

## A DOWNWARD SLOPE?

A knowledgeable commentator on radio, Keith Suter, has put out a piece on the decline of the Uniting Church and the likely collapse if the decline goes on. This set me wondering about the strengths and weaknesses of the UCA and similar churches around the world, like United Reformed Church in UK, the United Church in Canada, and the United Church of Christ in USA.

My thesis is that one way to measure the start of considerable numerical decline is the date when we ceased taking church membership seriously.

It was, in all our Protestant traditions, a serious and challenging moment when you were accepted as a fully responsible communicant member. This was distinctive. It set us apart from national and ethnic churches where, after infant baptism, you were assumed to be on the general path to Confirmation and Communion, just by being a citizen. With us you joined as a member because this was the calling of Christ, and so you accepted the central beliefs and the moral disciplines of the community. The local church kept a record of its membership; it was not a light or casual thing. It was sometimes referred to as a Covenant Fellowship.

My local church ceased to keep a careful record of membership twenty years ago. A list was kept of those who were traditionally enrolled and had been there for years, plus strong supporters who had not wanted to do anything formal about membership, plus those who came to church occasionally and left their name in the visitor's book, plus those who had been members but had moved away and had not asked to be delisted. This created a long list but did not claim that it was a list of members. Membership as a formal status was left behind. We were excused from any clear commitment.

At the same period we ceased to fulfil our baptismal commitments. In that service we promise, as a congregation, to care for the baptised infant/child so that Christian teaching may lead to discipleship. This has lapsed, partly because parents coming for baptism are often from a distance and come to this church because their family have been members from long ago. It is also because we have no system of pastoral visiting of those baptised.

The thinking at that time was all for inclusion. We were a welcoming community, respecting all who would come, without differentiation. That was not at all a bad intention. Christ welcomes all. Yet it was an emphatic loosening of the ties which held us together. As we were liberal in our attitude towards confirmation and membership, so we were liberal in theology. I question whether it is possible to build a strong institution with such a basis.

We might respond that the great purpose is not to create strong institutions but to witness to the spirit of Christ, and that perhaps we have got closer to that aim than some more

prosperous denominations. That is entirely possible. It is not for us to judge. But we cannot then be surprised if the Uniting Church is seen to be in decline.

**To maintain a strong church through generations and through this intensely competitive, secular society requires clarity and simplicity in its belief, a structure which is both effective and light, and a challenging discipline of life and worship.**

**BELIEF** The Uniting Church set out with a statement of belief in its Basis of Union. This was a thoroughly considered, Reformed, classically-based and intellectually open document. It gave authority to Scripture and also held open the continuing process of interpretation. It regarded the church as on pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God, holding the treasure in clay pots. This good but wordy statement did not become in any way a test of membership; no one other than ministers at their ordination had to subscribe to it. It was not taught regularly from the pulpit. Most worshippers knew little of it. So it was sometimes said, "You can believe anything you like in the Uniting Church." Thus we surrendered one of the keys to a strong, stable, durable body.

There were some good reasons why this was so. Within the three denominations which came together in union there were many varieties of approach to faith and definition of faith. The Presbyterians looked back to the Calvinist tradition long ago, and still held to the place of honour for Scripture, for eldership and for the regular discipline of presence at the Communion Service. Methodists looked back to Wesley, the focus on personal religious experience and the outworking of faith in social action. Congregationalists were keen to preserve the rights of the local congregation, especially in the calling of a minister. They distrusted creeds as always partial witnesses to the mysteries of God. So to introduce a new creedal statement which would be considered authoritative for the church, which could be readily understood and used in worship, was not practical.

The appeal of a simple, clear statement marked the great Evangelical campaigns of Whitefield, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and all their descendants down to Billy Graham. They preached that you are in or out, saved or damned, trusting Christ or mired in sin; your choice today determines all. Only faith can save you. Thousands have been moved by such preaching and we would be foolish indeed to mock such directness and certainty.

In seeking honesty we cannot be so curt. No short form of words can contain it all. We are limited in knowledge, vision and language. The Nicene Creed, often taken as the ecumenical best chance of unity, is tied to the thought forms of the Greek/Roman world and says not one word about the ministry of Christ; it jumps from miraculous birth to death and resurrection. But should we not try in our time and our fellowship, so that all of us could unite in a statement of faith to be used regularly in worship? My own poor attempt at such a statement is appended.

**ORDER** We started out with a firm decision for an eldership pattern; that is for the local church to set aside and ordain elders for life, those who would form the leadership group

with the minister. There was also a parish pattern, to keep some of the character of the Methodist Circuit, with a Presbytery covering perhaps twenty or thirty local churches, and a OSynod for each State, and a General Assembly for the national body. This was rather too heavy an ordering to be sustained, with a possible five layers of decision-making. The State Synods have held the key to property and are the major influence on policy.

In 1977 the churches came together rejecting episcopacy as the possible way forward and for oversight purposes kept to a pattern of councils. I have lived with such a pattern for many years and can see some of its strengths and weaknesses. It does engage and represent a wide spectrum of opinion and experience. It listens to lay people as much as to clergy. It is careful, not bulldozing local loyalties. It does not have to pretend to omniscience. It very seldom carries a big stick. But it is slow, cumbersome and consumes much time for presbytery and synod members, drawing ministers away from local pastoral work. It is conservative, very rarely creating radical initiatives. It lacks a clear personal voice and personal leadership. Episcopacy does not answer all the problem, for a bishop may become heavy-handed, dull, out of touch with congregations, but it has proved a very stable way of keeping the church together through difficult times. It is one element essential for any union of the Protestant and Catholic traditions. We should not regard it, as some strict Scottish Presbyterians do, as a dangerous disease.

But we have retained the tradition of a professional, stipendiary ordained ministry. We have trusted that this is the way to ensure that the central Christian inheritance is carried forward, that worship is regular, informed, orderly, and that the congregation may be cared for pastorally. We have been strict in ensuring the education of candidates for ordination. This pattern presupposed that a congregation and a minister would be matched with the help of the Presbytery, and with the congregation providing the finance and housing for the minister. Our history shows that this pattern is not viable. In farming areas the congregations are too small to support a minister, so have to be grouped, often over large distances. In the big cities costs have grown and a minister with a manse, plus the upkeep of buildings, becomes too heavy a cost for a declining congregation. Yet to spread ministerial pastoral care over several congregations hardly answers the problem, for it weakens one of the inherent purposes of ministry, to be deeply involved in the local community.

Just looking at the figures - untheological – it now needs about 60 church members, each giving about \$2000 a year to carry a budget for a full-time minister plus general upkeep expenses. It seldom works like that. Letting out rooms and halls, bequests, bazaars and stalls of all sorts, concerts, creches – all means are used to balance the budget. So we plough on without any radical consideration of the pattern of ministry.

We might, for example, move to a pattern of fewer but stronger congregations, combining existing congregations, using the sale of premises to build or improve one district church, with one or perhaps two stipendiary ministers. Or we might look at the non-stipendiary ministry as the pattern, with each one nominated by the congregation and paid only expenses, while the stipendiary minister would be the district mentor, adviser, encourager and public speaker. Or we might press the ecumenical challenge and share ministry with

other denominations. But any such initiative would require conviction and courage, which do not easily reach effective outcomes through a committee system.

#### DISCIPLINE AND CHALLENGE

“Easy come and easy go” would be a poor motto for any substantial institution. It suggests a floating membership, drifting from one place to another on a whim. It is not quite like that in the general usage of the Uniting Church, but there is a tendency that way. We do not mark entry with any clarity, although baptism and confirmation could be very significant milestones in a personal faith journey. We do not hold to a tithing custom for our giving to the church, or anything approaching that. We do not ask that members regard attendance at worship as a top priority in their lives. In fact we hold to Membership Lite. The result is that most congregations depend on a small core of devoted people who offer themselves for service because of personal conviction, or delight in the fellowship, or the nourishment of their spiritual life. They are tireless but aging, for they were shaped by their family in their childhood when Sunday School and Youth Group was a common experience. There are few successors.

The challenge of Christ to “Follow Me” was radical and risky. It was to call people to a journey on a bumpy road where old habit or tradition could not protect you and the authorities were eager to take you down. There is no way to transfer the first century milieu into our present day; we cannot ignore two thousand years of human development. But is there not a real challenge in discipleship? Are we too easily assimilated into the consumerist environment? Should we not challenge policies which deny human solidarity and tend to racism? Too often the church has been on the side of conservative, military and dictatorial regimes, a position which does not reflect the way of Christ.

The concept of discipline in the life of the church has always been a cause of friction. Even in apostolic times questions were raised about authority; who was in and who was out. The Bishop of Rome claimed authority as the senior of all the bishops and the developing papacy endorsed that, so that to be within the church meant to be in communion with the Pope, to hold the same basic faith as the Pope and to be subject to his judgement. That is a way of dealing with authority which we have rejected, but our replacement, the authority of the Word is less clear, more open to argument and more individual. In practice we do not accept a churchly authority; congregations can happily disagree with a General Assembly decision or fumble their way around it. We live with conscience as king. This may be a splendid philosophy but it does not build a strong institution based on a sure, agreed faith.

AND SO.....

The Uniting Church, both by original intent and by personal conviction through the years, has chosen not be strong on those institutional factors. It was, in a sense, born to fade away. There was a hope for further unions but these came to nothing as no partner could be found. There was joy in the many ethnic groups which brought their fresh vitality to the

fellowship. We have consistently taken a public stand for social justice. But we failed to draw succeeding generations, lacking the strong, simple, demanding, whole-life challenge that drew us as teenagers, and so have relied on an ageing membership. Perhaps we have been too timid or too comfortable.

Suppose the Synod asked every congregation to write a one page statement on where and what it realistically expects to be in ten years' time. Would that challenge our church councils?

Any planning for the future shape of the church needs to be bold and radical (for repeating the present pattern in a different building is not likely to draw more into discipleship), not dominated by the accountants (who have their role but not always a vision for the Kingdom of God), and engaging the talents of all (for neither the ministers nor the councils alone can engineer the future of congregations).

We need sensitivity to the pain that older members feel when any radical change is suggested. Many have given life service in a congregation. In some cases they know it is a diminishing community but they continue to make personal sacrifices to keep it going. So no local church should be closed down without the fullest thought, prayer, discussion of possible alternatives and careful planning. The fact that the Synod is the legal owner of the local church property should not be determinative; every congregation regards the local church as theirs.

We need to learn from those of our congregations which are strong and growing. We thank God for them. What are the factors that have been influential for them? Do they indicate a way to follow? Have we listened enough to our Korean, Chinese and Pacific Islander congregations?

It is not realistic to think of copying "successful" popular churches, either those with elaborate ritual, classical liturgy and trained choirs, or those with shouting, swaying enthusiasm. We can only be ourselves. There is a unique place for the Uniting Church in the community with our three strains of Reformation heritage, our ecumenical intention, our liberal approach, our multi-ethnic fellowship and our strong social witness. It may be a small place but it is where we have been led, and it is a species of church which can enrich the universal fellowship.

I would urge the leadership of the Uniting Church to look anew at our intent to go on uniting. This is difficult at present when most churches are defensive and self-concerned, but unless we pursue the hopes of 1977 we have no clear institutional objective. We should look again at the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 between the Lutheran and Reformed communions, which opened up the possibility of intimate mutual acceptance. We could consider the UK union of the Churches of Christ with the United Reformed Church to see if there are signs there of a way forward. We should not give up the ecumenical calling.

I can't forget a visit back in the 1980s to a new town in the Netherlands on a polder of reclaimed land, where there was just one site for a church, one new building, for all. There were a Catholic priest and a Reformed Church Pastor in a joint ministry, each leading

worship in their own tradition. On Sunday morning there was a service at 9.30 and another at 11.0. But they never announced which would be which. That was probably testing the rules; it was about trust, movement towards unity, and it seemed to work.

Could we try to do something of that order in the new suburbs which are growing rapidly around our big cities? In the present social context there is a strong call for the denominations to be co-operative in the large new suburbs, for religious tribalism belongs to the past.

So, at this 40<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Uniting Church, we have to admit the decline in our numbers and social influence, think realistically about our challenges, rejoice in our present dedicated membership, strengthen the factors which hold us together, and seek fresh ways in which we can minister the word of God's grace for our generation. We must cling to the rock, not to the rubble.

Bernard Thorogood June '17

## WE BELIEVE

Our thoughts and words cannot contain the mystery of God,  
but what has been revealed to us we believe with confidence and joy.

We live as children in their parents' house, this wonderful creation, aware of the darkness of human cruelty, delighting in all beauty, generosity and love.

We believe that in the man Jesus of Nazareth we meet the eternal, creative purpose of God, always seeking healing and peace for fearful, divided humanity.

We believe that in his death and resurrection we see the love and power of God sharing the depth of human sorrow and transforming tragedy to glory.

So we follow Christ, the way to God, the truth that endures and the life beyond death.

We are called by the Spirit into the fellowship of the universal church, praying for its unity, faithfulness and courage. We believe that Christ is with us in word and sacrament, in all humble service and all sincere search for truth

We share the striving for justice, freedom from oppression and respect for all people.

We believe that the will of God, which is beyond our sight and effort, is the fulfilment of creation, when all life will be at one with the Creator.

We believe in God who is over all, through all and in all, spirit of love, hope and life for ever. We praise God with word and silence, talents and dreams, song and service now and always. Amen