

# Church beyond?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 23 June 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 5B; Uniting Church Anniversary

Ephesians 2: 17-22; Psalm 127; John, 17: 1-11

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Our lives and world are shaped by the stories we choose to tell, and how we tell them. That is one reason the study of history is so vital. For it makes a huge difference what we choose to include, remember, and carry forward in the story of ourselves we share. So what story about ourselves and our world do we want to tell, and to carry forward, on this 47th anniversary of the official founding of the Uniting Church in Australia? How does this reflect the vision of church as beloved community which we heard about in our readings? And how, vitally, do we see this story developing in the future?

When I was teaching church history in Brisbane, I was asked to write for the diocesan newspaper about Anglican beginnings. This was especially prompted by requests from St John's Cathedral welcomers who encountered a number of visitors, not least Catholics, who would challenge them about how the *Ecclesia Anglicana*, now known as the Anglican Church, came into being. 'Your Church is not up to much', these would say, 'because it only began in the 16th century, and was invented by Henry VIII for his own personal needs.'

As not enough Christians know even their own denominational history, some welcomers were struggling to respond positively. Meanwhile, as we know only too well in Sydney, Anglican identity is highly contested, as it has always been. It therefore matters what story Anglicans tell about themselves and their history. And it certainly matters to change the very misleading idea that the *Ecclesia Anglicana* began in the 16th century, and that the English Reformation was simply about Henry VIII. So I was happy to oblige. The first part was entitled '*Origins of Anglicanism: what did the Romans and the Celts ever do for us?*'<sup>1</sup>

Well, I won't tell my understanding of the story of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* on the Uniting Church's anniversary! However, we might reflect similarly on what stories are told about the Uniting Church. I say that also as it still seems a little odd to me that the Uniting Church lectionary celebrates its own denominational founding. I guess that may be a quite Protestant, rather than Catholic or Anglican, thing. However, I guess one advantage is that it does ask us annually to reflect together upon who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed.

In the case of the Uniting Church, I wonder if the founding date of 1977 is always very helpful. A little like events connected with Henry VIII, it is of course important to recognise events such as 1977, the Basis of Union, and other landmarks since.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://anglicanfocus.org.au/2019/05/29/the-origins-of-anglicanism-what-did-the-romans-and-celts-ever-do-for-us/>

However, the story of the Uniting Church is surely much bigger than the last 47 years. It was, for example, born out of 20th century ecumenism; out of Evangelical Revival, particularly through the work of John Wesley and his collaborators; crucially out of various Reformations in the 16th century; and out of the early Church period when the classic creeds were formulated. Ultimately of course, and most importantly of all, the Uniting Church comes out of the story of Jesus, and the story of faith that Jesus was a part of. Furthermore, the story is a continuing one: one calling us onward into new and renewing steps with others.

Through the Assembly's Act2 process, a wide consultation has taken place across the Uniting Church and the reported results<sup>2</sup> have been made [available to us online](#) for several weeks. I have made its [summary](#) available through our eNews this week, and I hope it may act as one helpful focus for the discussion of our faith future together after worship today. What, I wonder, resonates with you, from the Act2 report and your own experience? What surprises you? What do you feel that we together, from this community, can contribute to the best church futures we may share with others?

To start the ball rolling, here are four of the things I personally most resonate with in the life of the Uniting Church, and four things with which I struggle. The first positive is the unambiguous commitment to the equality of women and men. There is no '*it depends on the Minister and the congregation*' qualification. This is also manifest in the wonderful leadership of Uniting Church women, exemplified in less than three weeks' time when the first female President from a Pasifika background will be installed.

Secondly, as also manifest in the President-elect, the UCA is demonstrably a multicultural Church in many respects.

Thirdly, the UCA seeks to offer a distinctively relational approach to life, theology, and ministry. This is a particular gift which it offers to the wider Church and world and which is still deeply needed.

Fourthly, the UCA seeks to be deliberately contextual, especially in engaging with the specific realities of these lands we now call Australia. All of those things are precious to me. What about you? What do you give thanks for in the life of the Uniting Church today?

Four things I struggle with in the life of the Uniting Church sit alongside the positives and are sometimes entwined with them. The first is the sadly continuing lack of unambiguous commitment to the equality and full dignity and expression of LGBTIQ+ people. Seriously, for a Church which regularly speaks up, on many matters, about inclusion and justice, this is surely not good enough today, if ever it was in the past?!

Secondly, like all Australian Churches, and worldly powers and structures, we still have a long way to go in recognising the full challenge and opportunity of post-colonialism. This is so much more than multiculturalism and building on good work with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://act2uca.com/report/gift-of-the-spirit/>

Thirdly, I wonder if the Uniting Church's relational emphasis sometimes leads to a confusion of charisms, where anxiety to ensure participation of everyone works against purpose and effectiveness: where, for example, too many voices are involved, or decisions are avoided or postponed.

Fourthly, for all the importance of contextual engagement and developing distinctive Australian characteristics, there is a risk both of losing sight of the breadth and depth of Christian life and experience across the world and across the centuries, and also of losing aspects of transcendence in valuing immanence. This may partly be me, as a person with an Anglican story, but constant awareness of being part of a much wider project seems to me to be a necessary feature of any healthy Church.

What do you see and experience in the Uniting Church's continuing story? My sense is that the Act2 Report offers us both a helpful snapshot into where the UCA is now and some important themes and specific pathways for the future. How do you respond to them? Some of the strengths and struggles I have named are certainly included in the Act2 Report and its proposals.

Some are a little hidden. Others you may see that have not been named, or named very lightly. How, as a congregation, might we want to respond together? One key Act2 element, for example, is a fresh attention to theology, which is potentially most welcome. This includes proposals to develop a new national theological college structure and resourcing. We in this congregation, and others, might however reasonably ask, *'but what specifics of theology and resourcing will be nurtured?'*

Just as with the proposals to streamline the cumbersome outdated structure of councils, how do we make sure we are not simply moving around deckchairs on a ship whose direction also needs attention lest more icebergs are struck? After all, it may be that we are living through a new shift and configuration of faith and spirituality which goes far beyond modest reshaping of existing vehicles of religion.

What do you think?

Our two readings today do not provide us with easy answers to questions of what Church might look like by, say, 2033 (the 200th anniversary of this congregation). However, they do remind us that the Church, in divine terms, is both much bigger and more subversive than all the stories we tell about our Church denominations or congregations, or individual Christian lives. Indeed, that is at the heart of the significance of the letter to the Ephesians as a whole, and today's reading in particular.

Perhaps the appalling carnage of the Gaza conflict and resurgent hostilities between different groups gives us a better insight into this radical message. For it is addressed to Gentile hearers in the context of powerful Jewish-Gentile and other entrenched ethno-religious divisions in the ancient world. It affirms that the promise of Christ is one of peace to all.

Two key aspects among others are worthy of notice. Firstly, those who respond to Christ are *'no longer strangers and aliens'* but are called 'citizens' (*sympolitēs* in Greek), in the only use of that word in the New Testament. In the context of the Roman Empire, it is a radical affirmation of full participation in divine life.

Secondly, this is not an individual gift and calling but about forming a new temple together: a new holy space made of relationships which can help transform the world. This further illuminates the theme of true belonging in our worship this month. For in the Roman world, to be a member of a household meant refuge, protection, identity and the security that comes with a sense of belonging. Salvation, the writer of Ephesians is saying, includes union with one another in a new community which transcends human divisions through the grace and peace of Christ.

Applied to Church futures today, it affirms that an authentic Church is one in which, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, we remember that *'the stranger in our midst has always been the near approach of the One to whom Jesus prayed.'* If any Church is to have a future in God it must therefore be concerned not so much for itself and its own life and story, but for others and God who calls it beyond itself. As Bonhoeffer pleaded: *'Keep open the boundary'* to the neighbour *'furthest from you.'* How then is that found in our Church's journey and the new story we seek to know?

Meanwhile, our Gospel today reminds us that our story must always be renewed by the story of God in Godself and by the Johannine vision of the *'beloved community'* which always exists both among and beyond us. An iconic ecumenical text, John chapter 17 calls us into the life of God, significantly, as a prayer: not, as such, into an institution, or a denominational or congregational plan, although these may be part of the journey. John 17 also encourages us to lift, or deepen, our horizons beyond our smaller stories, into the mysterious story of God in Godself.

James Haire, a former UCA, and NCCA<sup>3</sup>, President, often shared a helpful image that a great Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once coined. *Think of the Church as a pair of bifocals*, James would say. *At the bottom we see the world, and the Church, as they look close up, with their blessings and struggles, full of contention as well as connection.*

That is part of what Act2 offers us, and it is vital to own. At the top of our vision however we are also called to see the world, and Church, through divine eyes: as one, holy, catholic (or if you prefer, universal) and apostolic reality. Without that vision of Church, and world, beyond, we are less than we might be by God's grace and we miss our mark.

So - what fresh and renewing story do we seek to share in the days ahead?

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> UCA: Uniting Church in Australia.

NCCA: National Council of Churches in Australia