GROWING UP UNITING

Edited by
Patricia Curthoys
William W. Emilsen

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The Proceedings of the Third Uniting Church
National History Society Conference

11–13 June 2021

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Foreword

People who enter their 40s often ponder over whether their lives are what they had hoped they would be and it's not unusual for there to be disappointments and dashed expectations. Those who entered into church union in 1977 were engaged in a bold and radical experiment, carried aloft by ecumenical ideals that were seen as a witness to the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace as hundreds of years of division were placed in the rear view mirror. Undoubtedly, not all of that idealism has borne fruit, but the wind blows where it wills, and new and unexpected moves of the Spirit have shaped the UCA into what it is today.

The organisers of the Uniting Church National History Society Conference, Growing Up Uniting (Sydney 11–13 June 2021), were eager to hear the voices of the young people of the church, those who had not known the precedent churches but grew up as Uniting Church people. I was delighted to participate in the conference (via Zoom in the comfort of my home office in Melbourne) and to hear these articulate voices speak with passion, conviction, hope, and yes, a little 'holy anger' at times, which was appropriate and necessary. The UCA often laments the absence of young people in our congregations, but it is clear that so many of those who are among us, in every Presbytery and Synod, are outstanding disciples of Christ. They love God and people, and they love the Uniting Church. It was very significant, and perhaps a signpost of the timeliness of our Conference theme, that, soon after the Conference, the Rev Charissa Suli was chosen as President-Elect of the Uniting Church, the youngest person ever to fill that role.

Of course, those who did grow up in Congregationalism, Methodism, or Presbyterianism brought into the new church the wisdom and experience of the larger church's preceding centuries. Their voices have significantly shaped what it has meant for younger people to have grown up Uniting. As community elders they carry

the wisdom of a longer pilgrimage, marked by the overcoming of challenges and a depth of insight that only comes from experience. The word 'radical' is often applied only to young people, but its word origin means, 'back to the roots.' Sometimes the most radical thing a young person can do is have a conversation with their grandmother, whose insights can be, not just nostalgic remembering, but an act of prophetic imagining.

The Conference was also the occasion of the launch of the book, *Growing Up Uniting* (MediaCom, 2021), edited by William W Emilsen and Elizabeth A Watson, which gathers extremely valuable qualitative research on the Uniting Church in Australia. Taken together with this Proceedings volume, we are given a hugely valuable snapshot of the UCA at this stage in its life cycle. The voices of the young and the not-so-young are brought into conversation in this collection, together discerning a way forward for a vibrant future. This will not be a future we determine by our own strategy and cleverness, but something we may together discern of the promises of God. I commend this book to you with joy and gratitude.

(Rev) Associate Professor Glen O'Brien
President, Uniting Church National History Society

Introduction

> [H]istory is not a dead subject. It does not lie there safely in the past for us to look at when the mood takes us. History can be helpful; it can be dangerous. It is wiser to think of history not as a pile of dead leaves or a collection of dusty artefacts but as a pool, sometimes benign, often sulphurous, that lies under the present, silently shaping our institutions, our ways of thought, our likes and dislikes.[1]

The Canadian historian Margaret Macmillan's metaphor of history as a benign or sulphurous pool lying beneath the surface will resonate for many Australians. Being the driest inhabited continent on Earth, Australians are familiar with windmills and artesian bores that tap into precious reserves of groundwater accumulated in massive aquifers under the ground. Groundwater is the main source of drinking-water for Perth as well as many Australian cities and towns. Without it pastoral activities in many regions throughout Australia would cease to exist, native flora and fauna would struggle, and ecosystems would collapse. Although much groundwater is fresh and suitable for drinking and agriculture, some is salty and saturated with chemicals. History is like these great artesian basins of groundwater, sometimes benign, sometimes unpalatable, seeping out in natural springs or forced to the surface by pressure in the rocks.

The sixteen articles in this collection come from the Third Uniting Church National History Society Conference held in Sydney in June 2021 and focus on the theme 'Growing Up Uniting'. They adopt surprisingly different and creative approaches to their subject matter, partly, because the conference organisers encouraged different historical approaches and partly because the conference theme itself bordered on or ventured into contemporary history.

The difficulties with writing contemporary or even near history are not always obvious and need to be briefly reiterated. The first difficulty is the risk of allowing one's personal experiences to colour the way history is interpreted. One's emotional involvement or personal experiences with (say) the Uniting Church, whether they

be for good or bad, can make it hard to be a dispassionate observer. Anger, resentment or a strong sense of injustice may lead to eloquent and powerful polemic but it rarely makes for good history. A positive experience of church can likewise distort one's perspective. For example, almost everyone who took part in the hundreds of church union celebrations around the nation in June 1977 remember the euphoria surrounding the inauguration of the Uniting Church. They experienced it as 'good news', a visionary event, causing the eighteen year-old Andrew Dutney to question, 'Where did the joy come from?'[2] Even a journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the time believed he was witnessing a significant landmark in the nation's history, part of the 'Great Ecumenical Advance'.[3] Very few of those who participated in the 1977 celebrations could have scarcely imagined ten to twenty years later ecumenism being described as 'the Light that Failed' or committed ecumenists fearing the beginnings of an 'ecumenical winter'.[4]

A second and related difficulty with writing near history is that the historian's perspective is vulnerable to new and unexpected events in the church's and possibly the nation's history. It is difficult for the historian to stand back and see the history of the Church as a whole or at least as a defined period. Unlike Glen O'Brien and Hilary Carey's history of Methodism in Australia from the early nineteenth century up to 1977,[5] there is still no possibility of taking a long view on the history of the Uniting Church. Let us give a more concrete example. In 1987, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Uniting Church, the historian Ian Breward made a characteristically cautious listing of its achievements. At one point, however, fervour replaced caution as he signalled the formation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress at the Fourth Assembly in May 1985 as the greatest achievement of its first decade: 'If the UCA had done nothing else', writes Breward, 'but create the Aboriginal and Islander [Christian] Congress at the 1985 Assembly, it would have more than justified its life since 1977.'[6] If Breward were writing in the second decade of the twenty-first century, his assessment of the

1985 Assembly would almost certainly be different. The intervening years in Australian society witnessed a radical transitioning from a mono-cultural perspective to a multicultural perspective and the Uniting Church itself in those years has been transformed by CALD communities and their leaders. Uneasy as it is to say, if the 1985 Assembly marked the turning of a page in the brief history of the Uniting Church, it was not the formation of Congress, important as that may be, it was the Uniting Church's unequivocal declaration of itself as a multicultural church.

The third difficulty affects historians of all generations but for those writing near history, it is particularly problematic. We mean the problem of simply absorbing the assumptions of our times or, at the very least, of those ideas that are treated as 'gospel' within the Uniting Church. Let us illustrate with an example from Henry Reynolds' and Nicholas Clements' recent biography *Tongerlongeter: First Nations Leader and Tasmanian War Hero* (2021).[8] Writing about the various books published on the Black Wars in Tasmania since James Calder's *Account* in 1875, Reynolds castigates a long line of 'bleeding heart' historians who focus on 'the violence and brutality of the settlers' and treat the Tasmanians either as 'a simple or a uniquely peaceful people who sat passively around their camp fires unable to resist and waiting to be shot.'[9] In the light of the Uniting Church's commitment to reconciliation and covenanting and the Uluru *Statement from the Heart's* call for 'truth telling', Reynolds comments are particularly apt:

> Interpretations that concentrate on violence done to the Tasmanians, on massacre and genocide and on their fate as victims, do them less than justice and misunderstand the motivation of both the settlers and government. … They also fail to pay attention to the fact that most of the men working out on the frontier were convict servants who had not chosen to be part of the invasion force and had little to gain from working in dangerous districts without guns or horses. They were understandably terrified by their adversaries, living with levels of acute anxiety. For them there was often a stark and brutal choice of kill or be killed.[10]

The first three chapters in this collection are based on the keynote addresses given at the conference. Each of them adopts hybrid

methodologies to create knowledge and to deal with the challenges of near history. Each of them attempt to stay within the evidence they have generated. The outgoing President of the Uniting Church, Deidre Palmer's 'Creating Christian Communities of Welcome, Hope and Liberation' highlights the importance of listening in near history. Her article is based on listening attentively to nine national 'Around the Table' conversations and one online gathering with a total of some 100 youth and young adults held between July 2019 and June 2021. Palmer's approach clearly demonstrates how empathetic listening to the young can reap a rich harvest of wisdom. The eight 'themes and priorities' to emerge from her chapter: (i) intentional long-term nurturing in Christian discipleship, (ii) creating space for questioning, (iii) intentional conversation, (iv) encouraging intergenerational Christian community, (v) fostering community, (vi) developing a well-informed, prophetic voice, (vii) affirming 'every member ministry', and (viii) exposing young people to a broader experience of church – deserves the closest attention by all councils of the Uniting Church.

The second keynote was delivered by Ruth Powell, Director of NCLS Research Centre. Powell's 'Growing Up Uniting: An inside out perspective' deals with the challenge of near history by adopting a three-pronged interdisciplinary methodology: documentary analysis of the *Basis of Union* and other key Uniting Church statements, personal story and, most importantly, sociological analysis of the 'lived religion' of Uniting Church people in NCLS data collected over the past thirty years. Powell focuses on six prominent themes in the Uniting Church's story that resonate for her and epitomise what is 'beautiful and inspiring about the Uniting Church at its best'; they are, in her words, 'snapshots' of : (i) the 'lived experience' or discipleship of Uniting Church attenders; (ii) the Uniting Church's relationship with First Nations people; (iii) its attitude to ecumenism; (iv) its commitment to multiculturalism; (v) its service to and advocacy on behalf of the community; and (vi) its affirmation of women's ministry. Powell's historical snapshots are cause for celebration and more or

less align with another encouraging trend in NCLS data: that Uniting Church people have a strong vision for the future which, if realised, hold the Church in good stead.

The third keynote was delivered by historian William Emilsen and sociologist Elizabeth Watson. Their chapter 'Growing Up Uniting: Insights to ponder; lessons to heed' deals with the challenges of near history by adopting two strategies to explore its relatively straightforward aim 'to investigate the religious experience of people (aged, roughly, between their late teens and mid-forties) who have grown up in the Uniting Churchs'. The first strategy was to solicit written reflections from twenty young people, males and females in roughly equal numbers, from around Australia. Emilsen and Watson published the collection of reflections as a companion volume to these Proceedings.[11] The second was a focus group discussing similar issues to those raised in the reflections. The two bodies of data constructed from these two strategies were then analysed. From the reflections three insights stood out: the need for intentional mentoring of young people; the positive benefits of belonging; and, perhaps most surprisingly, recognising, accepting and appreciating the distinctive character of the Uniting Church. Whereas the reflections concentrated on past experience ('growing up' in the church), the focus group turned its attention to the present and to the future of the Church. In terms of the present four key themes emerged. They include (i) the importance of community; (ii) having places of welcome; (iii) the opportunity to express vulnerability and discuss contentious issues; (iv) confidence in the Church's leaders. Underlying both the reflections and the focus group was a profound sense of hope that:

> the church will see itself as a rich, interlinked network of communities, communities that are open minded and open hearted, that are hospitable, welcoming environments, that provide safe places for vulnerability but also for honest (even hard-hitting) debate, communities that are not afraid to take risks, and experiment with different forms of gathering and worshipping, that go on caring for each other and seeking new ways of meeting one another's needs, a church, and its many and varied communities, that is prepared to tackle the difficult questions of our time, to take a public stance on issues that matter for all Australians.

Following the chapters by the keynotes speakers there are three chapters written by onlookers who deliberately set out to chronicle an event or episode in their own time and attempt to shape it into a historical narrative. Dean Eland's 'Growing Up Into Union' carefully examines the membership of the inaugural Assembly with its implications for generational change in the following decade. Despite Eland's provisional findings, his plea for greater attention to Uniting Church biography and, ultimately, the idea of developing 'a UCA Dictionary of Biography' will spark the interest of many. The other chapter is by the educationalist Mark Hillis who both seriously and playfully explores a prominent Australian radio broadcaster's quip that the Uniting Church is 'mostly harmless'. Hillis rejects the 'mostly harmless' label as an inaccurate description of a church that has defied government decisions about going to war, committed itself to hospitality for refugees, sought to tell the truth about relationships with Indigenous Australians, addressed contentious issues of sexuality and climate change, advocated ethical investment by our institutions, sponsored safe injecting rooms and agitated for the reform of laws dealing with drug abuse, policing and sentencing.

Alison Longworth's chapter on St Martin's in the Foothills Uniting Church near Perth stands alone. It is the only chapter in the collection that traces the history of a congregation that has come into being since church union. It is the unfinished story of the Uniting Church in microcosm with flourishes of growth, doubt, bold innovation, struggle, and positive witness to the wider church and society.

Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 are written by active participants in a particular cause but it would be a huge mistake to dismiss them as axe-grinders. Warren Talbot's chapter on understanding LGBTIQA+ stories is a gem. It takes its inspiration from the French philosopher Paul Ricoer's ground-breaking work on narrative[12] and draws illuminating parallels between the ways LGBTIQA+ people have 'grown up' in the Uniting Church and the Uniting Church's own developing understanding and response to LGBTIQA+ people. Similarly Jonathan Barker's chapter on the 'Renewed Diaconate'

adopts an 'insider's' stance. It too contains valuable nuggets of information that help explain the bumpy road the diaconate has traversed since the Sixth Assembly in 1991. Margaret Reeson's chapter on the courageous work of Young Ambassadors for Peace initiated by Joy Balazo is both measured and heart-warming.[13] Amelia Koh–Butler and Tony Floyd discuss the National Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee of the Assembly's imaginative and fruitful approach to theological reflection called 'Space for Grace'. It is used by CALD leaders for discernment, especially on contentious matters relating to gender, identity and marriage. Sarah Lim discusses the work of Uniting Redress, the national body set up by the Uniting Church to respond to, and provide for, children and vulnerable people who have suffered abuse at the hands of the Uniting Church or its institutions. Her short chapter is a sober reminder of the devastating impact of abuse on children and the imperative to prioritise their safety.

The last five chapters in this collection seek to encapsulate history in the form of reflections and autobiography. These chapters are the primary stuff of history and contain indispensable raw material about the Uniting Church. Their authors make a valuable contribution to the historical enterprise. The *talanoa* or Pacific way of telling stories compiled by Viniana Ravetali and Andrew Thornley offers a fresh perspective on CALD people's experience of growing up in the Uniting Church. Katalina Tahaafe–Williams' 'Uniting journey' is a sustained reflection on her experience of marginality with both its challenges and blessings. Richard La'Brooy's 'ministry of a stained-glass millennial' is a powerful plea from a millennial (born between 1981 and 1996) who has not given up on the Uniting Church despite the difficulties. Clive Jackson traces a longer time span than La'Brooy but he does not experience the same angst as the millennial. Nonetheless, Jackson feels compelled to identify the distinctly Uniting features that shaped his formative years. Finally, Douglas Simper's chapter 'Growing Up Uniting through Music' takes the reader on a forty-year personal journey of creating and performing music. His musical

odyssey has nurtured the Uniting Church and, in turn, been nurtured in the Uniting Church.

In addition to the sixteen papers presented at the conference, we have included the Rev. Peter Walker's sermon preached on the Sunday morning of the conference and the speech given by the Rev. Charissa Suli at the launch of William Emilsen and Elizabeth Watson's *Growing Up Uniting*. Peter Walker is the Principal of United Theological College and he preached on Genesis 28: 10–16, calling his sermon 'A Strange Place'. He suggested that the Uniting Church is in 'a strange place' and challenged those present to think wisely and well about continuity and change from the strange place that the Church now finds itself. Charissa Suli was elected President-elect for the Assembly soon after the conference. Her speech and joyful presence epitomised the hopes and possibilities that lie before the Uniting Church.

It is commonly thought that being an onlooker guarantees greater insight into events; indeed, quite the opposite can sometimes be true. Yet, despite the difficulties of writing near and contemporary history, and despite some scepticism in the historical profession about attempting to do so, we conclude on the confident note that the Proceedings of the Third Uniting Church National History Society conference will remain a precious resource for the Uniting Church as it journeys into the future.

Endnotes

1 Margaret Macmillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2009), xii.

2 Andrew Dutney, *Where did the joy come from*? (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), 6.

3 Rodney Smith, 'The Assembly', in *The Uniting Church in Australia: The First 25 Years*, ed William W Emilsen and Susan Emilsen (Armadale, Vic.: Melbourne Publishing Group, 2003), 7.

4 Hilary Christie–Johnston, 'Ecumenical Winter?' in *Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977–1997*, ed. William W Emilsen and Susan Emilsen (North Parramatta: UTC Publications, 1997), 91–97.

5 Glen O'Brien and Hilary M. Carey (eds), *Methodism in Australia: A History* (Farnham, Sy: Ashgate, 2015).

6 Ian Breward, 'Decade of Pilgrimage: The Uniting Church from 1977–1987', *Trinity Occasional Papers* VI, no. 2 (December 1987), 5.

7 The 1985 statement 'The Uniting Church Is a Multicultural Church', is readily accessible in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 622–25.

8 Henry Reynolds and Nicholas Clements, *Tongerlongeter: First Nations Leader and Tasmanian War Hero* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2021).

9 Reynolds and Clements, *Tongerlongeter*, 208–9.

10 Reynolds and Clements, *Tongerlongeter*, 209.

11 William W. Emilsen and Elizabeth A. Watson, eds, *Growing Up Uniting* (Richmond, SA: MediaCom, 2021).

12 See, for example, the three volume work *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988).

13 See also Margaret Reeson's *Live Peace: Joy Balazo and Young Ambassadors for Peace* (Moreland, Vic.: Acorn Press Ltd, 2015).

1

Creating Christian Communities of Welcome, Hope and Liberation: The voice of young adults in the Uniting Church

Deidre Palmer

Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the voice, presence and actions of young adults shaping the present and future of the Uniting Church in Australia as part of the Conference theme: 'Growing Up Uniting'. During my time serving as President from July 2018 until July 2021, I have had wonderful opportunities to listen to and speak with Uniting Church members of all ages. While in this paper I am particularly focusing on what I am hearing and seeing of the young adults of the Uniting Church, you will also hear that we are an intergenerational Christian community connecting across age groups and many of our young adults greatly value and enjoy this experience of the Christian community.

I also want to note that when we speak about young adults, they are not a monolithic group. It would be hard to define a 'typical' young adult in the Uniting Church, let alone in Australia. While young people in the Uniting Church and the wider community may have things in common, they also have unique stories and experiences to share. Over these past three years, as I have served as President, it has been a privilege for me to sit with young people across the Uniting Church and listen to their stories of faith, of discernment, and of their vision of following Christ in a world that holds many challenges and possibilities.

I am focusing on some of what I have heard from the 'Around the Table' gatherings that I have hosted as President, from National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) Online, from conversations with young adults of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), our National Conferences and young people who are part of the councils of our Church, particularly the Assembly and Synods.

For most of my adult life I have been a member of the Uniting Church. As a 21-year-old I attended the Inaugural Service of the Uniting Church at Sydney Town Hall at 8 pm on Wednesday 22 June 1977 (I still have the entry ticket!). My growth as a disciple of Christ has been nurtured by the Uniting Church. Through the nurture and encouragement of friends, teachers, older and younger disciples, I have been empowered to express my Christian vocation through teaching, social work and leadership roles in the life of our Church. As a young adult, working in children, youth and young adults' ministry and Sunday School teacher education, I was given remarkable opportunities by people who created 'Christian communities of welcome, hope and liberation'. They were Synod staff, local church leaders, communities of peers, who shared a passion for Christ and a deep commitment to serving Christ in the world through the life and witness of the Uniting Church. For these people, I am forever grateful.

I want to speak briefly about our identity as the Uniting Church, and some of the areas which have been important for the ministry of young people. I will pick up these themes again, as you hear the voices of young adults from 'Around the Table', NYALC Online and across the life of the Uniting Church.

The Uniting Church from its inauguration has affirmed the gifts and voices of young people shaping our life and mission. This affirmation arises from our understanding that *every person is created in the image of God*, infinitely loved, valued and respected. Our *every member ministry* has led us to identify the gifts of all members, including youth and young adults, and affirming that we

all have a part to play in shaping and reshaping the life and witness of Christ's church. We believe, arising from Scripture, that *women and men are created equal* and are invited into their fullest humanity in relationship with Christ. Our belief that women and men are called to fully exercise their gifts in leadership and other forms of ministry in the Uniting Church has affirmed generations of girls and women in their identity and gifts.

We believe in a *holistic Gospel* – that the Good News of Christ speaks into all aspects of our life – social, cultural, economic, political, psychological and spiritual. You will hear this foundation reflected over and over again in the voices of our young adults. We are in a *Covenant relationship as First and Second Peoples*. Our young adults are First and Second Peoples committed to voice, justice, truth telling and walking together into a more just and hopeful Australia. We are a *multicultural and intercultural church*. This is our lived experience. From the early disciples at Pentecost to the movement of the Holy Spirit today, God weaves us together in our diversity and common faith in the transforming, liberating Christ.

Arising from these foundations of the Uniting Church, (and there are others that I haven't mentioned) we have young people who:

- are passionate followers of Christ
- are discerning the call of God on their lives, and seeking wisdom on where God is leading them
- are embodying the love and hope of Christ in their families, schools, workplaces and wider community networks
- are passionate advocates for God's vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation for our world
- are members of our decision-making councils
- are contributing to local churches
- are part of ministry in schools and universities
- express their Christian faith through the arts
- offer their gifts in worship
- are sharing their faith with their peers
- are building pastoral networks

- are supporting our global partners through Uniting World
- are working for UnitingCare agencies and other non-government organisations; and
- are part of the ministry of Frontier Services.

The Uniting Church believes that young people are the church of today (as are our children and older members!) as well as the church of the future.

In the Assembly, one of our key areas of focus has been on 'Discipling the Next Generation'. In this area, we are developing young adult leaders, and providing resources, gatherings and networks that encourage and empower young adults in their ministry to engage in God's mission and to sustain them in their faith and in their daily lives.

Around the Table

As part of my ministry as President, I have hosted conversations with young people of the Uniting Church in 'Around the Table' gatherings. I first consulted with Amos Washington, in designing 'Around the Table'. Amos was the Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations in 2018. He had engaged in a listening tour around Australia, hearing from young people about what they care about, and their issues and concerns.

The 'Around the Table' gatherings included listening to the stories of Uniting Church youth and young adults around a series of key areas and questions regarding their journey with Christ, their Christian discipleship, their experience and views of the Uniting Church and what sustains and encourages them in living the Gospel of Christ in their daily lives. They also included a conversation on their views about how the Uniting Church might be engaged in the public space and their hopes for who we are and are becoming as a Church and their hopes for the world.

My original plan was to hold twelve of these in-person gatherings. I had held nine of these 'Around the Tables'; the first took place in Canberra on 25 July 2019 and the last was held in Perth in May 2021.[1]

In June I was due to visit Victoria and host three there but because of COVID safety measures, I hosted an online conversation. I had plans for Queensland 'Around the Tables' gatherings in April 2020, but they, too, had to be cancelled due to COVID restrictions. The conversations included over 100 youth and young adults.

I hope that these conversations have been a source of encouragement, challenge and discernment for all the participants and for the Church more widely. I also hope they are a source of inspiration as together we seek to live out God's vision of the renewal of Christ's Church and the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation. I have shared some of the stories and insights from these conversations as I travelled around the country. I have also included some of the insights of our young people, their questions and hopes in my Retiring President's report to the Assembly (17 July 2021) and the appendices that more specifically focus on the young adult conversations.

The following is a brief overview of the process of the Around the Table conversations: The participants in each conversation were invited to engage in four activities and record their comments: In Activity One the participants responded to four questions: What brings me grief? What brings me joy? What sustains and encourages me? What concerns me in society and the world? Some of the responses to 'What Brings Me Grief' are listed below. They are not in any particular order.

- Losing close family, friends and loved ones
- Climate change and a bleak future. Climate chaos and how it is affecting the poorest. Lack of action-led care for all of God's creation
- Racism
- Pandemic/COVID – loss during COVID – connection to friends and family, time and plans. Isolation
- Seeing someone lose faith
- Disagreements
- Christian values not really permitted
- News

- Fewer young people attending church – where is the future?
- People not taking God seriously
- Not being heard, feeling voiceless
- Fractured families
- Being worried for our future
- Pressure on younger generations to be the future and save the current crises
- Self-doubt
- Abuse of power
- People in church letting their people down
- Being stressed by an overload of situations that are uncontrollable
- The discrimination people face for their background and religious belief
- People who are judgemental and blame it on God
- The separation in the UCA
- Family division
- Division in the world.
- Conflict and animosity
- Child abuse
- Christians not living from a knowledge of God's love for them and non-Christians not realising/knowing that this is an option
- The stress and pressure of being a mother who works full-time
- Relations changing or being less strong
- The future
- Not being sure if I am welcome in the church
- Homelessness
- School
- Medical issues
- Mental illness
- Injustice
- Poverty
- Violence against women
- Violence
- War

- Digital addiction
- Mental health and teenage suicide
- Sin being okay

The responses to the question ‘What brings me joy?’ include:

- Family
- Music
- Food
- Nature
- Friends
- Pets and animals
- Community and connection
- Seeing others experience God’s goodness
- Doing what I love
- Immanence, presence
- Gardens
- Solidarity
- Meeting like-minded people
- God
- Seeing loved ones flourish
- Desserts
- Dance
- Reading and learning
- Art
- Smile and laughter
- Being creative
- Seeing people’s lives transformed by the good news
- Growing in faith and trust in Jesus
- Hope
- When ‘grief things’ are addressed
- Seeing God’s plans unfolding
- Genuine conversations
- Appreciating and welcoming small things

- Being able to connect with others from different backgrounds, no matter the difference we are able to come as one and explore our different options
- Giving back to the community

The list of responses to the third question, 'What sustains and encourages me?' include:

- Friends
- Music
- Family
- Food
- Reading the Bible
- Worship
- Sunday services
- Prayer
- Work
- Faith community
- Hearing testimonies
- Talking with other people
- Encouraging books
- Water
- Kindness
- Faith
- Hope that God ultimately has a plan
- Determination to make a difference
- Hearing God
- Historical and global connection to this church
- God – God's people, all people
- Hearing stories of how God is working in the world
- Getting stronger in faith
- Family history
- Relationship with God
- Technology and social media – connection around the world

The responses to the fourth question 'What Concerns Me in Society and the World?' reflected many of the responses to the 'grief' question.

- Climate change and the environment.
- Pandemic/COVID
- Racism
- Mental health
- Fires
- Greed
- Housing affordability
- Division
- Equality
- Poverty
- Domestic violence
- The future
- Inequality of First Nations people
- Anger, hatred and aggressive fear
- Lack of respect, denial and self-centredness
- Unequal distribution of resources
- What we choose to accept as appropriate behaviour/integrity
- Power imbalances
- Division
- Growing up

The second activity invited participants to reflect on their faith journeys. They chose a photograph or image that spoke to them about their faith journey and they shared their reflections with one another.

The third activity related to the Uniting Church. Participants were asked to complete the following four sentences: The thing I value most about the Uniting Church is … . My best experience of the Uniting Church is … . The biggest challenge facing the Uniting Church is … I wish that the Uniting Church … . Again the responses are listed in random order.

Completing the first sentence ‘The thing I value most about the Uniting Church is …

- Inclusivity
- Empowerment of women
- The diversity within it and multiculturalism, the communities that it creates
- The Church actively working toward social justice in the community
- Commitment to First Peoples
- Open communion table
- Friends and an environment where there is no judgement or discrimination
- Evangelism
- The people in the church
- Coming together of cultures
- Structures can facilitate innovation
- *Basis of Union*
- Its focus on compassion and inclusion – all are welcome
- At the forefront of caring change
- That we’re a verb not a noun
- Spirit-led action is called for and there is an expectation that people in the Uniting Church community are focusing on serving, going beyond their salvation to act as disciples
- Our breadth and depth
- Open-hearted communities – I’m so glad I grew up in the Uniting Church and in a community, that loved love and that it has led me to people who welcome and accept those who are other and cast out
- How liberating and inclusive it is of social issues
- Delving into big theological issues with young people
- Music and worship
- Being able to be in a congregation with my cultural heritage
- Care for the new generation and giving us a voice

Completing the sentence ‘My best experience of the Uniting Church is …’ elicited the following joyful experiences of community.

- KCO (Kids Campout)

- Revivify
- NYALC (National Young Adults Leaders Conference)
- Climate March
- NCYC (National Christian Youth Convention)
- TNC (Tongan National Conference)
- Road trips to events
- State youth camp
- The people I have met
- Community of faith
- Being together somewhere to talk, laugh and have lots of fun
- Having a church family to come to every week

The third prompt relating to 'The biggest challenge facing the Uniting Church is' brought forward a diversity of responses.

- Division
- Volunteer burnout
- Willingness to close ministries and churches
- Aging of the church and their willingness to change their perspectives of the past and why it's not like that any more
- Being rejected as a whole person for being gay in some places
- Engaging young adults
- People afraid of change
- Wanting to go to church
- Climate change
- Church being boring
- Lack of discipleship/spiritual direction
- Culturally ingrained greed
- Churches focussing on their flock only and not working in mission together
- How to steward historical wealth and properties for the future.
- Losing young people
- Losing their faith
- Breaking the boundaries of what is normal in the church
- Understanding its context

- Being able to gather for everyone
- Communities of solidarity
- Clinging to old ideas
- Intergenerational trauma
- Stepping outside our comfort zone – worshipping outside our culture
- Resources for younger generations to help out the community

Similarly, the final prompt 'I wish that the Uniting Church …' elicited a rich palette of thoughtful responses.

- Was able to understand young people/youth more
- Had a more political position on environmental issues especially
- Willing to confront internal issues, less in-fighting
- Would embody the love of Jesus in community
- Look at how many opportunities there are for youth to lead a Christ-centred life in all areas of it
- Start new things – stop old things
- Continues to embrace creative methods of worship
- Allow young people to shape the future of the Uniting Church
- Would continue to steadfastly (but gently) work toward social justice in the wider community
- More prominence of Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) – especially young people knowing about it
- Encouraged more talks and conversations about mental health and worldly issues
- Were able to assist more in transitions within the church
- Provided workshops to develop leadership skills more frequently
- Had more Christian retreats/camps
- Operated in silos less
- Did better in forming ministry agents well equipped in ministries with multicultural and First Nations people
- Discussed and spread awareness on mental health.
- Build unoffendable, resilient disciples, leaders, churches.
- Would see conflict and confrontation as valuable
- Would see emotional health as critical to formation

- Continued to focus on discipleship
- Would bring more souls to Christ and into the Church
- Continue our openness, honesty, inclusivity, understanding in acceptance of others

The fourth activity asked a question about the Uniting Church's public engagement. The first question was: 'How do we want the Uniting Church to engage in public spaces?' and some of the responses (again, not a comprehensive summary) included: young people valued the Uniting Church's hospitable, welcoming, pastoral, intergenerational and multicultural nature. They also valued the Church's covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. In the public space they were particularly sensitive to the need to respond to domestic violence, racism, the treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum, and to mental health issues faced by their peers. They are actively addressing the impacts of climate change and believe as the Church that we need to be urgently responding to this crisis.

National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) Online

In addition to the 'Around the Table' gatherings, I hosted with the Rev. Charissa Suli four online conversations with young adults who are part of an informal network of young people who have participated in National Young Adult Leaders Conferences. They were invited to respond to questions about what they were experiencing as the challenges and learnings from the global pandemic. What is sustaining them and in what ways do they think the Uniting Church should be responding to our present contexts. Some of the learnings were a deep appreciation of the Church's pastoral networks, an awareness of disparity between nations to respond to the pandemic, and a growing concern about the economic impact upon people who have lost their jobs. They expressed appreciation of the church's adaptability, including the resourcing of worship online, and a resurgence in family worship and devotion.

My observations and reflections

Throughout my various conversations with Uniting Church young people there have been consistent themes. They include:

- A deep appreciation of the inclusivity of the Uniting Church
- The importance of community and friendship
- A valuing of Christian retreat/conference/camp gatherings held by the Assembly, Synods and regions
- An acute need to respond effectively to the climate crisis
- A concern for the mental health of peers
- A commitment to eliminating gender-based violence
- A desire to alleviate poverty and address greed
- An appreciation and a commitment to focus on priorities across the Uniting Church and with our Global partner churches
- The importance of encouraging and affirming young people in their discipleship and in the leadership they are offering the Church

Across the councils of the Uniting Church and in the UAICC and our National Conferences, priority is being given to nurturing young people and developing their leadership and ministry gifts. I have also seen this priority expressed in meetings with our global partners in the Pacific Conference of Churches, the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific, the Christian Conference of Asia, and the World Methodist Council.

As I have met with young people of the Uniting Church and listened to the wider conversations across the councils of our churches, I hear a number of themes and priorities that call for our focus and attention as the Uniting Church:

First, *intentional long-term nurturing in Christian discipleship* that invites people to grow and deepen their encounter with Christ and live out their Christian vocation requires urgent attention.

Second, *spaces for questions* and expressions of faith and doubt need to be opened up. The Church needs to create opportunities for young people to go deeper and to actively respond to the challenging issues for our church and society. Some of the spaces that have

provided this kind of dialogue and engagement include NYALC, NCYC, School of Discipleship in NSW, Christian Students Uniting, local, Presbytery, Synod and school sponsored conversations.

Arising from our conversations in recent years on marriage, there are indicators we need to continue to strengthen our ministry in growing people in discipleship through deep engagement with Scripture and theology. It's especially important to engage people in communal contexts where they hear other people's perspectives for the purpose of deepening our Christian faith, and strengthening our life and witness as Christ's Church. I recall being at a national young adults gathering where a number of young people were concerned that: 'we don't talk about these things'.

The third priority is not unrelated to the first and second. There needs to be more *intentional conversations*; conversations that engage young people at depth and in ways that connect to their contexts. If we are to grow as disciples of Christ and strengthen our life and witness, it is important that we take the time to be together and listen to one another. This will take intentional planning in local, regional and national spaces. In my life as an educator, social worker, Moderator and President, it has been an amazing privilege to enter into deep conversations with people about their lives, their experiences of God, their sense of identity, their concerns, their hopes and visions, their faith journeys.

Fourth, the Church needs to encourage *intergenerational Christian community*. Many of the people of all ages who I have encountered in my service as President have expressed a deep appreciation of being part of intergenerational Christian communities. These communities honour the voices of all age groups and through their encouragement of one another, help renew and strengthen people's faith journeys with Christ.

Fifth, we need to foster *community*. We are called to shape mutually respectful, vibrant communities of faith that listen to the Spirit and are open to the ongoing transformation that Christ brings.

I was encouraged by people's desire to focus on our common vision and unity, respecting different voices as faithful expressions of the way of Jesus.

Sixth, we need to develop a *compassionate, well informed, prophetic public voice*. Many of our young adults embrace the holistic Gospel as an important foundation of our Church. I have heard from Uniting Church members of all ages of the deep commitment to engage in God's mission in the world of justice, peace, reconciliation, healing and hope in ways that are well informed, have integrity and are prepared to be courageous.

Seventh, there needs to be an affirmation of '*every member ministry*'. Young adults are expressing their ministry through living their Christian vocation in their daily lives. This takes many forms, from local churches through to Uniting Church agencies and schools through to faithful people serving in their profession and living out their Christian discipleship in their relationships, families, communities and daily living.

Eighth, we need to continue to offer and resource *national gatherings* for young people. At my recent President's Conference (April 2021) we heard people's stories of God's call on their lives and the ways they are living their Christian vocation. There were so many people that named a national youth and young adults' event as a significant place where they discerned God's call. They named it as a turning point in their lives. They also noted the sense of Christian community and the depth and breadth of Christ's Church that they experienced at such events.

Into the future, it is important for us to be considering how we connect young adults nationally, with a purpose of growing in faith, having a view of the breadth and depth of the Uniting Church, and strengthening a network of young Uniting Church members across the country. National Christian Youth Conventions (NCYC) have been significant gatherings for our Church, where people have experienced the multicultural nature and theological and liturgical

diversity of our Church. NCYCs have encouraged a broadening of horizons, a deepening of/or a coming to faith in Christ for the first time, a discerning of God's call to various ministries and expressions of Christian vocation. In recent years, the National Young Adult Leaders Conferences (NYALC) have been life-giving and transformative and have served some of the purposes of NCYCs as I have listed them above.

We have highlighted, for a number of years, the importance and priority of developing young adults in Christian discipleship and leadership. One of the questions into the future is, 'What are we prepared to give in time, vision, energy, personnel, money and other resources so that young adults are free to exercise their gifts and flourish as passionate disciples of Christ?' Or put another way, 'In what ways are we supporting young people to exercise their ministry in and through the Uniting Church and to participate in and lead our prophetic public witness?'

Conclusions

As I have reflected on these conversations and the life and mission of the Uniting Church, and as we look to the future, I invite you to reflect on this question: *What do you hope young adults will experience in and through the Uniting Church*?

I offer the following as my hopes for young adult encounters with the Uniting Church to add to those of your hopes. I hope that young adults will experience a life-transforming encounter/relationship with Jesus Christ, as one who loves them unconditionally, and who invites them into their fullest humanity. I hope that they will encounter God who cares about the world they live in and who is concerned about climate change and the state of people's mental health. I hope they will share in a community of Christ that is participating in God's mission in the world. I hope they will find a community of Christ where they are respected, heard and their gifts and voices are embraced. And, finally, for young people who may never become members or join

any of our groups, I hope they will encounter the Uniting Church as a voice of integrity, that speaks of justice, truth-telling, reconciliation, healing and hope; as a listening community that respects their voice and advocates for a society in which all people and the whole creation can flourish.

Endnotes

[1] Canberra–July 2019; Darwin–October 2019; Hobart–February 2020; Launceston–February 2020; Adelaide–February and November 2020; Sydney–February 2021; Perth–May 2021; Online–June 19, 2021.

2

Growing Up Uniting: An inside out perspective

Ruth Powell

My great-grandmother on my mother's side lived to be 101. Her name was Beatrice Jordan. On my father's side, my great-grandmother, Mabel Reeson, lived to the age of 99. I wonder if my life will span a whole century. The Uniting Church was formed on 22 June 1977. I was 10 years old at the time and living in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea and, I admit, it had little or no impact. However, if I do make it to 100 years, like my great grandmothers, I will have had an experience of 'lived history'. I will have been a witness to the first 90 years of the Uniting Church's history.

I would like to offer some reflections on a few key themes: being disciples of Christ, First Peoples, ecumenism, cultural diversity, service and advocacy (including creation care), and women. I will draw briefly on some of the founding or key documents for the Uniting Church. I will share some personal stories and I will bring insight from the 30 years of data that we have collected through six waves of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS).

I have titled my presentation 'Growing Up Uniting: An inside out perspective'. I am aware that I occupy a space that is both inside and outside the Uniting Church and my reflections will be coloured by these different perspectives. I am an insider by virtue of my strong family connections. Yet, I also bring scholarly observations based on my work as a researcher for the past 30 years.

The 'inside' part reflects my perspective as a person with a strong sense of my Methodist ancestry. I am the child of parents who are or have been Uniting Church ministers, lay preachers, missionaries, moderators, presbytery officers, and holding roles on more

committees and working groups in congregations, presbyteries, the New South Wales Synod and the UCA Assembly, than is positively decent! I met my husband at a Uniting Church Easter camp and he has been, variously, an organist/piano player in a Uniting Church congregation, a leader in a church plant, and who has worked in presbytery and synod roles around mission and innovation. My eldest son, who just turned 21 last week, is slowly working through a period of discernment. I am an insider.

Yet, I also come to these reflections bringing my academic training as a sociologist of religion. My tools are quantitative and qualitative methods. While I have managed many research projects over the years, the most well-known is the National Church Life Survey, which is the largest, longest running survey of its kind in the world. Surveys are given to church attenders, both adults and children. They have been translated into ten languages: English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tongan, Dinka, Arabic, Italian, Chin (Burmese) and Karen (Burmese). Results are provided to local churches and to church leaders at regional and national level.

In the sociology of religion there is a concept called 'lived religion'. This idea refers to the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life. While belief and membership are part of what lived religion entails, I am not going to dwell on the size of the Uniting Church – other than to say that it has roughly halved in the time we have been tracking it. I want to focus on lived religion, which is the religion of the ordinary people. It can happen both inside and outside the context of congregational life as either approved traditional practices or new innovations. Looking for lived religion involves, in part, how people explain themselves – which is just what the Church Life Survey helps us to hear on a broad scale.[1] So, I want to highlight the everyday practices, taking a broader lens to this review of the past few decades.

As I provide some reflections on my chosen themes, I will start with the story from the founding documents, and then I'll add a personal touch, followed by outlining the data story.

Disciples of Christ

The Uniting Church's founding story

From the outset, the Uniting Church was committed to being built on the One Lord Jesus Christ. The opening paragraph of the *Basis of Union* (1971) states:

> The Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic, and seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church, hereby enter into union under the name of the *Uniting Church in Australia*. They pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. … In this union these Churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will. In entering into this union the Churches concerned are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died, and that she awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.[2]

And the third titled 'Build upon the one Lord Jesus Christ' reinforces the centrality of Jesus Christ:

> The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the holy catholic and apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. In love for the world, God gave his Son to take away the world's sin.[3]

Personal story

I'm a missionary kid. My mother taught women in Papua New Guinea and shared the gospel with them. This is my image of the power of the gospel: there were people so transformed that they left their homes to go to other places. They were sent people in mission. It was that important that they left their homes to do that. These are the people I grew up with, the missionary community who felt it was important enough to share this gospel. I watched as a child this gospel transforming lives. They went to a people where the order of value was men, boys, pigs, and women. They took a gospel that taught women that they were in the image of God, and it mattered not

whether they were male or female, God created them. They are loved, they are known; women's lives were transformed by understanding themselves through the power of that gospel. That's what I saw. I saw a gospel delivered to people who were afraid of the spirit of their ancestors, a gospel that was able to break the symbols, the spiritual power of the ancestor spirits, the fear of that was able to be broken and new life emerge. What a privilege for me to be a missionary kid and see the power of the gospel in action.

So let's come to the Uniting Church now. What have we learnt from thirty years of listening to ordinary Uniting Church attenders as to how they are tracking as disciples of Christ?

NCLS data story

What is the lived experience of faith among ordinary Uniting Church attenders? How embedded are practices of faith that sustain our disciples? From the 2016 NCLS, we know that: (i) seven out of ten spend time at least weekly in prayer, Bible reading or meditation (44% do it every day or most days); (ii) eight out of ten said that God is most important or more important than almost anything else; (iii) four in ten (38%) said that they had experienced much growth in faith in the past year.

Similarly, there has been an increase over time in the proportion of UCA attenders who always or usually experience inspiration in worship services. The Uniting Church may be justifiably gratified at this increasingly positive review of its worship experience. It is quite likely that many churches have been investing in developing their worship services. Some will have invested in developing their musical repertoire. Others have drawn from both traditional and contemporary arts, using form and colour to engage and communicate. Some will have explored the riches of other traditions, perhaps adopting the rhythm of religious seasons, or meditative practices. However, is it possible that we are only hearing from those who remain, those who are comfortable and nurtured by what is offered? Have the people who wanted something different, who were not nurtured by the

worship experience of their churches, given up?

Despite evidence of growth in faith and positive feelings about worship services, there appears to have been a loss of confidence over time about inviting others to visit or join faith communities. This is a pattern that is repeated across denominations and deserves a longer discussion about the place of church in contemporary society and the impact of the negativity that has surrounded churches in recent years.

First Peoples

The Uniting Church's founding story

While the *Basis of U*nion does not specifically address Australia's First People, the Uniting Church over the past four decades has worked hard, and continues to work, to find pathways for reconciliation.

The following are some of the formal significant moments in the Church's relationship with First Peoples.

1985 UAICC recognised at the 4th Assembly

1985 First Indigenous Moderator Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra

1988 Rev. Charles Harris leads Bicentennial protests

1994 UAICC-UCA Covenanting agreement

1997 Uniting Church formally apologises to Stolen Generation

2009 Revised preamble to the UCA Constitution acknowledges God's revelation to First People before colonisation

2014 A Destiny Together rally at Parliament House, Canberra

2015 (ongoing) UAICC-UCA Sovereignty/Treaty conversations

2016 15th Assembly affirms First Peoples as sovereign

Personal story

I didn't think that I would find my own 'insider' connection with this theme. However, when I noted the fact that Rev. Dr Djiniyini Gondarra was the first indigenous Moderator in 1985, I remember a story shared recently by my mother who, along with dad, are rereading all the letters sent home to my grandmother from the mission field in the 1960s and 1970s. Mum explained:

> In our Visitor's Book on 2 Dec 1970 we have signatures of 'Terry Djiniyini [Gondarra]' from Galiwinku, Elcho Island and 'Joe Mawundjil' from Milingimbi. They were about 20 or so and were on their way home to NT after a year studying at Malmaluan Christian Ed Centre near Rabaul – having a sight-seeing trip to the Highlands. They brought a didj and clap sticks and demonstrated these to the amazement of the locals.

It is at this point that I want to give a 'shout out' to all the hoarders – the citizen historians, and archivists and those who do it in a more formal capacity. History is told from primary and secondary sources. But this requires people who have a long view, who love and care and curate those sources – the letters, the photos, the meeting minutes and so on. You may be mocked and pushed to minimise your holdings – but there are times to resist!

In a special nod of appreciation to my grandmother and mother (both historians) and all those who have been known to 'hoard' items for future historians to reference, please indulge me as I read directly from the primary source. It is dated December 1970. I was three.

> Our life has been pretty frantic of late. I think when I wrote on Wednesday I was about to take two aboriginal boys to the airstrip after having them overnight. When I did so we found that Christine Lowe was on the plane … but due to various weight factors Wally had to load off someone or something. So Christine came home with us again for another night. Rooted sheets out of linen basket (unwashed) as I had come to the end of my single sheets!
>
> Visitors have been so much part of our life on Friday afternoon. Ruth suddenly announced 'I am a visitor. My name is Mrs Cole' and we have had Mrs Cole with us ever since. She has joined our household complete with three children, Sally, Guy and Ruth, plus other more nebulous offspring, each with differing abilities re buttons et cetera or what they like to eat, a pet called 'Dog Only' in contrast to our cat and Mr Cole, who being indisposed has spent all his time asleep in bed which explains why he doesn't talk to us. I have been addressed as Mrs Reeson. Most entertaining … Even looking around critically and remarking, 'You have a very nice house, Mrs Reeson.'

NCLS data story

While I cannot give any considered reflection on the history so far of the Uniting Church's relationship with Australia's First People, I will give three snapshots based on NCLS data. First, there is a low familiarity with the work of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander

Christian Congress within the broader Uniting Church. For example, within the New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory (NSW/ACT) Synod 36 percent of attenders had not heard of Congress, 33 percent were not familiar at all with what Congress did, 27 percent had some familiarity and just 5 percent were very familiar. Furthermore, when it came to covenanting between the Uniting Church and Congress, 51 percent of attenders were unaware of what was meant by it, 27 percent were aware of covenanting but were not very familiar with it, 18 percent were familiar but had no direct experience of covenanting, and only 4 percent had direct experience of covenanting.

Second, Uniting Church attenders have low social contact with Aboriginal people, representing a significant divide between its official statements and what is happening in congregations. Some 46 percent of attenders admit that they do not know an Aboriginal person and nearly half of the Uniting Church attenders (47 percent) who do know an Aboriginal person rarely mix with them. Paradoxically, 64 percent of Uniting Church attenders agreed that churches should be more active in promoting reconciliation.

Third, there are low levels of involvement with Indigenous people. Only 1 percent of Uniting Church congregations in the NSW/ACT Synod are heavily involved in Aboriginal-specific ministries, 12 percent have some involvement and 4 percent are taking steps to become involved with First People. I think we have some work to be done.

Ecumenism

In the foundation of the Uniting Church and in the first two decades of its history, a commitment to ecumenism held a prominent place as evidence in the second paragraph of the *Basis of Union*:

> The Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. She recognises that she is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission. Recalling the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries, she looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church's unity expressed, in similar Councils. She thankfully acknowledges that the uniting Churches were members of the World Council of Churches

> and other ecumenical bodies, and she will seek to maintain such membership … She declares her desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches.[4]

This broader vision was also presented to the nation by the new Uniting Church in 1977: 'We are conscious of our responsibilities within and beyond this country. We particularly acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In these contexts we make certain affirmations at the time of our inauguration.'[5]

Personal story and NCLS story

Nowadays the importance of ecumenism has waned and I would suggest that the term is not used widely. I think that the focus within and beyond the Uniting Church is more about the distinctive identity of a group, movement or organisation. For the Uniting Church its identity is more framed around inclusiveness than ecumenism. When Uniting Church attenders were asked what they liked most about their church, 65 percent of them affirmed inclusiveness of all types of people. Uniting Church attenders are quite clear about their view on this. Inclusiveness of all types of people is its distinguishing mark and, I guess, this aligns with a vision of being truly 'uniting'.

Cultural Diversity

The Uniting Church's founding story

In the *Basis of Union*, there is a commitment to a unity in Christ which transcends cultural and racial boundaries.

> She believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end she commits herself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific. She declares her desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches.[6]

When we engage the theme of cultural diversity, we walk into the minefield of labels and terms with different meanings: ethnicity,

race, multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural. Mostly we think in terms of ethnic diversity when we talk about cultural diversity, but, of course, cultural groups can be formed on many different bases. I will limit my comments to ethnic diversity.

One of the pathways that the UCA has taken is to support National Conferences. These are mono-ethnic groupings. Another organisational mechanism has been to set up mono-ethnic presbyteries or parishes such as the Korean Presbytery and the Tongan Parish in the NSW/ACT Synod. At the same time, many churches are multicultural in terms of their makeup.

Personal story

I grew up in a multicultural missionary community. I live in a suburb where 98 percent of the students at the local school are of non-English speaking background. This is where I feel most at home.

NCLS data story

In terms of that original commitment to special relationships to churches in Asia and the Pacific, we know from the 2016 NCLS that there continues to be strong support for the work of service and proclamation overseas. For example, some 80 percent of UCA churches have a special commitment to people in developing countries. Closer to home, the Uniting Church embraced multiculturalism, at the 1985 Assembly, declaring itself to be a 'multicultural church'. In 2016, a quarter of all UCA attenders were born overseas with 16 percent from non-English speaking countries. Furthermore, some 80 percent of UCA attenders agree that immigrants have made Australia a better country. With regard to local churches, more than 44 percent have provided support to newly arrived migrants, most commonly in the form of material aid, friendship and hospitality; and more than a third of local churches are involved in migrant ministry and this has increased significantly over time.

It is encouraging to see at this time that the UCA continues to take seriously its commitment to being a multicultural church. I

would add a cautionary note. In the detailed research we have done on multicultural churches, while we found that in general they were more healthy and vital than mono-Anglo churches, we also found that those from non-Anglo backgrounds continues to be limited in terms of their participation across all forms of ministry – even when they reported that they felt they had the gifts and skills in certain areas. There is more to be done.

Service and advocacy (including creation care)

The Uniting Church's founding story

> We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.
>
> We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringes basic rights and freedoms.
>
> We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourages a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.[7]

Personal story

I am encouraged and inspired to watch my own children and their peers take this vision seriously. They deeply understand the scourge of racism and other injustices that reduce basic rights and sense of humanity. They are living with the widening gap between rich and poor. Their only reality has been an earth that is not being cared for and replenished.

NCLS data story

The Uniting Church has a strong record so far of serving the community and advocating for others. This quality of church life focuses on service, acts of care, welfare, social justice and action. It

is a measure of how churches are living out their call to be the hands and feet of Christ; how they respond to the call to feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, care for the sick and so on (Matthew 25).

Many UCA attenders serve others in informal actions of care and social action and this proportion is increasing. Four in ten attenders are involved in community service, social justice or welfare activities connected to their church. This proportion has risen significantly over the past 30 years. Attenders also reported their involvement in community-based groups. Six in ten are involved in community groups not connected with their church. This figure has been relatively stable. Australian society continues to benefit from the Church which provides an extraordinary voluntary social welfare safety net (that is largely unheralded) made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals giving their time. That this remains true over time and has increased is something to celebrate.

The sharp rise in activities based within local churches, in contrast with the stable levels of involvement through wider community groups, deserves further reflection. Is this a sign of the Church in mission in new ways, perhaps trying to build new bridges to their communities? Are these signs of busyness in local churches always authentic expressions of living our faith in the whole of life? Or does the buzz of activity sometimes indicate a desperate casting around for new connections when old ones don't work? What differences will it make in the future if the hosting group for such activities is more likely to be the local church, rather than Christians being salt and yeast within existing community groups?

It must also be noted that the research conducted on this core quality over the years by the NCLS Research team has found that high levels of service within a church is the quality least associated with outcomes such as attracting newcomers, or numerical growth. If this is what churches hope to achieve as they build new bridges to their communities, then it will take more than simply doing it in the way that it has always been done before.

Women

The Uniting Church's founding story

In the first edition of the *Basis of Union*, the language was still non-inclusive. But, as noted in the 1992 edition, 'In 1971, when the Basis was completed, the desire for gender-inclusive language was only just emerging. Twenty years on, some of the language of the Basis sounds rather curious. More importantly, some people find parts of its language to be jarring and even alienating. … The Assembly Standing Committee resolved to issue this 1992 edition of the Basis in order to ensure that the Basis is well used in the church, frequently consulted, valued and heeded.'[8]

Throughout the Uniting Church's history it has always been clear that women are not to be barred from any ministry position in the Church by virtue of their gender. For example, the *Code of Conduct for Ministry* states: 'Ministers shall: (i) accept the theological validity of the ordination of both women and men for ministry in Christ's church as a Minister; (ii) be willing to work with and support women and men as colleagues in the ordained ministries; and (iii) be willing to encourage, equip and support both women and men in all forms of ministry in the Church and to teach the Church's position in this regard.'[9]

Personal story

When I think of gender and the church, a photo of my mother comes to mind. She is washing her feet in a bowl, having hiked over a mountain to minister to the local people in the Highlands of PNG. She preached, prayed, taught the Bible, led communion, helped people to faith, trained and equipped them to lead – and all as a lay woman. While perhaps this was unusual and linked to its context, this is my model. This is how I see it should be. I am very thankful that I never experienced any sense of being limited by the Uniting Church to serve and minister to others. I was an elder as a young adult, on councils, and encouraged to preach and exercise leadership. As a sociologist I know that women are more religious than men and mothers are the

greatest influence on faith named by church attenders.

NCLS data story

In the Uniting Church the number of women attenders exceeds that of men. In 2016 63 percent of attenders were women, and women continue to make up the bulk of the church. The Uniting Church's posture on the inclusion of women has stayed true.

Vision and innovation

Where to from here? As is appropriate for a history conference, we have focussed on looking back. We have also marked where we are at this moment. However, I do want to add a few comments about the posture towards the future.

Aware and strongly committed to a vision for the future

The idea that it is important for groups to have a sense of direction, goals, or vision for the future, has gained profile among churches in recent decades. While the format varies widely, mission planning, or pastoral planning activities have become commonplace across many churches, as in other arenas, such as business, corporations, and community groups. Indeed, the resources provided by NCLS Research to local churches following a Church Life Survey are, at their heart, planning tools, designed to help churches to be proactive, and build on their strengths towards a desired future.

In some contexts, the leader conceives, casts and carries the vision with varying levels of consultation. However, having a clear vision, regardless of how well it is communicated, is only part of the dynamic. Another vital component is for that vision to be accepted and implemented. These two aspects are picked up in an NCLS question that asks if attenders are aware of a vision or directions for the future, and also their degree of commitment. Previous research based on NCLS data has consistently found that having a clear and owned vision is important to overall church health and vitality. It is strongly related to other core qualities.

One of the most encouraging trends in the data story we have about the Uniting Church is the greatest positive increase over the twenty years in the commitment to a vision for the future. The proportion of attenders who say they are aware and strongly committed to the vision or directions of their local church has increased from 22 percent in 1996 to 33 percent in 2016.

People in churches appear to be finding their footing in the changing tides. More churches appear to be attending to questions about their purpose in a given time and place and discovering a shared vision. This is evidence of a degree of intentionality about the work of the church in mission. Whether or not the hoped-for outcomes are forthcoming is yet to be seen.

Imaginative and flexible innovation

Healthy churches are characterised by having a culture of being open to new possibilities. Having a degree of flexibility to allow innovation is associated with growth in numbers and with higher levels of newcomers who have not previously been part of church life.

At its heart, this is about the dominant missiological question of gospel and culture. As applied to churches it holds within it the tension of change. On the one hand, there is the risk of discontinuity and disruption, while on the other hand, there is the opportunity of more effective witness and service.

Against a background of broad social and cultural shifts, labelled with terms such as post-modernity, and post-Christendom, there has been much innovative responsiveness 'on the ground' within churches as well as theological and missiological reflection. Wayne Brighton argues that the Church's effectiveness hinges on its capacity for innovation, while noting Hans Küng's observation that 'the Christian Church for much of its history has not welcomed innovation, often misidentifying it as heresy, because of its association with changing doctrine, ceremonies or structures.'[10]

In 2016, when Uniting Church attenders were asked whether they agreed that their congregation was always ready to try something new, 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed. This is a trend upwards from 64 percent in 2001 (when the question was first asked in this format). Attenders assess their churches as more open to innovation than previously. Along with an increased clarity of vision about the future, this suggests churches are in increasingly good stead for engagement in effective mission. Yet, the move from potential to actual is challenging.

Conclusion

The history of the Uniting Church is contained within our lifetimes. We are living it out. In this snapshot of a 'lived religion' my perspective has been both from the inside and out. I have drawn on primary founding documents that offer one perspective on how the Uniting Church imagines itself to be. I have grounded the big ideas and themes in my own lived experience through some stories. Finally, I have taken the role of an observer, drawing on the data provided by six waves of the National Church Life Survey that have taken place to date from 1991 to 2016.

Looking forward, we have learnt that attenders assess their churches as more open to innovation than previously. Along with an increased clarity of vision about the future, this suggests churches are in increasingly good stead for engagement in effective mission. Will the Church move from potential to actual?

The themes I chose to reflect on, the ones that were embedded in the founding documents and that I resonated with, were being disciples of Christ, First Peoples, ecumenism, cultural diversity, service and advocacy, and women. I realise that many of these themes are about people who can sometimes be on the margins. This focus is, for me, at the heart of the gospel and what is beautiful and inspiring about the Uniting Church at its best.

Endnotes

[1] Nancy T. Ammerman, 'Finding Religion in Everyday Life', *Sociology of Religion*, 75, no. 2, (2014): 189–207, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sru013

[2] *Basis of Union* § 1.

[3] *Basis of Union* § 3.

[4] *Basis of Union* § 2.

[5] Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 'Statement to the Nation', June 1977.

[6] *Basis of Union* § 2.

[7] 'Statement to the Nation', June 1977.

[8] 'Introduction to the *Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992): 3.

[9] Assembly Standing Committee minute 92.61.5.

[10] Hans Küng and David Tracy (eds), *Paradigm Change in Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1989) cited in Wayne Brighton's 'A Framework for Effectiveness in Mission', *Australian Journal of Mission Studies*, 6, no. 1, (2012): 42–43.

3

Growing Up Uniting: Insights to ponder; lessons to heed

William W. Emilsen and Elizabeth A. Watson

Introduction

This paper has the same title as the 2021 conference of the Uniting Church National History Society. But it has had a lengthier gestation. More than fifteen years ago it was prompted by a heartfelt outburst from a student studying Uniting Church Studies with William Emilsen at United Theological College in Sydney. His class was discussing Andrew Dutney's *Where did the joy come from*?[1] when one student exclaimed, 'I didn't experience the joy and exuberance of Church Union, that happened before I was born, for me it has been a constant struggle.' It was one of those lightbulb moments. For the first time Emilsen started to see the Uniting Church's history through the eyes of people at least half his age. So began the determination to understand better the religious experience of those people who have grown up, persevered, and matured within the Uniting Church. Alongside this was the conviction that this experience was something all of us within the Uniting Church needed to hear – that here lay much insight and understanding from which we might all learn.

A second stimulus to the writing of this paper is the recent publication of several books with the words 'Growing Up' in the title – for example, *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia, Growing up Disabled in Australia, Growing Up Muslim in Australia* and, most importantly, an older work by the Catholic historian, Edmund Campion, called *Rockchoppers: Growing Up Catholic in Australia*.[2] Behind all of these collections lies the assumption that accounts of

this kind are needed because they provide a way for both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to better understand a particular sector of Australian society. They help us think about the different experiences of other people. They also help us question the assumptions we make and enable us to see more clearly the prejudices we hold.

A third and more profound stimulus behind our interest in the religious experience of people who have grown up in the Uniting Church is the developing concern shared by many of us about what the Uniting Church has done, or is not doing, for its young people. The disturbing fact that once vital activities that involved children and young people are no longer central to the life of the church, or no longer there at all, is alarmingly clear. The formation of young people in the Uniting Church is almost totally absent.

The rather lengthy gestation has meant that our thinking about our approach and about how best to structure the research and to implement it has had time to settle and take shape. There are virtues in that. As is almost always the case in any research, there was no one way to go about exploring this issue, no one way to seek insight and understanding on a complex subject. And, as with all research, since one cannot incorporate all that one might like, in theory, to include, the necessary pruning back and sharpening of focus, can be useful. The advent of COVID 19 simply helped focus our efforts even more precisely, while reminding us that there was an open-ended character to this enquiry. We could envisage the possibility that in the not too distant future we might find ourselves seeking further ways of exploring this question, employing other data gathering efforts, airing the findings of this early stage with others and eliciting their response to those insights. So, to reiterate, this is a beginning, one contribution, not only to a much wider exploration, but to an inquiry which is (and must be) an ongoing one. Needless to say, it would add considerably to our insights if we could study those who have dropped out of church and learn from their experience. That is a whole different research project and more demanding, in terms of its design.

Methodology

We began our research by setting ourselves the rather general, but relatively straightforward, aim: to investigate the religious experience of people (aged, roughly, between their late teens and mid-forties) who have grown up within the Uniting Church in Australia.

Having refined our focus, we decided upon two strategies. The first was to solicit written 'essays' or reflections from twenty young people, males and females in roughly equal numbers, from around Australia. The second was a focus group comprising six young people discussing similar issues to those raised in the written accounts but also exploring (more explicitly) experiences of the present and thoughts about the future they envisaged for the Uniting Church. The written reflections (and those alone) are brought together in *Growing Up Uniting*, the book we edited and which was launched at the conference.[3] This paper, however, reports on the results of both strategies – reflections and focus group.

For the written 'essays' or reflections, the writers were encouraged to tell their story in their own way and to highlight those issues that mattered most to them. Nevertheless, our letter of invitation provided some prompts if participants needed something to 'get them going'. These questions included issues such as the strengths and weaknesses of the church in their judgement, experiences of the church that had been rewarding, experiences of inclusion (or otherwise) and of community more generally, where the church was 'heading' in their view, why they 'stayed', what might tempt them to 'walk away', what was most important to their faith, what had been the greatest influences in their faith journey. Again, the emphasis was always on 'telling it how it is, how it has been, for you'.

The focus group was (with one exception) made up of a different group of young people but with a similar composition. Six participants were involved. Anonymity was promised, and the participants were free to raise any matter they wanted to. There was no set agenda. Whereas the reflections naturally concentrate on past experience (the 'growing up' in the church), in the focus group we turned our

attention to the present and the future of the Uniting Church.

Four questions were given to the participants beforehand so that they didn't come to the focus group cold. The first and second question related to the present:

1. What matters to you about the Uniting Church?
2. What are the things missing in the Uniting Church?

The third and fourth related to the future:

3. What are your fears or concerns for the Uniting Church?
4. What are your dreams for the Uniting Church, for yourself, and for future generations?

In the remainder of this paper we focus on what we see as the most important insights we have gleaned from the two methods. But before we do, a few brief comments on the problem of analysis and interpretation in research of this kind. The insights being uncovered in research of this kind – the data from both strategies – are of course, non-numeric and, more importantly, highly individual and personal. In seeking reflective accounts from people, written as they wished, highlighting what was important to them and with ample time to ponder, and conducting a focus group which relied solely on a few prior prompts and good moderation, we have created a rather particular point of departure for an ongoing inquiry.

In employing these methods – reflections and focus group – we have produced two bodies of data which present important analytical challenges. To be brief, in spite of all attempts to be open-ended in *constructing* our data as outlined above, when it comes to *analysing* it, we were aware that this process inevitably involved imposing, to some degree, our own structures and our own preoccupations upon that highly individual material. This should not be taken to imply that the findings should be assigned less weight or usefulness. On the contrary, it should be taken to suggest a greater awareness of just what is at stake in any interpretative effort and how vital it is that we 'keep an eye on ourselves' as researchers and question our conclusions regardless of the kind of research we undertake.

The Reflections: The Past: insights and lessons

First of all, we turn to the reflections in *Growing Up Uniting* which concentrate, as you might expect, on the past. Our primary purpose was to elucidate those factors that were most valued by the contributors as they were growing up in the Uniting Church. Needless to say, there were rich insights. However, three stand out.

Mentoring

By far the most important factor that determined whether or not young people remained in the church is mentoring. Almost all contributors mention significant mentors: Sunday school teachers, ministers (both active and retired), youth workers, chaplains, lay people, parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents. Certainly mentoring is the consistent factor to emerge from the reflections in the development of young leaders. So important was mentoring for one contributor that he virtually pleads with the Church to introduce sustained programs of mentoring for all young people up to the age of 25. If there is a single lesson to be drawn from *Growing Up Uniting*, then the Uniting Church will need to rediscover the importance of mentoring fast.

Belonging

The second factor is belonging, that feeling of being welcomed, known by name, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed and loved. In *Growing Up Uniting* there are many stories about the positive benefits of belonging. A young woman of Tongan heritage, born in Australia, writes:

> Growing up in the Uniting Church in Australia has enabled me to witness and imitate God's inclusivity. There is a distinct warmth and openness felt every time I have stepped into a Uniting Church or been involved in any UCA activity. I have been blessed with strong relationships from both young and old …[4]

In another place she writes:

> The attraction of the Uniting Church for me is simple: There is a sense of welcome when I walk through the door of any Uniting Church … I feel I will

> always be welcomed into the church regardless of the length of time I have been inactive, the size of the contribution I make to church life or whether I have accepted Christ into my life.[5]

One of the unexpected insights to emerge from the contributors to *Growing Up Uniting* is that they value a Church where belonging matters as much or more than believing and relationships more than religiosity. The lesson is obvious: be intentional about helping people feel as though they belong.

Recognising, accepting and appreciating difference

The third factor to emerge from *Growing Up Uniting* may also come as a surprise to many, one that may perhaps be troublesome to some. It is the recognition, acceptance and appreciation early in one's faith journey that the Uniting Church is different from many other churches.

Probably the most visible difference for young girls is women in leadership. For many of the contributors to *Growing Up Uniting*, it was completely normal growing up to have a woman as their minister. Not until much later did they realise that it was such a "big deal" in other churches.[6] As a teenager, one of the three ordained contributors in the collection fondly remembers her minister wearing dangly earrings and speaking of God like a woman. She comments, "I will be forever grateful to have grown up in a church where gender was not a stumbling block to imagining myself in ministry."[7]

The Uniting Church's adoption of an "open table"[8] is another marker of difference that young Uniting Church people soon discovered, sometimes surprisingly so, that made their church different. One contributor to *Growing Up Uniting* writes that she was in primary school when she discovered that her friends in the Catholic Church were not allowed to take Holy Communion before their Confirmation. "But as a child in the Uniting Church," she recalls, "I was able to receive the bread and the juice – they were the gifts of God for all. Communion united us, young and old, children and adults, as the people of God."[9]

As children in the Uniting Church grow up and go into work or on to further studies, they discover other differences about the Uniting Church that are less visible though no less important. One contributor is explicit on this point:

> I am aware that … I am remarkably different from my non-UCA friends and peers. I read a lot of news, I engage at a deep level with politics, social constructs, challenging power and systems that keep people oppressed and disenfranchised. I am engaged spiritually and very interested in the spirituality of other people. I don't often find friends that are interested in these things (outside of the UCA).[10]

There are obvious dangers as well as strengths in applauding difference. It is hard to imagine the Uniting Church, so shaped by the Reformed tradition, becoming so culturally and theologically different that it separates itself from society and other churches.

The Focus Group: The Present: insights and lessons

The present is certainly not ignored in the reflections, but there is almost no mention of the pandemic which retained its relentless grip throughout the time our participants were writing. This stands in marked contrast with the Focus Group responses. It is the backdrop for almost all that was discussed in that forum.

One further point should be emphasised. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the participants in the focus group are not named; that is, in contrast with those providing written reflections of their experience of growing up in the UCA. In general, this is how focus groups are run. Those participating are guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. So, in the analysis that follows no names are included. However, we might simply add that in addition to attempting to keep a gender balance in the group, the ages of participants ranged from late teens to mid-forties and covered quite a range of occupational backgrounds.

The importance of community

One of the major themes in this discussion was community, the church, especially the local church, as community, a place of

belonging! As one person expressed it, "People crave community". The emphasis was on shared time and shared space, of conversations across generations, of a place where and when "the Spirit can touch people's hearts". Participants spoke of the unique nature of this kind of community, of there being no real equivalent in the secular world. Church communities, at their best, are places of acceptance, and of the kind of hospitality that welcomes and embraces all comers, that celebrates and enjoys diversity. The experience of COVID 19, of that extended period of social and physical isolation, simply highlighted the importance of this understanding of community. There was a fervent hope that these qualities of genuine community can be recaptured and enhanced post-COVID even if in different form – some times of meeting face-to-face in a larger group but also in smaller, house-based groups, and continuing to meet via Zoom and Skype, recognising that that means that more people, particularly older people, may be able to join in, especially at night time and in winter.

A place of safety

In this discussion of community there was also an explicit emphasis on safety, of feeling safe in a church community. Two aspects were highlighted. The first was the importance of the gathered church as being a place where one can be vulnerable and have one's vulnerability acknowledged and accepted. More explicitly, we are being reminded in this research of the need for the church to acknowledge just how widespread and significant are issues of mental ill-health in the Australian community as a whole but also within our churches – the need to recognise the wide-spread nature of depression and anxiety in our community, not confined to the young but an especially concerning feature of many young lives. This issue and the message to the church also featured in one of the reflections.[11] Discussion in the focus group named the need to recognise the challenges in people's lives and the importance of "creating a space where people are able to be honest about where they are at and able to

explore difficulties", personal difficulties. There was an emphasis on how the busyness – "too much busyness" – of the church may work against that possibility.

The second feature of community that was highlighted was the need for churches to be safe places for discussions of contentious issues, of things that might make us feel uncomfortable. The culture of most church communities is one that is uneasy with challenging conversations. Younger people in the church can experience discomfort with airing issues that may offend those they care about in the church. As one contributor said – "I might love the place, love the people, but just want to be able to say, 'I think this is nonsense', especially in relation to hymns". Can we find ways to create space for young people in the congregation to explore the things they find "true and meaningful and sacred for them regardless of what others might say"? This is especially difficult "in small congregations where too often it becomes a matter of keeping each other together", of "let's not move into harder discussions but just stay supportive of one another". What was highlighted was the difficulty the church has in accepting that different views and convictions are part of every congregation, that open-ended exploring and probing and doubting are important, that there must be found a safe place for respectful dissent and debate, acknowledging that that is where growth can happen, where the possibility of doing things differently can begin and flourish. One member of the group expressed it as "a tension which is about safety, feeling safe to explore the doubts and the journey we're on, but still wanting to be part of that loving community". What was seen to be missing was the possibility of having two different views, ideas, being expressed, passionately expressed, yet still to be continuing to offer support for one another. Is it possible that our commitment to consensus decision-making in the committees and councils of the church might not serve us especially well when it comes to encouraging a culture within the local congregation of good, honest debate, that does not help us recognise how vital that might be in the life of the congregation?

Reflecting further on this important but also testing observation from our participants, we were struck by an argument made by Hugh Mackay in his latest book, *The Kindness Revolution: How can we restore hope, rebuild trust and inspire optimism*.[12] Mackay was writing about communities in general but the argument he presents is an important one to reflect upon:

> Creative tension can be generated by robust disagreements, respectful resistance to each other's ideas and a willingness to argue over points of disagreement between us. Indeed, that kind of engagement builds our resilience. Conversely, a failure to engage with such contests will undermine our resilience, will reduce the prospect of renewal – in a relationship or a society – and could be a worrying symptom of creeping indifference.[13]

While the reality that all communities have shortcomings was acknowledged by our participants, what this part of the discussion highlighted was that at times such as the present one of considerable upheaval, two profoundly important needs of our time are not really being met very adequately, if at all, in many church communities and that there may be little recognition of the need to tackle this failing as we move into the future.

Risk taking and the need for fundamental change

Along with community and the creation of safe places for vulnerability and for debate, there was a second significant theme. This related, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, to the importance of risk taking and the conviction that we must not react to the future and what it may bring out of fear or turning inwards in an effort to survive.[14] "Making decisions out of fear" is not confined to the church. It has become widespread. As one person expressed it, "We are on a cusp. The world is facing monumental change". In the context of the church, the fear is that the church won't be there "when we reach middle age and later". There was a "hope it would be, but a fear that it won't". And, in general, there was a despair that decisions will be made in terms of "fighting to keep things going as they have been" rather than looking to embrace something new and different. What will remain of the church? In this context and again drawing on the

COVID experience, there were things that were noted as features of the church that we should perhaps be working to sustain, to develop further, or reimagine. They included the importance of gathering together and sharing tea and coffee and sometimes a meal as well. There needed to be a thoroughgoing reassessment of the different ways in which we might gather, in different settings, as different groups – "mixed mode" as it was expressed, offering different options for people of different temperaments and with different needs, including quiet places and providing opportunities for contemplation and shared silence, but also learning about our faith together and making provision for that. And while there was a naming of the church's failure to be at home with the notion of robust debate, there was an acknowledgement that the Uniting Church does encourage exploration and indeed questioning of our faith and that there is a recognition of the place of the intellect, of ongoing exploration of theology and the teachings of the church. Those aspects were also seen to be a necessary part of any future church.

Leadership

The issue of leadership and failures of leadership were raised in a number of contexts. There was disillusionment with the structures of the church on the part of some in the group while others knew little of that wider decision-making structure. "I don't feel any passion for the institution, in terms of Synod and presbyteries and the whole structure – yes, I know you can't do the things you do without the structure, but I just feel disconnected from it. I've been asked to be part of decision making but I found those experiences soul-destroying." There was a valuing, however, of the voice of the Uniting Church speaking out on matters of importance in the wider community, indeed issues that are vital for the nation and the world. "I am proud of the Uniting Church when it takes a political or policy stance."

Thresholds and the future

In the concluding discussion, it was suggested by the facilitator that participants might consider the image of "threshold", of stepping

into the future bravely and with open minds. One person spoke of his dream being that the church might become "a place where faith is explored beyond theology", in a sense that was "more transformative". He feels that we have lost the ability to be transformed and changed. We are too caught up with a fear of the church dying. Other views supported the notion that it would be too easy for the church simply to die more quickly because of a failure to be a bit braver and look outward and ask what has this year of COVID opened up for us, what opportunities are there for doing things we never thought we would do. "What is God actually asking us to look at now and can we see beyond the lens of what we've always done." "We mustn't become stale." There was a return to talk of the importance of being prepared to take risks. "Real change always involves risks, calculated risks. Always some degree of risk. It has to!" And our faith is one that demands we take risks as we step out in faith.

Throughout this discussion there was a profound hope that the church would rise to the challenges that we are facing and, in a real sense, the belief that this could be achieved. And so we would want to emphasise that, for all the deeply felt exasperation and even, at times, disillusionment with the Uniting Church, the focus group discussion was firmly grounded in that hope. This also characterises the reflections.[15] They, too, were critical yet remained, by and large, thankful for what has been and hopeful that what lies in the future for the church will be something good, something of importance, of lasting value, a church of profound relevance to our challenging times.

It is important that we acknowledge that while hope might be the substratum of this research the actual subject of "hope", of its meaning, was not explored explicitly either in the reflections or the focus group. However, it would certainly not be at odds with our data to say that what underpins these discussions is a conception of hope as essentially a "practice", as something to be enacted, as something to be expressed, to be lived out, in all we do and say.

This is a hope that the church will see itself as a rich, interlinked

network of communities, communities that are open minded and open hearted, that are hospitable, welcoming environments, that provide safe places for vulnerability but also for honest (even hard-hitting) debate, communities that are not afraid to take risks, and experiment with different forms of gathering and worshipping, that go on caring for each other and seeking new ways of meeting one another's needs, a church, and its many and varied communities, that is prepared to tackle the difficult questions of our time, to take a public stance on issues that matter for all Australians.

What is named in this research is the need to reimagine the church, a plea that we do so, and a belief that this is what we are all called to do.

Endnotes

1 Andrew Dutney, *Where did the joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001).

2 Anita Heiss, ed., *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia* (Carlton, VIC: Black Inc.: 2018); Amra Pajalic and Demet Divaroren, eds, *Growing Up Muslim in Australia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2019); Edmund Campion, *Rockchoppers: Growing Up Catholic in Australia* (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1982).

3 William W. Emilsen and Elizabeth A. Watson, eds, *Growing Up Uniting* (Richmond, SA: MediaCom, 2021).

4 Elvina Kioa Kramer, 'Finding Spiritual Freedom', in *Growing Up Uniting*, 151–52.

5 Ibid., 150.

6 Emma Halgren, 'Carried by a Loving God', *Growing Up Uniting*, 122.

7 Elizabeth (Ellie) Elia, 'Love Child of the UCA', *Growing Up Uniting*, 85.

8 On the "open table" in the Uniting Church, see Eojin Lee, *Theology of the Open Table* (Oregon: Resource Publications, 2017).

9 Michelle Harris, 'Sticking with the Uniting Church', *Growing Up Uniting*, 134.

10 Sarah Williamson, 'Belonging to a Questioning Church', *Growing Up Uniting*, 207.

11 See Katrina Davis, 'Notes on Liberation', *Growing Up Uniting*, 61–70.

12 Hugh Mackay, *The Kindness Revolution: How we can restore hope, rebuild trust and inspire optimism* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2021).

13 Mackay, *The Kindness Revolution*, 145.

14 See, for example, Frank Furedi's Conclusion, in *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

15 See the Introduction, *Growing Up Uniting*, 17–18.

4

Growing Up into Union

Dean Eland

Introduction

Forty-four years ago, 215 members of the Inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia met at the Lyceum Hall, Wesley Central Mission, 210 Pitt Street, Sydney. The Assembly met for three days, 22–24 June and resolved to establish the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), adopted the *Basis of Union* and Constitution including the respective responsibilities of the four Councils, elected officers and appointed committees of the Assembly. Assembly membership comprised 70 from each of the three denominations entering Union and six from the United Church of North Australia. (Records indicate that Presbyterian membership was one member short at 69). Visitors to the Assembly included guests from partner churches, ecumenical organisations, other denominations, and supporters from across Australia.

Questions that emerge after 40 years

Revisiting this event after four decades prompts questions about organisational and procedural issues involved in forming a new denomination. Research could explore the way members were appointed, who they were and why they were chosen. This study is one attempt to develop some understanding about their background and the implications this had for the Uniting Church in the following decade. The summary notes that follow include the significance of denominational origins, personal profiles and leadership roles leading up to union and their continuing influence following the Assembly.

Members of the Assembly included a few who were members of the Joint Commission on Church Union during part or all of the twenty years of its negotiations, and these could be described

as the foundation generation. Others present could be named as the emerging generation, growing up in one tradition and in the UCA's first decade, growing up into Union. These members were called by the church and were responsible for giving shape and form to the new denomination. Leadership during this time illustrates the way successors carried their past with them. They created history by meeting the expectations of members and congregations who in their own context were called to adapt, change their patterns of governance, and become a new church.

Revisiting these events is also an invitation to remember and recall the personal cost and emotional experiences of those who had the responsibility to achieve the vision and take practical steps to make the dream come true. Those present described their experience in many ways. Norah Norris, a Presbyterian minister from South Australia, recalls the emotion of the final communion service of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. 'After a long morning we concluded by celebrating Holy Communion together. It was an emotional time. I know, because I was one of the servers. I could see as I moved amongst them how moved our people were.'[1] After the service those who were to become members of the Uniting Church left their former colleagues in the Margaret Street Assembly Hall and walked to Pitt Street.

Congregationalists met in their historic 1846 building at 264 Pitt Street and, on arriving at the Lyceum, were met by protestors holding up various placards. Many were followers of the Rev. Carl McIntire, President of the International Council of Christian Churches who arrived in Sydney to take on another foe, the 'apostate' Uniting Church and the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Philip Potter.[2] I was moved to confront this group with some strong words, but Harry Herbert took me by the arm and suggested it was better to walk on and ignore what was being said.

Facts and figures

UCA minutes, directories and publications include information

about the placement of ministers and this research is limited in reviewing the role of lay members as data is more difficult to access. Other limits to the study include incomplete information in identifying those who are still on the way with us. My best estimation would be about twenty Uniting Church members or 10% of the 215 who were present in 1977.

A one-page appendix includes data about the generational and denominational identity of those who were Assembly members. As this is a comparative quantitative study the following paragraphs include information about percentages of women and men, lay and ordained, denominational, and state or territory background. Insights from this data touches on similarities and differences between the former denominations. In these comments a few biographical indicators are introduced. I will be suggesting that these qualitative descriptions are a first step in understanding something of those who were founders and others who emerged as leaders in the first decade of union.

Lay and ministerial members of the Assembly (100 and 115) were close to equal representation. A letter dated 5 August 1975 from the Secretary-General of the Methodist Church of Australia, Rev. M. Wilmshurst, to the Secretary of the South Australian Conference provides information about the decision of the May 1974 Special General Conference. The Conference decided that those representing Methodists would be 12 ex-officio and 58 elected. This was to include seven ministers and nine lay persons from NSW with the same numbers for Victoria/Tasmania. South Australia and Queensland were both to have four and six, Western Australia one and three and Canberra one each.[3] Congregationalists included equal numbers.

Women members of the Assembly were: Congregationalists 27%, Methodists 11%, and Presbyterians 21%. Andrew Dutney, in his 2001 book *Where did the joy come from*?, draws attention to the question of women's ordination, what was assumed and what was debated. 'One of the first contributions of the Congregational members of the Joint Commission was to draw a line in the sand on the matter of

women's ordination. … A really searching discussion and the most testing debate took place a little later in 1974.'

Dates of ordination are connected and sum up where ministers were ordained. To some extent these figures reflect the history, population numbers and relative denominational strengths across Australian states. New South Wales, including the Australian Capital Territory, and Victoria have comparable numbers. South Australia and Queensland also have similar numbers. South Australia has a higher percentage of Methodist and Congregational ordinations and lower numbers for Presbyterians. This is one indicator of the social origins of the denominations in colonial times. Of interest also is the number of those ordained in other countries including five Congregationalists from the United Kingdom and none born overseas for Methodists.

Dates of ordination are one indication of the age and generational cluster of ministers. The data provides some insights about those who were likely to retire in the first decade and those who will become leaders in the three or four decades to come. The 1988 Assembly Directory is one source of information about those who continued in ministry and those who resigned or died in the first ten years. Sixteen names or 13% of the ministers at the Assembly are not listed in 1988 including eight Congregationalists, (two resigned), four Presbyterian and four Methodists. Other ministers, the emerging generation who were to grow into Union, carried their history with them. Andrew Dutney, in his 2005 lecture "'So different so quickly': The Impact of Church Union on the Ministry', refers to Arnold Hunt's comment that 'most of us, especially in South Australia, believed that more of Methodism would survive than has been the case.'[5]

The location of the 115 ministers in 1977 included 33 from New South Wales, 24 from Victoria, 19 from South Australia, 17 from Queensland, 11 from Western Australia, 4 from Tasmania, and 8 from the Northern Territory. In describing the social composition of the Uniting Church these figures could be set in conjunction with population and census data. Research undertaken by the Christian Research Association over the past 40 years provides information

about the trends and percentages of UCA nominals in each state.[6] This information is one indicator of the relative strengths and composition of church membership in relation to socio-cultural context.

Foundational and emerging Assembly leadership

Those called to denominational leadership in the decade after the Inaugural Assembly offer some insights about generational change and this was evident by the Fifth Assembly in 1988. Biographical information is one indicator when outlining the roles, the emerging generation, those who became officers of the Assembly, Synods and Presbyteries.

Further background information about the emerging and successive generations is available in historic sources including minutes, reports and resolutions of Council of Synods and Presbyteries. Journals and papers published by Synod based societies include *Uniting Church Studies, Church Heritage, Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Trinity Occasional Papers* and studies undertaken by the South Australian Uniting Church Historical Society.

Documentation by historians and articles by leaders are also included in three books edited by William Emilsen, *Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977–1997, The Uniting Church in Australia: the First 25 Years and An Informed Faith: The Uniting Church at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Recent steps taken to digitise Assembly documents are available online and this encourages members to discover many of the critical justice and theological statements where members have found more light and truth in the way the church engages and serves the wider community.[7]

The founding generation

Heads of the three denominations led the Inauguration service in the Sydney Town Hall at 8.00pm on Wednesday 22 June and included Rev. K.B. Leaver, President of the Congregational Union of Australia. Leaver was ordained 1939 and in 1977 was a chaplain, having retired in 1976 as Principal of Parkin Wesley College. Rev.

R.C. Mathias, ex-President-General of the Methodist Church of Australia, is not listed in the 1988 directory. The Very Rev. G.A.M. (Pat) Wood, Moderator-General of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, who moved the motion to establish the UCA was ordained in 1938 and retired in 1976.

Twenty-five members of the founding generation submitted the 1963 Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union.[8] The JCCU included three laymen, one from each denomination and no women. Sixteen members had retired before 1977 including eight Congregationalists, four Presbyterians and four Methodists. Fourteen years later nine were members of the 1977 Assembly. The five Congregational ministers were Walter Albiston, Geoff Barnes, John Bennett, Henry Wells and Frank Whyte. The two Methodists were Rupert H. Grove and Rev. Dr Harold Wood, and the two Presbyterians were Rev. Prof. Davis McCaughey and Rev. Prof. James Peter.

At the 1977 Assembly, Davis McCaughey, ordained in Northern Ireland in 1942, retired as Master of Ormond College in 1979, and was inducted as President. Rev. Winston O'Reilly who was ordained New South Wales in 1938 was the first Assembly Secretary and at the second Assembly, held in Melbourne in 1979, O'Reilly became President and Rev. David Gill, ordained 1965, became Secretary. Both were from New South Wales: Gill had served as a staff member of the World Council of Churches from 1968 to 1979. Almost all the JCCU members who attended the 1977 Assembly and Second Assembly officers that were ordained from 1939 to 1944 were retired by 1980.

Emerging generation

At the third Assembly in May 1982, the Rev. Dr Roland Busch from Queensland, ordained in 1954, was elected President and Rev. Gregor Henderson, Secretary. Henderson was in placement in Hobart, Tasmania and was ordained in 1971. The Secretary for the Commission for World Mission and Commission for Mission, Rev. Dr. John Brown, had been ordained in 1958 in Victoria. From 1960

to 1971 Brown was a missionary in Korea and then a staff member of the Presbyterian Board of Ecumenical Mission and Relations from 1972 to 1977. He retired in 2000.

David Gill, a former Congregationalist, Assembly Secretary from 1980 to August 1988 became Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches until 2001. Under Gill's leadership the ACC became the National Council of Churches in Australia in 1994 and received Catholic and Lutheran churches as members of the new Council.

Gregor Henderson, a former Presbyterian ordained in 1971, continued as Assembly Secretary for eleven years from 1989 to 2001. From 2006 to 2009 Henderson was President of the Assembly and for some of that time was also involved in the World Council of Churches Central Committee (1998 to 2013).[9]

The fifth Assembly in 1988 elected the first lay member Sir Ronald Wilson as President. Wilson was a High Court Judge, a former Presbyterian from Western Australia and the first Moderator of the Western Australia Synod. The 1994 Seventh Assembly commissioned the first lay woman, Dr Jill Tabart, as President.

1977 Synod Officers in the emerging generation

NSW/ACT Synod: Mrs Lilian Wells, Moderator and Rev. Frank Butler, Secretary were both former Congregationalists and Butler had been ordained in 1956.

Northern Synod: Moderator Graeme Bucknall, a former Presbyterian, was ordained in 1939 and the Secretary, Graham Bence, a former Congregationalist was ordained in 1953.

The first Moderator of the Queensland Synod was Rev. Roland Busch, a former Presbyterian, who was ordained in 1954. The Secretary, Rev. Doug Kirkup, a former Methodist, was ordained in 1951.

In the South Australian Synod, the Moderator, Rev. Ian Tanner, a former Presbyterian, was ordained in 1959 and the Secretary, Rev. Kyle Waters, a Methodist, was ordained in 1950.

The Tasmanian Synod appointed the Rev. Christiaan Mostert as its first Moderator. Mostert, a former Presbyterian, was ordained in 1968. The Secretary was the Rev. J.S. Petrie, a former Presbyterian, who was ordained in 1958.

The Victorian Synod appointed the Rev. Ron Allardice, a former Methodist, as Moderator. Allardice had been ordained in 1943. A former Congregationalist, Rev. G.A. McAnalley was Secretary. McAnalley had been ordained in 1959.

The Western Australia Synod appointed Ronald Wilson, a former Presbyterian as Moderator and G.A. Wilson, a former Methodist, was Secretary.

The emerging generation based in Synods was made up of eleven ministers, mostly ordained in the 1950s. Ordination decades indicate that Synod officers during the UCA's first decade were: one from the late 1930s, one from the 1940s, eight from the 1950s and one in the 1960s. Three laypersons were appointed as Synod officers: two men from Western Australia and one woman, Lillian Wells, from New South Wales. The denominational backgrounds included three Congregationalists, three Methodists and five Presbyterians.

Pointers to further research by UC Historical Societies

As a result of this research, I am suggesting that there are several ways that will encourage the Uniting Church to be thankful for generational change and consider the implications this has for the future.

- Biographical information assists members to track changes and trends about the way leadership is transferred to successive generations.
- Historic research and publications provide sources to explore the impact of demographic and membership trends and to help members appreciate the way churches adapt and respond.
- Further documentation about members past and present are valuable reference points for continuing research and collaboration between history scholars and current challenges facing denominational leaders.
- Personal stories, recollection of events and achievements affirm what has been achieved by UC Councils in confronting the challenges of the day.

- Through collaboration and mutual support UC historical societies and scholars have the possibility of creating a UCA Dictionary of Biography.

Further positive possibilities follow when research outcomes inspire and inform. Biographical documentation leads to theological reflection and finding ways to build up and affirm significant changes in being a people on the way. Research also assists current members to affirm the ministry of all the people of God, those who have gone before, the great cloud of witnesses. Andrew Dutney suggests that by going back we are traveling back in time, another world belonging to the fifties and sixties, 'but it it's a journey we have to take if we want to catch a glimpse of what they saw – a vision that led them into union with a trust, courage and joy that we seek again in our generation.'[10] What then do we discover from this journey into the past about present challenges and being a future church?

Appendix: Members of the Inaugural UCA Assembly, 23–25 June 1977

Congregational

Women: 19 + Men: 51 = Total: 70

Lay leaders: 35 + Ministers: 35 = Total: 70

Ordination location: NSW: 8, VIC: 9, SA: 7, QLD: 4, WA: 1, TAS: 0, OTHER: 5 (UK).

Decade of Ordination: 1930s: 6, 1940s: 3, 1950s: 16, 1960s: 6, 1970s: 4.

Ministers' location at 1977 Assembly: NSW: 9, VIC: 7, SA: 7; QLD: 4: WA: 5; TAS: 1; NT: 2.

Methodist

Women: 8 + Men: 62 = Total: 70

Lay leaders: 32 + Ministers (including Deaconesses): 38 = Total: 70

Ordination location: NSW: 12, VIC: 10, SA: 6, QLD: 7; WA: 3; TAS: 0.

Date of ordination: 1930s: 4, 1940s: 7, 1950s: 17, 1960s: 6; 1970s: 2.

Ministers' location at 1977 Assembly: NSW: 13, VIC: 6, SA: 8, QLD: 7; WA: 3; TAS: 1.

Presbyterian

Women: 15 + Men: 54 = Total: 69?

Lay leaders: 33 + Ministers (including Deaconesses): 36 = Total: 69?

Ordination location: NSW: 12, VIC: 12, SA: 3, QLD: 4, WA: 1, TAS: 2, OTHER: 3.

Date of ordination: 1930s: 4, 1940s: 6, 1950s: 10; 1960s: 13; 1970s: 3.

Ministers' location at the 1977 Assembly: NSW: 11, VIC: 11, SA: 4, QLD: 6, WA: 3, TAS: 2.

United Church of North Australia

Rev. Dr Robert Bos: ordained NT, 1972.

Rev. G. Bucknall: ordained VIC, 1939.

Rev. B.A. Clarke: ordained SA, 1963.

Rev. T. Djiniyini: ordained NT, 1976.

Rev. G. Ewin: ordained NT, 1963.

Rev. N. Place: ordained VIC, 1966.

All Assembly Members

Women: 42 + Men: 173 = Total: 215

Lay leaders: 100 + Ministers: 115 = Total: 215

Location of Ordination: NSW: 32, VIC: 31, SA: 16, QLD: 15, WA: 5, TAS: 3, OTHER (including Northern Territory, India, Sri Lanka, England, Northern Ireland): 13.

Ministers' location at the 1977 Assembly: NSW: 33, VIC: 24, SA: 19, QLD: 17, WA: 11, TAS: 4, NT: 8.

Members of both the JCCU in 1963 and of the 1977 Assembly: 5 Congregationalists (Revs Walter Albiston, Geoff Barnes, John Bennett, Henry Wells and Frank Whyte), 2 Methodists (Mr R.H. Grove and Rev. Dr A.H. Wood), 2 Presbyterians (Rev. Prof J.D. McCaughey and Rev. Prof J.F. Peter)

June 2021: Estimate of ministers still living: 20 to 25.

Two or three resigned from the ministry or the UCA or have joined another denomination.

Endnotes

[1] N. Norris, *UCA Fortieth Anniversary*, https://scotschurch.org/home/talk/aug2017/40-years-uca.html

[2] 'Service inaugurates Uniting Church', *Canberra Times*, 23 June 1977, 7.

[3] Letter from Rev. M. G. Wilmshurst, Secretary General, Methodist Church of Australasia to Secretary of the South Australian Conference, 5.8.1975, History Centre, Uniting Church South Australian Historical Society.

[4] A. Dutney, *Where did the joy come from*? *Revisiting the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), 3.

[5] A. Dutney, "'So differently so quickly": The Impact of Church Union on the Ministry', *Historical Society of the Uniting Church in South Australia*, 18 November 2005.

[6] P. J. Hughes, M. Fraser and S. Reid, *Australia's religious communities: facts and figures from the 2011 Australian Census and other sources* (Nunawading: Christian Research Association, 2012), 102–105.

[7] https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/

[8] Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering* (Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1964).

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregor_Henderson, accessed 24 August 2021.

[10] Dutney, *Where did the joy come from*?, 2.

5

Mostly harmless? An unwanted label for the Uniting Church

Mark Hillis

The fictional *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, in Douglas Adams' well-known eponymous novels, had only one entry for the planet Earth. The entry simply stated, "Mostly harmless."[1] Some years ago I found myself exchanging emails with a self-identified atheist radio broadcaster. I had teased him about his frequent comments on religion, and that I relied on his broadcasts to keep me informed. When he learned that I belonged to the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), he remarked that, aside from the Buddhists, he regarded our church as 'one of the least harmful religions.'

Introduction

Did the UCA come into existence to be less harmful than some other expressions of faith? A project like *Growing up Uniting* is needed to explore the past, present and future trajectories of our church in the context of its many communities. In doing this, we must listen to the diverse generations and attend to the making of disciples and the forming of faith. My own experience of 'growing up' Uniting is as a UCA Minister of the Word since 1977, serving in pastoral and specialist educational placements across forty-four years. This paper will reflect upon a few slices of this vocational experience, drawing upon the resources of the *Basis of Union* and upon the work of theologians and educators who have invested deeply in the Uniting Church finding its way. The intention is to explore some of the ways the UCA may be able to shake-off a 'mostly harmless' label and help build a vision for the present and future of the Church.

Concern about younger generations in the UCA

My first Bible commentary was a gift from a long-term mentor, Bill, whom I had first encountered as my Sunday School teacher. Whether there were ten students or two on a given Sunday, he worked through the lessons with equal passion and excitement. Bill shared his faith openly, with profound personal insight, including reflections based upon his work-place experiences and his home life. Also a dedicated lay preacher, Bill was exemplary as a lifelong learner. Reflecting upon my experience with Bill, and another mentor, Tom, as well as my own mother, I cannot help recalling the words of Henri Nouwen: 'When a student really wants to have a teacher, one has to give someone the freedom to become his [sic] teacher by offering one's own life experiences as a source of insight and understanding'.[2]

There is a personal cost for those who offer their life experiences and faith as part of a community. It is not a trivial pursuit nor is it contrived to be a harmless or risk-free one, but a willing investment in the next generation. It is not a matter of just looking after one's own relatives and family, the call to serve Christ always seemed to imply an enlargement of the concept of family.[3]

Not one of those who were my mentors and teachers ever required that their expression of faith find identical replication in the upcoming generation. They were confident that God's Spirit would look after the future. Yet, they were also certain that their testimony was important in the formation of those mentored by them. It was a testimony of words and deeds. The only problem was that there were fewer and fewer of my generation (Baby Boomers) who had sufficient contact with the Church to be formed in such a way. As a child I had observed that the older I became, the smaller were the Sunday School classes using the curriculum materials from the Joint Board of Graded Lessons. Andrew Dutney records his own experience: 'I hit adolescence in the early 1970s, just after the Boomers had evacuated the churches. Where was everyone?' [4]

My first ordained placement was in 1976, to a Methodist church in rural New South Wales. By today's indicators, it was a vibrant

Methodist circuit with a central town congregation and two outlying rural congregations. There was a more senior minister already in placement, a full-time deaconess, and me, as the paid ministry agents. The buzz of the soon-to-be formed Uniting Church was significant, as this was a regional centre, which also had a thriving Presbyterian congregation that was committed to the UCA (with one full-time minister) and a Congregational church with periodic, part-time ordained leadership. The inauguration of the UCA occurred there with great civic and ecumenical engagement. Attendance at the inaugural celebration filled the largest available venue in the region.

Yet, despite the appearances, members of the new UCA parish were concerned about the relatively limited engagement with younger generations. There were youth groups and Sunday Schools, but few young people seeking Confirmation or sharing in leadership roles. Parents often spoke to me with regret that their teenage and young adult children seemed reluctant to follow them into church membership. Regionally, Presbytery and Synod leaders were looking overseas for resource people who might bring wisdom and insight for the Church to address its emerging concerns about younger generations. It was while serving with these congregations, immediately pre, and then post-Uniting, that the question raised by the theologian-educator John Westerhoff, 'Will our children have faith?' became a matter for serious study and discussion, sometimes facilitated regionally by Synod staff.[5]

In Westerhoff's work one finds a disparaging critique of what he terms the 'schooling-instructional paradigm' that was heavily informed by age-group and developmental stage theory.[6] Westerhoff made use of James Fowler's theory. It helped to frame the urgent discussion about intergenerational faith formation, something that congregations needed to pursue in the foreground. Improved knowledge about human development and age-appropriate learning for congregations was helpful so long as it did not become an end in itself. Their main task was the nurture and formation of faith with younger generations, not a replication of school life.

Various age and stage theories have been influential in the formation of children and youth in what Charles Foster calls 'mainline Protestant' Christian denominations, including the UCA. Foster argues that numerous factors have been influential in the loss of participation by younger generations in mainline churches. Among the factors he includes are the decline of reinforcing structures for the nurture of young members within denominations; the lack of a catechetical culture of faith formation in congregations; the loss of a compelling narrative about God in the crosscurrents of theological, religious, and cultural diversity; and the neglect of intergenerational connection in mentoring faith formation. Both Westerhoff and Foster are strong advocates for congregations that nurture faith in community. They agree that without each generation sharing their faith and action in the world with one another, the Church could not further its mission.[7] Respected interpreters of the UCA's *Basis of Union* leave no doubt as to its imperative to be on mission in the world. The mission of the Church must take place with great humility and appropriately contextual discernment.[8]

Missional adventures

What was called a World Mission appointment took me to a teacher's college in Papua New Guinea (PNG), jointly run by the United Church there and the PNG Government. That two-year appointment (1979–1980) opened my eyes to the generational issues for the Church at home in Australia, because the enthusiasm for participation and leadership among the young people there was quite extraordinary and inspiring. On return, I accepted a placement with a Uniting Church congregation that was on mission: to the homeless people in their area. The work with homeless people grew to become regional and was supported by the government and several local churches for thirty years until it merged in recent times with a larger church-based agency. That particular UCA congregation took initial risks with their membership and their resources. The pivot to mission with the homeless was hotly contested and debated before achieving

general acceptance. In the years with that community (1981–86) I would not have described it as 'harmless.' It was courageous.

The formation of Elders

As a Regional Education Officer (REO) with the NSW Synod of the UCA, based in Newcastle (1987–1999), one of the first voices I heard was that of Dean Drayton, who came to NSW to serve as General Secretary for the Synod Board of Mission. Dean was advocating for a new era of conversion growth in the UCA. He helped people to see that the projects of previous generations (especially the 'Builders' generation, the parents of the 'Boomers') were not going to be replicated in the present. Among the many projects that Dean initiated and supported, I remember him encouraging the beginnings of a more empirical approach to understanding what was happening with the churches in Australia. It would become possible to address Andrew Dutney's earlier question, "Where was everyone?" in the form of the National Christian Life Survey (NCLS).

As REO, I was privileged to experience the work of quite young UCA parishes finding their feet. Numerous parishes and congregations sought support in exploring the roles of their Councils of Elders, whose responsibilities included Christian Education and Pastoral Care. Many of these engaged with me and Board of Education colleagues in providing learning experiences on specific topics of concern for them and in preparing and conducting weekend Elders' Retreats. For the purposes of this paper, I want to mention three things that were constant features of such retreats in my experience: storytelling about the Elder's lives and experiences of faith; explorations to discern and affirm their spiritual gifts; and discerning ways forward in mission with the congregation.

The explorations discerning spiritual gifts were generally with reference to Bible texts (as per, for example, 1 Corinthians 12). On such occasions, educational media (including the creative use of narrative) revealed how readily the Elders were able to interpret the biblical texts to affirm one another as spiritually gifted. It was

astonishing at times to see how readily such peculiar gifts as healing and miracle working could be interpreted in dynamic, vital, practical and grounded ways. In their storytelling about faith with one another, time and again the names and brief biographies of significant others were prominent: stories of those who shared and modelled faith for each of them. The significant persons in Elders' stories were teachers, parents, mentors, friends, and ministers. They often recalled weekly meetings, group life and camping experiences, where significant others became real and accessible role models.

The faith formation of these Elders was clearly of an interpersonal nature. They were connected to Christian community by people who shared their lives with them in wholesome and exemplary ways. These were folk who had, in retrospect, the great joy of community life amongst people who enriched and enlarged their sense of identity as Christians. Their lifelong engagement with faith was both taught and caught through such work.

Encouraging Elders to take up their educational and leadership roles was provided by people working in agencies based in synods and presbyteries. Around Australia, they attempted to provide resources and support to congregations, most strongly in the 1980s and 90s. With diminishing resources and, for many, a lack of clarity about the roles of Elders in a restructured church (when the one church council became the rule for the UCA), there was less call for specific Elder education events. However, as Denham Grierson suggested in 1996, lay education was comparatively unaddressed and under-resourced because it lacked undergirding in the *Basis of Union* and in the formation of ministry leaders: 'The Uniting Church has lived its life without attending to what the Hebrew tradition would regard as essential to its very existence, the rabbinical task'.[9]

A combination of factors no doubt led to the under-resourcing to which Grierson referred. One of those factors, for Grierson, was the evidence he found that: 'Lay people in the church clearly do not feel that they are being instructed in the faith. Ministers of the Word do not feel laid upon them the task of edifying their people'.[10] This, he

felt, came down to a lack of heft in the UCA's founding documents. 'Here teaching, whether intended or not, becomes a subset of preaching, and is largely viewed in that way by many Ministers of the Word.'[11] Admittedly, the Ninth Assembly in 2000 tried to address the matters Grierson and others had been raising with the publication of the *Report to the Ninth Assembly of the Task Group on the Teaching Ministry and Mission of the Church*.[12]

Curriculums and crises

Christian education leaders and communities in Australia and New Zealand were early adopters and practitioners of a united and a collaborative approach before 1977. From 1968, the Joint Board of Graded Lessons became the Joint Board of Christian Education (JBCE).[13] One of its first activities was to create a new curriculum, the Christian Life Curriculum (CLC, 1969–1983), which had learning for all ages in view. This was a major, comprehensive project that endeavoured to meet the needs of traditional Sunday Schools, but also to offer youth and adults resources for learning and sharing their faith in the world. The CLC was received with gratitude in many parts of the church and aroused controversy in others. Controversy had usually to do with different attitudes and approaches to the use of the Bible. The CLC was well supported as a resource in its early years. That was partly thanks to the pre-1977 expectation in Methodist Churches, that the Joint Board materials were to be generally used by congregations. Post-1977, there was less support, and a growing desire for less expensive, alternative, and new resources.[14] The CLC was succeeded by resources with less longevity: The *Living Faith* curriculum (1983–87); *New Living Faith* (1988–94); and *Life Plus* Modules (1994–97).

One of the JBCE's rivals for curriculum resources in the Uniting Church was the Canadian lectionary-based resource (with some regular contributions and writing by Australians) *The Whole People of God*. That resource was particularly popular with UCA ministers who liked to feel that their Sunday sermons were aligned with learning

elsewhere in the congregation. The JBCE resisted lectionary-based materials throughout its life, although it prepared *Living Faith* as a curriculum that linked lessons to the major festivals of the church year.[15]

Once the JBCE was dissolved, in July 1997, *Uniting Education* became the National Assembly's agency, and partnered with MediaCom in South Australia to collaborate in the creation and promotion of *Seasons of the Spirit*, an ecumenical, international, lectionary-based curriculum, published by Wood Lake Books in Canada. *Seasons of the Spirit* continues to this day, but is no longer connected with the Uniting Church Assembly.[16]

Through all the curriculum debates and changes, briefly outlined here, there were other conflicts and controversies across the life of the church over Baptism, sexuality and leadership, and organisational restructuring. Christian educators, in my varied experience, continued to strive to convey an ethos of learning that was inclusively ecumenical, biblically aware, and socially engaged.

Another field of church engagement is religious education in schools (RE). It is also a field in which curriculum materials, or syllabus, is an ongoing source of tension. Whereas in a church community, creativity with the curriculum is often encouraged, I discovered that was not always possible in RE. A number of situations where I consulted on behalf of the UCA or ecumenical bodies,[17] encouraging teachers to stay within curriculum guidelines became an issue of discipline for volunteer teachers who sometimes perceived RE in schools as a platform for their personal proclamation. Certainly, as a storyteller, educator, pastor and preacher, I have never regarded the biblical tradition of the Church as harmless. In asserting that, I have true sympathy with the parent in the following story. In May 2001 Judy Jones wrote to a parent magazine, *Sydney's Child*, about the "Scripture" program in her local government school, which was authorised by religious organisations and usually delivered by volunteer lay teachers:[18]

> What really angers me is that teachers at both our new and old schools encourage parents to send their children to Scripture on the grounds that it is just harmless stories, nothing hard core. … My friends' children, who went to Scripture this week, came home saying they looked at pictures of God and learned how he made the world in six days. Make no mistake, Creationism is alive and well and potentially thriving in every state school that abides by the Department of Education guidelines.[19]

Jones' concern created some reaction from official and private persons wanting to correct her impressions from a broader base of information.[20] The correspondence was also discussed at the June 2001 meeting of the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools (ICCOREIS NSW).[21] None of the discussion in that meeting embraced what is to me the most interesting aspect of Jones' letter: the references to storytelling in religious education. In my view, Judy Jones was correctly perceiving the dangerous potential of storytelling in the world of discourse and ideas. Rightly or not, Judy Jones was fearful that a religious ideology, 'Creationism,' was being promoted in her local school under the 'innocent' guise of storytelling. Unlike the *Hitchhiker's Guide*, Jones did not believe that storytelling in religious education is by definition benign or harmless.

After many years teaching SRE in New South Wales schools and working with teachers and leaders in various training seminars and courses, I am aware that biblical storytelling can easily stir controversy: storytelling about creation or about heaven and hell. There have been occasional complaints and censures and controversies about SRE teaching in some localities. These have tended to be resolved by promises from the offending parties to either withdraw or to strictly adhere to an agreed curriculum. However, as Judy Jones recognised, Bible stories are not easily rendered harmless. Wittingly or unwittingly, teachers who use Bible stories are working with a powerful medium of communication. And the Church has always known that its message can be transformative. It should not apologise for that. The UCA has often modelled appreciative and critical approaches to the Bible that have led to its members finding themselves distinctly uncomfortable in the company of more

conservative Christians. Such approaches would potentially provide creative responses to people like Judy Jones in the story above.

Transformative learning will best take place where there is no coercion or abuse of a captive audience, such as some forms of 'evangelism' may advocate in a school setting. As Andrew Dutney has helpfully put it: 'Sometimes it feels as though it would be easier for everyone if we just treated the Bible as God's instruction book – do this, don't do that. But we couldn't do that and be the Uniting Church'.[22]

The Uniting Church, at least in New South Wales and Victoria, has not been entirely comfortable with the style of Christian Religious Education in state schools.[23] Having taught and coordinated training for volunteer teachers for decades and having collaborated with other denominations in providing resources for teachers, it is disappointing, yet understandable, to note the gradual decline of UCA participation in such ministry. As more conservative elements pursued the work with greater control of curriculum, there has been even less inclination for UCA parents to agree to their children attending it or for Uniting Church ministers or leaders to engage with it. It would be interesting to research the participation of UCA parents and volunteers in the alternative Ethics program in New South Wales, and to learn to what extent children from UC families are enrolled in SRE versus Ethics. In 2011 Peter Sherlock gave a helpful outline of religious education and the need for a balanced and informative approach in state schools in Victoria. His analysis could be said to reflect many of the sentiments I and other church leaders have expressed in New South Wales and nationally with reference to this topic.[24] In 2015 the UCA in Victoria withdrew its support for Access Ministries,[25] whilst asserting the right of UC members to continue volunteering with the service if they so choose.[26]

Tangible play, storytelling, and profound learning encounters

In 1996 an Anglican colleague introduced me to Jerome Berryman at Morpeth, New South Wales. Jerome was sharing his approach to

a style of learning for young children which he called Godly Play. Jerome had adapted this approach from a Roman Catholic form of catechesis developed by Sofia Cavalletti,[29] called The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS). In 1998 I was able to visit and train with teachers working in CGS atriums in Brisbane. My own involvement with and advocacy for this movement began in the last three years of my REO appointment and carried over into a congregational placement in the Lake Macquarie area of NSW (1999–2005). What was noticeable about this approach?

- The time-consuming engagement with tangible materials in biblical and sacred storytelling. One could witness children and adults becoming (many for the first time) creatively stirred by the Bible and other elements of Christian tradition.
- Through intergenerational storytelling and open-ended inquiry (wondering together, rather than posing leading or loaded questions) adults and children could find common ground and explore faith together. For the children, it is an invitational, non-coercive encounter with core stories and faith practices.

Could it be that the practitioners of Godly Play in the UCA found an approach to teaching and learning which is accessible to newcomers and old hands alike? For one group there is access to what may be called a 'second naïveté' in faith,[28] and to others a fresh and deep exposure to formative story and community in a contemplative environment. Part of the work of Christian teaching, learning and formation is to engage with the great stories of the Bible and tradition in a way that is open to the future and in tune with God's work in the world. In order to proclaim the good news of God's love for the world, embodied in Jesus Christ and his disciples, the UCA will always need members who are encouraged to discover and use their gifts in community.[29] It will always need its scholarly interpreters, its faithful evangelists, prophets and martyrs, who 'confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds.'[30] The words of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr come to mind: 'As we grow older, we ourselves become the storytellers. We

pass on to the young ones all they must know. The stories and songs sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside'.[31]

As an educator, I would keenly advocate that to complement and grow the missio Dei through the UCA, we must encourage openness to lifelong learning and give creative attention to the formation of disciples as a core priority, which Craig Mitchell, for example, has so passionately advocated.[32] As the experience of the UCA's early leaders has shown, adult faith is grown through attentive nurture and inspirational mentoring relationships. Even today there is no substitute for the careful nurturing of faith in local communities. Congregations and faith communities must find culturally and contextually appropriate ways to engage in and model lifelong learning with enthusiasm and devotion.

Mostly harmless?

According to John Dickson, an Ipsos poll conducted in 2017 found that sixty-three percent of Australians surveyed think religion does more harm than good in society.[33] Given that salutary report, a label like 'mostly harmless' seems mild. The UCA, however, has a desire to be a truly Australian church, serving the mission of God in the world God loves. Let us venture to pray that the Uniting Church reject both a harmful and a 'mostly harmless' slur. Neither term adequately describes a church that was formed with the goal of uniting with other Christian churches, despite the complications and risk. They are not fair descriptions of a church that seeks to incorporate the faith and life of many different cultural communities.

Mostly harmless is not the best description of a church that is prepared to defy government decisions about going to war; nor of a church that has committed itself to hospitality for refugees. It is not the best description of a church that seeks to tell the truth about relationships with Indigenous Australians and develop forms of life that demonstrate its commitment to reconciliation. Nor is mostly harmless the best label for a church that consistently raises the ire

of its own conservative membership by addressing questions of sexuality in leadership, and equality in marriage. It is not the best label for a church that frequently joins with other organisations, and in solidarity with Pacific nations, in seeking to address climate change. It is an inappropriate label for a church that has advocated divestment in fossil fuels through its own financial institutions. It is not a good description of a church that supports (admittedly in the name of harm minimisation) supervised injection rooms, and which urges rehabilitation and reform of laws about drug abuse, policing, and sentencing. Even in the humble ministries with which I have been associated over these forty-four years, 'mostly harmless' is not the best descriptive label, and not one that the Uniting Church has ever sought.

In playing with the theme of this conference I may ask, 'Are we dying, as some indicators may suggest, or is the UCA growing up?' David Withers seems to think that the UCA is 'a maturing denomination that is slowly coming to terms with that which its founders foresaw as its critical task.'[34] For now, I am with Andrew Dutney (who had a 'sudden insight' while taking a bath) in saying that I may feel responsible for the decline of the church, but I'm not; and it's not your fault either! 'It's just a thing. … we need to interpret and respond to with a radical trust in the sovereignty of God, confidence in the sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and openness to the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit'.[35]

Endnotes

1 D. Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Great Britain: Arthur Baker, 1979), 52. At the outset I acknowledge the variety of meanings that may be imparted by the phrase 'mostly harmless'. In some ways 'mostly harmless' could be interpreted very positively indeed. For example, with reference to pollution of the planet, 'mostly harmless' is a compliment. With respect to human relationships in their diversity, 'mostly harmless' is also positive, though not exciting. In the field of human health and of harm limitation with reference to drug use, the UCA has a positive reputation in some quarters and a negative in others. In the world of theology and the propagation of Christian faith, 'mostly harmless' may sound derogatory or dismissive; suggestive of apathy or disinterest. I have taken the label to have been given in a spirit of mild condescension, and therefore not very complimentary.

2 H. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 12.

3 Mark 3: 31–35; Matthew 12: 46–50 and Luke 8: 19–21.

4 A. Dutney, 'It's not my fault (and it's not yours either)', *Backyard theology: conversation starters on faith, life and leadership*, (Adelaide: MediaCom, 2011), 72.

5 Westerhoff, an Episcopal minister and theological educator from the USA, was a well-known visitor to the Australian church scene in the 1970s and 1980s. *Will our children have faith*? (East Malvern: Dove Communications, 1976) was widely read here in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A revised edition was published in 2012. John E. Mavor makes reference to the importance of Westerhoff's work for the training of Christian education staff in his memoir, *Come On! Come On!* (Blackburn: PenFolk Publishing, 2010), 387.

6 Stage theory has been greatly exemplified in the exposition of James Fowler's *Stages of Faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (Melbourne: Dove, 1981) and its many spin-off publications. Stage theory, through many iterations, has been hugely formative in the creation of curriculum materials for children and youth.

7 Foster's work spans several decades. Landmark volumes include *Educating Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) and *From Generation to Generation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books 2012). Foster visited Australian church educator conferences in the 1990s. See also M. Hillis, 'What is happening with intergenerational learning in Christian Education?' *Uniting Church Studies*, 20, 2, December 2014.

8 Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space*, 65ff. The chapter heading, 'Theology as the art of naming where God is,' really sets the most appropriate context for mission.

9 D. Grierson, 'Why has the UCA turned its back on the Teaching Ministry of the Church?', *Uniting Church Studies*, 2, 1, March 1996, 40.

10 Ibid., 40–41.

11 Ibid., 37.

[12] Item 00.28 in the Minutes of the Ninth Assembly of the UCA: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/assemblies/minutes9thassembly00.pdf> ; see also P. Butler, 'Teaching for Worship: relocating the teaching office of the church,' *Uniting Church Studies*, 6, 2, July 2000, 35–48.

[13] The Joint Board of Graded Lessons included all three founding UCA denominations plus Presbyterians and Methodists from Aotearoa New Zealand.

[14] The CLC was a spiral curriculum that allowed for cyclic re-use each three years. Some congregations assiduously stored and re-used. Others were looking for something new.

[15] N.D. Clement, 'An Historical and Conceptual Analysis of the Christian Life Curriculum' (Master of Educational Studies Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1999), 78.

[16] *Uniting Education* had itself folded by 2005. From that time until 2010 the Assembly continued to promote Seasons of the Spirit, when the agreement with MediaCom Education was concluded. *Seasons*, however, continues to be used by many Uniting Church congregations, mostly for its materials which support worship preparation.

[17] Such as the Inter-Church Commission on Religious Education in Schools in NSW (ICCOREIS).

[18] In NSW state schools (public schools), Special Religious Education (SRE) has been conducted for more than 150 years. Since 2006 an alternative program, Ethics Education, has been offered, also by volunteer teachers.

[19] J. Jones, Letter to the editor, *Sydney's Child*, May 2001.

[20] See *Sydney's Child*, June 2001.

[21] Of which I am now an inactive Life Member, representing the Uniting Church in Australia.

[22] Dutney, *Where did the joy come from*?, 37

[23] Religious education in state schools, provided mostly by volunteers and variously labelled: CRE/SRI (Victoria), SRE/Scripture (NSW).

[24] https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-fourth-r-religion-in-schools-in-victoria/10101300. Accessed 05-06-2021.

[25] The body overseeing Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Victoria. It replaced the Council for Christian Education in Schools (CCES).

[26] https://www.eternitynews.com.au/archive/uniting-church-withdraws-support-for-access-ministries-sri-program-in-victoria/ Accessed 05-05-2021.

[27] Cavalletti, interestingly, was a friend of Maria Montessori and also of Jean Piaget (who was part of the Swiss Montessori movement). A key reference for Cavalletti is *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing scripture and liturgy with young children*, translated by P.M. Coulter and J.M. Coulter (Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992).

[28] The term second naïveté was used by Paul Ricoeur to describe what may be called a post-critical appreciation of the depth and symbolism of faith. See P. Ricoeur, *The symbolism of evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

[29] *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 13.

[30] *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 11.

[31] Miriam-Rose Foundation: https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/

[32] Flexible, intergenerational and cross-cultural Christian Education has been recommended and exemplified across the church in the years of work accomplished by Craig Mitchell through the UCA National Assembly from 2011 to 2017. See his broad and comprehensive study via this link: https://theses.flinders.edu.au/view/3da42e12-260f-4d92-b78a-51a9d193ee60/1.

[33] Reported in J. Dickson, *Bullies and Saints: An honest look at the good and evil of Christian history* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2021), xx.

[34] David Withers, 'The Basis of Union: a missionary vision for Uniting Church congregations,' *Uniting Church Studies*, 21, 1, June 2017.

[35] Dutney, *Backyard Theology*, 73

6

St Martin's in the Foothills: A congregation growing up Uniting

Alison Longworth

'St Martin's Forrestfield was the first new congregation formed within the Uniting Church in Australia, post-Union.'[1] This statement appeared in a history of the Kalamunda Uniting Church published in 2018 and to date no evidence has been cited to challenge that claim. St Martin's has been in a linked relationship with the Kalamunda Congregation since 2005. While the Kalamunda Congregation began its life as a Methodist Church in 1910, the Forrestfield Congregation was launched in 1978 when the Uniting Church was still in its first year. This paper will focus on the congregation and will consider if St Martin's is settling into a comfortable middle age in 2021 or whether it continues the process of 'growing up Uniting' on Whadjuk Noongar country in Western Australia.

The Forrestfield Congregation did not suddenly appear in a vacuum. Its beginning can be traced to a group of seven members who began meeting as a house church in Forrestfield in the mid-1970s, while still attending their home churches within the Victoria Park and Districts United Parish. From that small nucleus, the Parish planned to establish a congregation centred on the semi-rural area emerging as a low socio-economic suburb in the foothills of the Darling Scarp.[2] With two full-time ministers and strong lay leadership the Parish drew together congregations with Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational heritage. It offered theological studies for lay leaders, providing a solid foundation for Christian disciples. Members of the Parish were looking forward to the inauguration of the Uniting Church in June 1977 and, as the name implies, were already operating as a United Parish.

Although negotiations towards church union in Australia had begun as early as 1905, a renewed desire for church union in Australia occurred within the context of the worldwide ecumenical movement that flourished after the Second World War. This led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and in Australia a growing awareness of its geographical context within Asia and the Pacific.[3] The World Council of Churches adopted its controversial Programme to Combat Racism in 1969. In Australia this program was preceded by the 1967 Referendum when Australians voted to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the census and allowed the Commonwealth to make laws affecting them. It was anticipated this would improve conditions for Indigenous Australians. It was an era of great social change. The struggle for land rights and self-determination for First Nations people continued through the 1970s and Australian churches gave leadership in favour of land rights.[4] Other social movements included second wave feminism and protests in opposition to the Vietnam War. Many members of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches in Australia were influenced by these changes and yearned for church unity that would usher in a renewal of the spiritual life and a growing concern for social justice.

Within this context and with excited anticipation, members of the Victoria Park and Districts Parish were among the 7000 people who gathered on Sunday 26 June at the Perth Entertainment Centre. They came to celebrate the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia that had occurred in Sydney four days earlier, with the event being reported on the front page of the inaugural issue of *Western Impact*, what would become the Western Australia (WA) Synod monthly newspaper.[5] Robert Watson, from the Forrestfield home church, recalled the hope of many people that this would be the beginning of a wider ecumenical movement striving for unity and justice around the world.[6] Watson and Heather Abercrombie, also from Forrestfield, were both lay representatives for the Presbytery of Perth at the Inaugural Synod meeting in October 1977.[7] The Presbytery

of Perth had no rural parishes within its geographical boundary. The Presbytery reported that they were still coming to terms with what it meant to be the church in the city and the special problems of urban mission.[8] While Watson and Abercrombie participated in this and other business of that first WA Synod, in the outer Perth suburb of Forrestfield the primary focus was building a congregation.

The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church recognised the importance of the congregation within its structure, describing the congregation as the "embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ."[9] The young Forrestfield members were ready to face the challenge of such a daunting task. They were assured of the support of the Parish who intended to resource the new congregation, including the purchase of the former sales office of a local land developer for use as a worship centre.[10] Plans were already being laid to reach out into the wider community of Forrestfield, opening their building three mornings a week as a drop-in-centre, with three families each taking a turn to keep the centre open.

The inaugural service of the new Forrestfield Congregation was held on 16 April 1978 and reported in *Western Impact*.[11] Although feminist concerns were strong in the 1970s, and the three denominations who formed the Uniting Church all recognised the ordination of women prior to union, the leadership at the opening service was a very male affair. Chair of the Parish, Phil Hulbert, (later Rev.) led the service. Minister Rev. John Rees preached the sermon, Rev. David Oxley challenged the congregation as the representative from the Presbytery of Perth and the Moderator (later Sir) Ronald D. Wilson QC led the commissioning. Male leadership predominated, but the image published alongside the report showed the members of the new congregation, including women, men and children, placing the cross outside the new centre. This would be a family church.

Members of Forrestfield Congregation raising the cross at the opening service (Western Impact, Parish Supplement, April 1987)

During the commissioning Moderator Ron Wilson expressed his hope that the birth of this congregation would challenge and inspire the Western Australian Synod into expanding into other communities where there was no Uniting Church presence. More new congregations did emerge in those early years. For example, in 1979 a new worshipping community was commenced in Bullcreek.[12] The Parish of Wanneroo was established in January 1981 and the Kelmscott Congregation in February 1982.[13] Also, in 1982 and reflecting the changing multicultural status of Australian society, a unique celebration occurred when the Korean congregation that had been meeting for several years in the Carlisle building within the Victoria Park and Districts Parish was inaugurated as the Uniting Church Korean Congregation.[14] The story of these and other newly formed Uniting Church congregations deserves more research, but this history remains focused on Forrestfield, the first to emerge post-union.

The Forrestfield Congregation was part of a parish that took seriously the Inaugural Statement to the Nation of the Uniting

Church and its commitment to correct social injustices and work for the eradication of poverty and racism. For example, the Victoria Park and Districts Parish was represented on the committee of the *Making Room* project that reported in 1978 on the issues confronting the advancement of First Nations peoples.[15] In 1982 it was supporting work with the Noongar fringe dwellers in the Lockridge area of the Swan Valley where overcrowding and unhygienic conditions contributed to high incarceration figures and despair.[16]

The Forrestfield Congregation flourished in those early years and by 1982 anticipated becoming a Parish in its own right, separate from the Victoria Park and Districts Parish.[17] They had already outgrown their building and were hoping for a new site to accommodate their worship, junior church, fellowship group and seniors group, organised in cooperation with the Anglican Church and the Kalamunda Shire.[18] Robert Watson was an elder at Forrestfield and chaired the Victoria Park and Districts Parish Council.[19] Watson had been Assistant Administrator of the Methodist Homes for Children from 1970 to 1978. His commitment to the wider church and his administrative experience enabled him to guide the complex arrangements towards achieving Parish status, although it was a process that took several years.

During the negotiations towards becoming a parish, recently retired Rev. Keith Dowding commenced a part-time ministry with the congregation in August 1983.[20] Dowding guided the congregation through those early years and as it transitioned into a larger property. That property was a former Baptist Church built in the 1950s of handmade cement bricks. It had been used by the Hillside Community Church and then for a Christian school before its purchase by the Uniting Church.[21] The modest church was named St Martin's, in recognition of the fourth century saint who stood against oppression and proclaimed the gospel by word and action.[22] Dowding's influence was apparent in the naming for the emphasis of St Martin on non-violence and simple living had been incorporated into the rule of the Iona Community which Dowding had joined in the 1950s. The first

service at St Martin's was in February 1984, although the congregation initially worshipped in the hall due to extensive renovation work.[23]

The congregation had grown to twenty confirmed members, seven members in association, twenty adherents and thirty-two baptised members with four Elders, and ten people teaching the children. Two musicians led the singing and people actively participated in worship through Bible readings and distributing communion while many volunteers were working on the renovations to the building. The senior citizens' group and women's group continued and there was now a youth group. A new activity was the Prison Fellowship's support group based at Forrestfield with people coming from several churches in the south-east region of Perth.[24] It was appropriate that the official opening of the Forrestfield building was held on St Martin's Day, Sunday, 11 November 1984.[25] Rev. Keith Dowding preached the sermon, and the Chair of the Victoria Park and Districts Parish, Rev. Ron Mutton led the service. In that solemn and yet joyous occasion the St Martin's members dedicated themselves to the worship of God and to the service of humanity.[26]

Nine months later, on 28 July 1985, St Martin's people shared a unique celebration when the Rivervale Congregational Church was received into membership of the Uniting Church and incorporated into the Victoria Park and Districts Parish. The Rivervale Congregation was one of a minority of Congregational churches in Western Australia that did not enter the Uniting Church at the time of union but now desired to take that step.[27] It was fitting that representatives of the various councils of the Uniting Church shared the leadership of the service. Rev. Dr Geoff Hadley led the service as Chairman of the Presbytery, Rev. David Gill, a former Congregationalist and General Secretary of the Assembly preached the sermon, Rev. Dr Michael Owen, Moderator of the Western Australian Synod led the prayers of intercession. George Wasley, Life Deacon of the Rivervale Congregational Church presented the Bible to Rev. Margaret Greenhill, one of the ministers within the Victoria Park and Districts Parish. In the written order of service, Greenhill was designated

Foothills Parish, 25 January 1987
(Courtesy of Uniting Church Archives, Synod of WA)

as Chairman of the Victoria Park and Districts Parish.[28] Although the 1985 Assembly approved several changes to the Constitution to reflect more inclusive language, this was clearly still a work in progress throughout the wider church.[29] In time the inclusive term Chairperson came to be accepted as more appropriate within the councils of the Uniting Church.

St Martin's became the Foothills Parish in 1987, in the tenth year of the Uniting Church. For the first time they had a full-time minister, the recently ordained Rev. Dr Peter Sellick. The image included below captured the assembled congregation of children and adults surrounding Sellick and Moderator Rev. Jim Moody, all posed before the modest building. The congregation had certainly grown since that first group of seven met as a house church in 1978. The sign in front of the building displayed the name St Martin's. Although rather difficult to discern in the photograph, on either side of the name were the logos of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC).

The UAICC had been recognised by the National Assembly just two years earlier and given responsibility for the work of the Uniting Church among First Nations people.[30] By 1987 the WA Congress Committee proposed it was time for alternative arrangements with the Synod regarding work with Aboriginal children as managed by the Uniting Church.[31] The Sister Kate's Children's Home in Queens Park, established in 1934 to care for so called 'quarter-caste' children and the Mofflyn Child and Family Care Services were both located within the geographical location of the Victoria Park and Districts Parish. As Administrator of Mofflyn and a member of the Synod Child and Family Services Board, Robert Watson was involved with these negotiations that have proved to be an ongoing process. The inclusion of the UAICC logo in the St Martin's sign was evidence of an awareness of these emerging concerns within the inaugural Church Council at Forrestfield. That awareness can be attributed to the influence of Rev. Keith Dowding who guided the congregation towards becoming a Parish, combined with Watson's first hand experience. The public visibility of the two logos suggested St Martin's welcomed the development of the UAICC within the WA Synod as part of the process of growing up Uniting.

At the inaugural Annual General Meeting of the Parish Peter Sellick reflected that his first year had been focused on building the spiritual life of the members. In the coming year he hoped to encourage more community involvement. Thanks were expressed to the Victoria Park and Districts Parish for their continuing support, including their payment of the Foothills Mission and Service Contribution for 1987, a sign that the new parish was not financially independent.[32] The Foothills congregation might be a Parish now, but there was still more growing up to be done. Under the leadership of Sellick an evening service was attempted in the neighbouring suburb of High Wycombe but it did not continue. It was disappointing that after such enthusiasm and commitment to establish and develop the Parish, the Foothills Parish soon found it was not possible to financially sustain full time ministry. From 1994 they returned to part-time ministry,

provided by a few ministers and committed members who shared their time and skills.

In June 1998, the Uniting Church was turning twenty-one. Since 1996 St Martin's had published a creative monthly newsletter *Marty's Messenger* including local and wider church news plus puzzles and competitions for all ages. In June 1998 *Marty's Messenger* included a poem by Cisca Swaan, written in 1977, expressing her misgivings and hopes for the Uniting Church. Her message that unity was up to each person was still a call to her readers after twenty-one years.[33] For St Martin's, coming of age meant continuing to focus on service in the local community. The Foothills Parish was able to raise a loan towards purchasing items for a Low-Cost food outlet.[34] The food outlet and opportunity shop resulted in contact with local people from many different backgrounds including First Nations people. Both ventures were huge undertakings by volunteer staff.

After a trial period, from 2005 St Martin's and Kalamunda Congregations agreed to share their resources.[35] This enabled the congregations to remain independent but work together, including resourcing a full-time minister. When Robert Watson was inducted as Moderator of the WA Synod that year, the St Martin's building was too small for the Synod celebration and the larger Kalamunda building was filled to overflowing. To choose a suburban church building for that occasion rather than a large city church was a sign of the commitment of the Watson family to the local community.

Rev. Alan and Rev. Betty Matthews joined St Martin's in 2007, after a long ministry and ten years of active retirement. Serving as a deaconess in the Presbyterian Church since 1954, after the renewal of the Diaconate, Betty became the first Deacon to be recognised in the Uniting Church in Australia in December 2002. Alan and Betty encouraged the congregation to look beyond the local context to the mission of the church within Australia and overseas including work with refugees and asylum seekers, Frontier Services and the vision of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

It has been noted earlier that the Uniting Church was born in

an era when the world-wide ecumenical movement was strong. From its beginning, the Uniting Church was committed to working ecumenically with other Christian Churches. The hope for greater unity among the different churches had not been realised with the result that the Uniting Church was seen as another denomination rather than ushering in a movement of renewal. At the local level, however, there were signs of Christians working together. Ecumenical relationships within the Kalamunda Shire were fostered through Church LINKS, beginning in 2009. Church LINKS was introduced by Margaret Brodie, a member of the Kalamunda Uniting Congregation. Representatives from twelve churches, including St Martin's and Kalamunda Uniting Congregations, met three times a year. Many local projects were supported, including Youthcare, World Day of Prayer, Carols by Candlelight and Sharing a Hills Christmas.[36]

In response to the influx of migrants and the changing social and cultural environment the Uniting Church had declared itself to be a multicultural church in 1985. When a Samoan Methodist congregation began worshipping in the St Martin's building in 2012, St Martin's people welcomed this development. In 2015 the Samoans had no minister and requested to join St Martin's for communion. An invitation was extended to them to worship with St Martin's on the fourth Sunday in the month for communion and to also join the combined service at Kalamunda on the fifth Sunday. By 2016 the group were officially recognised as the Samoan Uniting Church and hosted the Uniting Church Samoan National Leaders Conference in Kalamunda, beginning with a celebration of recognition of the congregation in the opening worship.[38] The St Martin's members were inspired by this celebration and an arrangement for planning future shared events was established.[39] It was another stage in the journey of growing up Uniting. The invitation to St Martin's people to participate in the annual Samoan White Sunday celebration was a sign of growth between the two congregations. The image below was taken in 2018 during the White Sunday worship service. The service included items by the children and the baptism of Jezeviah Sugalu

Children singing at the Samoan White Sunday Celebration in Forrestfield, 2018 (Photograph courtesy of Hanamoa Viatogi)

Vili by the incumbent Minister of St Martin's and Kalamunda, Rev. David Tressler.

As the Uniting Church prepared to celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 1917, the WA Moderator Rev. Steve Francis had suggested forty can signal a mid-life crisis.[40] In April that year the St Martin's Congregation decided to close the Food Outlet.[41] The decision was not seen as a crisis however, but an opportunity to reassess the purpose of the centre. It had operated for almost nineteen years under the direction of Nely Watson and Kim Tulloch with the support of 15 to 20 volunteers but could no longer compete with the discount prices of the supermarkets. After careful consideration it was decided it was time for a new direction. The community centre would remain open one morning a week, continue to share free bread and provide a meeting place where tea and coffee were served in a welcoming environment. Operating as Marty's Café, it was a welcoming place for people feeling isolated in the community. The opportunity shop continued to provide a valued service in the community, firstly under the vision of Florence Cunneen and later by Marg Brand and Mary

Tulloch. It generated income for the congregation with 15 percent of the income directed to school chaplaincy while various charities were also supported with donations. Management and staff were volunteers from the congregation and community.

My husband Robin and I joined St Martin's at the beginning of 2019 when I was a Uniting Church minister transitioning into retirement. I quickly learned this was a congregation that honoured its beginnings as the first new congregation within the Uniting Church era. In the foyer I observed a framed photograph of St Martin's Cross outside the restored abbey on Iona and on the wall of the church hangs a banner of St Martin. Each year on the closest Sunday to St Martin's Day, 11 November, the congregation celebrated its heritage within the tradition of Saint Martin and the Uniting Church. At the Annual General Meeting held in April that year the Chairperson began his report: 'Our Church though small in number is huge in heart.'[42] This reflected the positive outlook of the members and yet the meeting recognised the need for some future planning to look at the mission of the congregation.[43]

Over the coming weeks several meetings were held where the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities of the congregation were considered. The result was that by July 2019, the congregation agreed on the following vision statement: 'a church that risks living the way of Jesus, participates in God's action in the world, enables people to discover new life in the Spirit and to live by that discovery.'[44] The opportunity shop and Marty's Café remained as the main mission focus. A few individual members were active in the wider church. Support to agencies such as Uniting WA, Frontier Services and UnitingWorld was given through donations to annual appeals. Kalamunda offered a monthly Messy Church program while the Samoan congregation was intergenerational and held Sunday School each week for their children. The St Martin's Congregation however had no children or young families. Over the four decades of the life of St Martin's the children had grown up and most were no longer associated with the church of their childhood. It appeared St

Martin's had reached a plateau in its life cycle. They had adopted a courageous vision but how the congregation would risk living the way of Jesus was the question to be addressed. Listening to the Samoan congregation about the effect of climate change in the Pacific region and the challenges faced by second generation Samoans within the Uniting Church in Australia was an opportunity for St Martin's to be part of the continuing journey of being a multicultural church.

A new era for St Martin's began in February 2020 when Rev. Sophia Lizares was inducted into the Linked congregations.[45] Lizares was the first woman minister in placement at St Martin's. Born in the Philippines and raised in the Catholic Church, she had international experience in the ecumenical movement.[46] As a Deacon, Lizares brought a passion for justice and deep commitment to the Covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. The settling-in time for the new minister was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic which was sweeping the world. By the end of March, Perth was in lockdown. St Martin's quickly adapted to a new way of being church. A special meeting of the congregation was held online, when decisions were made to facilitate the life of the congregation into those unprecedented times.[47] The opportunity shop and community centre closed for a time, but the linked congregations began to worship from home, apart and yet together, using Zoom. When the treasurer invited people to give their offerings online, most did. The St Martin's Congregation responded generously to the Covid-19 Relief Support Fund which assisted migrant, refugees and homeless people who were adversely affected by the pandemic. Pastoral care of the members and volunteers was maintained through the weekly newsletter, phone calls and a newly formed Facebook group.

This was also a time of new beginnings for Kathryn Smith who had been baptised in 1978 within another congregation. Like many of her generation, Kathryn had become distant from church until she began attending St Martin's just weeks before the lockdown. Kathryn experienced the online worship as a gentle way to return to the faith

of her childhood. By mid-June 2020 St Martin's was able to worship together again with covid-safe restrictions that have gradually eased with the occasional short lockdowns in 2021. Kathryn participated in confirmation classes, was mentored by Revs Betty and Alan Matthews and was confirmed at St Martin's on 14 February 2021. She witnessed to the kindness and teaching she had received at St Martin's and how reaching out with compassion to the community demonstrated to her the purpose of the congregation.[48]

In her keynote presentation to the Uniting Church National History Society Conference in 2021, Associate Professor Ruth Powell shared the statistic that only one percent of Uniting Church congregations are meaningfully engaged with First Nations people. St Martin's has recently joined that small percentage. Encouraged by the leadership of Lizares, a small group of people from St Martin's and Kalamunda Congregations have formed a Covenanting Yarning Circle and are seeking to engage with Whadjuk Noongar people. Practical Covenanting has been initiated by the staff of the St Martin's opportunity shop who are mentoring and offering donated goods to the team of Noongar leaders at the Beananging Kwuurt Institute (BKI) who have recently opened an opportunity shop on the site of the former Sister Kate's Children's Home.[49]

The identity of the Uniting Church in Australia has been influenced during the forty-three years since its inauguration by racial, cultural and gender issues within a changing Australia and currently lives with the reality of a worldwide pandemic and the threat of climate change. The decline in church attendance in Australia has meant that some Uniting congregations in Western Australia have not survived these forty plus years. St Martin's, however, though small, remains a vibrant community. It is evident that the link with the Kalamunda Congregation has created a real benefit for both congregations and has enabled them to share the service and cost of paid ministry. St Martin's situation continues to be a positive example to the wider church, where many small congregations in Western Australia are not able to support a minister. The commitment of strong lay leadership

St Martin's Congregation on Pentecost Sunday, 2021
(Courtesy of Nely Watson)

and a relationship with the local community are continuing strengths.[50]

It has been seen that St Martin's Foothills Congregation in 2021 is quite different to the eager young adults who first worshipped together in 1978. Robert and Nely Watson are the only foundation members who remain, but others have joined. Members of St Martin's, while reduced in numbers and older now, are very committed to their continuing life and witness together and to their membership within the Uniting Church. In preparation for Pentecost Sunday 2021, Rev. Lizares invited the St Martin's Congregation to write prayers for the church at this time and for the church in 2050.[51] It was an invitation to prayer and action in the present and to hope in the future. For St Martin's in the Foothills, the journey of growing up Uniting continues.

Endnotes

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2 Ibid.

3 Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal* (Unley SA: MediaCom Education Inc, 2016), 17f.

4 Robert Stringer, 'The Western Australian Churches' Response to Aboriginal Land Rights 1970–1985' in *Religion and Society in Western Australia*, ed. John Tonkin (Nedlands, WA: UWA Press, 1987), 160–168.

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6 Personal communication from Robert Watson, 3 August 1921.

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21 Bunn and Maher, 41.

22 St Martin's Forrestfield Report to Parish Council, 30 May 1984, MN 659 ACC 9685A/11 (Battye Library, Perth).

23 Ibid.

[24] Forrestfield Report to Parish Council, February 1984, MN 659 ACC 9685A/11 (Battye Library, Perth).

[25] St Martin's Forrestfield Report to Parish AGM, October 1984, MN 659 ACC 9685A/11 (Battye Library, Perth).

[26] Order of Service for the Consecration of Saint Martin's Church in Forrestfield, St Martin's Day, Sunday 11 November 1984.

[27] Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Western Australia, *Reports and Proceedings of the Ninth Synod*, 1985, 220.

[28] Order of Service for the Reception of the Rivervale Congregational Church into the Victoria Park and Districts Parish of the Uniting Church in Australia, Sunday 28 July 1985.

[29] Uniting Church Assembly, *Minutes of the Fourth Assembly*, 1985, 23.

[30] *Minutes of the Fourth Assembly*, 1985, 17.

[31] *Reports and Proceedings of the Eleventh Synod*, 1987, 72 and 168.

[32] Minutes of Foothills Parish Inaugural AGM, 13 March 1988, MN 659 ACC 9685A/4 (Battye Library, Perth).

[33] *Marty's Messenger*, June 1998, 1.

[34] *Marty's Messenger*, June 1998, 1; December 1998, 4.

[35] Bunn and Maher, 41.

[36] *Revive*, September 2019, 24.

[37] Minutes of Foothills St Martin's Congregational Meeting, 2 August 2015.

[38] *Revive*, October 2016, 16.

[39] Chairperson Kim Tulloch's Report to St Martin's AGM, 21 May 2017.

[40] *Revive*, June 2017, 3.

[41] Foothills Food Centre Report to St Martin's AGM, 21 May 2017.

[42] Chairperson Kim Tulloch's Report to St Martin's AGM, April 2019.

[43] Minutes of AGM and Ordinary Meeting, St Martin's Foothills Congregation, 14 April 2019.

[44] St Martin's Foothills Uniting Church Outcomes of No 3 Planning Meeting Sunday 14 July 2019.

[45] *St Martin's News*, 16 February 2020.

[46] Joint Nominating Committee profile of Rev. Lizares, January 2020.

[47] St Martin's Uniting Church Congregation, Minutes of Special Meeting via Zoom, 19 April 2020.

[48] Personal Statement by Kathryn Smith at her confirmation service on 14 February 2021.

[49] The Yarning Circle at St Martin's and Kalamunda Uniting Church Congregations, Minutes, 9 April 1921.

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7

Growing Up Uniting: Understanding LGBTIQA+ stories and ecclesial narratives

Warren Talbot

> Narrative is not innocent. Some narratives traumatise, others pacify, even heal. And the stories we tell of ourselves differ from those told about us by other people.[1] *Paul Ricoeur*

Introduction

What are the narratives of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) for people who are LGBTIQA+? Have they traumatised, pacified, or even healed LGBTIQA+ people? How are LGBTIQA+ stories told and who tells them? The purpose of this paper is to sketch an answer to those questions informed by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self. The sketch is drawn by increasing the understanding of the ways in which LGBTIQA+ people have grown up in the Uniting Church, closely linked to the ways the UCA itself has grown up in its understanding of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and intersex status. This is done in three sections. Firstly, I outline six ecclesial narratives which have been identified through a series of policies and practices adopted by Councils of the Church.[2] Secondly, these narratives are further understood by a description of LGBTIQA+ stories in the life of the UCA. Finally, and most tentatively, I introduce aspects of the thought of Paul Ricoeur on narrative identity to explore interpretative themes which might resource our thinking about the ecclesial narratives and LGBTIQA+ stories outlined in the first two sections. Thus, in terms of methodology the paper combines descriptive historical material and an interpretation of that material.[3]

At the beginning, however, it is essential to make several observations about the language being used. Clarifying language has both an intrinsic and a hermeneutical value, playing a role in the construction of narrative identity.[4] What do the seven letters and now one symbol of the acronym used in the title of? this paper refer to? Why does the acronym continue to expand? What is the significance of the changes for the ecclesial narratives and stories being examined? 'LGBTIQA+' refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and plus.[5] The acronym itself reflects a bringing together of a complex set of different, though related ways of referring to sex, sexual and gender diversity and the ways people might identify including intersections between and across this diversity. More specifically, LGBTIQA+ seeks to spell out the diversity seen in sexual orientations, identities, and behaviours; gender identities and expressions and physiological sex characteristics.

The acronym continues to expand because in many ways our understanding of sexual and gender diversity is expanding. If you like, we are growing up in our understanding. In my judgement this is to be welcomed as medical and scientific understandings increase, as individuals are increasingly open about their hitherto 'private' desires and expressions of embodiment, and as churches deepen their understanding of incarnational body-affirming theology.[6] To anticipate the discussion of Ricoeur below, my suggestion is that the ongoing construction and functioning seen in the LGBTIQA+ acronym in power relations includes both what Ricoeur describes as *idem*-identity (sameness) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood).

The changing and deepening in the language used to talk about the lives of LGBTIQA+ people and communities can be illustrated in the policies of the UCA both before and after union. Three brief examples will suffice to illustrate the point. Prior to union, none of the three churches were, officially, naming gay and lesbian people. The language of study documents and policies prior to 1977 was about 'homosexuality' and 'homosexual people'.[7] This continued in the early years after union. In 1985 the Assembly Committee

on ‘Homosexuality and the Church’ referred to the ‘homosexual condition’ with reference to various medical publications, and a serious discussion of aetiology and cure.[8] By 2015, the President of the Assembly, Stuart McMillan, could write a pastoral letter to all Church members affirming the inclusion of LGBTIQ people, without any need to spell out the acronym. It is recognised that most of these changes in Uniting Church discourse about LGBTIQ people follows that which has taken place in the wider community. In the following discussion I will be using the terms as used at the time and reserving the acronym ‘LGBTIQA+’ for wider observations.

Uniting Church narratives about LGBTIQA+ people

In a previous paper I proposed four domains for a discussion of the Uniting Church, LGBTIQ people, and removing boundaries based on sexual orientation.[9] The domains were: the honesty and courage of individuals coming out; responses to external pressures for change; peer group support, networking and advocacy, and formal institutional responses.[10] One of the major external pressures for change was proposals in State and Territory parliaments to remove criminal penalties for consenting sexual activity between males in private. The proposed legal changes prompted a response by all Synods.[11] Although in one sense working with the same material, framing the discussion in terms of narrative identity raises a different set of concerns, namely the themes which emerged from the activities in the four domains.

At the outset it is valuable to stress that this section is about narratives, plural. Although it is possible to delineate the six narratives, in many cases they overlap or there can be a continuum of views within and between narratives. There were tensions within different Councils of the Church with individuals and some groupings trying to develop policies and reach practical decisions based on different narratives. In addition, although there is what might be seen as a broad linear movement since 1977 (a growing up?), as the description ranges from local churches to the national Assembly, the movement

is not uniform either in direction or the pace of change. The six ecclesial narratives discussed below, and summarised with a single keyword, are: invisibility, difficulty, rejection, diversity, celebration, and apology.

Invisibility expresses the ideas that LGBTIQA+ people were hidden, inconspicuous and silent inside the Uniting Church and its predecessor denominations. As mentioned above, the three uniting churches had each undertaken studies on the subject of homosexuality, mainly in the context of proposed legal changes. The discussion took place as if the categories 'church' and 'homosexual' were mutually exclusive. At the inauguration of the UCA at the Sydney Town Hall in June 2022, the visionary Statement to the Nation proclaimed that:

> We deplore the divisions of humanity along racial, cultural, political, economic, sexual and religious lines. In obedience to God, we struggle against all systems and attitudes which set person against person, group against group, or nation against nation.[12]

It is not clear what the word 'sexual' means in this context, though it would be reasonable to assume that it refers to what is more accurately described as 'sex', that is, the differences between males and females. It was to be some years before Assembly statements incorporated 'sexuality and gender identity' as standard words in statements of welcome and vision.[13] At the time of union the overwhelming narrative was one of silence, as if LGBTIQA+ people did not exist or, if we did, were not part of the Church. As an ecclesial narrative invisibility is certainly not innocent. The narrative changed in 1981 when 'homosexual' people became a problem in the life of the Uniting Church.

Difficulty expresses the idea that LGBTIQA+ people pose a serious problem for the Church and the Church's participation in God's mission. I am not aware of any examples in the life of the Uniting Church since 1977 where a Council of the Church has initiated a policy or procedure without being prompted by a LGBTIQA+ group or a decision needed to be made about an individual.[14] Many of the movements from invisibility to difficulty were triggered by individual

lesbian or gay persons who believed they were called to commence training for the ordained ministry, were already ministerial candidates or ordained ministers looking for a new ministry placement.

In 1981 Cecily Moreton was a candidate being recommended to proceed to ordination. When a growing number of individuals became aware of Cecily living in a same-sex relationship, that posed a problem for the Presbytery, which addressed their immediate difficulty by asking the Assembly to provide advice. The Assembly established the Committee on Homosexuality and the Church which presented a final report in 1988. There are several other examples in every Synod where some degree of openness by LGBTIQA+ people generated a problem for the relevant Council(s) of the Church, though they remain undocumented at this point in time. Until approximately 2000 the difficulty the Church faced in accepting otherwise qualified LGBTIQA+ applicants and candidates was addressed by rejecting the individual involved. This resulted in many gifted LGBTIQA+ people offering their God-given talents in areas of life outside of the Church.[15]

Rejection expresses the idea that LGBTIQA+ people are disobeying God's will revealed in the Scriptures. Churches, as opposed to sects, have generally regarded themselves as places of welcome to all people. In the case of LGBTIQA+ people the welcome mat was frequently stained with a series of terms and conditions, mainly based around the view that Christian teaching required lifelong abstinence from all same-sex sexual activity. This view was expressed in different ways and regularly summarised as celibacy in singleness and fidelity in [heterosexual] marriage. That understanding was adopted by the Queensland Synod and remains the policy of that Synod.[16] Ricoeur's use of the term 'traumatise' in pointing out that 'narrative is not innocent' seems particularly apt when individuals' hopes and dreams are dashed and they are rejected solely for reasons relating to an aspect of their being such as sexuality or gender identity.[17]

Diversity expresses the idea that LGBTIQA+ people are

one part of the Church and may be accepted in some parts of the Church. Sexuality was an agenda item at each triennial meeting of the Assembly from 1985 (Fourth Assembly) up to and including 2006 (the Eleventh Assembly). Despite the intensity of debate at the Assembly meetings and beyond, the resolutions carried did not extend beyond affirmations of unity and diversity in Christ.[18] The Eleventh Assembly was the last to address the matter of sexuality and leadership. The resolutions include references to the 'variety of theological perspectives', 'members being not of one mind', and 'diversity of belief'.[19] Putting the debate positively, the Assembly resolved 'to recognise that the possibility of living with difference is a gift which Christ offers to the world.' [20]

Celebration expresses the idea that LGBTIQA+ people reflect God's good creation, and their lives and relationships are blessed. A number of congregations, particularly in inner city areas, have moved beyond a somewhat passive welcoming of LGBTIQA+ people to celebrating the participation of LGBTIQA+ individuals, couples and families.[21] In the Uniting Church this is seen clearly in the decision of the Fifteenth Assembly meeting (July 2018) which resolved to change the Uniting Church's national policy on marriage which permitted ordained ministers and Church Councils to celebrate same-sex marriages. In those congregations where marriage has been conducted for same-sex couples, it has certainly been a high point of celebration both for the couple and the local church.

The 2018 decision also permits ordained ministers to not perform marriages for same-sex couples. This decision therefore includes the narratives of both celebration and diversity. It was framed by the Assembly and received throughout much of the wider Uniting Church as a continuation of existing policies of diversity. The Western Australian Synod, for example, offered the following summary:

> Within the Uniting Church, there is a diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings, developed through continuing faithful discernment and held with integrity on matters relating to sexuality and marriage. The Church accepts this diversity within its life and makes the decisions necessary to enable its ministry and members to act with integrity in accordance with their beliefs.[22]

Apology expresses the idea that LGBTIQA+ people have been seriously wronged and harmed by the Church's teaching and practice over many years. This narrative is relatively recent and is seen most clearly in the decision of the Assembly Standing Committee in September 2019 to appoint a Task Group with the following stated purpose: To develop the wording of an official apology from the Uniting Church in Australia to LGBTIQ Australians for the church's role in the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQ people, couples and families.[23] That group has a charter to consult widely, within and beyond the Church, and to present a final report at the Seventeenth Assembly in 2024.

LGBTIQA+ stories in the Church

As with narratives, it is important to stress the plurality of what is being discussed. Each individual LGBTIQA+ person is different, though there are some common themes that can be discerned, certainly when people have joined together to form a network of some sort. There is a risk in any discussion of identities of reducing the discussion to an isolated individual, even when discussing networks. (As will be mentioned below, in Ricoeurian terms, the self is not restricted to me.) The stories discussed and summarised (except for the first one) with a single keyword are: coming out, support, networking, advocacy, and integration.

Coming out can only be described and understood as the most distinctive life journey of LGBTIQA+ people. It involves individuals and communities finding a voice, not being silenced, and sharing stories in a number of different ways. Coming out is a fundamental part of the life story of LGBTIQA+ people including when there are negative consequences such as rejection and discrimination. *Support* closely relates to and follows coming out in seeking and obtaining authentic care from peers, friends, and family members. Networking refers to more formal seeking of support with other LGBTIQA+ people, often through organisations. In the Uniting Church most organisations have balanced the needs for mutual care and social

support, education and information, and engagement and recognition with the wider Councils of the Church. *Advocacy* refers to efforts made by networks of LGBTIQA+ people to change the policies and practices of organisations and institutions, in this case the Uniting Church. *Integration* refers to the process of bringing together both one's faith identity and identity as a LGBTIQA+ person. In many cases integration has involved leaving the local church someone has been involved with or leaving the denomination or organised Christianity entirely.

Narrative identity in the thought of Paul Ricoeur

The above two sections have introduced narrative themes and stories. These can be framed in a number of ways, and in their own way the words I have chosen constitute one possible framing of the circumstances of LGBTIQA+ people in the life of the Uniting Church. These are open to being contested. In this section I am outlining aspects of the thought of Paul Ricoeur on narrative identity to provide a resource for further thinking and research about LGBTIQA+ people. Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), one of the most distinguished French philosophers of the twentieth century, made a substantial contribution to philosophical hermeneutics including a hermeneutic of the self.[24] Ricoeur was also a Christian in the French Reformed (Huguenot) tradition, writing extensively on matters of religious experience, and biblical hermeneutics.[25] Ricoeur never addressed matters of power and justice specifically with regard to gender, gender identity and sexuality. Nonetheless my suggestion is that his writing can provide a valuable resource for those of us who seek to address such power relations. It is a very brief and tentative exploration at this stage.

Narrative identity does not only refer to the idea that we explain or recognise our lives by telling stories but that self-understanding and the ways we make sense of our lives take narrative form. For Ricoeur, narrative identity is 'the kind of identity that human beings acquire through the mediation of the narrative function'.[26] This

mediation redescribes our reality and shapes a coherent pattern by bringing together elements spread throughout time and space.

Ricoeur introduces and makes use of two possible meanings of the English word identity, using the Latin terms *ipse* and *idem*. He uses 'sameness' as a synonym for *idem*-identity and 'selfhood' as a synonym for ipseity or *ipse*-identity. *Idem*-identity refers to the substance of identity, unaffected by time, largely immutable and univocal. It asks the question 'What am I?'. In contrast *ipse*-identity asks the question 'Who am I?'. In ipseity there is no claim concerning an unchanging core of the personality whereas for *idem*-identity permanence of identity sits at the top of a 'hierarchy of significations'.[28] The identity which emerges from asking 'Who am I?' is both equivocal and multivocal. There is no immutable me.

From this thumbnail sketch it may be seen that Ricoeur's approach opens up possibilities of self-understanding other than univocal narratives such as universal heterosexuality or being cisgender.[29] Though located in history, ipseity does not refer to a fixed identity and thus relates to some of the instability and 'indecency' found in the changing acronym LGBTIQA+ as discussed above.[30] In the complex interactions of sexual orientation, identity and behaviours, gender identity and expressions, and physiological sex characteristics, LGBTIQA+ people may be asking both 'What am I?' and 'Who am I?'. A narrative brings coherence. In Ricoeur's understanding all self-knowledge is an interpretation. It seems to me that, although not unique to LGBTIQA+ people, the interpretation arising from our (that is, LGBTIQA+) self-knowledge carries an imperative particularly in an institutional framework characterised by the narratives of invisibility, difficulty, rejection, diversity, celebration and apology.

As Ricoeur claims, narrative is not innocent. His major work on the hermeneutics of the self, *Oneself as Another*, resists the atomisation of the individual. 'To say *self* is not to say *I*'.[31] Narrative identity includes and enables ethical considerations. As seen in the title, narratives facilitate our capacity to relate to the other as another self, and thus to relate to 'oneself as another'. Narrative identity is

not innocent partly because narrative does not allow us to forget, as it draws on both fiction and history. In 'the extreme figure of the history of victims – the relation of debt [which history has to people of the past] is transformed into the duty to never forget.'[32] Ricoeur's later work *Memory, History, Forgetting* finishes with an epilogue titled *Difficult Forgiveness* which has insights valuable when considering the narrative of apology.[33]

Conclusion

In conclusion I return to the three questions asked at the beginning of this paper, informed by Ricoeur's bold declaration that 'narrative is not innocent'. The questions were: What are the narratives of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) for people who are LGBTIQA+? Have they traumatised, pacified or even healed LGBTIQA+ people? How are LGBTIQA+ stories told and who tells them? Ricoeur's claim that 'narrative is not innocent' is well-demonstrated in each of the Uniting Church narratives concerning LGBTIQA+ people outlined above. Invisibility, difficulty, rejection and even diversity have the capacity to traumatise LGBTIQA+ people. Diversity may also function to pacify a number of people, depending on their geographical location within a Synod. In addition, diversity may also heal LGBTIQA+ people as does celebration. The ecclesial narrative of apology is intended to both pacify and heal, but it remains a matter for the future whether this takes place, or the narrative inadvertently functions to (re)traumatise people.

Although not linear, the exploration of themes and stories above does generally confirm what I concluded in 2017, namely that the 'overall story is one of progress towards full equality for LGBTIQ people in the UCA.'[34] There has been a growing up by both the Church and LGBTIQA+ people, at least those of us who have remained connected to the Uniting Church. The continued growing up by the Church can be illustrated in two ways. First, the 2018 decision on marriage, although not where full equality advocates would finally like to be, was an occasion for genuine celebration.

This includes same-sex couples in the Uniting Church who never thought that there would be a time when *their* love would be blessed and celebrated in *their* church. From this it is very unlikely that there can be a going back. Second, whereas in 1977 there were no openly LGBTIQA+ ordained ministers, the numbers of LGBTIQA+ clergy are increasing in numbers, visibility, and the very ordinariness of the Church ordaining and placing LGBTIQA+ individuals. This was demonstrated in the induction of the Revd Dr Josephine Inkpin, an Anglican priest, as the Minister-in-Placement at Pitt Street Uniting Church in early 2021. Dr Inkpin is the Uniting Church's first openly transgender ordained minister. That was widely known but the Presbytery of Sydney and the Synod of NSW/ACT proceeded with the placement on a business-as-usual basis. At least seven of the contributors to the 2021 book *Growing Up Uniting* confirm this overall assessment.[35] These voices from the first generation to have grown up in the Uniting Church name the Church's efforts to affirm, welcome and celebrate LGBTIQA+ people as an important part of their identity in the Uniting Church. They are encouraging and hopeful voices for all of us.

Endnotes

1 Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016), 245–6.

2 When capitalised 'Councils' is referring to the four formal Councils (Assembly, Synod, Presbytery and Church) established within the UCA. When capitalised 'Church' refers to the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA).

3 I write as an insider activist: UCA member, cisgendered gay man, member of the Uniting Church LGBTIQ+ Network and several official UCA committees on sexuality.

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52–5, 301.

5 Clare Allen, "Language and symbols", Uniting Church LGBTIQ Network, *Open and Affirming Leaflet* No. 3, 2019.

6 There is a growing literature on 'queer theology' discussing sexual and gender diversity. For an introduction see Susannah Cornwall, "Constructive Theological Perspectives: What is Queer Theology?", in *Queer Theologies: Becoming the Queer Body of Christ*, ed. Stefanie Knauss and Carlos Mendoza-Alvarez (London: SCM Press, 2019), 22–34.

7 Avril M. Hannah-Jones, 'Divided We Stand: The Sexuality Debate in the Uniting Church in Australia 1977–2000' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2013), chapter 2.

8 Gordon S. Dicker (ed.), *Homosexuality and the Church: A Report of the Assembly Committee on Homosexuality and the Church* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1985). In observing this I am not being negative about the work of the Committee, chaired by the late Rev. Dr Gordon Dicker. The Committee presented issues and concerns calmly and moderately, paving the way for much of the future discussion in the wider Uniting Church. They were working in the first half of the 1980s, and the Church owes the members of the Committee a debt of gratitude. It might also be noted that one of the LGBTIQA+ groups in the Uniting church in the 1980s, CrossSection, described themselves at the time as a 'fellowship of homosexual and heterosexual Christians', though most community groups had commenced using 'gay and lesbian'.

9 Warren Talbot, 'LGBTIQ Pilgrims and the Uniting Church in Australia', in *A Pilgrim People: Forty Years On*, ed. Robert W. Renton (Hoppers Crossing: Uniting Church National History Society, 2018), 122–40.

10 Ibid., 126. The four domains were largely derived from studies about social movements, networks, and interest groups in political science and sociology.

11 Ibid., 129–32.

12 Cynthia Coghill, in Cynthia Coghill and Elenie Poulos, eds, *For a World Reconciled*, (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 2016), 9.

13 Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Our Vision for a Just Australia* (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 2021), 7.

14 I would be very pleased to hear if any readers are aware of such examples.

15 The situation with applicants and candidates has been discussed at a number of 'Daring' conferences, that is, the biennial national conference of the Uniting Church LGBTIQ Network. One documented example is the situation of Simon Moglia in the Synod of South Australia. See Julia Pitman, "South Australia", in W. W. Emilsen and S. Emilsen, *The Uniting Church in Australia: The First 25 Years* (Armdale: circa, an imprint of Melbourne Publishing Group, 2003), 130–58.

16 The decision was originally made at the 1991 Queensland Synod meeting (Minutes, Resolution No. 119) and reaffirmed at a Special Synod meeting, 7–9 November 2003 (Minutes, Resolution No.1).

17 In making this comment, I am aware of the fact that quite a number of Church members who seek to test their call to the ordained ministry are not accepted as candidates or ordinands. That is a legitimate and important part of the process. The circumstances being considered under the ecclesial narrative of 'rejection' are those when the individual was deemed to have the necessary gifts, graces and call by God, and the rejection related solely being LGBTIQA+. It may never be possible to identify and name those individuals even if the church does proceed with an apology to LGBTIQA+ people.

18 For a record of the Assembly decisions see UCA Assembly, National Working Group on Doctrine. 'Sexuality and Leadership: documenting the History', 2009. www.nat.uca.org.au Accessed 21 September 2016.

19 Coghill and Poulos, *For a World Reconciled*, 352–5.

20 Ibid., 354.

21 For an account of one (non-Uniting Church) congregation in terms of the differences between affirming, welcoming and celebrating see Josephine Inkpin, 'Why even affirmation can be part of the problem', https://www.blessedimp.org/blog/why-even-affirmation-can-be-part-of-the-problem Accessed 25 June 2020.

22 https://unitingchurchwa.org.au/local-church/weddings/ Accessed 9 September 2021.

23 Meeting Notes, Assembly Standing Committee, 26–27 August 2019. I have been appointed as a member of the Task Group.

24 A valuable introduction is found in Charles E. Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Two features of Ricoeur's work are the volume of his work (more than 30 books and approximately 500 articles) and its scope ranging across philosophical topics such as language, history, ontology, psychoanalysis, ethics, politics and religion.

25 Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Trans. by David Pellauer, Edited by Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

26 Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative identity' in David Wood, ed. *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2011), 188. Some key ideas here are that 'self-knowledge is an interpretation', narrative is a privileged form of mediation of these interpretations, as are signs and symbols, and that 'this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction.'

[27] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 1–26.

[28] Ibid., 2.

[29] Cisgender individuals are people for whom their physiological sex at birth corresponds to their sense of gender identity.

[30] 'Indecency' is an overarching term used by queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid to speak of the crossing of many boundaries and fixed categories. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[31] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 18. The philosophical context is discussions which either valorise or depose the individual 'I'.

[32] Ibid., 164.

[33] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 457–506.

[34] Talbot, 'LGBTIQ Pilgrims', 139.

[35] William W. Emilsen and Elizabeth A. Watson, eds. *Growing Up Uniting* (Richmond: Mediacom Education, 2021). The number seven is chosen because it represents the number of contributors who were in some way explicit about matters of sexuality and gender identity. Other contributors may share that approach, but have not stated it, as they were not asked to comment on any specific topics in the life of the Church.

8

The Renewed Diaconate: A personal view

Jonathan Barker

Thirty years ago the Sixth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) made the historic step of renewing the diaconate. This presentation harks back to its promise, recalling issues which seemed so important at the time and then asking where the UCA is now regarding diaconal ministry.[1] You may remember the 1991 decision was followed by controversy. Many thought the decision was made in haste. In response the Assembly Standing Committee charged the Assembly Doctrine Commission to develop a report on ordination and ministry for the 1994 Assembly. A task group was established with Rev. David Gill as its convenor.

The report, *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*, was circulated prior to the Assembly. It caused quite a stir, particularly among newly ordained deacons. The Report alleged the Sixth Assembly erred at several points which needed to be redressed. Deacons, in response, asked to meet the Task Group, a request granted by the Assembly Standing Committee. Two meetings were held; firstly, with Bev Fabb and Jonathan Barker and secondly, Barker attended with Murray Muirhead. Perhaps it was not a good tactic to begin by criticising the membership of the group you are conferring with! For example, there were no deacons on the Task Group, which we regarded as a serious error, given that theologising is from personal perspectives influenced by historical, cultural and social factors. Also, the Task Group was all male, although originally it did have two female ministers of the Word. However, after our meetings, we felt we had been heard.

The Task Group and Assembly Standing Committee agreed that

our submission, *The Renewed Diaconate is a Sacramental Ministry*, would accompany The Report. Key issues and outcomes were as follows: The Report alleged it was a mistake to regard ordination being to the 'ordained ministry'. Apart from being tautologous, ordination is properly meant to be a *ministry of something* – to a specified function. 'Ordained ministry' as a concept could too easily be taken to confer a special status within the church. We did not argue against this but did differ over ministries being 'accredited' either as a deacon or a presbyter which happened subsequent to ordination. When this was discussed in the Assembly, many respected ministers of the Word lampooned two accreditations. At the end of the debate, Rev. Robert Gribben said we had heard the theological, ecclesiological and ecumenical arguments against and that he would cap these off with his liturgical arguments. Hence the proposal to rescind 'one ordination' was passed. The question of being ordained 'for life' was conveniently ignored. The term Presbyter was also not accepted.

While I had reservations about the term 'accreditation', I now think that by resorting to two ordinations we lost something unique. As one who changed from being a minister of the Word to a deacon in that twilight time of accreditation, I note now that having two ordinations makes it almost impossible for ministers of the Word to change ministries. When ordained in the Congregational Church as I was, the wording was 'ordained to the Ministry of the Gospel in the Church of Jesus Christ'. Is this not what in essence both deacon and minister of the Word are called to be? After being ordained, it is then not hard to say when one is ordained as either a deacon or a minister of the Word. Maybe it is time to revisit this issue.

Although the Report argued against deacons being authorised to preside at the Eucharist but with Presbyteries able to grant such presidency as needed, this proposal did not pass. We had argued in favour of deacons continuing to preside at both sacraments as being intrinsic to diaconal ministry. The heavenly banquet of the Kingdom is not to be *owned* by the institutional church or any part thereof. Those in our society who are truly marginalised have a place at the

table. Deacons saw links with their ministry and those on the edges, beyond the everyday life of and forms of the established church. Deacons could already testify to newly emerged communities where both word and sacrament were celebrated.

Some Task Group members were well known in ecumenical circles and had concerns over a diaconate which authorised eucharistic presidency. We agreed there were few precedents for establishing a truly renewed diaconate as the Uniting Church had. While other traditions may have permanent deacons, they are invariably within the framework of hierarchical institutions. The Uniting Church is strongly framed as a non-hierarchical body having a more consensual culture and a uniquely conciliar method of governance. A diaconate co-equal with Presbyters (the sure sign of both being ordained to have Eucharistic presidency) could be problematic to other traditions, but that would be our distinctive witness to other churches. After all, we had pioneered ordaining women much to the initial horror of some ecumenical partners. This issue did not sway the Assembly. This may or may not have been an issue in dialogues with ecumenical partners.

The relationship between the two ministries and the basis for this remained the key ongoing issue. The backdrop is the question of what precisely is meant by and what is the warrant for mission. The Task Group argued strongly that the Trinity should be the overarching model for mission and ministry. As Deacons we felt this was far too abstract. A key phrase in the Report was 'the church was an echo of the life of the Trinity and the purpose of the church is to energise and direct the church's praise of the triune God in the world – which is the ultimate horizon of all ministry'. We strongly asserted that Christian ministry is grounded in the incarnational reality of the Jesus Christ event which resonated with the practice of ministry among the disempowered, hurting, and outcast. The *Basis of Union* itself is filled with Christological language which was not referenced in the Report and there was a peculiar absence of any Biblical references which was highly unusual for a report to and on behalf of the Assembly.

We agreed that all ministers were servants of the Word. However,

there would need to be a flexible distinction. Each ministry would have a particular *orientation* – presbyters within the gathered congregation; deacons in giving leadership with the church's mission in the wider community. The Report drew on the 'gathered/scattered' metaphor originally formulated in the 'Life and Mission' studies of the World Council of Churches. We differed on a seeming rigidity of the roles of presbyter and deacon. While the locus of diaconal ministry is in the wider community, it ought not to be so institutionalised as to be alienated from the gathered ecclesial community. The 'gathered/scattered' metaphor wasn't meant to rigidly delineate roles or be an either-or as to who belongs to the church.

After intense discussion and debate the Seventh Assembly in 1994 decided to 'reaffirm the mutuality and equality of the ministry of the Word and the ministry of deacon' and to 'recognise ordination as the setting apart of persons for ministry as ministers of the Word or as deacons and understand ordination to these two ministries as two distinct ordinations'. It was noted that these decisions 'do not affect the validity' of those ordained since the Sixth Assembly. The recommendation to no longer authorise deacons to preside at the eucharist was not passed.

In conclusion, the question remains, has the diaconate fulfilled its promise of enlivening the church and its mission? Many deacons have chosen or had opened to them effective ministries as chaplains, with Frontier Services, in agencies of a social ministry purpose or even in approved roles in secular positions. Many deacons have been in the front-line in exercising notable serving ministries across the nation. When stories are told of diaconal ministry, they are justifiably lauded. However, I wish to share some observations and generalisations concerning diaconal ministry at the level of the local church. Together with many other deacons, I believe that the Church (specifically congregations) has largely not been able to imagine and implement effective diaconal ministry. Let me list six factors which have mitigated against the implementation of diaconal ministry in practice.

First, we were a different church thirty years ago. There was an expectation that larger churches and parishes with multiple ministries would include deacons. Personally, I had the good fortune to share in ministry with a minister of the Word in a large city church where our ministries were truly co-equal reflecting the orientation of each. But that is now rare. Deacons are often the sole minister in placement. Thirty years ago, few envisaged the rapid decline, closure and the number of remnant congregations struggling to maintain their presence and property.

Second, it seems diaconal ministry is just not embedded as an image of possibility within the Uniting Church generally. My experience on the NSW & ACT Synod Ministerial Placements Advisory Committee (2008–2010) was that mostly placement profiles never envisioned deacons playing a role in leading the church into the future. Diaconal ministry was just not in the frame. There were rare exceptions such as an entirely new diaconal ministry established in Goulburn, New South Wales.

Third, I think the doing away with parishes has led to a focus on the primacy of the gathered life of congregations. Being part of a parish reminded churches that congregations existed in a shared geo-social missional context. Also, parishes enabled ministers to be sustained in a full time capacity. It would seem that congregations in their gathered form, could see that as the ultimate purpose of their existence, avoiding the question of who is church for.

Fourth, despite all attempts to persuade theological colleges to take seriously distinctive formation for diaconal ministry, it simply has not happened.

Fifth, since 1991 changes have occurred not previously envisioned. For example, regional churches came into being which see a place for diaconal ministry. Related to this is polarisation within the UCA, especially in South Australia. The large non-geographical Generate Presbytery does not have one deacon serving within it. A ‘senior pastor’ model of ministry is often favoured over tem ministry. Does this thinking tempt some to think they have a special authority

as ‘leaders’ placing them ‘above’ others?

Sixth, let me conclude by coming back to the question of ‘mission’. A positive legacy of the 1994 Report is its use of the *gathered/scattered (commissioned)* metaphor. Life and mission are two distinct dynamics held in creative tension. Unless such an image is embedded in one’s thinking, the promise of diaconal ministry in congregations in the widest sense is unlikely to be in the frame of expectation of being the church. And ‘mission’ is so often conceived in purely individualistic terms (*to make disciples*), refraining from then asking, ‘disciples for what purpose?’ The apostolic witness to the inbreaking of the kingdom of justice and truth is not part of the discourse. However, serving with the disempowered, social pioneering, transforming communities and, as always, delivering the liberating Word is the primary agenda for a church.

Perhaps there may be another appropriate way to imagine diaconal ministry. Small congregations have to ask themselves, ‘what is our future?’. They have the potential of becoming a *diaconal community*, which really focuses on who in the wider community they exist for. Small, committed, caring and missionally oriented spirit communities can have extraordinary catalytic power when they decide how they may respond to specific socio-spirit needs in their neighbourhoods and region. If such diaconal communities exist within a shared geo-social region, then by supporting each other they may give new hope to the church at large.

The radical witness of servanthood, which characterises diaconal ministry, is a witness the church needs at large more than ever. It is ironic that when the Uniting Church is in rapid decline and needs ways to refashion its mission in the wider community, a diaconal pioneering model could play a significant role in renewing the church for mission. Hopefully the institutional church may still realise the timely potential of diaconal ministry.

Endnotes

[1] This paper is based on a memoir first drafted for *Diakonia Occasional Papers*, 28 May 2012.

9

Putting Wheels Under Good Intentions: The case of Young Ambassadors for Peace

Margaret Reeson

What do we mean when we say that we 'express our solidarity' with someone, as a Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) Assembly or Synod? What action is involved, other than good intentions and a mention in the Minutes? This paper will consider ways in which the UCA has attempted to work in genuine partnership with diverse communities and partner churches overseas. The UCA, through Unity and International Mission (now Uniting World), related closely with partner churches during a period of instability affecting our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region about twenty years ago. One expression of that was the establishment of the program Young Ambassadors for Peace (YAP). Using the experience of YAP in the period 2000–2012 as a case study, this paper will explore one way in which good intentions grew into practical actions.

It is July 2000 and we are at an evening session of the Ninth Assembly of UCA. The report and proposals from Unity and International Mission are about to be presented. A group of visiting church leaders stand at the front, ready to speak to us. They come from nations in Asia and the Pacific in what some are calling the 'arc of instability'. As each guest speaks, we hear the pain of Fiji and Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Maluku and Ambon in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India. Tribal warfare, conflict between Christians and Muslims, divisions based on ethnic differences that have escalated into years of war, political coups that have destabilised a nation, a bishop who describes barely escaping with his life. This is not just alarming and often shocking information.

This is life for these people who have been sharing our Assembly. These are our friends, and beyond each one live communities and nations in terrible distress.

Even the most carefully worded Minute of a meeting fails to express the emotion behind it. The Minutes for that session run for several pages. At several points we declare that we plan to 'stand in solidarity' with these communities. We state that, in regard to conflict and suffering in several parts of Indonesia, 'Assembly agencies, church councils and church members have sought to stand in solidarity with our partner churches and other groups in Indonesia during their time of trial and suffering – offering prayers, financial and other support, and encouragement as we have been able, often feeling the great inadequacy of our response.'[1]

We promise to urge our churches to pray, and that we will support humanitarian relief through ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, and will be advocates on their behalf. We say, 'In their difficult time we commit ourselves as best we are able from our position of security and comfort, to walk with them.'[2] We add that we 'recognise that partner churches in India, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, South Korea, Taiwan, Fiji and the Philippines have faced – and continue to face – communal and religious conflict, and political tension in the life of their societies; (b) to continue to stand in solidarity with our partner churches in these countries…'[3]

We mean well. We really mean to stand in solidarity while those church leaders are standing there right in front of us. But what do we mean? What can we do? One definition of solidarity is 'a union or fellowship arising from common responsibilities or interests, as between members of a group, or between classes. Community of interests, feelings, purposes.' Union… fellowship… common interests … community of purpose… but how can we, as members of an Australian church, express that to friends beyond our immediate horizon?

This moment in 2000 at the Ninth Assembly was not the first time the Uniting Church had attempted to work out what we meant by

'standing in solidarity' with partner churches overseas. One solution has been to leave responsibility for connections, relationships and advocacy to staff members of the appropriate national body. In that critical period around 1999–2000, members of the staff of Social Responsibility and Justice and Unity and International Mission made many visits to regions in the grip of crises. Simply turning up in a war zone, or being accessible on the end of the phone, was vitally important. They built trust as they shared experiences.

We have recruited those who could work alongside our partners for short or long terms. People who have worked in overseas countries and have learned the language continue as significant bridge-builders – for example John Brown and Korea, James Haire and Indonesia, John Mavor and the Pacific. In the 1990s, leaders from partner churches attended and participated in the meetings of the World Mission Committee, so that decisions were made together.

There was the Interns in Mission program in the 1990s when young adults spent extended periods in a host community overseas. Early versions of the About FACE program for youth sent teams of young people to partner churches as well as to indigenous communities in Australia. Exposure visits for parties of adults and work parties have provided not only practical support but also opened the way for new understandings and relationships. The appeal to stand in solidarity with a distant community now means not only commitment to an idea or a purpose but is linked with real people. This can lead to genuine prayer and financial support. Yet there are limits to all those attempts to stand in solidarity.

Three months after the Ninth Assembly, in October 2000, the Reference Committee for Unity and International Mission met. All the troubles affecting our friends in our partner churches were still very much alive. We all felt helpless. What could we do? How could a group of well-meaning Australian Christians have any influence over governments in other nations, or offer anything of use to tribal groups, political factions or warring religious bodies beyond our shores? At the time, I was Chair of that Committee and Bill Fischer

was Director. Over morning coffee, staff member Joy Balazo came to sit with us. She had an idea. Would Bill give her permission to take some time away from the office to think? She said, 'If we can't influence governments, is there some way we can offer support to those at the grassroots who may be able to bring change? Youth, perhaps.'

It was a risk but Bill trusted Joy and gave her space to work on a plan. He knew that she had a strong background in human rights and advocacy. Originally from the Philippines, she had worked in many challenging contexts and was familiar from personal experience with the people and situations of many of the places where conflict was now so violent and embedded.

When Joy presented her ideas to Bill Fischer and the Committee some months later, she proposed offering workshops in peace building. She told us, 'I want something that is alive, not an academic discussion.' She suggested a theoretic base for mediation and conflict resolution from an Australian source, the use of games and fun learned in the Philippines through community organising, drama, dance and symbols observed in refugee camps in Burma, and getting enemies to sit together to talk in small groups as she had seen at a big women's conference in war torn Bougainville. She was very keen to run a pilot workshop with representatives from warring factions, and to hold it at Greenhills, the UCA conference centre near Canberra. She wanted to travel to recruit participants for something that sounded both dangerous and very uncertain. We who listened to her were impressed with her enthusiasm but cautious about how this dream might work in reality. She wanted to call this dream Young Ambassadors for Peace. It would soon be known as YAP.[4]

After a great many logistical and other challenges, the first group arrived for a YAP workshop in December 2001. They came from Sri Lanka, Burma, Ambon, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. Most of them were very nervous. Here they were, in a strange place among strangers and the only people who spoke their own language were from the enemy group. If they were nervous, Joy

was very scared indeed. Was she about to waste a lot of the church's money on a colossal failure? If these young people were at home, they would be likely to attack and kill each other. What had she done?

For some participants, it did not begin well. Where was the speaker's lectern? Why did Joy insist that everyone sat on the floor, at the same level, when there were plenty of chairs stacked against the wall? Was their food safe? And why were they playing silly games, not listening to more lectures with some analysis? Had they come under false pretences? For the first two days everyone was very tentative and anxious but by the third day they began to see that the games, drama, symbolism and rituals were all like enacted parables, leading them to greater understanding. Strangers began to join each other at the dinner table. People from opposing camps began to have conversations. It was not easy and many activities were very challenging and painful but by the end of the week most of them had begun to see possibilities for building peace among their own people at home.

After they had all gone home – and no one had been murdered – Joy assessed what had happened. Next time, she decided, any workshop must happen in a host country, not in the neutral territory of Australia. There was no point teaching one or two people from each location. For any real change to be possible there needed to be a much larger community working together. Next time she would use fewer formal lectures and allow more time for participants to engage with each other to work on their own critical issues.[5]

Over the next few years, Joy led workshops in a number of very different contexts. At first it was very difficult as most of the teaching and leading was the responsibility of a single person, Joy, with an interpreter, and the concept and model of the workshops was new to all the participants. As time went on, people who experienced one workshop were there to support and encourage new people in subsequent workshops. In 2002, she only led two workshops – in Sri Lanka among four different ethnic and faith communities and in Ambon where Christians and Muslims had been in violent conflict. By

2003, invitations began to come from people who had attended that first tentative effort in Canberra. From a slow start, Joy found herself leading more workshops than seemed physically possible. In an eight-month period in 2003–4, she led nine workshops in six different countries, with all the complexities of travel for participants, security, accommodation, food and funding usually done through inadequate communication systems. North-east India, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, back to Ambon, Sri Lanka again, Burma, and the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Each context presented a very different set of circumstances, different reasons for conflict and different barriers to finding peace. How could short workshops of about a week in length possibly make any difference?

Joy's director Bill Fischer tried to pin her down to write something to explain this approach. In 2003 she wrote: 'Young Ambassadors for Peace is a human rights program aimed at developing a culture of peace based on justice… To expose young people to the fact that human rights violations can be prevented and conflict can be resolved through peaceful means…it is training, networking and movement-building rolled into one'.

My husband Ron and I have been able to witness this program. We visited the very first YAP workshop in Canberra in late 2001. As a recently retired person, Ron was employed by Uniting World in a part-time capacity for six years. One task was to meet with Joy on her return from each adventure, for debriefing and pastoral support, and to help shape her narratives for use in publications. At the same time, I was serving on the committee of Uniting World that had responsibility for Joy's work, hearing regular reports which recognised the challenges and hazards involved. On one of our visits to our former home in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, we attended the first YAP workshop held in that region in 2003, witnessing the activities but also the challenges and the outcomes.[6] In 2005 we also attended a gathering of YAP Coordinators from all the regions where YAP had been introduced, held in Canberra. It was an extraordinary privilege to meet and spend time with peacemakers from contexts

as diverse as North-east India and Bougainville, PNG highlands and Ambon, Solomon Islands and Burma.[7]

Some observations: YAP has been a tool, an instrument, to help communities to do their own work. Because it uses humour, drama, play, and symbols, the process can still work even when there is no common language. The model demands that people from each side of a conflict work together, to talk and work with each other to find understanding and possible solutions rather than talking about each other. Each step has a thoughtful purpose and leads to working out what real, achievable first steps can be taken together.

Here are some steps in the process:

- *Creating a map* of their region. The participants work together using natural materials like paper, sticks, stones or leaves laid on the ground or floor to create a rough model of their local context and landscape. Then Joy asks, 'Who will be my tour guide? Tell me about your place.' In one place she asked, 'What are those red hibiscus flowers scattered across the area?' 'Those represent each tribal conflict in this region.'
- *Creating a timeline* of the conflict, working with those from each side of the issue. This can be confronting, with different perspectives of what has happened.
- *Using games, drama, symbols and activities* to learn more about power and its misuse, prejudice, and attempts at reconciliation. Every 'game' has a purpose.
- *Symbolic burning of prejudices.* This ritual can have a profound impact as participants confront their own prejudice.
- *Teaching* by Joy or others. Some formal lectures expand the understanding of the discipline of peacemaking and peace building.
- *Mapping the conflict* and asking: who are the players? What do they fear? What do they need? What can we do? Who will work with us on some practical steps? This can be the most difficult but significant stage as people from both sides

of a conflict attempt to understand the complexities of their situation and seek solutions together.

- *Deciding on practical steps* for future action together.
- *Commitment ritual* at the conclusion of a workshop when participants create an appropriate way to symbolise their intentions for future peace-building.
- *Training of trainers*, passing on the model to other groups, including to other nations. This is a later stage and takes place after initial workshops.[8]

Some issues: Too much rested on one very independent person. When her health was compromised, that was not good for either Joy or her work. Reaching some inaccessible mountain places that involved hiking, such as Bougainville, became too hard for Joy. Continuing conflicts in some places has made gathering for workshops impossible. Conflicts between leadership, with differing goals, have sometimes limited their effectiveness. The independent approach of the leader could be both a gift and a hazard.

People have sometimes attempted to compress a YAP workshop into a day or two, using only the most dramatic aspects. Some participants have not been prepared to turn up for the whole process. Those who thought that they could visit the workshop at intervals, usually busy leaders in faith communities, often missed the point. Without giving serious time for the hard and confronting work needed, it can become simply an interesting exercise. There are other models for peace-building, and on occasions those working with other approaches have dismissed this particular approach as inadequate. Some communities suspect any outsider, believing that they would not understand their culture or history. Joy has said that YAP is simply an instrument that can be used across cultural, religious and linguistic differences. It forces people to do their own work.

Joy Balazo retired from Uniting World in 2012 and returned to the Philippines. In recent years the YAP program has evolved. In some places it has disappeared in its earlier form. In some contexts

the original conflict has been resolved and those who have been influenced by the YAP model continue to apply those lessons in other conflict situations, for example in Ambon and Bougainville.

I have a particular interest in the place of YAP in the PNG highlands. Since their first YAP workshop in 2003, YAP members have been able to negotiate the surrender of guns and have gathered supporters from among all the local churches to be a force for good in a troubled region. In May 2021 we had a message from their key leader, Moses Komengi. Moses attended the very first YAP workshop in Canberra in 2001. At that time, he felt alone and ill-equipped to confront the tribal warfare in his home region. Now, twenty years later, he was reporting on the successful completion, with a strong local team, of yet another intense six-week YAP program working to build peace again between fight-leaders involved in recent violent tribal warfare.

This has been one way in which the Uniting Church has been able to be in solidarity with our neighbours. We have worked in relationship, with a common purpose, even though we come from very different contexts.

Endnotes

1 UCA Ninth Assembly Minutes 2000. 00.35.11(b)

2 UCA Ninth Assembly Minutes 2000. 00.35.12 (e)

3 UCA Ninth Assembly Minutes 2000. 00.35.14 (e)

4 Margaret Reeson, *Live Peace: Joy Balazo and Young Ambassadors for Peace* (Brookvale: Acorn Press, 2015), 96–98.

5 Ibid., 101–109.

6 Ibid., 133–139.

7 Ibid., 167–169.

8 Ibid., 147–159.

10

Space for Grace: Growing up and redesigning 'home'

Amelia Koh-Butler and Antony (Tony) Floyd

During the period 2009–2016, Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community leaders from across Australia grappled with identity and dared to own the descriptor of belonging to a 'Multicultural Church'.[1] The unfolding discussions about gender, identity and marriage required fresh approaches to discernment. The National Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee (MCM-NRC) of the Assembly worked on methodologies and resources identified as *Space for Grace*.

This essay articulates a narrative journey of the Uniting Church maturing in its diversity, with First peoples and Second peoples,[2] through healthy, respectful and genuine story-sharing and story-listening. As the UCA has grown up, its CALD leaders have sought to contribute from the margins into doctrinal conversations. The context and the journey of building that community are described in the first section of the UCA's *Manual for Meetings*.[3] During the course of this journey, the statement *One Body Many Members, Living faith and life cross-culturally*[4] was adopted by the 13th Assembly in 2012. The paper contained characteristics of life and faith experienced within cultural diversity. It expressed a call to the church to live into every aspect of communal life and structures:

1. IN WORSHIP AND RESPONSE TO THE CREATOR GOD: celebrates, confesses and acts out its faith in the one sovereign God who through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities, cultures and languages.
2. RECEIVES CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AS GOD'S GIFTS AND:

- embodies these diversities as gracious gifts of the Creator God to the human family,
- rejoices in the variety of God's grace, and
- lives out its life and witness cross-culturally as a sign and promise of hope within multicultural, multiracial and multifaith Australia in the 21st century.[5]

Members of the MCM-NRC were seeking genuine ways for the broad diversity of cultural contributions to be respectfully heard within the committee, and across the wider membership of the church, rather than being relegated to the margins. This inclusion extended across the life and responsibilities of all Uniting Church councils, agencies, schools and colleges. The MCM-NRC's discussion on Christian marriage and marriage equality acts as an illustration of the positive, affirming, and rich effects of that journey. In effect, the journey became a maturing pilgrimage, allowing communities to move beyond the infancy of their belonging in the Uniting Church family. Just as discussions about Baptism had tested the foundations of the Uniting Church during the 1980s and 1990s,[6] discussions about marriage led the multicultural church to grow up and recognise a range of voices.

Expectations around being heard in relation to marriage reflected the MCM-NRC members' commitment to paragraph 13 of the *Basis of Union* on gifts and ministries:

> The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. … The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission.[7]

The future growth of the UCA likely depends on harnessing the contributions of inter-cultural interactions. Learning from *Space for Grace* experiences we identify key strategies for future collaborations. We have been an integral part of the UCA as it has grown up. Out

of significant personal experiences and immersions, we write of the growing up (journeying) of the UCA's embrace of diversity and inclusiveness, its witness to living faith and life cross culturally.

Streams of stories, expectations and discoveries

> My own life has been enormously enriched by exploring and engaging with different people and cultures, particularly the First Peoples of northern Australia. Sitting under trees with the law men of Elcho Island and tuning in to their way of thinking was a turning point in my personal formation. I'm sure many of you have been significantly moved in your personal faith or participation in God's mission by an experience of difference or diversity that has challenged your worldview. … No matter how difficult the conversation or how wide the differences are, there is nothing that cannot be resolved if we are prepared to hear one another and leave the space for God's grace.[8]

By 2009, members of the Uniting Church in Australia were talking about cultural understandings of marriage. Conversations about same-gender relationships and gender-identity had been part of 'tricky issues' conversations for some years. By 2011–2012, the UCA was aware of increasing conversation in the Australian community and in religious circles, as people began to pose questions about how the church would respond to changing definitions of marriage and legal recognition of same-gender relationships.

Intentional UCA 'marriage' conversations began in 2012. In the MCM-NRC it quickly became clear that we could not start by considering same-gender relationships. Instead, we considered how our different Christian journeys and cultural experiences made sense of marriage and relationships of household or kinship. By listening, we expected to find points in common. We discovered the need to make new language and meaning with one another. We had to redesign home. As we grew up in a new and changing society, alongside new family, we had to evolve new ways of doing theology.

In 2009, the UCA had adopted the understanding that 'the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony.'[9] We reasoned the Spirit may have acted in the same way in other communities. We determined to listen carefully

to the various non-dominant-culture groups now part of the Church. We sought to identify, and begin to map, this breadth of experience, identifying themes and questions. Initially, we learnt about very different practices within at least 14 different cultures within the diversity of the MCM-NRC. Some themes were common, others unique. Previous assumptions about the world and marriage were completely overhauled in four hours. The world had changed. The process took the form of mapping a web of connectedness rather than a more Western-style linear statement of thought and conversation process. It was a form of mind-mapping.

This essay describes a contextualised view of how the interactions of a highly diverse community of CALD leaders enabled higher order theological listening. Contextualisation invites cross-cultural examination and conversation. Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou contrast corporately expressed faith with that which is understood and acted on apart from the community, highlighting problems of uncritical acceptance or denial of habits.[10] They suggest the need for leadership using both *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) approaches and bringing together a relational understanding from 'walking in the shoes of the other'. Appreciation of context requires disciplined evaluation and reflection, going beyond the subjective understandings of a single viewpoint. This highlights the need to understand the practices of each diverse group, both when together and when apart. As authors, we were able to take an *emic* view in our roles as National Director of Multi/Cross-cultural Ministry and Chairperson of the MCM-NRC Reference Committee. We noted constant pressure to dismiss the 'lived experiences' of the MCM-NRC from 'outsiders' and seek in this paper to narrate the experience from within.

The group discovered they did not need to be in consensus in order to undertake a team approach to theological work and grew in confidence in talking about the experiences from their own cultures. Indeed, diversity, rather than sameness, was valued in new ways. Dominant culture and dominating cultures gave way to appreciation

of difference and wonder (in the sense of awe). Learning to articulate beyond one's own culture and achieve intercultural respect became core goals of doing theology.

Spirit as meeting place

In early church communities, problems arose as people from beyond Judaism encountered the message of the followers of Jesus: what to do with these outsiders, the Gentiles? How can we share stories when our context, culture, experiences are so different? Initial responses were quite clear, though not unambiguously accepted. It was expected that the Gentiles must enter into this community by first becoming Jews: assimilating into the original language and cultural group. They needed not only to be grounded in a specific tradition but become assimilated into it. This expectation was confronted and completely pushed aside in a totally unexpected invasion of hearts and worldviews by God and by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit which fell on them (Acts 10: 44). The story of Peter and Cornelius and its consequences in Acts 10 and 11 is apposite here.

At the moment when tradition, theology, or expectations clearly and coherently derived from both might have been applied and Peter demanded they all become Jews, the radically unexpected occurred. The Holy Spirit burst into the gathering and poured the power of Pentecost into the lives and hearts of people who had not even been baptised. Even though this totally unexpected activity of God the Holy Spirit brought about conviction, faith and transformation it was still a matter for very serious questioning back in Jerusalem. Other stories of those early Christian communities make clear that while this episode had a happy conclusion, the matter of how new groups gather into the wider Body of Christ is ongoing.

In a contemporary pluralistic urban setting, where gospel proclamation is situated in-between and among multiple cultures, it is more helpful to recollect these early church experiences, where Jews and Gentiles heard the gospel together (Acts 2:5–11, 11:19–21, 13:16, 26), largely in home communities. The church grew across

culturally-bounded sets and overcame cultural barriers between different groups. People needed to learn to cross cultures at home, around a table. Discussion about diversity at the table was shaped by the personal experiences and research areas of the MCM-NRC members. This included those who had contributed to the evolution of the group, such as Helen Richmond,[11] whose research into interfaith marriages influenced conversations and was in turn shaped by conversations with MCM-NRC members. Likewise, one of the MCM-NRC members, Rosemary Dewerse, explored intercultural conversation in subsequent publications.[12]

Perhaps the truest expression of God's hospitality, for even the most marginalised, is the welcome to the Lord's Table.[13] When the people of God gather to extend God's hospitality beyond themselves, they incarnate God's missionary activity. When they share the Lord's Supper, they enact the proclamation of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 11:26). In the Eucharistic liturgy, we are invited, not to the church's table, but to the Lord's Table; it is Christ who welcomes us. By reminding people the table is the Lord's, members of the MCM-NRC were challenged that no single cultural group or worldview should dominate the common space. In this instance, MCM-NRC members were not seeking to take a thesis, antithesis, synthesis approach. Rather, the members were in a constant state of struggle using oral cultures to articulate experience and collaborate in emerging thinking.

Such storytelling starts with recognising whose stories to tell. People delighted in hearing each other's stories and exploring threads of stories together. Just as the Apostle Luke recorded communication challenges (Acts 2:8–11), the Australian narrative features confronting elements of segregation, racism and attempts by the Church to challenge this with a prophetic voice. It is questionable if reconciliation is even possible without confessing pains, past and present. Newcastle theologian, Chris Budden, argues Second Peoples need to acknowledge the invaded space they occupy and how this affects relationships, with God and one another, asking if shared songs are even possible before old ones are confessed? He

proposes a more shared journey.[14] This is the challenge to engage in critical contextualization. Indeed, hearing, digesting and responding to stories of First Peoples liberated many of these migrants to be able to share painful and oppressive stories.

Diversity

Diversity is having a seat at the table, *inclusion* is having a voice, and *belonging* is having that voice be heard.

The household table is usually hosted by the 'at home' family. Culturally, this is often perceived to be hosting by a dominant culture group. Often, the people who are most unaware of a dominant culture are the ones who feel completely at home with it. People often desire to be hospitable, going out of their way to make minority people feel welcomed and cared for. Welcome is experienced when we enter into each other's lives without expecting sameness. Knowing our personal sense of place and personhood allows us the confidence to take a seat at the table. We are able to respond by sharing some of our 'home' story, moving beyond stereotypes towards effective relating.

When a dominant culture group assumes the role of host at Christ's table, hospitality can become a caricature. Who is this host, who determines normative behaviour, according to their own cultural standards, when the feast of heaven is for all? Who is the interloper, when during the liturgy we proclaim, 'This is the Lord's table, and he invites us to this feast!' Knowing and articulating the validity of varied stories of the guests allow them to be placed humbly beside each other in the presence of the Host.

Inclusion

Space for Grace was not intended to become a political or theological posture, nor one which cheapens the acts and experiences of God's grace. *Space for Grace* was rather intended as a pastoral opportunity for experiencing liberty and salvation. It was intended as a way of holding people in community by reducing the fear and anxiety of being 'unknown'.[15] It provided a method for exploring

and understanding diversity while developing increasingly generous relationships.

For those of us born and nurtured in 'western' cultural and philosophical traditions, living with and communicating meaningfully across cultural and religious differences can be a foreign, even frightening experience. Yet God gives us space in which we, who are so often the guardians of 'the story', can become story listeners as we allow other story sharers to be heard, respected, and valued. It is our experience that God's grace will work through the many who live, worship, witness and serve within the UCA as equal travellers, carrying insights of living in close, respectful, neighbourly proximity with religious and cultural difference, images and metaphors.

MCM-NRC meetings were challenged by conversations around being time poor. Members reported hearing comments in other committees and councils of the Church that 'Every second counts, so we must move on to the next agenda item'. Members wanted to recognise the time we have is actually God's gift to us. Within that gift, the task is discerning the directions and resources, insights and possibilities stirred by the various experiences.[16]

During the initial five years, the group rejoiced in each other's scholarly achievements and global recognition of work.[17] Many of the cohort left homes and lands, sacrificing place and position to join Jesus on the margins of Australian society and serving in Australian churches. The experience of migrants has not been one of a unified Australian Church, but of competing and conflicting power groups, each self-identifying as true Church. Nevertheless, coming into union involved growing into a new identity and maturing as new Australians.

MCM-NRC members experienced their greatest welcome from First Peoples. Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) leaders have been consistently hospitable and generous in their words and deeds. A greater struggle has involved trying to be heard by 'dominant cultures'. Responding to conversations with UAICC members about colonial and post-colonial experiences,

MCM-NRC members quickly expressed the dissatisfaction that they were often encouraged to 'leave behind' their pre-Australian learnings. The faith resilience and spiritual maturity, gained through migration, was an asset they were called to share.

UAICC members, who speak into a kinship relationship within the Covenant with the Uniting Church in Australia, helped the MCM-NRC understand that silence does not always mean approbation, nor does it imply disapproval. Sometimes, there are simply no words that can be spoken or heard within respectful relationships. Dialogue may only be possible for some when there is a secure home for conversation, or at the very least, a place of temporary hospitality.

Proceeding to redesign the home for 'grown-ups'

We started one late-afternoon session (5–7pm) sharing stories about marriage in our families, which was so interesting that we gave up our after-dinner free-time to continue (8–10pm). Initially, we learnt about very different practices within at least fourteen different cultural experiences. Some themes were common, others completely different. Our previous assumptions about the world and marriage were completely overhauled in four hours. The complexity of the world had changed.

While this may seem like an exclusively anthropological approach, the group included theologians, liturgical scholars, missiologists, social developers and scientists. Most were first generation Australian migrants. Some were Indigenous to their country of origin, challenged by their own indigeneity and speaking from their own post-colonial and post-missionary contexts. The conversation was rich, with different disciplines edging into the storying and clarifying questions. We learnt to care for one another as people invited into the hospitality of each other's stories. We were guests in each other's spaces. We were careful and respectful. We adjusted ourselves to being in familial prayerful relationship with others of many different stories.

In only a few days we went from being situated in our own lands and stories to being in globally-formed relationships with multiple

world-views. This was made possible because of a shared reading of carefully holding 'all things in common' (Acts 2:42–47) and seeing what God would nourish us with. We banqueted in each other's offerings and understood different languages. We reeled from an experience of Pentecost after which we would never be the same again. Stories were not used to set the boundaries of convention or rules of social gaming. Rather, they allowed us to better understand the etiquette and field of play. They gave us a guided tour of what was possible, rather than what was directed.

We understood that the diversity of the Reference Group was its key strength and wanted to explore how we could seek God and hold unity within our diversity. We focused on spending time on the first nine pages of *A Manual for Meetings*, trusting that the essential 'work' would be discerned and dealt with on the journey.

Meetings took 3–4 days, twice a year. The first day was spent entirely in gathering and co-creating spiritual community. Worship and Bible study allowed us to move into exploring the human-divine encounter, making meaning using metaphors from scripture and culture. We listened to one another's news and stories. As people spoke, we identified emerging issues and, at the end of the day, summarised any emerging themes.[18] On the second day, we broadened our understanding of a co-created community, introducing inputs and issues referred from different sectors of church or society. The human–divine engagement would then require us to see where and how these connected with our experiences. We undertook theological reflection, featuring diverse stories and styles, in order to bring as many voices into the process as possible.

We reflected using the tools of scripture and doctrinal debate. Nuanced doctrines developed over centuries or decades, from different parts of the world, were used to stretch our thinking, rather than as tools for silencing engagement. For many, this made a refreshing change, as each participant was able to recount occasions when their migrant voice had been silenced by dominant voices in the Australian context. Indeed, we reflected, the people who were most likely to

hear our voices and listen deeply were those other silenced voices, belonging to First Peoples. In addition to a background of 'Terra Nullius', we realised we were embedded in a reality of 'Experience Nullius'.

Having taken the time to recognise the work of the Spirit among us, the gathering did not start to formulate proposals until day 3. This always included ensuring that there was a clear and common understanding of what was shaping as a proposal and that the various insights and concerns noted in the first two days were recognised and acknowledged in some appropriate and respectful way. The decision-making session rarely took longer than an hour or two on the last day of meeting. Then we would have lunch and conclude with Communion … sending us out, empowered and nourished by learning, community and sacrament. We really did not need longer for decision-making if we had taken the time to do deep theological discernment *together* on the way towards forming the proposals.

We were aware of criticism that the process was (a) 'time consuming', and (b) vulnerable to being colonised by the frequent 'Western' process of 'programming', where over-focus on outcomes could undermine attention to process and disrupt relationships.[19] Sensitivity to differences of style proved particularly helpful. Although many of us had been formed in Western-style (or Eurocentric) theological seminaries, we all had cross-cultural experiences to draw from and we were interested in broader theological methods. In a group of (at times) sixteen or more people, most had teaching and research experience in a range of different seminary and university settings, employing quite different approaches to research. Additionally, being a group of mostly migrants, the group members were well-travelled and attended international conferences on a regular basis in very different parts of the world. This meant the group did not have a dominant culture view determining what could be considered normative. Normality was something to be negotiated, rather than assumed.

Although most of the group had extensive experience in using

more linear or hermeneutical spirals that assumed progression in a particular direction, we deliberately introduced the 'tried and true' discernment disciplines from non-western spiritual heritages. Some of these involve additional steps to enable relationships to be maintained whenever new material is introduced. For example, some (region-specific) small groups discerned what parts of stories could be safely shared with the wider group, without exposing particular communities to anxiety and vulnerability or the possible consequences of shame.

The group included participants from Asia, Africa, Oceania, Europe and the Middle East. All were committed to using the UCA's foundational document, the *Basis of Union*, as a key reference point. This led us to adopting *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* to inform our approach to method. However, this did not assume a linear or 'boxed' approach, but rather, one of conversation. Tradition, reason and experience were grounded by Biblical reflection.

Every member of the MCM-NRC was touched by God's grace in the conversations from those years. We struggled together and there were tears and laughter. We did not get to having end-solutions to complex questions and issues. But we found the Spirit spoke to us in ways we could not have foreseen. We were led into deeper awareness and acceptance of our diversity, differences, and ability to live by grace with the tensions. It is our conviction this is the manner of journeying anticipated in the *Manual for Meetings* for communal discernment and genuine consensus.

The experience embodied the vision in the declaration affirmed by the 13th Assembly (2012) and commended to the whole UCA, its councils, agencies, congregations and members of 'a multicultural Church, living faith and life Cross-culturally' that 'receives cultural and linguistic diversity as God's gifts and embodies these diversities as gracious gifts of the Creator God to the human family, rejoices in the variety of God's grace, and lives out its life and witness cross-culturally as a sign and promise of hope within multicultural, multiracial and multifaith Australia in the 21st century.'[20]

Figure 1: The Wesleyan Quadrilateral reimagined, with Scripture as foundation and Reason, Tradition and Experience informing discernment.

The conversations and prayers which led to this declaration and affirmation identified 'what if' questions to encourage future theological work:

- What if we move beyond binary thinking? What if we do not choose between 'this' or 'that'? What if we live with multiple understandings on a range of issues? What is the place of equality and full acceptance in the life of God's people?
- What if all we can or need to know is that God's creative and re-creative acts of loving-kindness and mercy are the foundation of all relationships and communities?
- What if we don't need to insist on dominant thinking, since God invites us to relational and intellectual humility?
- What if God's gift is a path between our absolutes, and Christ 'who in his own strange way constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church'[21] walks with all of us? Paradoxically, the ekklesia is blessed with unity in its profound differences,

complex safety barriers, all of our rich and enriching insights, views of truth, and hopes for wholeness.

- What if such a middle path is not a passive path, avoiding struggle? What if faith is an active, insightful and wise path provoking change in our minds and transformation in our lives, another step in God's intention for the redemption of all creation?
- What if God is calling us faithfully to journey, and the learning and faithfulness is not in our answers, but in our being a 'one-anothering community' in Christ, with a full and honoured place for all?[22]

Outcomes and conclusions

Space for Grace is continually being developed and refined. It served our group of culturally and linguistically diverse leaders well over a number of years and helped us stay in community, despite our different backgrounds, theologies and worldviews.

Making decisions in a *Space for Grace* involves a commitment to:

- Go beyond our normal boundaries of safety into a space where we trust the Spirit of God to move us into sacred relationships. We call this the 'grace margin'. This requires a trusted facilitator who assists in holding people to respectful behaviours.
- Form a community of respectful listening by using a system of mutual invitation to speak – and allow room to listen.
- Avoid judgement and analysis or deconstructing of people's stories. Instead, recognise they are subjective and represent the reality that each person has experienced.
- Identify themes in common and differences to be further explored.
- Share hospitality and faith (e.g. break bread, share a meal, share the Eucharist).

- Respect the confidentiality of each other's stories as sacred – safe and treasured, because they are the stories of the children of God – only to be shared with the express permission of the storyteller.
- Continue to work together as a group to identify what can help discernment while still maintaining respect.

When *Space for Grace* is created, groups usually get imaginative about what they do next. Groups may enter into relational covenants or commitments. We pray that the future of the UCA is a future of diversity, inclusion and belonging.

Endnotes

1 The terminology was intentionally adopted as a title rather than as a descriptor.

2 As defined in the Uniting Church in Australia Constitution and Regulations: *Preamble*, paragraph 2ff, and *Constitution – Definitions*, paragraph 3 (Uniting Church Press, 2018).

3 *A Manual for Meetings* 2009. Rev. ed.([s.l.]: National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 2009). The first section, which in the 1995 edition ran to nine pages, is focused on how meeting communities are to gather and go about their work. Section A: Meeting together, included, (a) The formation of community; (b) Why we meet together; (c) How we meet together; and (d) How we make decisions. The MCM-NRC discussed at length the importance of addressing the cultural sensitivities around meeting places and behaviours. By focusing on meeting process, members determined only to make decisions after hearing, reflecting on and discussing all the business. The Committee reached consensus because the time taken to attend to Committee culture changed the perceived experience of safety and opened the margin for grace.

4 *One Body, Many Members – living faith and life cross-culturally*. Statement and Resolutions from 13th Assembly, (Uniting Church, 2012), 18–19.

5 Ibid., 19.

6 John Squires noted, 'In the early years of the Uniting Church, debates about Baptism were the focus of great controversy.' https://uniting.church/dna-of-the-uca/, (accessed 10 November 2021). This is a reworking of his original thinking, published on his blog, https://johntsquires.com/2018/08/15/what-i-really-like-about-the-basis-of-union/ and https://johntsquires.com/2018/08/20/alongside-the-basis-of-union-there-was-the-statement-to-the-nation/, 2018.

7 Paragraph 13, *Basis of Union*, edited by The Uniting Church in Australia (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992).

8 Stuart McMillan, ex-President Assembly UCA, from the Introduction to the Facilitator Guide: Introduction to the Space for Grace, 2015. https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/Space_for_Grace_Facilitators_Guide_-_A5_v1.pdf (accessed 10 November 2021).

9 Revised Preamble, UCA Constitution, 2009.

10 P. G. Hiebert, D. Shaw and T. Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 49.

11 Helen Richmond's detailed discussion about intercultural interfaith marriage would later be published in *Blessed and Called to Be a Blessing: Muslim–Christian Couples Sharing a Life Together* (Oxford: Regnum, 2015).

12 See R. Dewerse, *Breaking Calabashes: Becoming an Intercultural Community* (Unley, S.A.: Mediacom Education, 2013).

[13] For an excellent discussion of different ways of including the most marginalised at the table, see Janet Forsythe Fishburn's *People of a Compassionate God: Creating welcoming congregations* (Nashville, TN : Abingdon Press, 2003). In particular, the essays by Linda Vogel, Elizabeth Box Price and Mary Elizabeth Moore, all provide experiential reflections on practices of inclusion.

[14] C. Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).

[15] E. Law, Inclusion: *Making Room for Grace* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 39–47. See chapters 2–4, where trust in God's grace in the face of the unknown or uncertain can work to reduce the barriers of fear and anxiety and create space for that grace to be manifest and effective.

[16] It seemed to members of the MCM-NRC that the application of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (that is, using Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience for theological discernment) privileged scripture, reason and Western tradition, but often ignored their lived experience. See Figure 1.

[17] Seven of the eighteen members were publishing doctoral or postdoctoral materials related to intercultural engagement during this period.

[18] Here the authors were functioning as facilitators in our roles as the National Director and National Reference Committee Chairperson.

[19] Fundamental to the developing journey towards Space for Grace in an understanding that trusting, transparent, respectful relationships which reflect the community nature of God as Trinity are central. However, when the Guidelines for Space for Grace were rolled out, they were frequently treated as another 'package' to be programmed into an Agenda, rather than a journey of patient discernment to be entered on.

[20] The Declaration formed part of the MCM-NRC Report Document to the 13th Assembly: Uniting Church in Australia. 2012. *One Body, Many Members – living faith and life cross-culturally.* Statement and Resolutions from the 13th Assembly (Uniting Church, 2012). See Minutes: https://www.assembly.uca.org.au/images/assemblies/MINUTES_OF_THE_THIRTEENTH_ASSEMBLY.pdf (accessed 11 November 2021).

[21] Paragraph 4, *Basis of Union*, edited by Uniting Church in Australia (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1992).

[22] Andrew Durness, 'Leadership in a one-smothering community', *Australian Leadership*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 4–5.

11

Growing up Safe in the Uniting Church

Sarah Lim

The Uniting Church in Australia has an enormous footprint in the care of children in the community. In addition to children involved in congregational life, its agencies form one of the largest networks of out-of-home care providers in the country. Its schools operate in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. It operates child-care, health services and disability services across Australia. Historically, the Uniting Church (and its predecessor churches) have run homes, missions, boarding facilities and health facilities.

The Uniting Church knows that sometimes children in our care experienced neglect and physical and sexual abuse. As a Church, it has faced up to its failures and taken steps to provide redress to people who experienced abuse, and to prevent abuse from occurring in the future. So, what does it mean to grow up safe in the Uniting Church? What exactly have we learned from the past and how exactly are we taking steps to prevent abuse from occurring in the future? And what does it mean for your specific context in the Church?

What was it like?

From the Uniting Church's participation in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the National Redress Scheme for survivors of institutional abuse, it has a picture of what life was like for some people growing up in the care of the Church and other institutions. This paper shares some of what it looked like growing up where safety was not always prioritised and children were sometimes not believed nor given a voice. It then outlines some of the lessons we can take from the past.

Some facts: Children in out-of-home care were the most vulnerable to abuse, particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s. After that time there have been fewer allegations attributed mostly to the professionalisation of the out-of-home workforce. The highest risk contexts in which abuse occurred were out-of-home care, schools, and congregations. The alleged perpetrators were mostly male, though there were a small number of females mostly in the 'other resident' category. Generally, alleged perpetrators held positions of power and authority. In different contexts there were distinctive characteristics of offending. In congregations and schools, grooming of children, families and entire congregations predominated. In out-of-home care offending occurred under the guise of punishment or discipline.

In congregations the abuser could be the minister, a member of the minister's family, a youth leader, a camp leader or another member of the congregation. The location of the abuse included church property, cars, campsites, the abuser's or the survivor's home. The preliminaries to the abuse invariably involved gaining trust of a child and adults around the child, grooming of the child, family and congregation (with offering special jobs, gifts, and taking a special interest in them), offering opportunities to be with the child away from other adults (for example, taking children on drives, offering lifts home, offering driving lessons, and coming to church early or staying after the service).

The official response to abuse when it was disclosed at the time has been poor. Often the trauma was exacerbated by the disbelief of parents and others due to the high regard and unquestioning deference to those who had the authority of the Church. The impact of abuse on children is lifelong, affecting physical and mental health and causing social disconnection, confusion about sexuality, and spiritual disconnection. It can result in long-lasting feelings of betrayal by the Church, by those who profess love and care, and by God. This is particularly present in accounts of abuse that occurred in a congregational context, but permeates through all situations relating to abuse in the Church and its institutions.

Remembering

What have we learned from the past? Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* reminds us that 'Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of the social order, and for the healing of individual victims.' She refers to bystanders being forced to take the side of either the victim or the perpetrator, and reflects that it is easier to take the side of the perpetrator, as they ask us to do nothing. On the other hand, taking the side of the victim means sharing the pain. However, as we undertake this work, there is not only a sharing of pain. There is also hope for the future. There is learning, change, passion and commitment across our entire Church as we move ever closer to a culture of safety.

So, apart from working to provide redress to individuals who have been harmed, what does this 'remembering and truth telling about terrible events' give us? First, redress, reconciliation and healing are an important part of our story as a Church and the wider community. Second, it helps us manage risk better, especially on where to focus attention. Third, it encourages vigilance, prioritises the safety of children, and improves standards of behavior and supervision. And fourth, it helps raise the standard of record keeping so that allegations of abuse can be properly investigated and for strengthening the identity of the individual victims of abuse.

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A *Talanoa* on Growing Up Uniting

Viniana Ravetali and Andrew Thornley

For most Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, finding a home away from home is important. The Uniting Church, in declaring itself a multicultural church, expresses its commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive people of faith. This has enticed different communities. The journey hasn't been easy for most of our minority ethnic communities and, like the church itself, we continue to make many mistakes, and encounter controversies and successes. All communities have their own stories of joys and sorrows, of hardships and achievements in their journey of faith.

I wish to acknowledge with appreciation, the support and trust of the planning committee of the Third Biennial Uniting Church National History Society conference in encouraging and supporting a CALD presence and voice through this session.

Talanoa is the *Pasifika* way of storytelling. It is used in several native *Pasifika* languages but may not be limited to Fiji, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Samoa. Jione Havea breaks down the essence of talanoa to the triad of story, *telling*, and *conversation*. 'In *talanoa*, story dies without *telling* and *conversation*; *telling* becomes an attempt to control when one does not respect the *story* or give room for *conversation*; and *conversation* is empty without *story* and telling.'[1] In the *Pasifika* way, there is no separation between *story*, *telling* and *conversation*, for they interweave into *talanoa*.

This cultural concept is influencing academia and *Pasifika*

diasporic communities. The concept of *talanoa* from earlier years has moved from the definition of 'talk without any particular framework for discussion' to 'dynamic interaction of story-telling, debating, reflecting, joking, sharing families' genealogies, food and other necessities. It is talking about everything or anything that collaborators are interested in.'[2] *Talanoa* is about creating or strengthening relationships and coming to an understanding between those involved.

Interweaving this concept of *talanoa*, the primary focus of this session was to listen to the stories and voices of CALD experiences in 'growing up' within the Uniting Church. We were fortunate that an enthusiastic group of people – from teenage to senior years, Tongans, Fijians, Samoans, Anglos, and one of Chinese background – were present and participated in this session. It is obvious that our diversity, inter-culturally and intergenerationally, is a wonderful and great gift of God to the Church, bringing it vitality and vibrant life.

The three key areas for discussion during the *Talanoa* session were 'Belonging, Passion and Challenges'. Questions were asked to evoke experiences about membership, inclusivity, tradition, history, doctrine, discipleship, governance, processes, language, generations, formation, freedom and spirituality, to name a few.

As Chair, it is our hope that real experiences shared in the *Talanoa* can be a cause of celebration, as well as assist us to live into the reality of being a multicultural church – to engage and participate fully in the life and faith of the church, in its structures, as people of God!

Immense gratitude goes to the following people for their invaluable contributions to the success of the *Talanoa* session. Special mention initially should be made of the late Rev. Ron Reeson, former missionary in Papua New Guinea, who attended the *Talanoa*. Praise God for his ministry! The other participants are listed below in the order of their first names.[3]

Belonging

Vinnie: The three key areas we wish to concentrate on today are: Belonging, Passion and Challenges. Let us discuss the first of these. What does it mean to belong to the Uniting Church?

Belonging with liberation

Christine: I grew up as an Anglican and if I had stayed within the Anglican tradition, I would not be part of the church anymore, whereas within the Uniting Church I can be authentically me. It gives me light and hope on a Sunday when I go to church and where I feel strongly supported in both my theological journey and understanding of God. It helps me understand things that I never believed I would understand, including what it means to be in community with the CALD and Indigenous and LGBTQI communities. I don't know that I would have had that experience in other places or with other churches.

Vinnie: You said 'authentic you'. Can I just ask you to elaborate that phrase?

Christine: The authentic me says that I don't know many things and the Uniting Church said to me: 'That's OK'. Where I grew up and I said 'I don't know', I was told, well, this is how it is, so this is how you have to believe and I found that very stifling. There was a liberation in the Uniting Church that allowed me to think things, to act on things even though it was against all of those things growing up that I was told I couldn't say, act, or do.

Belonging with identity

Ofa: [The Uniting Church] has allowed me the space to figure out who I am. To give this a context: our congregation (Leigh Fijian Parramatta) is currently celebrating our 30th anniversary this year so we are collecting stories from the congregation on their journey with the Uniting Church and life in general. This is something that has been on my mind for a while. I've struggled a lot with my identity,

growing up, coming from Fiji and relearning how to live in society here and so, with that struggle, the Uniting Church has allowed me a space to figure out my Australianness and my Fijianness hand-in-hand and also helped me along the way with my faith. It's not perfect but it's reassuring that we are constantly making spaces and ways for people who are journeying similarly to me or those going through other journeys to also figure out for themselves no matter what it is.

For me that is very important: when we talk about inclusivity, it is not just the different cultures but also the nuance of the subcultures and the intersections. I feel like it's a responsibility, because I've been able to connect other young people and help them to figure it out in whatever capacity I have. I've been really keen to connect with the Rotumans, to build relationships with them and also with the Tongans and then branch out into the wider CALD community because there are so many of us who do sometimes feel 'siloed' in our own cultures. And when we step out into the wider Uniting Church it's so 'eyes-wide-opening' to be like: 'Oh, there are so many other people out there who are also going through these journeys that we can connect with' and so I find that nurturing as part of the Uniting Church.

Belonging with inclusion

Samata: For me, belonging to the Uniting Church is belonging to an ecumenical body of the Catholic Church. The formation of the Uniting Church was just beginning when I was growing up, at a time when there were three different organisations. Now we are going forward as an ecumenical body. The polity of the Uniting Church is also very inclusive. That's my belonging to the church: it's very ecumenical and includes all people in the Body.

Lillian: I'm from the Sydney Rotuman Uniting Church at Drummoyne. My background is Methodist from Fiji and, having arrived in Sydney in my early 20's, the first thing I looked for was a Methodist Church [Wesley Mission], knowing it was all part of the Uniting Church. It was okay, this is where I'm going to continue my faith journey. Growing up for me here as a young adult, has

actually meant community. Rev. Samata has talked about inclusivity; I acknowledge the parish that we grew up in, all the learnings and teachings from those who have been in our journey as a community of faith in the Rotuman church. Also, the parish encouraged us to learn more about [the] Uniting [Church]. It wasn't easy but that was part of the journey, being inclusive and learning more about what it is to be the Uniting Church.

Vinnie: Lillian, you mentioned that it wasn't easy. Would you like to give us a little more information about that?

Lillian: Certainly. I first joined Wesley Mission. There were different island congregations that were all part of [Wesley]. It was very difficult; there was a lot of conflict around. There was one branch, we decided, 'let's attach ourselves to the Five Dock/Drummoyne Parish'; there was a member in the Rotuman congregation who was part of that [parish]. The difficulty was setting out, starting up, learning. With the difficulty, however, came the encouragement by the local parish and past ministers; they said, you are one of us, let's do things together. They encouraged us to go out and learn. They acknowledged our naivety in this but they included us in all the learnings and teachings. They also helped us understand our culture and the mix with the Uniting Church and again, those learnings are all part of our lived experience and I will always be grateful for that.

Belonging with diversity

Ron: I spent my early years as a Methodist in Australia. Then in my later 20s, I went with Methodist Overseas Missions to work with the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. They themselves had just come into union. I was there for 10 years. Then, just before I came back to Australia, the Uniting Church had begun. I commenced a placement in the Canberra area, in a parish for 10 years and then regional work. Obviously, I brought with me many of my roots but I learnt some new things and I liked some things about the structure of the Uniting Church.

I'm now in retirement in the suburb of Gungahlin and one of the things I notice about it is its multicultural nature: many cultures, refugees and all sorts of different things. I don't know that we are handling it very well, but that's been a rich experience. In earlier days we did a lot of hospitality, enjoyed meeting them, hearing their stories. That to me was the changing face of the church, the changing face of society within that area which is less mono-cultural than it was earlier.

Vinnie: I do think that this is reflective in our church, the multicultural part of it. Let's hear from Tony Floyd.

Belonging with First Nations people and new migrants

Tony: I'm a migrant to this country twice. My folks brought six of us here from Britain in 1959, sponsored by the Methodist Church in Victoria.

This reflected cultural and political attitudes at the time, shaped by the first Federal Parliament [1901], that Australia would be one culture – British and one language – English. My second migration was in 1976 when, having travelled to the USA on a British passport, they changed the rules while I was away and I had to reapply to migrate home. Both these events shaped significantly my ability to connect into migrant *talanoa*. I say it because of two particular experiences.

First – my background was Methodist, my Dad and grandfather were both Methodist local preachers. When I came here, some of the very first friends I made were in January 1961, when my family moved and we were two houses up from a First Nations family. Many years after this, my friend Daryl and I were reminiscing about those years. Daryl said to my wife Shirley (whose father had been a Home Missionary), 'you know, when we moved in, your Mum and Dad came around to see us; they were the first white people that came past our front gate', – 1960. Then he said to me, 'you know, you came trotting through our gate as though it was the most normal thing in the world. I thought we'd gone to heaven', he said.

In addition, we talked about how he and his nine siblings were all

born on the verandah of the hospital at Deniliquin, because black fellas were not allowed inside. His nephew, who is my nephew by marriage, at his grandmother's funeral talked about how he thought it quite ironic that when she was dying, in the last few weeks of her life, she needed palliative care and she received that in the Deniliquin hospital, in a room that had been the maternity ward which looked out on the verandah where her children were required to be born. I couldn't get my head around that because he was my mate! We didn't think of each other as 'pommy bastard', which I got called quite a lot, or 'Aboriginal black fella'; we were just mates.

That conversation [with Daryl] began to raise for me in a very poignant way questions about race, culture and background and assumptions – dominant culture stuff – and realizing that at the time he was talking about [early 1960s], and that I look back on with great joy and delight, they didn't even count. This is pre-inclusion in the Census. And I've watched [Daryl's] siblings – some of whom have gone through the characterised version of urban indigenous – alcohol, prison and so forth. I've watched these two nephews of mine and their sister – one of whom looks upon his uncle's experiences in the 1960s and early 1970s as condescending to the dominant culture; his brother has a very different view about that: he saw Daryl and his brother's and cousins' experience actually as stepping stones on a journey that has changed massively.

And so one of the things I delight in growing up in the Uniting Church is the hesitant, disrupted, fragmented but nonetheless persistent journey to confront our own participation in history but also to listen to – without reframing – the journey and the knowledge and the insights and the spiritual connection of first peoples.

My second experience relates to a congregation where we had English language ministry and Bahasa Indonesian language, two ministries, one congregation. Beginning that journey was significant for me in terms of what we mean by inclusion in the Uniting Church. Part of that was a conversation from the first and second language English speaking members at Camberwell and the Indonesian Bahasa-

speaking members. We were very fortunate: we had members from all three previous traditions [Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational] and they spoke strongly about their journey into Uniting. As I listened and watched, the Indonesian-speaking group sat closer and closer to the edges of their seats. Their body language said they were caught up in this story. When it finished, there was quiet for a while and then one of them said, 'that's our story'. We waited for a while because we knew they didn't come from a Uniting or United Church. What they had picked up on was that the signposts and the struggles and the difficulties and dealing with the traditions you have brought with you, into a [Uniting Church] context where others have brought different traditions – that was the story for them of migration!

That experience opened the door to some very rich conversations that I have been blessed to be part of as a migrant, but with other migrants of different colour, culture and language. Making those kinds of discoveries. Where are the signposts that mark us and shape us? How can we talk about those together in a way that can help us bring the whole of who we are into that space?

Vinnie: *We will now go to Katalina to wrap up this part of the Belonging session.*

Belonging: We still have some way to go

Katalina: Everyone I've heard resonates with all my experiences. The significant point that I would like to highlight is belonging to the Uniting Church means belonging to a church that allows or that gives permission to question. Someone who is very politicised and radicalised like me feels at home in the Uniting Church; that I can question things. However, I also want to say that it is precisely that culture, that permission giving and the fact that we are a church where we can all feel welcomed and belong, that can also risk us becoming complacent. Just because we are so visibly multicultural and diverse doesn't mean that we rest on our laurels. We still have some way to go. And when it comes to our relationship with our first people,

it is an issue where we might feel that we have done a lot. Having established UAICC, signed up to a Covenant in a reconciliation relationship and having the Preamble in the Constitution – these are significant landmarks in our relationship with our First People. But, there is so much still to be done. Being part of a church that welcomes is a wonderful thing but we mustn't allow ourselves to risk thinking that the work is done.

Vinnie: *Malo. I can draw from some of the things that have been said already, the passion that comes across in your contributions. Let us move to the second and third areas of our conversation: what about the passion, the joys, excitements, challenges and sorrow you have experienced growing up in the Uniting Church?*

Passion and challenges: belief and culture in tension

Tupou: I was born in Fiji, baptised a Catholic and then grew up in both Catholic and Methodist Churches. During that time, I struggled on the right path in this faith journey, getting confused between Catholic and Wesleyan/Methodist. That was the part I struggled with until I moved to Australia.

My first time at church [in Sydney] I was expecting more like contemporary worship; I did not know that our church was literally cultural. That Sunday, I sat there and the Fijian hymns came up on the screen. After church, I was expecting my uncle or someone in the family would notice that I was wearing pants but the chance of inclusiveness and giving me that sense of belonging – no one saw or even realised that I was wearing pants. So, that moment I thought, OK, it's fine to wear pants but I'm still Fijian, I need to wear proper attire like a young Fijian woman growing up in church.

The challenges I face now – I don't really struggle with my cultural identity but the majority of the time I struggle with my religious background because I was baptised Catholic growing up in the Wesleyan/Methodist church and coming here as Uniting Church which covers, I think, a little bit of everything when I was growing up.

Glen: When you came to Australia in the Uniting Church, you wore Fijian traditional dress? Is that your experience?

Tupou: In Fiji, we wear traditional dress as well. We call it Sulu where we dress in something to cover our legs but on moving to Australia, we were expecting more westernised, thinking that we could wear whatever we want; but when we walked into church, every lady was wearing the same thing as back in Fiji.

Glen: Would you say it was the same as Australia or is it actually more conservative in Australia?

Tupou: I would say it's the same thing; our culture was observed right back to the Uniting Church.

Glen: And one final question. Did that help you to be an Australian Fijian Christian or is it actually something you want to have a conversation with your elders about?

Tupou: I still feel more like a Fijian, not so much an Australian. With my culture being observed in church, it helps me to maintain who I am and not be lost or fight between 'am I an Australian Fijian or am I a [Fiji] Fijian'?

Passion of new believers

Amelia: I'm serving in a Chinese congregation at the moment, as well as multi-lingual and operating in four languages every week. Three of the languages happen at the same time and the other language happens separately. Amongst the Chinese that I am working with, the longer-term congregation are considerably more conservative than the new believers. And the new believers are open to a very progressive theology. (The longer-term congregation, by the way, is two and a half years old!). The new believers, who I baptise every second or third week, are progressive. What it means to be Uniting in that context is a very broad umbrella.

Passion and challenges in worshipping

Henry: I am from the Parramatta Leigh Fijian congregation. I just

liked that question on joys and challenges. About a week or two ago, we were interviewing one of the elders of the church and he shared some stories of the last ten years. The challenge that he raised was, as you mentioned, the conservative, traditional viewpoint, because every month we young people lead worship and he was against the fact that we were using instruments as part of worship. He said, 'where I come from, traditional Methodist, we only sing, we don't use guitars or piano'. I found that interesting – and I noticed that before we started on every second Sunday of the month, he would sit at the back of the church and I guess we found that a challenge. In interviewing him later, he said, I've come to learn that we are in a different place now and that, though it is hard, he has managed to get over it, that it's a better way of engaging for us young people to use an instrument or two. That is something that gives me great joy – that they understand that the Uniting Church provides a space for young people to voice, unlike the traditional form of our own worship.

Liu: I am an Australian Tongan in the Tonga Parish, second generation, born to migrant parents. I grew up straddling two congregations, the Tonga Parish and Marrickville Uniting Church, Marrickville being multicultural. What was helpful was that my time with my friends in Marrickville Uniting was perhaps one of the most formative experiences – to work, worship and engage with people in my heart, more in English and not so much Tongan. Yet, my parents were able to engage in a worship community in a language that they also understood which was in the Tonga Parish. I appreciated that, growing up in the Marrickville Uniting Church, I was also given space to ask questions.

With Marrickville Uniting and the Tonga Parish, there are different ways of formation with young people. In the Tonga Parish, we do things very much like back home – whether it's Sunday School, learning about Bible verses. When I speak and worship with fellow young [Tonga Parish] members, I would ask them, 'what did you learn from that session' and they would just recite the Bible passage. I would ask, what does that mean to you? And it was hard for them to

articulate it in more of a heart experience rather than what they have just retained by memory. So I think that even in our cross-cultural circles, we need to focus a bit more on not only learning the Bible but how to apply it?

Vinnie: *In the Synod of NSW/ACT, the work for the younger generation has been highlighted. Ofa, would you like to say something about that?*

Passion: The focus of Pulse

Ofa: This is my second year working with Pulse and engaging with what we coined the emerging generations, children, families, young adults. It's been interesting going into some youth groups or congregations and building relationships with them, getting to know them and having people tell us – oh, we don't know how to give talks, which are some sections of youth groups where they talk about faith and the Bible and what it means to them.

The space we are trying to look into now is in some of the events that we do, like Kids Camp Out, which has been an annual thing. We are now developing two camps in September, one for High School 7–11 and an HSC Study Camp for Year 12. In the High School camp, we are looking to make sure there is a lot of content around discipleship and what it means – who are we as young people in the Uniting Church and what does it mean to be part of Christ, Kingdom country? In addition, trying to make sure that discipleship goes from the 'get-go', from when they are kids, because kids take things in, they absorb what they learn in church and they are so sparked. It's just being able to relate to them and allow them to process in their way.

It's important to keep stability as they continue to grow because young people tend to drop off, especially once they transition from high school into adulthood once the judgement comes in with how they start to explore their lives. Maybe they have seen a stump in the subculture or 'that's not Christian', they tend to fall back from that judgement. So it's journeying with them throughout their experience and asking where is God through all of that? Our cycle right now

is making sure we touch base with all of that, from when they are Sunday School, kids, High School, young adult transition and then into the traditional church when 'you're old enough to be an adult'. For us, we've learned that's important and to make sure it is seen through all cultures.

Passion and challenge: The Uniting Mission and Education vision

Glen: We're trying to be both multi-cultural and younger focussed in everything we do. The Pulse team leads the Synod in NSW/ACT with periodically made decisions to prioritise youth and young adults and children's ministry. We are trying to bring in our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse [CALD] communities – and that's not the right language is it – our migrant-ethnic communities and their second and third generation young people, who still have a connection to their children, they still have large groups of young people.

We don't measure them very well in the National Church Life Survey, but when we do measure, we get a sense that my culture – the Anglo-Celtic culture – has privileged the interests of the older generation over the young people. Anytime we speak up in favour of young people, we are sometimes accused of ageism. Yet, five years ago in this Synod, 70% of our membership was over 60 years old and only 8% were between 15 and 30. The Synod has taken some of that seriously; in 2017, the Synod Meeting voted to prioritise ministry and mission to those in the first third of life. We understood that to be not just white people; this is a multi-cultural church, first third-of-life, emerging generations. The Pulse team leads that work but it is expressed in a whole range of other ways. We saw that in Deirdre [Palmer]'s talk, a reference to 'revivify', many cultures, one in Christ – in some ways taking the multicultural gathering but actually building on that, handing it over to the young people and saying 'you do it your way'.

We've had a couple of amazing contemporary gatherings – Asian, Pacific Islander, Anglo working together to run these very contemporary worship occasions. In that space, we realised that we

were not just running an event, but actually setting a paradigm for what the future church needs to look like; that we will need to be planting new churches that are multicultural led. The Church that UME envisages for our future doesn't have one minister. It will have many different shapes but it will have typically three ministers: Asian, Islander, Anglo and there would be every variation on a theme. Furthermore, the Church Council will be a multicultural Church Council. The congregation will not only be Anglos, Asians, Islanders; it will be all of Sydney's diversity.

I say Sydney quite deliberately. In a church that frequently speaks about the bush, right here we have 5 million people living in this city and half of them five years ago had two parents born overseas and the majority of those were born into non-English speaking backgrounds. Most of them don't have a natural church home. There are a couple of fantastic multicultural congregations – yes, just a couple – in the entire Body of Christ in this city. But there is no denomination that actually says, 'this is the future, let's do it'.

We've got many challenges. One: Anglos hold too much power, money and property and we are very happy to have people of colour come in and be tenants in our space. Two: Our first generation immigrants don't really want to give up their culture and their language and their cultural dress and their music. We have to have conversations: how do we honour those things – those traditions are really important, we don't want to lose them, we don't want to lose our identities – at the same time as doing something new that the whole community can benefit from?

One of the signs of hope is in the candidate community here [at the Centre for Ministry, NSW]. We have a third mostly Korean but other Asians, a third of Pacific Islander connection and a third Anglo. When the students organise hospitality, it's a beautiful community, little children running around, tipping over the lounges in the auditorium and playing together. And there's everything – there's gay, there's straight and every colour in community, being the church together. In this space, we create a community that gives us a picture of what the

future church can look like and the candidates experience that as part of their formation programme.

Therefore, I'm quite optimistic about the future of the church if we have the courage to let it happen. If we have the courage to let new instruments come into worship, and if we then have the courage to include that amazingly multicultural community around us. All you have to do is look out the door in Parramatta – how do we actually be the church to them? They are not going to come into a Fijian congregation and they're not going to come into a 70-year-old Anglo congregation, but if you were one of the ministers and you were one of the ministers – [*pointing to two of the younger members of the audience*] – and you were the ministry team in ten years' time, that's the future of the church.

Passion and challenges: the migrant-ethnic community and worship

Samata: I hear the young people and what you [Glen] have said. I want to watch more of what the Methodist Church in Samoa does now. Because they use young people in the church. They present their message in church every Sunday. They dance, they sing and when we hear that, we are thinking – 'they are still conservative'. No, they are not. It is **here** – the people from Samoa, the people from Fiji – they are conservative here in Australia. We still lean on our culture, we respect our culture. But in Samoa, it's changed; the young people dance in church. They make presentations instead of the Sunday School message; the young people come forward and express their message in song and dancing and that's wonderful for me.

Glen: I'm a member of the Australian Association for Mission Studies that kicked off in the year 2000. At the first Conference, we had a paper which actually said that across all cultures, there is a pattern – and across all faiths, not just Christianity – where, when people immigrate to a new culture, they stick at the time when they left. But there's another thing happening: because the church is a place where they can continue their culture, their language in a foreign land, they are more than twice as likely to go to church and to

participate in church than they would be if they stayed [in their home country]. However, their children are half as likely [as their parents] to be involved in church by the time they reach the age when they can make a decision; because they are dealing with all the confusion of being an Australian, English, heart language, at school speaking English, mixing multi-culturally, at church wearing traditional dress – it's a real challenge.

Katalina: It's understandable that [the first migrant] generation feels very threatened and more conservative because their culture in the bubble is much more threatened, it will disappear in the white cultural context. What we need are truly bi-cultural ministry agents and leaders in the church, because it is about relationships of trust. Those first generation people need people who can be bridging the gap, that they can trust to understand where they are, where they come from, to value their cultural identity.

I never diminish or undervalue what those minority ethnic communities have to offer whether it's by rote learning about the biblical texts, because that in the long term provides those kids with safe language that you do not get in white churches for the young people. So, we value those things but if you have the ministry agents and leadership who know how to relate and feel completely at home and are respected in their own communities as well as being able to navigate and negotiate the white culturally-dominant churches, you will have that vision for multi-cultural churches.

It can happen truly in a good way, so that we are not ending up with a multi-cultural church that is just pseudo-honorary palagi [Anglo] churches made up of brown faces. I think that is the next step in our journey. We are talking about our candidates. Many of our Pacific Island ministers are in palagi churches and are not necessarily ministering to their own people. You don't have to be a [Tongan] minister in a Tongan community to be good in the Tongan community and to interact with your community. You don't have to be a Rotuman [minister] in a Rotuman church and to be engaging with the Rotuman community. Yes, we need those ministers to do that but we also need

those ones that are coming through with your [Glen's] understanding as leader of UME to ensure that the candidates are equipped as much as possible to be bi-culturally competent.

Vinnie: *In my reflection this morning during devotion, I actually said that our diversity is a gift of God, also a gift from God and what has been said is exactly what I meant when I made that statement.*

The passion and challenge of new converts

Amelia: I want to bring another perspective. Almost all of the migrants in my Asian community [in Eastwood, Sydney] are first generation migrants so their story is a little different. They don't have a church to look back to [in their home country] They have the discovery church here so they have a new evangelism and belief experience which can become fixed in a six-month period. Once that fix has happened, it's hard to move beyond. Yet, there is a passion for evangelism that is extraordinary.

So, there's quite different issues and, bi-culturally, the challenge is that to become Christian most of these people have rejected their culture. To try to help them to reconnect with things of value within the culture, I use the preamble to our constitution as a way of saying, God was revealing Godself before you discovered how to articulate the gospel in your particular way. God was already creative, already loving, already revealing Godself. That is a new concept for many new believers, coming out of a different milieu. Therefore, that's a big challenge but it is a slightly different perspective because a lot of the conversation assumes that migrant communities are coming from a Christian background; mine are not.

Glen: In the Agape Indonesian congregation – in Wesley Mission – and in the mainland Chinese congregation, also in Wesley, quite a large percentage are not Christian, so they come to Australia and they are looking for a place to have their culture, language and connections. They join a church as a place to do that and a significant number of them come to faith. The current minister of the Wesley Mandarin-

speaking congregation came to faith in Australia as a student and went to church as a place to get cultural support and now he's the minister leading that.

Andrew: Can I just ask Amelia one question? You said most have rejected their culture. Now, among the Pacific communities, they are trying to preserve a good part of their culture, it's important for them. Can you just elaborate what you mean, when you say that they have rejected their culture?

Amelia: As many people here would understand, the culture is not just about art, food and those kinds of things. It's also about kinship, family relationships, and role responsibilities within the community. In my own personal experience, I was disowned for becoming a Christian. I was cast out from my family for becoming a Christian. I was not able to carry my Chinese family name anymore. In Chinese congregations, we have many people who have been cast out or exiled from their family for taking the faith – both from diaspora Chinese (Buddhist, Taoist, Confucanist) communities, where if you become a Christian you can no longer hold responsibilities for caring for your ancestors, or in mainland Chinese communities, where if you become Christian you can no longer be a member of the Communist Party. You've been cast out by the culture because you have brought shame on your family. So, when people in my community want to hold Moon Festival and other ceremonies important to the Chinese, we do that but we have to re-examine what those cultural norms will mean for us, because they cannot mean what they have meant before.

Vinnie: *Thank you. Friends. One area that I really haven't asked any questions about but I know it is a grey area for many of our minority communities in the church is about governance and church processes and the administrative part of our church.*

Challenges: governance

Andrew: On governance, to all the young people here, Church Councils have a critical role in the Church, important for administration but also accountability. As Glen has said, the focus in the Uniting Church

now is on the first third of life so we will be hoping that young people will join our Church Councils, committees and presbyteries.

Katalina: It's true, process and administration are really important. However, we do also have ways of teaching. We have *Living Our Values* as well which includes the responsibilities of Church Councils. It's good to be present on Church Councils, to learn in practice but we can also do courses.

The other thing I want to say and this is to do with the issue of ageism. We don't have enough competent non-white people with the vast experience of church and administration. Sometimes, we are further marginalised because the white church seems to think we should focus on young people. The average age of the white church is over 60. Minority ethnic groups don't have enough experience; we are always playing catch-up. You [Anglos] need to recognise that and not leave us out in the cold; we still have things to offer, not just in the wider church but also for our younger people, in their formation, in building this church.

Samata: I think there are some white people that are very dominant. They don't give a chance to anybody; they dominate the whole Council.

Lillian: I think the challenge is where Presbytery thinks they know a congregation. They think they know better, where they don't actually know the uniqueness of a congregation and we are actually being dictated to – 'this is what we think you should know'. After all our learnings and teachings growing up, to me that is very challenging and we are pushed aside because we are aged. We came as the young and have grown and when they say they want the young ones, who better to learn from than people with lived experience, wanting to help.

Vinnie: *Thank you all very much for this valuable Talanoa session.*

[Samata closed with prayer].

Endnotes

1 J. Havea, *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018), 2.

2 T. Vaioleti, '*Talanoa* research methodology: A developing position on Pacific research', *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12, 2006, 21–34.

3 The other participants were (in order of first names): Rev Dr. Amelia Koh Butler (Minister, Eastwood Uniting Church); Anare (Henry) Seru (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Dr. Andrew Thornley (Sydney Presbytery and Member of the Conference Organizing Committee); Christine Gordon (Archivist, National Assembly UCA); Glen Powell (Executive Director, Uniting Mission and Education); Isaiah Vakabua (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Joshua Toa (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Julia Foiakau (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Rev. Dr Katalina Tahaafe–Williams (Minister, Nightcliff, NT and former NSW–ACT Multicultural Consultant); Lillian Pene (Drummoyne Rotuman Congregation); Liuanga Palu (Sydney Presbytery Multicultural Officer and Uniting Mission and Education Mission-shaped Ministry Project Officer); Mereseini Vocea (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Milise (Ofa) Foiakau (Pulse Field Officer, Uniting Mission and Education); Rev. Samata Elia (Retired UCA minister); Rev. Dr Tony Floyd (Retired UCA minister and former Director of Assembly Multicultural Ministry); Tupou Kamotu (Youth, Parramatta Mission); Rev. Viniana (Vinnie) Ravetali (Senior Chaplain, MLC School and Chair of Sydney Presbytery); Rev. Dr William Emilsen (Retired UCA minister, Lecturer and Chair of the Conference planning committee).

13

Growing Up Uniting: Negotiating the margins

Katalina Tahaafe-Williams

This paper hopes to spark conversations about the ways in which the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has evolved in its journey of over four decades, highlighting key historical developments since 1977 that have informed and shaped the Uniting experience. It seeks to share some insights as to what it means to grow up Uniting from specific socio-cultural locations. The paper is framed as a dialogue between voices from the margins and key aspirations of the UCA implicit in its *Basis of Union* (*BOU*).

For some, growing up Uniting has been a mixture of blessings and challenges and involved the constant and ongoing negotiation of marginal spaces and perspectives. The Uniting journey, or what I call the 'Uniting experiment', has been challenged and enriched by gender, racial-ethnic, class, and generational concerns. It has also been rich with negotiations around doctrine, theology, mission, discipleship, human sexuality, and ecumenism.

Davis McCaughey and Andrew Dutney's commentaries on the *Basis of Union* in the early years of the Church inspired an imagining of the world of the *BOU*. They were a reminder of the awesome vision and courage of the three denominations that led them into union. It therefore makes great sense to articulate marginal perspectives on growing up Uniting in the context of the *Basis of Union*, though underlined by a healthy mixture of celebration and critique. On a more celebratory note, there is no hesitation in recognising the Spirit-inspired manifesto that is the *BOU*, which has guided the life and witness of the UCA for over four decades and has seen the achievement

of key aspirations over that period. It is worth celebrating the fact that the *BOU* continues to be relevant as a guiding document for our journey as a pilgrim people on the way to the promised goal, albeit mindful that there are still gaps that leave some of us negotiating in marginal spaces.

It is rather surreal that I should stand here in this space, the Centre for Ministry at North Parramatta, to speak about growing up Uniting and negotiating marginal spaces. This is a space that features prominently in my growing up Uniting; a space that hitherto was a comfort zone but now, following a six-year period of absence (away working with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva), feels alien to me and makes me somewhat an outsider. The dynamics of negotiating space and perspectives is at play in quite unexpected ways.

The story of my Uniting experience began a few suburbs down the road from here – in Auburn where the biggest and oldest Tongan Uniting Church was founded by my parents' generation in the early 80s. My home congregation was Harold Wood on Helena St (with sister congregations of Rodger Page on Parramatta Road and Tilba Street in Berala). An integral part of my growing up Uniting experience was being exposed as a young person to the cross-cultural relationship of mutual respect between Tongan elders and the Anglo leadership in that community as they negotiated how we could be a bicultural church in that space. That very positive experience really set me on the path to multicultural mission and ministry.

I claim to be a product of the 'Uniting experiment' given my experience of having been informed and nurtured in my faith journey as a young person within the first two decades of union by visionary UCA ministers (namely Carol Morris and the late John Butson) and faithful dedicated church elders in what was then known as the Auburn Parish. They ensured that my peers and I were spiritually nourished. The community leaders and elders steered our faith journeys through UCA formative youth programs such as the National Christian Youth Conventions (NCYC), About Face, and Why Me. Through the

mentorship of those ministers and lay leaders, the support of Anglo and Tongan elders in that community, I learned the fundamental nature and identity of the UCA as a church that is called into being by God through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 4). I discovered that being church for the UCA means that in everything we do, whether gathering for worship, studying the Bible, dealing with property and finance matters, or sharing a meal together, it is Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit who gathers us and meets with us personally in all these activities. That experience also helped me understand the seriousness with which the UCA strives to be a sign and instrument of the reconciliation and renewal for the whole creation as its ultimate calling (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 3).

Growing up Uniting in the Auburn Parish was instrumental not only in setting me on my pathway to multicultural mission and ministry but also in launching me into active participation in wider UCA spaces. Whether they were youth spaces, multicultural ministry spaces, or governance spaces, entering those places as a young lay minority ethnic female meant instant negotiations of marginal spaces and perspectives. Sitting on governance bodies such as the Assembly and New South Wales Synod Standing Committees often meant being the lone brown face in a sea of white faces – mostly male. While not necessarily novel given they were common experiences in classrooms throughout my schooling life, it was still unsettling in the church where grace-filled spaces lit by Christ's love and warmed by God's justice should be the norm.

Negotiating marginal spaces and perspectives fundamentally means breaking boundaries and barriers. Margins and marginal spaces are defined as ungodly and unnatural places and spaces in which the 'other' is forced to exist, excluded, and denied their human dignity and justice.[1] Nevertheless, in those ungodly places and spaces the marginalised are doing God's mission, utilising their agency and meagre resources to transform power structures so that all may live lives of dignity and justice.

The intimidating pressure of breaking barriers, of negotiating marginal spaces as a young minority ethnic lay female, was not a deterrent which was probably due to a mixture of youthful boldness and socio-political radicalisation borne of my university exposure to ideological activism. Undoubtedly, my self-assurance was grounded in and shaped by my Uniting experiences in the local Auburn Parish, with great mentoring and support by clergy and elders alike. My academic love affair with world philosophies and law at university, and my global ecumenical youth involvement, particularly with the WCC, also gave me valuable tools for barrier-breaking negotiations.

Certainly, in those UCA spaces, I had little access to diverse leadership models. Fortunately, I could not have asked for more enlightened, capable, inclusive and open-minded Anglo leadership models at the time, who continued the high calibre of leadership characteristic of the UCA since its inauguration in 1977. Leaders in both the Assembly and the Synods of the calibre of Dr Jill Tabart, Rev. Gregor Henderson, Rev. Dr Dean Drayton, Rev. John Brown, Rev. John Mavor, Rev. Shirley Maddox and Rev. Margaret Reeson inspired and emboldened me with courage to challenge exclusive barriers wherever I found them. Today in the UCA there is more visible diversity in our church leadership, in our committees and meetings, but in those days, I was often the only minority ethnic presence and voice in those spaces.

To be sure, key aspirations implicit in the *BOU*, and stated in the inaugural *Statement to the Nation*, have been either realised or further developed over these four decades for the enrichment of the Uniting experience. In the 2016 Census the UCA is the third largest church in Australia behind the Roman Catholics and Anglicans. We still possess strong Christian unity impulses evident in the national dialogues we have had over the years with several other denominations, most notably with the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and Church of Christ (Discipleship). Our presence as a key player in the ecumenical scene and as a partner in mission in Asia and the Pacific is stronger and more visible. Our multicultural commitment and journey

have contributed to a more visibly diverse church in the twenty-first century. The establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) in the 80s, our subsequent covenanting and reconciliation commitment in the 90s, the new preamble to our constitution, and our Frontier Services in remote communities reflect our strong commitment to walking alongside the First Peoples of Australia. Working together for their freedom, justice and peace are outstanding achievements to be proud of.

Moreover, our commitment to service and to serving the disadvantaged in our society is evident in 'Uniting' which is one of the biggest community services in the country, employing almost 100,000 Australians. Our commitment to conciliarity in our largely Presbyterian polity has helped facilitate our move to consensus decision making in the 90s, which has since been adopted by several other denominations around the world, including the WCC and other global ecumenical and mission bodies. We pioneered interfaith relations and dialogue in Australia, and we have done relatively well with gender equality. The fact that we have been ordaining women for years and that we have a Uniting Women's National Conference which celebrates women's gifts in ministry and leadership in the church is a testimony to our commitment to gender equality.

The UCA has always encouraged youth participation and leadership and that continues to be the case. Valuing youth, however, does not mean rendering older folks irrelevant. Sadly, the UCA still has some way to go in understanding the dynamics and complexities of multicultural inclusion and racial justice. A balanced approach that values intergenerational cooperation and mutual respect is urgent and necessary. The sexuality issue has haunted the UCA for almost three decades. Although its current position of leaving the decision on suitability of ministry to local councils remains contentious (Resolution.84), it is at least a 'pause' much needed by the whole church.

I suspect that negotiating marginal spaces and perspectives in the UCA is an ongoing task for some of us in our effort to be true to the

BOU, if we are to remain fully aware that there are gaps that need continuing negotiation to ensure the inclusion of the marginalised and the voiceless. The face of the UCA has certainly changed over the past four decades. It now seems to better reflect the diversity of God's creation – specifically in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and generations. It is inevitable that there will always be gaps and we need to address them for the sake of future generations growing up Uniting. Some of these gaps include mental health, disability, environmental sustainability, and climate justice. Gaps that require urgent attention include the continuing injustices faced by the Aboriginal peoples of this country. In over four decades, Aboriginal leadership in the UCA has been almost non-existent. Their socio-economic situation has grown worse over the past twenty years. Incarceration rates and deaths in custody continue to rise, and there is no political will to seriously address the issues of sovereignty and treaty Aboriginal Elders have prioritised in the *Statement from the Heart*. This is unacceptable!

The progress made in the multicultural agenda both in the church and society starkly contrasts the heinous reality the First Peoples of Australia continue to suffer. It would seem that the UCA's commitment to covenant and reconciliation with the First Peoples is still not enough. As a UCA leader in multicultural mission and ministry, I am uncompromising in my view that the multicultural agenda should take a back seat to the work on justice for First Australians. During the debates over the new preamble to the constitution I wrote an article, published in *Uniting Church Studies*, making that position clear. We need to understand that when we talk about a multicultural church, we are not to presume that First Peoples are part of that equation. Aboriginals are not just another minority ethnic group in Australia. They are the First Peoples of this land now called Australia and it is offensive and disrespectful to lump them in with the newly arrived multicultural communities. As recent migrants, we must recognise our complicity in the Aboriginal peoples' ongoing struggles for sovereignty, freedom and autonomy in their own country. Negotiating

indigenous spaces and perspectives requires more of later-arrivals to participate, and I believe that 'more' is implicit in the vision and aspirations of the *Basis of Union*. We all need to take seriously the fact that the healing of the whole nation is inextricably tied up with justice for its First Peoples.

I believe our *Basis of Union* continues to call us out of our complacency, energising us for the work that we still need to do. As a foundational vision and statement, the Basis was created at a particular time and space. But it was a forward-looking document that was not designed to bind us to those former ways and norms. Rather, the Basis is a profound reminder of the faithfulness of ordinary Christians to the call of Christ at a particular time and place, and it encourages us to seek to be faithful in our own time and place. As Andrew Dutney puts it, our UCA journey has been a spirit-led adventure of faith and today we are encouraged that Christ still calls us onward if we have the courage to continue[2] – minding gaps and all!

I thank God that my experience of growing up Uniting had been guided by the witness of ordinary faithful Christians through the inspired values and principles espoused in our *Basis of Union*. My prayer is that in the journey ahead the UCA will boldly witness in prophetic barrier-breaking ways so that it is ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 11) – for the sake of the next generation growing up Uniting.

Endnotes

1 The WCC Global Ecumenical Indigenous Network met with me in Bolivia in 2018 and drafted a Theological Statement on Mission from the Margins which defined marginal spaces in these terms.

2 A. Dutney, *Where did the joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union*, (Melbourne: Uniting Press, 2001), 37.

14

Growing Up and Growing Young: The ministry of a stained-glass millennial

Richard La'Brooy

Why stay? Why now?

Why buy stock in a dying organisation?

As a Stained-Glass Millennial it's a question I have wrestled with for many years.

I have spent my entire life in the Uniting Church surrounded by stained-glass. I was born into a traditional, suburban congregation in northern Sydney and have been part of that community my whole life. I was always going to be part of the Uniting Church. In fact my mother organised the date of my baptism with the minister of the congregation before I was born! I was always going to be in. In that congregation I was nurtured and supported; those people became like a second family to me. I was shaped by traditional forms of liturgy and developed a love of traditional worship practices, including the glories of organ church music.

Throughout my schooling, I was once again surrounded by stained-glass. I attended a Uniting Church school where the chapel has some of the most glorious stained-glass windows I have ever seen. There my faith was again formed and shaped through my connection with chaplaincy programs. As part of a largely traditional, private boys' school I continued to see the value of tradition and heritage. The connection that that school had to history and faith shaped me and my experiences. Through participation in the chapel choir, I was exposed to traditional choral music and structured forms of liturgy.

And in my current ministry context, I continue to be surrounded by stained-glass. I'm the Chaplain at another Uniting Church school which is again founded on principles of faith and embedded in tradition. The traditions and history of this school shape the way it operates today. Faith, and the chapel, continue to be central to the functioning of the College; largely due to the inheritance of faithful witness over many generations.

I am a Stained-Glass Millennial

Stained-Glass Millennial is a term I have adopted from a book by Rev. Rob Lee of the same name. Lee defines this group of people as 'those born between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s who have chosen to stay in the institutional church.'[1] In his book he explores the needs of millennials in the institutional church and engages with case studies of various millennials who have chosen to minister in the traditional church. I consider myself and many of my friends and colleagues as stained-glass millennials. Those people who choose to stay who willingly 'buy stock in a dying organisation' and pursue a calling that many millennials have given up.[2]

Yet it's a place I continue to wrestle with. I find I am often frustrated by our Church's inertia when we look towards the future. We talk about needing to change, to grow, to focus on young people, to do new forms of ministry. Yet the practice is often something very different. We cling onto the old and the familiar for fear of the new. We tell ourselves we need to change in order to live, yet hold tight to practices that mean we will die.

It leads me, and many others, to question why I stay. What future is there going to be for me to minister in if we pursue these same, tired forms of operating? Yet, try as I might, I cannot leave. I remain deeply rooted to this thing we call the Uniting Church. Lee suggests, and I resonate with his assertions, that we are people of the resurrection and trust in the 'promise of Pentecost'[3] that the Spirit will renew and sustain God's Church. Or to put it another way, in the words of our *Basis of Union*,

> God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole.[4]

What a beautiful image our founders had for our Church. Yet I wonder how well we are living that out, 44 years after Union. For many millennials the experience has been very different. In many ways we as a church have failed to live out our goal where the diverse gifts of members, particularly young members, are used for the building up of the whole.

I've been involved in the work of the wider Uniting Church since I left school and all that time I've heard 'what do the young people think'. I've heard many conversations and discussions about, and with, young people. I've been a young person so long that I'm starting to feel really old. And now there's a group of us millennials who don't neatly fit in the 'young adult' category, because we're too old, but by Uniting Church standards we're still young. Many of us are engaged in full time ministry and bring a wealth of experience to the table, yet we're considered too young to be truly involved.

It can be very disheartening to hear the questions in the Uniting Church of 'where are the young people' when myself and many others are sitting in the room and have been for a long time. Often the Church has forgotten the active presence of millennials in ministry when they wrestle with these questions. I can think of instances where I've sat in consultations at large Church meetings about ministry to young people and those around the table have come up with solutions yet never thought to ask myself and other millennials at the table what we thought. Just recently I was in a Church meeting where we were debating a proposal in which I was intimately involved, yet my presence was completely ignored due to my age.

In many ways I don't think we as the Uniting Church have got it right. We have either ignored the voice of young people or included them in our meetings to meet a quota without guiding them. We have often put young people into lay ministries because we sense a gift, but

we have not supported them in their work, leaving them to flounder and burn out. We have trained millennials for specified ministry but after their training is finished we forget to support them. I should hasten to add that my own ministry journey has been supported by many people and in most cases I have felt empowered far beyond my years. I have been given opportunities and experiences that many would dream of, and I have been trusted in some very important roles. I know this is the experience of many others across our Uniting Church and for that I feel blessed. But there is more to do.

Stained-Glass Millennials influencing church processes

Lee premises his book in a way that is helpful in understanding how the Church might support millennials in ministry into the future,

> 'It is my prayer that millennials will no longer be the subject of church consulting firms or focus groups but instead be included in the beautiful tapestry of the institutional church. May we no longer be test subjects or remedies for a dying church but instead an integral part of the kingdom of God.'[5]

I don't want to take away from any of the truly wonderful things that so many across our Church have done to empower young people. It is valuable and important. But now there is more to do if we truly want to be a growing and growing young Church. I wonder how many times we in the Uniting Church have run consultations or forums to hear the voices of younger members. We've listened to them and heard their concerns. But so often, it stops there. It becomes another report or another document that we heartily endorse at a synod or Assembly meeting that then gets filed away and never acted upon. This is when young people begin to feel disheartened. The joy and sense of value they felt when being consulted turns to sadness when they see nothing is being acted upon.

This call to be, as Lee puts it, 'an integral part of the kingdom of God'[6] was recently seen in the 'Open Letter to the Nominating Committee for NSW/ACT Moderator, and the people of the Synod' signed by 44 members and ministry practitioners in the NSW/ACT Synod, myself included. In that open letter the Nominating Committee were asked to bring nominations that were,

1. ‘At least 50 percent are Indigenous or come from CALD backgrounds; and
2. At least 75 percent of candidates are under 40 years old if male/ under 50 years old if female. (The age discrepancy here seeks to acknowledge the reality that parenting tends to disrupt the work lives of women more than men).’[7]

The intention of this letter was to also create a conversation around leadership in the Church and to challenge the Church to take seriously its commitment to Grow Young. It also called the Church to wrestle with the possible leadership of millennials in the Church and the role millennials might have in shaping the Church into the future. Using references to Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:21–24 as well as Paragraph 15 of the *Basis of Union*, the letter suggested that if ‘we affirm that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are found throughout the body, we are foolish to close our eyes (and our ballots) to the gifts of leadership the Spirit will offer the Church through younger, Indigenous, and CALD people.’[8] The letter was an articulation of what many Stained-Glass Millennials across the life of the Uniting Church have been feeling for a long time.

The letter was received with warmth by many across the life of the Synod, and in the wider national Church, and the Nominating Committee were considerate of the letter in its discernment process. However, many in the life of the Church felt offended by the premise of the letter and the assertion that leadership should come from the millennial generation. For many from the generation above, commonly called Generation X, they were offended by the premise that they would be passed over for leadership. Having waited for the Boomer generation to pass on leadership to them, they felt that it was now not fair to be passed over for the millennial generation.

The sad reality is that for leadership to be held by millennials, the consequence is that those of the generation above will miss out. The Open Letter acknowledged that fact. ‘This requires some sacrifice on the part of those who look like the leadership we are used to – white, male, older – to stop talking, step aside, and create space for others to

step forward.'[9] This does not mean that the role of older generations becomes redundant. In fact, the opposite is true, we need elders and wise counsellors more than ever. But in order to truly grow young and empower millennials in leadership and ministry, change must happen.

Growing Young is a concept that has entered into our Church parlance over recent years. It comes from a large body of work done by the Fuller Youth Institute in the United States called the 'Growing Young Project'. Through a comprehensive study of youth ministry in the US they have developed fundamental strategies to allow churches to reorientate their ministry so that they may 'grow young'.

But before I come to some key strategies of the Growing Young project, I want to look at ministry to young people more broadly. For many, this area of ministry is so foreign. We look at our traditional, stained-glass churches and wonder how we might reach young people and be relevant to new generations. The sense of pain and loss is real, particularly when we think back to what it looked like in previous generations.

We naively assume that in order to save our seemingly dying Church the solution is to hire a youth worker or start a hip, contemporary worship service. We run discussion groups or Bible studies to instruct young people on how to believe and what to believe. We tell ourselves that these actions will attract the kids and that will stave off the death knells of the Church. The problem is that that is only plugging a hole in a drain when in reality our issues are much deeper, we are in completely new waters.[10]

Young people and relationships

Young people today are one of the first generations to have no grounding in faith. Previously, even if your family didn't attend Church, you at least knew the fundamentals of Christianity. Yet today it is very different. Many young people have no touch points to faith, which makes our role as churches that much harder. This is something that I've come to understand in my work as a School Chaplain.

The 2000 young people that I minister to largely encounter faith because they have to. They go to Chapel because it is a compulsory part of their timetable and it's part of the ethos of the school. Yet, most of them don't understand Christianity, and many don't want to be there. That creates a vastly different paradigm to work within. Programmatic solutions don't work and so we must come back to relationships.

Andrew Root explores this more deeply in his recent book, *The End of Youth Ministry*, where he suggests 'youth ministry is for helping young people live a good life; youth ministry is to help young people flourish'.[11] The consequence of this understanding is that programs become unimportant, but relationships become prioritised. Youth ministry therefore becomes about helping young people to find joy in their life and therefore shape a flourishing life. 'A flourishing life is not a happy one but a joyful one, filled with words and acts of thanks'.[12]

The greatest gift we as Christians can offer is a relationship with a God who loves you unconditionally, who walks beside you and supports you. And as a Church, we can embody that love by showing genuine care and support for all people, particularly young people. By embodying that love we show the incarnational love of God to help young people live a flourishing, joy filled life.

This generation of young people are some of the most socially isolated people in society. Ironically, because of the prevalent connections that young people have online through social media they have become more disconnected in real life. Many young people have a handful of close personal friends, yet have hundreds of 'friends' on Facebook or 'followers' on Instagram. The so-called social connections of social media have meant that young people have lost personal, real-life relationships. This is even more prominent in relationships between young people and older generations.

The Church is in a unique place to combat some of this social isolation. By being people who show, not tell, God's embracing love, we work to combat this issue. If we modelled the all-embracing love

of God by being people who walked beside young people, supported them and upheld them in prayer and love then we might move them towards understanding what it means to be in relationship with the living Jesus.

As Christians we are called to model what Jesus' ministry looks like, and that ministry looks like relationships with each other. Some of Jesus' most powerful acts of ministry were not done by talking but rather by acting. By sitting next to the woman at the well or healing the leper, Jesus was ministering more radically than any sermon. Youth ministry should, therefore, be orientated in the same way towards relationships, rather than programs or teaching points.

By taking an active interest in young people's lives we would be combating some of the social isolation and disconnect that young people feel. Churches can, and should, be places where young people feel loved and supported. Churches should be places where young people are known; not just their name and what year they are in at school but a deeper understanding of what they like and dislike, what motivates them and what they hope for. If young people feel they are loved and supported, they are more likely to come and stay.

In a practical sense, the Fuller Youth Institute in *Growing Young* describes this as flipping the 5:1 ratio. Instead of the traditional child protection best practice of five children to one adult, imagine what it would look like if we had five adults for one young person. These five adults would know and support that one young person and would, in turn, create a 'greenhouse of formation… a rich warm ecosystem of discipleship for each young person within their church's influence'.[14] This is how we can be the agents through which young people experience the personhood of Christ. By being people who seek warm relationships with young people, we show that we do this because of a living God who calls us towards a warm relationship.

In my work in Schools Ministry this is what I have found most successful. By purely showing up - at music concerts, on the sidelines of their rugby games, in the playground - my students know that I care. They know that I know them, more than just their name but

also know their stories. I have come to regard this as a 'ministry of presence', just turning up to things and being around so that the students come to know you better. In doing this, I'm showing God's love for them. I'm trying to do what Jesus did and enter into a caring relationship with those to whom I'm entrusted to minister.

Our schools are one of the largest concentrations of young people that are in some way associated with the Uniting Church. In the Synod of NSW & ACT alone there are close to 10,000 children and young people in our Uniting Church schools. Yet, whether consciously or unconsciously, we have allowed the relationship between our schools and the Church to drift. Now, of course, we can not and should not consider them members of our Church in the same way that young people in our congregations would be. However, in some form or another, these young people are associated with the Uniting Church. What would it mean if we were to consider our schools as a mission field of the wider Uniting Church and took steps to actively engage them in the ministry and mission of the Church?

I think the greatest impact we can make in ministry in our Uniting Church schools is to come back to the concept of relationship. Again, it is not about teaching and preaching, although those are important. It is about being people who seek positive relationships with young people and, through that, show the love of God. Chaplains in these schools are often the 'God person' among a plethora of different voices. It is therefore important that the 'God message' that comes from these people speaks about the relational love of God.

The 'Growing Young' strategies

The 5:1 ratio which is predicated on relational ministry is one strategy that the Fuller Youth Institute names as part of Growing Young. Another key is 'Prioritising Young People Everywhere'. That means thinking how each decision the Church makes, at whatever level, affects the lives of young people. It means having young people at the forefront in decision making and in actions. We see a tangible example of this in our CALD communities where they have

straddled the divide between traditional, cultural forms of worship and worshiping in English for their young members. Prioritising young people everywhere doesn't mean doing things that we think are attractive to young people. It means genuinely thinking through how an action or decision will affect young people before you do it.

As our presbyteries, Synod and Assembly wrestle with the question of the future and face uncertainties about what lies ahead, this strategy becomes vitally important. As we develop strategic plans and plan for growth, we should be asking ourselves, do these plans 'prioritise young people everywhere.' And if they don't, then growth won't be possible. This doesn't mean we allocate money to a youth ministry budget. This means reorienting everything we do to the question of how this might support young people. It 'means giving up preferences or shifting what in the past may have been considered non-negotiable.'[15] This is a difficult and painful shift, but is necessary in order to grow young, and to simply grow.

Another key strategy that's part of the Growing Young project is 'Keychain Leadership', giving the keys over to young people in order to let them flourish. The Fuller Youth Institute astutely observes that 'whoever holds the keys has the power to let people in or keep people out'.[16] What would it look like if we were intentional about entrusting and empowering all generations, with their own set of keys?[17] In a real sense this means handing over the keys to young people in whom you see the potential, not just loaning them to them but giving them over to them to put on their own keychain. It means letting their leadership flourish by giving them the keys to the building, real or metaphorical. One practical manifestation of this could be seeing our councils of the Church, presbyteries, synods or the Assembly, led by people born in the Uniting Church rather than in our predecessor churches.

We have seen some recent examples of this with the election of the President and Moderators in some synods, but more must be done. We won't get leaders in the bigger tiers of the Church if we don't support them in the more local manifestations, in congregations and presbyteries. Keychain Leadership can, and should, be implemented

at a local level. Willingly letting young people into governance and decision making at this level can help grow them into leadership at other levels of the Church. Yet the sad reality is that it's at these levels that we see the most stubborn resistance to hand over the keys. Too often leaders in local churches and presbyteries hold onto the keys for decades, determined not to hand them over. But in order to grow young these keys must be willingly given over to younger generations, with the knowledge that the consequence is change.

Growing Young is difficult, and is painful, but is also renewing and hopeful. If we as a Uniting Church genuinely wish to shape a vibrant future, and live into the hope that our founders at Union had, then we have to be willing to grow young. Only then can we hope to build a rich future for this movement we call the Uniting Church.

Closing words: It's time to act

My experience as a Stained-Glass Millennial is one of many. So many of my friends and colleagues have struggled with their place in the institutional church. We have denied it, fought against it, but in the end we find ourselves too deeply rooted to it to give it up. For me, as a Stained-Glass Millennial I want to be here. I am deeply passionate about this thing we call the Uniting Church. I want to live out that hope which our founders envisaged over 40 years ago and build it to be something more special for the future. I've tried to get out, but the pull is too great. Our denomination is something special. But I want to be here in 30 years' time too and I worry what ministry might look like then if we don't do something about it now. I've grown up Uniting, I've been part of this Church since the day I was born. It's now time for the Church to grow young so that we might offer something for generations to come.

Endnotes

1 R. Lee, *Stained-Glass Millennials* (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2016), 2.

2 Ibid., 15.

3 Ibid., 10.

4 Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union*, 1992 Edition, Paragraph 3.

5 Lee, *Stained-Glass Millennials*, 11.

6 Ibid.

7 'Open Letter: Support Young People', *Insights*, 31 March 2021, https://www.insights.uca.org.au/imagine-a-church-that-took-its-commitment-to-young-people-seriously-enough-to-ask-young-people-to-lead-us/

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 A. Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 99.

11 A. Root, *The End of Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 8.

12 Ibid., 212-213.

13 K. Powell, J. Mulder and B. Griffin, *Growing Young* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 181.

14 Ibid., 182.

15 Ibid., 199.

16 Ibid., 53.

17 Ibid.

15

Growing Up Uniting: My formative years

Clive Jackson

Why is talking about one's formative years in the church important? I will discuss the value I find in taking the time to recall my formative years. It is important for my going forward, to make connections with what those formative influences did for me. And what were those more subtle influences of the church? It's important because I think it reconnects you with your personal spiritual motivation. It connects you with your journey. It helps you think about the now. It may even offer a framework for you for your next project going forward.

It is important to consider and compare what formative influences the church is offering now. What is the church educating its members and adherents about today? How is the Uniting Church continuing to reach young people through worship, youth ministry programs, and to children through Christian Education and Sunday Schools with Christian values and ethics? How is the Church discussing its policies and practices with adults?

So what positive influences does the Uniting Church give today? As an introduction, the Uniting Church is unique among Australian churches, by having the richest and most diverse heritage. It is the amalgamation of three previous denominations. The Church can tell about how it stands for freedom of worship, openness in expression, enquiring theology and insightful teaching that tolerates questioning. In fact, our founders were among those who stood for a secular society, and defended the freedom of religious belief, and the freedom not to believe.

It is important that we think about Australian society today. Where

most children seem to have no contact with, or access to a church, what then are the major influences on children and young people?

To consider the context of the community landscape, I note significant influences on most children today include sports on Sunday (having competitive and even aggressive role modelling); mobile phone games (offering 'mindless' entertainment or worse); closed Sunday Schools; churches too distant for children to walk to; Sunday as a workday and shopping day or Sunday as a home chores day. It's not the kids fault, and not even the parents' fault either. Nor is it the fault of local churches. They are just branches of the national and state body. The competition for peoples' time and attention turns on what is offered and whether people know about it (read – publicity and media). It's the church's leaders that need to convince the public that their church has values that people want to support. It is they that need to persuade people to lend it their support, time and membership.

So what of my growing up? I was a Congregationalist. From a very young age I attended a Sunday School, and this was followed by adult worship. I was aware of its 'inclusive of all' message. There was a clear multi-racial acceptance. I recall the children's chorus: 'Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world.' In every church, for all to see, there was a framed print on the church wall depicting Jesus surrounded by children of different cultural backgrounds. My point is also that Sunday Schools were where messages, more than just Bible stories, were given.

As a child, Sunday School was conducted in the hall before worship, and the children were led in for the first part of the service. As my mother was a member of the congregation, I had to sit through the rest of the service too. I learned all the Bible stories, and knew that the *preaching was Biblically-based*. As I grew a little older, I noticed that *women and men were treated equally*. Women were in leadership roles and were active in church meetings.[1] Women often formed a majority. It only was years later that I found out that this was not the norm for women across all churches. As a teenager, I

became aware of the church's *acceptance of science*. There wasn't a conflict here with science. It seemed to me that the church was teaching that science reveals more about what God has created. It was subtle teaching. It made an impact.

Another matter that was also subtle, and it's taken time for me to realise this, is the challenge made by the church for its members to *aspire to leadership*. If you needed to participate in the church meeting, you got practice in your speaking skills, and you got to present ideas. You may also have been invited to lead an activity. Beyond this, the church encouraged every member to be their best in whatever field of work and life that they were active in. Being your best included being a leader. Leadership was not reserved for ministers of the Word alone. Being a Christian and being in the leadership of any 'worldly' field was good. It was not a problem. I recall ministry candidates and the Theological College were often mentioned in prayers during worship. Any members of the congregation who had gone into ministry were regularly named in prayer. '*Belonging*' was an expression that members would use, when referring to their church.

In the Uniting Church, as a young adult and leader of a youth group, I soon had the opportunity to have a representational role on a Youth Council and Presbytery. As years passed, the Uniting Church provided opportunities for church roles and activities in the Parish and beyond. In recent years, I have looked for and made opportunities to promote music events. I have come to see music as 'music ministry', to bring people into the church environment, and for them to make connections with the church.

This is a Protestant church. It shares values of understanding the individual having a faith experience and journey, of doing your homework to study the scriptures, of personal prayer. It acknowledges Jesus as the head of the church and that's where obedience sits. The blessing of this is the understanding that the creative inspiration of each person is a gift from God. Some of the church's members have in the past helped set standards of secular freedom in society. (For

example, the 1872 Victorian Education Act created free, compulsory and secular education.) The attitude of *enquiry about scripture* is a value of this church. You are not taught to 'believe this, or else'. You are encouraged to look into possible layers of meaning, and then do some spiritual thinking yourself.

The Uniting Church has a lot to offer everyone – children and young people in particular. Spiritual health and welfare is very important. At this time when so much of the public space is taken up with talk about mental health, we need to have our church leaders talking publicly about spiritual health. The Uniting Church can build on its strengths. Leaders need to promote it, for its ethics, its practices, and the Christian message.

Endnotes

[1] The 'Church Meeting' was equivalent to the 'Church Council' in the Uniting Church today. 'Deacons' were elected and more-or-less equivalent to 'Elders' or 'Church Councillors'.

16

Growing Up Uniting through Music

Douglas Simper

Growing up in the Uniting Church enabled me to follow a journey of discovering my gifts in the context of a loving church community. This was a unique opportunity which led me to become a teacher, pianist, composer, writer and leader. In this paper I will explore my faith journey as an interconnecting story of church, social structures and personal growth and identity.

Growing up

I grew up in Blackwood, in the Adelaide Hills, when there were a few houses along the main road surrounded by cow paddocks and orchards. I was sent, along with my siblings, to Blackwood Methodist Sunday School from an early age, but my parents did not attend church other than the Sunday School anniversaries. At the age of twelve I made a 'decision' to become a Christian during a church camp at Adare, Victor Harbor, and although my current theological stance could be described as progressive, my life journey has been built on a strong faith.

My journey with God was significantly affected by three factors: the death of my father when I was a baby, being part of the Methodist family from an early age, and growing up in a musical working class family. In 1945 my father Lt. Colin Simper (2nd 48th Battalion) was killed in action in Borneo. This event framed my life and began a process of searching which led me to question war, nationalism, class, racism and the drive for wealth and power, and to embrace the themes of community, love, hope, peace and justice.

My maternal grandmother, Eleanor Bean, who attended Richmond Baptist Church in Adelaide, had come from a mining background in Northumberland, England. She was a singer and completed an Associate Diploma through Trinity College, London in the period following the Great Depression when life was challenging. My maternal grandfather died suddenly in his early 50s. My paternal grandmother Sylvia (Edwards) Simper was an organist at Rosewater Methodist Church but I have few memories of her because my mother remarried and the family made new connections. Although the strong post-depression and working class family values decried the arts as a 'frill', my mother had a piano and I was able to start lessons at the age of eight.

My early piano lessons were very traditional and I did not respond to the teaching which focused on random notes (Grand Stave – 'Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit') and technique. However, I made rapid progress with 'modern' teaching that emphasised chords, improvisation and the pop songs of the day. When I was thirteen I formed a band called 'The Beats' which played for church, community and social functions around the district, and I won some prizes when the Memorial Hall held talent quests.

A major part of my huge legacy from the church was the highly developed music tradition that included Sunday School anniversaries, concerts and camps, coffee hours and missions. In those early days the choir and organ were 'out of bounds' and enthusiasm for boogie and dance music had already set me apart from the 'classical' fraternity. But I was invited to play the piano in the ensemble which accompanied the anniversaries, spectacular events with a hundred or so children on a stage 'singing their hearts out'. My first attempts at composing were writing endless slow waltzes, tunes to existing hymns or pastiches of Caleb Simper music. The impetus for my subsequent composing came as new songs began to emerge including from the Medical Mission Sisters, Geoffrey Beaumont and Patrick Appleford, Tony Newman and Peter Stone, the Billy Graham Crusades and sacred songs on the hit-parade.[1]

God spoke to me through the parable of the talents which I interpreted as 'use your talents or lose them'. My mother and stepfather had not progressed beyond primary school and therefore the vision was a challenging one. To become a secondary music teacher I needed to complete Australian Music Examinations Board exams, so in Year 12 at Unley High School the headmaster lightened my subject load and I was able to complete Sixth Grade Practical, Fourth Grade Perception and Fourth Grade Theory in one year. I was accepted into the training course for secondary music teachers and completed a Bachelor of Music (Hons) at the Elder Conservatorium, a Bachelor of Arts at Adelaide University and a Diploma of Teaching at Adelaide Teachers College. At this stage I was completely absorbed by the goal of becoming a music teacher and ideas of being a composer, concert pianist or accompanist were not on the horizon.

The Adelaide creative explosion (1970s–80s)

It is amazing that in this period Adelaide was the centre of an explosion of the arts which flowed across the schools and churches. The previous ethos of the Playford years was conservative with a residue of Victorianism, patriarchal culture and puritanism in churches. My parents belonged to the Returned Servicemen's League and the Masonic Lodge and were reluctant adherents of the church. A key person in this period was Don Dunstan, Labor State Premier from 1967–1968 and 1970–1979. Dunstan's socially progressive platform included Aboriginal rights, women's rights, decriminalising homosexuality, abolishing the death penalty, relaxing censorship, protecting historical buildings and supporting the arts and arts centres.

My work as a composer was strongly influenced by being part of several creative conferences held at Nunyara Uniting Church and led by Rev. Ray Creevy. We wrote a musical called The Man Unnoticed which was performed in a theatre in Elizabeth. In this period my work as a classroom music teacher developed and I became Music Senior, Special Music Senior and had regional responsibilities.

In 1967 I began attending the chapel at the Nunyara Conference

Centre in the Adelaide Hills. The chapel was established by the Rev. Dr Malcolm McArthur and was a centre for wide experimentation in music, liturgy, church structures and governance. Nunyara was a major factor in my development as a songwriter and composer in a more general sense. My first writing partnership was with Neil Quintrell and some of our songs such as 'Turning Point of Time' have become known internationally. The music was not written in hymn style but took influences from rock, folk, pop and jazz sources. I met Sydney Carter, an English hymn writer, and was inspired by the words of 'Lord of the Dance' but was frustrated by the fact that Carter had used a Shaker tune rather than writing new music. The tendency of hymn writers to use folk songs instead of inviting composers to write new music is a great problem and has led to an overuse of some tunes, for example 'Amazing Grace', 'Morning has Broken', and 'Song of Joy'.

Creative Singing Group

The multi-arts performing Creative Singing Group (CSG) burst on the scene in Adelaide in 1969. It was primarily a choir but it also used dance, drama, original writing and theatre staging. CSG became a vehicle for Rod Boucher and me to write new songs, plays and music theatre works. I was commissioned to write a setting of the Eucharist (*Adelaide Choral Eucharist*, 1974) for the final service of the National Christian Youth Convention. The work included the successful song 'Lord of our Days'. The CSG performed widely in Adelaide churches and also went on tour throughout South Australia and Queensland.

Rodan Publications

Rodan Publications was a partnership of David Woods, Neil Quintrell, Rod Boucher and myself, publishing *From the Beginning, Turning Point of Time, the Songs for the People of God series, God Gives* and others. This seminal work was taken over by Pilgrim Publishing led by the late Graeme McIntosh, Norm Inglis, Jenny Ward and others.

Pilgrim Uniting Church

In the 1970s I joined Pilgrim Church 9.30am congregation where there was a group of people radically experimenting with the forms and content of worship. Children were specifically included in the worship-in-the-round format that incorporated new music, liturgies, poetry, drama, dance, increasingly new theologies and inclusive language. There was a significant dichotomy between the 11am service which was organ/hymn based and the 9.30 service which used contemporary music led by piano, guitars and drums. Pilgrim was blessed with excellent acoustics and a marvellous nine-foot Yamaha grand piano. Through this period I wrote music to words by Rev. Donald Bell and Rev. Bruce Prewer, and my songwriting developed by synthesising influences from African music, Holst, Bartok, Gershwin and Debussy into an overall pop, folk, rock, jazz framework. In 1988 I edited the seminal book *Songs from the Still Strange Land* which used the three stave layout and explored themes of Australian spirituality, justice and peace.

My time at Pilgrim Uniting Church coincided with my journey of 20 years in the South Australian Education Department as Music Senior, Consultant and Lecturer which combined teaching, composing and performing. Then in the 1980s I became a Composer-in-Schools writing songs and music-dramas for children, including works as *Professor Prism's Premonition, Macrocosm – Microcosm, In Search of the Great Australian National Anthem, The Dream Inheritors* and *Quantum Leap.*

New songs and new voices

Rod Boucher

Rod Boucher, who is a close friend of mine, has been a major voice in Australian Christian music and the more general pop scene. Rod was the leader of CSG and wrote many iconic songs in a strongly rocky and Aussie style including 'Every Little Bit of Australia' and 'No Worries Love'. In the contemporary Christian genre they were direct action songs with a strong celebratory thread, for example,

'God is Great Things', 'Emmanuel' and 'Grain of Faith'. Rod formed the Good God Publishing Studio, recording many of the emerging bands, and also published the *God is Great* children's song series. Rod and his family spent some years in the United Kingdom and Europe, performing as a street theatre group known as *Bedlam OZ*. Rod is known internationally and was recognised by Kevin Mayhew who published 21 songs by Rod with words by Margaret Glasson in the *Finding the Way* (2015).

Robin Mann

Robin Mann is an Australian Christian singer, songwriter and theologian who was recently awarded an honorary Doctorate of Divinity by the Australian Lutheran College. His style, emanating from folk music, is distinctly Australian. The songs are models of elegance and economy. His music appears in many publications including the seven volumes of the *Altogether Now series*, NCYC *Songbooks and Together in Song*.

Leigh Newton

Leigh has worked in both church music and secular contexts and became known as part of the bush band *Three Corner Jack*. He has released nine albums and is particularly known for *Christmas in the Scrub* and *Christmas in the Shed.*

Sing Alleluia

This book, published by Collins in 1987, was a supplement to the *Australian Hymn Book* and set an important precedent. Although it was only in two stave layout, it included contemporary songs where the chords were given. It included hymns set to folk melodies, a few Aboriginal hymns, Taizé chants and the work of new writers such as Brian Wren.

During this period my composing and publications included *Turning Point of Time* (contemporary sacred songs for congregations with piano accompaniment; words: Neil Quintrell; published by

Rodan Publications, Adelaide, 1976), *Songs for the People of God Volume 1–4* (contemporary sacred songs for congregations with piano accompaniment; words: Neil Quintrell, Donald Bell and others; published by Rodan Publications and Pilgrim Church, Adelaide, 1976–1986), *The Dream Inheritors* (cantata for treble choir and orchestra; words: Elizabeth Mansutti; commissioned and published by the Public Schools Music Society, South Australia; first performed at the Festival Theatre, Adelaide 1986) and *Songs* from the *Still Strange Land* (published by Joint Board of Christian Education, Melbourne, 1989).

Sydney: new horizons, 1990s

At Pitt Street Uniting Church I developed a friendship and collaboration with Rev. Dr Dorothy McCrae–McMahon which resulted in a dance drama *Birth is On its Way* and the *Australian Christmas Eucharist*, a setting of the mass for soloists, choir and orchestra. Commissioned in 1988 by Pitt Street and Chester Street Uniting Churches, Sydney, the premiere performance was broadcast live nationally by the ABC.

I also worked with Professor Jim Tulip at Chester Street (Epping) Uniting Church which resulted in the work *Children of a Hard God* performed at Sydney University. A friendship with Rev James and Anne Udy at Yaraandoo Centre, Fiddletown, led to writing songs based on creation spirituality. This period also included the work *Dreams and Visions*, a cantata for treble choir and orchestra; (words: Martin Luther King, Douglas Simper and Marianne Williamson), commissioned by MLC School, Sydney 1989, and first performed in the Sydney Opera House in May 1999.

I felt called to music ministry and this led to working with Rev. Bill Adams at Centenary Uniting Church, North Parramatta, followed by a period with North Ryde Brethren where I used contemporary music to build the youth group. Finally I worked as Director of Music at Gordon Uniting Church with Rev. Niall Reid and we organised several special projects involving choirs and orchestra. In this period

I met Shirley Erena Murray and Brian Wren and began to compose music to their words.

I felt that I needed to build an academic foundation to complement and support my development as a composer. In 1994–95 I completed a MEd (Creative Arts) at the University of New South Wales, which became the genesis of my *Hands on Music* piano teaching method. This has subsequently been developed into nine volumes and is used in the UK and Ireland. I won a scholarship and in the period 1996–99 I completed a PhD (Composition) at Southern Cross University, Lismore. For this study I collaborated with an Aboriginal writer Julie Jansen and composed a music theatre work Venus in Eritrea which was performed at Belvoir Theatre, Sydney.

Together in Song (Australian Hymn Book II)

I think it is important to assess the significance of *Together in Song* (AHB II), Harper Collins Australia 1999. This book of 783 hymns, psalms and songs was produced by an ecumenical committee chaired by Canon Lawrence Bartlett. It included 24 hymns by Brian Wren, 27 by John Bell, five by Shirley Erena Murray, a number of Taizé chants and eight contemporary songs by Robin Mann. There is limited representation of Australian composers and, although John Bell is an outstanding lyrics writer and the songs set to folk tunes work well, his own SATB and hymn style writing is less compelling.

For small churches with only an organist or pianist this book would become a staple. A major breakthrough was the changing of words so they were modernised and inclusive. There is a huge subject index and a tremendously useful index based on scripture passages. The major problem that I have as a composer/musician is that the committee decided to have a harmony (accompaniment) version which excluded the chords (they went into the melody version). The small number of songs in contemporary style were written in two stave format which means the musician has to carry the melody and accompaniment at the same time. I believe that a three stave format should have been used: Melody Line (Treble) to carry melody for the voice, words

and chords; Accompaniment (Treble and Bass) fully developed independent piano accompaniment. It is my contention that many musicians play the SATB, or given accompaniment, over and over no matter how many verses there are. The SATB was not intended as accompaniment but was meant to indicate the harmonization for a choir. A good musician should be able to improvise around the SATB chord structure of the hymn.

Some of the problems that I have mentioned in relation to music layout were overcome with the publication of *As One Voice* (Volume One 1992; Volume 2 1996; Willow Connection, Sydney) which represented material primarily used by Catholic churches. The books are a robust A4 size and use ring binder and spiral binder to make page turning easy. Some Australian composers are included alongside songs of Farrell, Willcock, Bell, Haughen, Haas, Walker, Schutte and Taizé.

Hillsong

I do not want to make a full analysis of Hillsong in this paper but it is important to note that Hillsong and other Pentecostal movements have built a world empire in music and mission. There are a number of aspects which need detailed consideration but my main observation is that Hillsong material is theologically conservative, emphasising a patriarchal, prosperity gospel, personal salvation and piety. The songs use a limited number of styles, in particular 4/4 slow rock/ pop ballads, usually in major keys. Having worked in a number of churches here and in the United Kingdom, I have found that the music has almost entirely taken over in many Anglican, United Reformed and Methodist Churches. It is hard not to feel, with other songwriters, that a lifetime of composing Christian music is being challenged. I have a strong commitment to themes of justice, liberation, hope and love and I am confident the expressions of my faith journey are worthwhile and will last.

The road less travelled

In the years 2001–2016 my wife Lorna and I lived in England and I was Director of Music at Priory Place Methodist Church, Doncaster, and then later organist/music leader at various Anglican churches in Somerset (Shepton Mallet, Litton, Chewton Mendip and Bath). When we were free we also attended services in Wells Cathedral. However, our home church through this period was Oakhill Methodist, a small chapel near Shepton Mallet. Although the church was theologically quite traditional, we experienced an amazing amount of love and grace in action. The worship was always lively with 15–20 young people and a number of key families who had gifts in music, drama, video, design and crafts. In this period the prevailing perspective in churches was evangelical, with fundamentalist influences and big national gatherings like Soul Survivor and Spring Harvest attracting thousands. Consequently my work as a Christian composer, which reflected a different theological emphasis, was not known. However, I found that I reached a number of children and adults through involvement as a music teacher in schools and workshops. One of the highlights was my composition of a large scale work for piano called *Somerset Scenes* and the organisation of the world premiere performance in Radstock, south of Bath.

In this period in the UK I completed *I Am God's Child:* 22 contemporary sacred songs for congregations with piano accompaniment; (words: Shirley Murray, Bruce Prewer, Douglas Simper and others), dedicated to Allan and Valerie Wallace, UK January 2004; *Images of God*: Contemporary sacred songs for congregations with piano accompaniment; (words: Brian Wren, Shirley Murray, Donald Bell, Douglas Simper and others), dedicated to Lorna Zhulan, Sydney 2002. These two books were self-published and have been absorbed into my latest book *Singing the Journey*.

2016: Sydney/Sapphire Coast

In 2016 there were family demands and it was time to return to Australia. After a brief stint in Sydney we moved to the Sapphire

Coast and we now live in Tathra, a beautiful beach town near Bega. We are part of Tathra Uniting Church which does not have a paid minister but is organised by the members. The church is very active in refugee advocacy, unemployment and bushfire/flood relief, and it runs a charity shop.

Singing the Journey (MediaCom Education, Adelaide, 2021)

This book celebrates more than 50 years of writing Christian songs for 'contemporary' worship. The 100 songs are a retrospective of my work and vary from miniatures to extended compositions. The songs first appeared in the various books published by Rodan Publications and later Pilgrim Publishing. Some are from *Songs from the Still Strange Land, Images of God* and *I am God's Child*. In addition there are 25 new songs which I have written in the last few years. *Singing the Journey* describes some of the pain and joy of lived experiences, the exploration of significant themes, and the development of identity and friendships through community and service. The Preface - 'My Story' - concludes with the following invitation to the reader: 'Whether you are in a traditional or contemporary style church I invite you to explore the 100 songs in your own context. No matter how you approach this resource I trust that it will empower your worship and inspire and affirm you in your faith journey'.

Conclusion

There is a paradoxical quality in the faith journey because we are called to show sacrificial and servant qualities but equally we work to build structures that allow people to have freedom, hope and wholeness. My career as a music teacher, composer and concert performer has required considerable discipline and time investment. The time spent on personal development can seem to be a selfish aspect and a negation of the family/community and yet without the development of skills and life experience the role of leader would be facile and narcissistic.

In this paper I have sought to show how my musical 'growing up' has been contiguous with my faith journey, nurtured in the beginning at Blackwood Methodist Church, Nunyara and Pilgrim Churches in Adelaide, and then sustained by a number of churches in Sydney and the United Kingdom. My early years were affected by the loss of my father and the struggle to develop an identity, but this lack of confidence was transformed because of the teaching, love, praise and acceptance I received in the church family. My musical and spiritual journey has been nurtured in the Uniting Church and this paper is my testament to that process.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, G. Beaumont et al, *Thirty 20th Century Hymn Tunes* (London: J. Weinberger, c. 1960) and T. Newman and P. Stone, *Travelling to Freedom* (Harbord: LPS Publishing, 1971).

17

We are in a strange place

(Genesis 28: 10–16)[1]

Peter Walker

We are in a strange place – in Australia and across the globe. A place that feels uncertain, insecure, and is a cause of anxiety for many. It is a place that no one could have imagined eighteen months ago. We are in a truly strange place now. It is a place that gives us a window onto Jacob's experience in Genesis 28.

The events of Genesis 28, the story of Jacob's dream, have been an inspiration to songwriters and artists for centuries. Perhaps the best-known of all is the African American spiritual:

> We are climbing Jacob's ladder, we are climbing Jacob's ladder …
> Every rung goes higher and higher …
> Every rung just makes us stronger …

The significant difference between Jacob's ladder in this song and Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28 is that, in the song, the ladder provides us with the opportunity to go higher whereas, in the Bible, the ladder allows God to come lower. The early rabbis explained for us that the text does not say that the ladder was planted in the ground, but rather, it was planted 'towards' the ground. In other words, Jacob's ladder was not anchored on earth, but anchored in heaven. And that becomes important as the story unfolds.

Jacob's dream

As you may know, the background to Jacob's journey to Haran is that Jacob has deceived the patriarch Isaac and stolen the blessing from his brother, Esau. When informed about his brother's deception, we are told that Esau 'cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry'. And it was while he was fleeing that scene of anger, and during

his 800-kilometre journey from Beersheba to Haran, that Jacob came to ‘a certain place’.

The Hebrew word used here in verse 11 is the same word we encounter in Genesis 22, where the narrator tells us several times that Abraham and Isaac, travelling to the place where Abraham anticipates he must sacrifice Isaac, saw ‘the place’ in the distance, ‘the place’ where Abraham was to sacrifice his son, ‘the place’ where Abraham was to place his future on the altar. So, anyone reading the whole story, and hearing that Jacob came ‘to a certain place’, would have realised that this was an ominous place.

The narrator adds to our sense of foreboding by mentioning that it was sunset. Darkness was about to envelop this place. It is in these circumstances that Jacob tried to get some sleep. Once asleep, Jacob had a dream, a dream about a ladder, a heavenly ladder touching the earth. And the angels of God are ascending and descending on it. Bear in mind that dreams in the ancient Near East were not regarded as the activity of the subconscious mind. Rather, they are thought to be instruments whereby something is revealed by God.

So, what is being revealed? If you picture the sleeping Jacob in the darkness on earth and picture the ladder stretching all the way up to heaven, you expect the next verse to say: ‘And there was God looking down upon the sleeping Jacob.’ Yet to our surprise, the Lord was not looking down upon Jacob; the Lord was with Jacob. Right there with him. Even more astonishing (and perhaps perplexing), God confers upon Jacob the blessing that he stole from his brother Esau. ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you, and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth … Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go …’ So, when Jacob wakes up, the first words he utters are these: ‘Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.’

What has happened?

God entered Jacob’s strange place. Just when Jacob felt the only way he could procure a future was by himself, on the run, through

his own plotting, God entered into Jacob's nameless uncertain place. And God affirmed God's hold on Jacob's future. The strange place became the place of communion.

The Uniting Church is in a strange place

I am three years into this role and I cannot help but say that I am weekly, if not daily, pondering what a strange place the Uniting Church is in. We feel unsure about our inheritance. And our insecurity has us on the run. Not from Beersheba to Haran but certainly from one review and restructure to the next review and restructure. And, perhaps realising the predicament we are in, we risk falling for technique over substance when trying to find a way out of this strange place.

The identity and activity of the Church throughout time and place, that is to say, who we are called to be and what we are called to do, changes surprisingly little across the waves of history. We are called to follow Jesus. We are called to witness to a message of hope in him. We are called to offer God praise and worship. We are called to bring help and healing. We are called to be a voice for the voiceless.

But while the identity and call remain constant, the context of course does change. The 'situatedness' of the church is a critical ingredient to how we live-out the church's identity and mission. We do need to change. Our situatedness demands it. We are a movement. But how can we think wisely and well about change from this strange place in which we find ourselves?

To me, something important rests in the distinction between invention and innovation. We do need change. But I do not think this is a time for inventors. Instead, this is a time for innovators. Put another way, the change we need does not involve inventing something new (as tempting as that may seem). Instead, it is a time for renewing something old.

Invention has the look and feel of an attempt at product differentiation. Let's make something shiny. Let's carve a new 'market share' for the Uniting Church. Innovation, on the other

hand, has the integrity of a tradition '*re-newed*'. Inventors are trying to make a new *something*. Innovators already have *something* (a precious something) that they wish to make new.

The something we have is the gospel of Jesus Christ, to which we give distinctive expression as an Australian church and as a church that longs to fulfil Christ's prayer that all his followers may be one. The charge, which Davis McCaughey preached to in the inaugural service on 22 June 1977, is to bear witness afresh to that gospel in our day, to continue to take the Australian context of our movement seriously, to engage meaningfully with the situatedness of our mission, and not to give up what might be named the Uniting Church's founding charism – unity.

To fulfil this mission well requires a deep understanding of yesterday and a bold imagination for tomorrow. Maybe even a wild imagination for tomorrow. The inventors I observe love the wild imagination but tend not to hold a deep understanding of the tradition. To renew a tradition, you need to have both. To renew a tradition, you need innovators.

It is risky to grab for any ladder that we think might allow us to climb out of this strange place. The risk of that anxious strategy is summed up for me in Psalm 11 verse 3: 'If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?' Is that a verse for the Uniting Church at the moment?

But there is good news

The story of Jacob's encounter with God in Genesis 28 reminds us, perhaps above all else, that God appears to be in the habit of finding people in strange places – places that are vulnerable and insecure. Even more, God seems to be in the habit of blessing and using them. The strange God whose love was revealed in the strangest of places – a cross on Golgotha – will also find the Uniting Church. After all, our very *Basis of Union* reminds us as follows: '… in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.'

18

Launch Speech for *Growing Up Uniting*

Charissa Suli

The title *Growing Up Uniting*[1] itself captures the eye of the reader with curiosity and implies that something has changed and grown over time. Before I opened the pages of this book I wondered to myself, what does it mean to grow up Uniting and what are the stories that I will hear that will inspire, encourage and challenge me as I continue to grow as a follower of Jesus Christ who holds my membership within the Uniting Church in Australia.

Before we open the pages to this book called *Growing Up Uniting*, our current President, Deidre Palmer states on the back cover that 'this book is a gift to the Uniting Church', Peter Walker, Principal of the United Theological College, affirms the 'testimony of those too young to have experienced the 1977 Union' and Simon Hansford, the Moderator of the NSW/ACT Synod, asserts the call by the 'Uniting generation to participate where God is calling the Church to be now'.

I opened the pages of this book and I read the stories told by women and men from across our nation who have faithfully and honestly shared their heart experiences of growing up Uniting. Every story is unique and gives voice to the journey of joy, blessing, learning, growth, fear, pain, struggle, frustration, loss, faith, and hope. Although the stories are unique to each individual's experience, place and time, there are common themes weaved throughout the narratives told in this book.

What I've found helpful about this book is that their stories sneak into our consciousness so effortlessly. You gain an experience not

just with the mind but you embody the stories as you read them and can relate to some of the stories told. Their stories teach us about what life has been like for these individuals and how the communities they were or are part of have helped shape and form their faith in Christ. They also teach us about ourselves in our current context and where the Uniting Church needs to pay attention.

I want to name some of the insights I've gleaned from this book:

- We need to pause and celebrate how far we have come as a church since Union. There is so much to celebrate as the Uniting Church, and we need to give thanks that we have grown into a church that has not focused on an individual expression of faith but has emphasised the gathered community where Christian faith is expressed. People of faith and no faith are always welcomed and upheld in community regardless of where they are at in life's journey.
- We have been at the forefront of calling on our nation to care for the environment, focus on inclusion and diversity and elevate the rights of our first peoples before mainstream churches.
- Our heart for Mission AND the missional opportunities that have been developed over the years – Lifeline, Wayside chapel, etc.
- We have embraced and made a commitment to our first peoples and CALD communities.
- We invested for decades in national gatherings for youth and young adults.
- Our ability to welcome all 'just as you are' is our strength and matters more than just believing.
- We are unafraid to have robust conversations about life, faith, and ministry.
- We affirm women in leadership.
- Our clergy are not the only theologians in the Uniting Church.

- We affirm and live out the ‘every member minister’.
- We have an open table and our liturgy is a gift.

And *Growing Up Uniting* also alerts us to the challenges we are facing today. Some of these include:

- Mentoring is important! We need to invest as a church in mentoring youth and young adults but also think younger in our mentoring and begin from age 12 and ensure anyone who is between the age of 12 and 25 has a mentor.
- We need to invest in the formation of our children, youth, and young adults.
- We need to be clear about our commitment to youth and young adults.
- We are becoming a church that is focused on being corporate and simply doing business which often takes precedence over God’s mission and discipleship.
- There is mistrust amongst members of the church and a focus more on defending its name than trusting in the movement of the Spirit.
- We need to embrace our identity of welcome, inclusion and relationship and keep seeking reconciliation, forgiveness, and redemption even when the road ahead may be blurry.
- And, finally, despite our imperfections, the Uniting Church is still very important for our Australian context. We are the Uniting Church and God’s work is not yet fulfilled. We are still a people on the way as we look ahead to the future.

Growing Up Uniting is an important book for our present-day church and I encourage you all to get a copy and share it amongst your communities because it challenges every member of the Uniting Church to rethink how we might be the church today in a world that looks so vastly different to the world in 1977 when our church came into being. As the world changes rapidly, the church cannot remain

stagnant and live in the past. The Church needs to take the next step forward and take action in responding to the changing context around it as we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of everyday people and not just to Sunday worshippers. We need to be at the forefront of modelling the love of Christ in every aspect of our ministry and it begins at home in our structures, councils, in our ministries and to the world.

The contributors to *Growing Up Uniting* are calling us to listen to the voice of God who is leading us into uncharted waters that require risk, change and deep trust in God to create new spaces, new life, new opportunities and give permission to a rising generation who is willing to stand on the shoulders of those who have come before and lead the church forward knowing that the intergenerational relationships are strong enough to work towards a shared future together.

Growing Up Uniting also reminds us that the Uniting Church is to sow the seeds like the parable Jesus told his disciples in this week's lectionary reading. We are invited to 'let go' not completely by withdrawing from the world and waiting for God to fix everything but realising that the Kingdom of God is not contingent upon our actions alone. The spirit of God is moving through others, through creation in ways we will never fully comprehend. We are called to do our part but, in the end, it is God's Kingdom that is being built, not ours, nor our churches, our nation, not our denomination.

We would be foolish to ignore the reflections in *Growing Up Uniting* and the call to action the contributors and editors alerts us to. It is wise to pay attention to their observations and insights and allow their wisdom to shape our next steps as we go forward to create a future that reminds people of what the kingdom of God looks like. Our growing up Uniting does not end with this book. The journey has only begun. There is still so much learning and growing to do as the pilgrim people of God. As one contributor, channelling Julian of Norwich, wrote, 'the best is yet to come'!

A huge *malo aupito, vinakavaka levu, faafetai lava*, thank you to the editors, Rev. Dr William Emilsen and Dr Elizabeth Watson and all twenty contributors to this book.

I now officially declare *Growing Up Uniting* officially launched!!!

Endnotes

1 William W. Emilsen and Elizabeth A. Watson, eds, *Growing Up Uniting* (Richmond, SA: MediaCom, 2021).

Contributors

Jonathan Barker served as a Deacon from 1993 in several parish ministries, lectured at Nungalinya College, advocated for Indigenous communities and recently in retirement assisted with the Effective Living Centre programs of empowerment in Wayville, South Australia.

Dean Eland retired in 2004 after 40 years of full-time urban ministry in three Australian States including 12 years in Redfern, then Whyalla and Port Adelaide. Dean was Director of Mission Planning, Synod of Victoria then 5 years with the Sunshine Parish Mission. Dean and his wife Judy are members of Pilgrim Church Adelaide.

William W. Emilsen is an Honorary Associate Professor in Church History and World Religions at Charles Sturt University and a Principal Researcher with its Public and Contextual Research Centre. He has recently written *Fighting Spirit: A History of Christianity at Warruwi, Goulburn Island* (2016) and *Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice* (2019). With Elizabeth Watson he edited *Growing Up Uniting* which was launched at the 2021 Uniting Church National History Society biennial conference in June.

Antony (Tony) Floyd is a retired ('recycling') Uniting Church minister whose ministry journey encompasses inter-cultural and international community during Doctoral studies in Chicago, diverse congregations including a two distinct languages congregation, Synod role in Mission Resource and Planning, and eight years as National Director, Multi/Cross-cultural Ministry. Several supply placements in culturally diverse communities since retiring.

Mark Hillis has served in pastoral and specialist education roles as a Uniting Church Minister in Australia and the Pacific and as a Sessional lecturer in Christian Education at United Theological College and Charles Sturt University School of Theology until 2020. He now lives in Katoomba, New South Wales.

Clive Jackson is a committee member of the Vic–Tas Uniting Church Historical Society and is a member of the Uniting Church National History Society. He is committed to promoting church heritage, including studying the former Congregational Church's contribution to the Uniting Church. Clive is a statutory planner for the Victorian State Government and a Fellow of the Planning Institute of Australia.

Amelia Koh-Butler is the minister at Eastwood (multilingual) Uniting Church. Her post-doctoral research has taken her around the world as Worship-Liturgy convenor for the World Methodist Council. She chaired the inaugural Multicultural Committee of NSW-ACT Synod and the National Assembly's Multi/Cross-cultural Reference Committee. She is National Advocate for Seeking Common Ground (Interfaith/Ecumenical).

Richard La'Brooy is a Pastor in the Uniting Church and is currently ministering as the Chaplain at Newington College, a Uniting Church School in Sydney. He has grown up in the Uniting Church and has served on many boards and committees. He is also a History teacher and passionate about the Arts.

Sarah Lim worked in social policy and legislation review and development in the Queensland Government before joining UnitingCare in Queensland (UCQ) in 2013. A large part of her work has been monitoring and understanding the lessons coming out of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and how they impacted on UCQ across the breadth of its services. Sarah is Chair of the Forde Foundation Board of Advice, a foundation established by the Queensland Government to provide micro-grants to Forgotten Australians to assist them in their needs. As National Director, UCA Redress Ltd, Sarah is deeply committed to the needs of survivors of community.

Alison Longworth is a Board member of the Uniting Church National History Society. Her doctoral research was an historical analysis of five women missionaries encountering the Noongar people of south-west Australia. Alison has published several articles and book sections with a focus on Western Australian Church History.

Deidre Palmer was President of the Uniting Church Assembly from 2018 to 2021. Prior to becoming President, Deidre served as Moderator of the Uniting Church in South Australia. Deidre has been involved in theological education for most of her life. She has served on the faculty of the Adelaide College of Divinity, Flinders University School of Theology, the Uniting College in South Australia and Perkins School, Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Deidre is also a social worker. She worked for four and a half years with Uniting Communities as a counsellor with their Childhood Sexual Abuse Counselling team prior to becoming Moderator.

Ruth Powell is Director of NCLS Research Centre that focuses on church vitality and community spirituality and wellbeing. For 30 years she has managed the five-yearly National Church Life Survey, a large and comprehensive database on church life. Ruth also holds a position as an Associate Professor and Research Fellow in the Charles Sturt University, as well as an Honorary Professor at Alphacrucis College in Sydney. Her research interests are congregational studies, leadership, and spirituality in the wider community.

Viniana Ravetali is of Fijian ancestry and migrated to Australia in June 1982. She has been an ordained Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church of Australia for 10 years. She is currently Chaplain at MLC School in Burwood as well as Chairperson of Sydney Presbytery within NSW-ACT Synod. She is also the Vice Chair of the Assembly Fiji National Conference.

Margaret Reeson became interested in the history of Christian communities while working in the highlands of Papua New Guinea in the 1960s. There she witnessed the birth of a young church. She began writing in 1968 and, many books later, is still writing. She has now retired from many committees.

Douglas Simper is a composer, concert pianist and music teacher. He has many published works to his credit including: *From the Beginning* (Rodan Publications 1972), *Turning Point of Time* (Rodan Publications 1975), *Professor Prism's Premonition* (4D Publications 1988), *Macrocosm Microcosm* (4D Publications 1988), *In Search of the Great Australian National Anthem* (Heinemann Publications, 1978), *Songs From the Still Strange Land* (JBCE, Melbourne 1989), *Hands on Music Volumes 1-9* (HoM Publications, UK 2004) and '*Singing the Journey*' (MediaCom Education, Adelaide 2021).

Charissa Suli is President-elect of the Uniting Church in Australia. She is the youngest and first person of colour to serve as President-elect, and the second ordained woman. Charissa is currently National Consultant with the Assembly. She has more than 20 years experience in cross cultural and intercultural ministry in the Uniting Church. She was ordained in 2014 and served in congregational ministry at Dapto Uniting Church in NSW. Charissa will serve the Church as President from 2024-2027.

Warren Talbot is a member of the Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney, national secretary of the Uniting Church LGBTIQ+ Network, and Campaign Engagement Officer with UnitingCare Australia. In 2020 Warren completed a MTh dissertation on the ethics of Paul Ricoeur at United Theological College/Charles Sturt University.

Katalina Tahaafe–Williams holds degrees from the University of New South Wales, London University and the University of Birmingham. She has served the world church and the ecumenical movement as a leader in public and contextual theology, world mission, ecumenism, inter-faith relations, social justice and multicultural ministry. She currently serves at Nightcliff Uniting Church in Darwin.

Andrew Thornley was born in New Zealand and migrated to Australia with his wife Carolyn and three sons in 1976. He graduated from ANU in 1979. He has published books on Pacific church history, with a special interest in Fijian Methodism and the first translations of the Fijian Bible. He has lectured at Pacific Theological College and Davuilevu Theological College in Fiji and United Theological College in North Parramatta. During 2021, Andrew and Carolyn, a Uniting Church minister, have been working in support of the Rotuman Uniting Church congregation in Sydney.

Peter Walker is an ordained minister of the Uniting Church in Australia and is currently Principal of United Theological College, Sydney and lecturer in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University.

Elizabeth A. Watson is a retired academic who holds degrees in Anthropology and Sociology from the University of Sydney, the Australian National University and the University of New South Wales. Her research and publications have focused principally on women's unpaid work, especially caring work. She grew up within the Congregational Church and has been an active member of the Uniting Church since the 1980s, serving on the Academic Board of United Theological College for several years. Elizabeth is a long-time member of Amnesty International and served for a number of years as National President of the Australian Section.

The voices of the young and the not-so-young are brought into conversation in this collection, together discerning a way forward for a vibrant future. This will not be a future we determine by our own strategy and cleverness, but something we may together discern of the promises of God. I commend this book to you with joy and gratitude.

(Rev) Associate Professor Glen O'Brien
President, Uniting Church National History Society