Such support is no longer required, but the seeds sown have born great fruit in what is the St Philip’s of today.

John Lamont, *The Right Amount of Crazy: St Philip’s College and Griffiths House—75 Years*

(Blackburn, Penfolk Publishing, 2019) — Copies available from St Philip’s College
(0889504511 or email: info@stphilips.nt.edu.au)



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Contributions to this newsletter are welcome, but please send them via email and in MS Word or Apple Pages format only.

Editor: Robert Renton
(robert.renton@bigpond.com)