

Sermon 20170625 – UCA 40th

Outer Eastern Cluster at Mooroolbark

Introduction [Acknowledge Rev Dr Robert Bos]

To the glory of the Living God, known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Memorable experience of attending the Inaugural Assembly of the UCA in the Lyceum Hall in Sydney in the afternoon of Wednesday 22 June 1977 and Sydney Town Hall. [**Historical** moment, Rev Ron **Allardice**, Rev Dr Davis **McCaughey**]

Dr Wood's ***Prayer of Thanksgiving and Constitution*** was, for me, one of those deeply profound and powerful moments that will never be forgotten.

An Occasional Sermon. I will also **resist too much history & trying to cover every topic** - three Readings set for today in the **UCA Lectionary** – John 17, Hebrews 13 and Ezekiel 37. I will do so under three headings:

The Gift and the Challenge of – Unity (more), Servanthood & Hope

The Gift and Challenge of Unity – John 17:1, 20 – 26

Farewell Discourse – like a Last Will and Testament by Jesus. Ch 13 – 17

John is not simply reporting to his community what was said and done back then – 60-70 years before. Rather, he is enabling his hearers or readers to participate in the moment – to make a **'then'** moment a **'now'** moment.

This prayer of Jesus was **their prayer**, and it is also **our prayer** to the one we are invited by Jesus to call OUR FATHER.

At the inaugural gathering in the Sydney Town Hall, the occasional preacher was the Rev Dr Phillip Potter. That's – "...**that they may all be one**. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, **so that the world may believe** that you have sent me". That is, that there is both a **personal** and a **public dimension** to Christian unity.

The endeavour for Christian unity is, we like to think, in our blood as a Uniting Church – part of **our DNA**. **First Assembly** – owned it as **our vocation**.

Disruption of the Kirk (Scotland, 1843) resulted in a transplanting of two Presbyterian branches to Australia. The formal **union** of these two branches was effectively achieved in **Victoria as early as the 1850s**.

The divisions of the **Methodist movement** in Britain resulted in five branches of Methodism being transplanted in the Australasian colonies. **Methodist union was achieved by 1901** (Britain 1930s).

In 1902, at the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, the notion of a **United Evangelical Protestant Church** was introduced.

Our three former traditions combined to form the **United Church in North Australia in 1946** – a major venture in Christian unity.

The year I commence theological studies, **1969**, marked the commencement of the **United Faculty of Theology (UFT)**

By the 1960s and 1970s there was a significant number of **Joint Parishes** of varying configuration in Australia – **The Ovens Valley Uniting Parish**. Neighbouring parishes (Beechworth & Mount Beauty) **Joint Parishes**.

Sadness - Continuing Presbyterian Church and continuing Independent Congregations. Methodist churches in New Zealand and the Pacific islands had now been separated to find their own life apart (Meth of Australasia).

The emergence of the **United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress** as a Covenant/Partnership with the UCA in the early 1980s is significant. **(Perhaps a model for the body envisaged at the Uluru Convention)?**

We can now rejoice that **immigrant peoples from the Pacific and Asia** now add a profoundly new dimension to the Uniting Church.

There are, of course, some efforts to for unions and cooperation with other Christian traditions (eg **Greensborough UC & CoC**). But these are few and are, sadly, largely based on a strategy for survival.

Many have a sense of **disappointment** concerning the **lack of impetus**. And I and many of my contemporaries lament the **conclusion of UFT**.

Yet there are **some less visible but important things** to be aware of:

Involvement in ACC and VCC

(Some local inter-church activities, but fewer these days)

Active members of world bodies, including the

World Council of Churches, World Methodist Council

World Communion of Reformed Churches (Pres & Cong)

The UCA is actively involved in a range of **Ecumenical Dialogues**

Discussions with Rev Drs **Robert Gribben and Sandy Yule** recently

UCA Nationally (including dialogues and World bodies)

UCA – with other churches – most recently **The Salvation Army**

WCC & WMC – “ and *Uniting churches*”

WCC dialogues ‘*Towards a Common Vision*’ (a missional statement)

WMC & WCRC various dialogues

Move for a joint assembly of **WCRC with Lutherans (500th)**

Important to note that most doctrinal issues seem to have been agreed and that it is mainly structural and polity differences that separate churches

Inter-Faith dialogues – UCA and moderate Islam are slowly taking shape

Challenge for our Outer Eastern Cluster of UC Congregations to keep before us the prayer of Jesus, and to ask what it means for our future.

The Gift and Challenge of Servanthood

Hebrews 13:1 – 8 (Application and closing exhortation)

Mutual Love

Local congregation etc (key)

The primary expression of the church's life

Hospitality

Visitors, other groups (Not so good at this)

Prisoners & Torture

Asylum Seekers & Refugees

[Refugee Week – Tammy Fraser !]

Marriage bed – Sexuality

UC disciplines (incl CofEthics, supervision)

Safe place for children

Acceptance/welcome LGBT (even if not...)

Love of money Statement to Nation 1977 (one of three)

Two paragraphs from the Statement:

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 infringe basic rights and freedoms. We will challenge values which emphasize acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.

The Gift and Challenge of Hope – Ezekiel 37:15 – 28

Thought it was Dry Bones (37:1-14) – Two sticks (similar challenge)

Prophetic Speech – **prophetic imagination!**

Some would have seen as audacious and absurd

Exiled from Judah (South) may possibly be imagined

But the northern tribes of Israel in Assyria 721 BCE ?

and King David had died nearly 500 years before

*“Ezekiel portrays the **impossible becoming possible**. The scattered tribes of Israel (some for more than 130 years) can be reunited. The homeland can be reclaimed. The Covenant can be verified. The Sovereignty of Israel’s God will be evident to God’s people, and the nations”*

OUR REALITY - UCA membership in Vic dropped from 83,000 in 1977 to less than half by 25th anniversary (I SUSPECT ITS HALVED AGAIN)

Major and rapid decline across the Western world

Progress of Enlightenment over 2+ centuries

Affluence and sense of self-sufficiency

Sexual abuse by clergy has had a significant affect – across churches

Terrorism has made people suspicious of religion *per se*

A lack of confidence, influence, and financial resources of the UCA

Strategies that once worked no longer do

Rev Dr Ian Breward (UCAs 25th) – Conclusion in 2002 (p223) *“Restructuring will not create the requisite spiritual energies. We have to wait in hope”.*

Luke/Acts – Prayerfully Wait (**Anna and Simeon**)

Uluru Statement from the Heart (Q&A 30 May)

Pat Anderson – Co-Chair of Referendum Council

“For any real political and social change one has to imagine a new future. One needs to be aspirational. There needs to be a dreaming”

Prophetic imagination and Hope

Dare to dream and anticipate a new future that GOD has for God’s church

Close Hebrews 13: closing section:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

Not just a call to faithfulness to the past dreams of the UCA. Rather, the same willingness to make difficult decision and face challenges of tomorrow.

A Hymn we shall sing later:...(Elizabeth J Smith, 1956- Anglican - Perth)

God gives us a future, daring us to go into dreams and dangers on a path unknown. We will face tomorrow in the Spirit’s power, we will let God change us, for new life starts now.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD ON THE WAY (Closing para of UCA’s BU)

The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.