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CROSS Purposes

The question of same-sex marriage is presently in the spotlight of both church and state. Over coming issues, *Cross Purposes* will run a number of pieces on this topic from different points of view within the church. One touchstone for the debate in the Uniting Church will be the “Sacred Union Ceremony” published last year by Uniting Networks Australia. In this issue, we publish a review of the ceremony by Anglican liturgist Elizabeth J. Smith. Elizabeth engages UNA in conversation in the second person, and gives an appreciative reading of the published ceremony while suggesting some areas where it could be made more robust.

In 2011, the Bioethics Committee of the Vic-Tas Synod was disestablished. We publish here a response to this decision from the Chairperson and Secretary of the late Committee, Ross Carter and Rosalie Hudson, critical of the justification that was given, in particular its emphasis on the UCA’s “grounded theology”. Ross and Rosalie argue that this risks substituting other “grounds” for Christian ethics than the church’s doctrine as described in the *Basis of Union*.

Continuing our recent *credo* theme of the church, Christopher Page (recently received as a Uniting Church minister) responds to Christiaan Mostert’s “Towards a Theology of the Church”. Christopher envisages a church less exclusively grounded in the particular textual narratives of the Old and New Testaments, and argues that a broader base of religious traditions is more appropriate for the expectations of contemporary society.

And Paul Stephens contributes another angle on the church, in particular what the future looks like for the UCA. He situates some of the current obvious challenges in their (perhaps surprising) historical context, and notes signs of hope, particularly in the opportunity for a changing church to renew its focus on God’s mission.

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Christopher Page

Cosmic Christ and Cosmic Church

a response to Christiaan Mostert

I am grateful for the insights I found in Christiaan Mostert's article "Towards a Theology of the Church" (CP 23). In our present age, with the demise of the institutional or as Christiaan has suggested the *empirical* church in Western society, we often abandon the hard work of theological reflection and choose pragmatic and structural solutions when deeper questioning is required.

A theology of the church raises in my mind the idea that there is such thing as God's view of what the church should be like; that there is an ideal plan for how and why Christians gather together, and that the bible is a prescriptive text providing exclusive insight into being the people of God. I don't think that that is the case. Theology is never more than talk *about* God. It is not the talk *of* God. The communication of the divine, of God, or of the sacred is for me, always experiential and therefore subjective. The biblical narrative contains an obvious description of ancient Israel's ordering of its religious, social,

cultural, political and moral life, and in the New Testament there are many descriptive narratives of the Christian movement from the first writings of the Apostle Paul to the stories about Jesus in the Gospels. These writings give us a glimpse of the form and structure of the infant and developing Ecclesia in the ancient world. But that description is fundamentally shaped by a world view in which God stands outside the world and speaks into it. Therefore we have in the biblical text pronouncements about the nature of God and the church which in the ancient world carried the authority of the words of God and therefore were accepted as prescriptive.

Not so today. The demise of the church in our era can be directly correlated with the collapse of external religious power. The language of "God over" cannot be easily translated into meaningful theological concepts for our time. More appropriate, it would seem, and possibly the only meaningful way in which we can speak of God today is as "God in" or "God

within". If the language of "God within" is adopted, then it is possible to speak of the church bringing itself into being and that it is the result of a few followers of Jesus forming a society of remembrance. Why? Because it was "God in" that time and place; "God within", dare I say the *Zeitgeist*, that moment in history when the human field was so porous that the divine creation could form a new being, a new way, and a new community in alignment with the life, teaching and message of Jesus. Paul Tillich in his book *Theology of Culture* says:

The Church is the Community of the New Being ... It is primarily a group of people who express a new reality by which they have been grasped ... It is the place where the power of the New Reality which is Christ, and which was prepared in all history and especially in Old Testament history, moves into us and is continued by us.¹

It is an interesting thought that the coming of this new community was being prepared throughout *all* of history. While I may be stretching Tillich's notion beyond his original intention, I suggest that the church was being prepared not only throughout the history of human activity, but also throughout our evolutionary history, to become the expression of a new being and a new way of being in the world. For me this fits well with the idea that the church did not simply begin with the calling and commissioning of the disciples. Nor would I say it began with the story of the

coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. While these were "porous" moments of divine activity, and there is as Christiaan suggests continuity between Israel and the church, what is more important in our era is to recognize the universal movement toward the "salvation" or "wholeness" or "completion" of the whole world and of the universe. This cosmic view of the Christ figure and the cosmic church will unshackle both Christ and the church from the narrowness of religious culture and I think revitalize theology so that it can talk about God within the universe.

Christiaan is unhappy with the idea that the church should be relevant to the contemporary era. If I understand him correctly he is concerned that the search for relevance can eclipse the quest for "being" and replace it with mere "doing". Being relevant is a two-edged sword. In one sense it is all about relevance. Our language, concepts, ideas, metaphors and images must have a cultural currency and they must be relevant if they are to be intelligible within a given time and place. However, often our Christian and religious identity is formed against the prevailing culture as suggested by Christiaan in at least one of the three models of "church" in ancient Israel. Different times and places demand different forms, structures and even, I would argue, different theologies. So how the church responds to a particular situation and in a particular context is important. Relevance for me is not the same as cultural compliance, moral accommodation or spiritual acquiescence. It is an informed

¹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 1959) 212.

discussion with the prevailing world views in which the church is a conversant and not necessarily an authority. Not an easy position for those who not so long ago held significant power!

Perhaps where I would differ from Christiaan in recovering a theology of the church is in the places from which we draw our inspiration. As Christiaan alludes to in the last paragraph of his article, there must be at least a dialogue between the sacred text and the prevailing culture which may express itself through film, literature, poetry and conversations with those of other faiths and with those of no faith at all. In fact, I would suggest that when you are lost and the map you have been following becomes oblique, perhaps the wisest thing to do is ask for direction from others you meet on the road. To be a pilgrim people doesn't mean we are isolated in the world of ideas nor is our identity so fixed that we are unable to shift in our theology when the shock of the new confronts us.

For me the fundamental theological shift that has occurred in the last fifty years has been in the idea that the Universe is the Word of God of which biblical theology is a part but not the whole. For me this expands our understanding of the church and of the Christ figure to become an all-encompassing and cosmic concept. The notion of a Christ consciousness that transcends even the Christian religion is becoming more prevalent in societies where differing religions are in dialogue. It's difficult to imagine fifty years ago that a book by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist

leader, would have had the title *Living Christ, Living Buddha*. There has been in times of upheaval and renewal in the Christian church a healthy syncretism that has revitalized and redirected the Christian faith. It is this ability to listen to the "Spirit of the Age" and to respond to it in meaningful ways that will keep our theologies on track and our churches alive.

Christiaan suggests that the post-exilic community in ancient Israel provides a helpful example of recovering identity that the church could learn from. My reading of the post-exilic community in

"To be a pilgrim people doesn't mean that we are isolated in the world of ideas."

ancient Israel is that it did incorporate significant ideas and practices into its religion. And these insights were drawn from the oppressive culture in which they found themselves. It is true that their identity as a community of hopefulness and perhaps a community of justice was forged in those fires of oppression and that during these times, and more probably many years later, they mined their own theological history and tradition for that which would give them spiritual sustenance and a stronger sense of identity. But it is also true that their religious faith incorporated ideas and

practices from the surrounding cultures that changed and reshaped their world view. The evolutionary process of both the spiritual life and of religious practices seems to be always a dynamic interplay between adaption and conservation and it is never static nor a simple return to a golden era.

Perhaps we are in a time when our theology of the church needs a serious overhaul. While a return to our roots is always a fruitful exercise, I think today we may need to seek understanding, our *raison d'être*, by looking out, rather than looking back or looking down. Christaan's idea that we must recover the sense of being a *storied* people is a helpful one. His suggestion of a *textual* community is I think, less helpful. It must be the narrative or rather the narratives of the bible that provide us today with the substance of our understanding of ourselves as a gathered community. But the biblical narrative is only part of understanding of ourselves. The living presence of the Spirit continues to give us stories that form and shape our identity and they must be grafted into the ancient story of the church. Also the wealth of biblical scholarship drawn from sociological and psychological studies of the bible and the human condition are essential in forming our theology of the church. This will of course throw up a range of competing theological views, but in this age I doubt that there is any other way. Monolithic theological systems are unwelcome in a world that values pluralism, evolution and innovation.

We in the 21st century are moving into a time of theology being done in reference to the physical universe in which we exist. The writings of cosmic theologians like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and Roger Haight and others, propel our theological thinking into the context of the Universe. And therefore even a theology of the church can't be exclusively drawn for the biblical text. Sallie McFague's notion that the world is God's Body is being expanded to incorporate the idea that the Universe is the body of God, or as the new atheists would postulate, the multiverse is God's body. (Of course the atheist would abhor the use of the word God.) So if our theology is so expansive as to take into account all that is, where does that leave a theology of the church that is exclusively drawn for the Hebrew and Christian scriptures?

I think there is present in the scriptures both Hebrew and Christian glimpses of a cosmic theology of the church. *Thus said the Lord, the heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that you build to me and where is the place of my rest?* (Is. 66:1) But the reader in the 21st century brings a very different cosmology to this text, so therefore must have basic hermeneutic skills to interpret the words in the modern era. Also often quoted among progressive Christians are the words from the Apostle Paul's sermon on Mars Hill: *For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring"*.

(Acts 17:28) The use of wisdom from outside the tradition, and the expansive nature of all being within God, draws many beyond traditional theological categories.

For me all theology, and in this case a theology of the church, does best when it looks up, down, in and out. It is a uniquely human activity that attempts to uncover, reflect on and explain the mysteries of divine and sacred encounters.

All of life is the theatre of God's activity, so all of life provides the substance for our theological reflection and nothing is exempted from the quest for wisdom and insight.

CHRISTOPHER PAGE is minister of Toorak UC and Vice President of the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria. He has recently moved from the Baptist to the Uniting Church, and has particular interest in adult faith and spiritual development.

credo

Paul Stephens

The Uniting Church and the Future

...things may look crook but there are signs of hope!

“Things are crook in Tallarook!” So goes one well known Australian colloquialism which if a Wikipedia article is to be believed relates to failing to find employment in Tallarook during the era of the Great Depression.¹

Whatever was once the case in the rural Victorian town of Tallarook, things today are not so wonderful with the church in this land, and most certainly with the Uniting Church.

So much so that UCA Assembly President Alistair Macrae challenged Presbytery Ministers at a conference in February to give some space to thinking about the fact that “we are sinking.”

I am a Presbytery Minister within the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra which includes much of what used to be termed the bible belt of Melbourne. According to some statistics I cobbled together there has been an overall decrease of 16% in attendance at worship in the congregations within

the Presbytery in the first decade of this century. Even more strikingly, in some parts of the Presbytery the percentage decrease has been much higher than this figure.

While there are some exceptions to this trend, this general picture I doubt comes as news to anyone.

In this brief article, as well as seeking to name the reality of the situation of the church in this land, I will contend that the Uniting Church’s plight reflects trends that are not particular to the Uniting Church or this country by drawing on the work of Robin Gill, and then offer some observations about what might be the appropriate response of the church to this situation.

Robin Gill is an English sociologist who has studied the trends in church attendance over the last two hundred years. A group from the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania met with him in Canterbury last year.

The fruit of Gill’s research has been some significant myth-busting. He maintains, for example, that the only

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tallarook,_Victoria (accessed 28/2/2012).

genuinely growing churches in England are Afro-Caribbean Pentecostal churches ... the Anglo Pentecostal churches are not growing.

Perhaps one of his most confronting contentions is that English church attendances, after a period of significant growth in the first half of the nineteenth century, have been decreasing ever since 1851, the year of a major church attendance survey. Interestingly this survey revealed that the Church of England was not doing so well in comparison with the free churches, as the Anglican Bishops either hoped or were ready to believe, but that is another story.

In England, possibly due to the dislocation created by the Second World War at its aftermath, there was no postwar period of church growth as was experienced in Australia.

In this country, as John Bodycomb argues, 1960 was the high tide of church attendance.² This is confirmed by data such as John Emmett's observation that 1963 was the year that saw historically the highest sales of educational resources by the Joint Board of Christian Education.

It is likely church attendances in Australia before the postwar era reflected the English situation and were decreasing during the period 1851 to 1945. In short, church decline in England and Australia did not start in the last thirty years.

The reasons for the decline are manifold and the fodder for much

² John Bodycomb, *A Matter of Death and Life: The Future of Australia's Churches* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1986) 8.

speculation and argument by theologians and other thinkers. Owen Chadwick wrote a profound series of lectures on secularization, for example, exploring such questions as: "Why should it be that a school boy at Harrow in the 1880s should say that 'Darwin had disproved the Bible' and so he had 'rearranged his faith accordingly'?"³

From the point of view of sociology, Robin Gill makes the following observations about the English situation which I am convinced are not totally divorced from the Australian context.

Based on extremely detailed analysis of a whole gamut of surveys related to church attendances, he has shown that the following often-held assumptions are open to serious question:

- that the churches in Britain were full before World War I;
- that the Victorians built churches to meet a need;
- that competitive church building increased attendance;
- that disillusionment with the church set in only after World War I;
- that empty churches are all due to secularization;
- and that the growth of twentieth-century leisure activities is responsible for decrease in church attendance.⁴

The last observation is particularly striking as I travel around congregations I often hear people argue that this

³ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975) 164.

⁴ Robin Gill, *The "Empty" Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 7-9.

is a crucial factor in young people not attending church.

Gill does however point out that the collapse of the Sunday School movement is clearly a more recent phenomenon. Whether or not adults were in church, it was not that long ago that a significant proportion of children attended Sunday School. Indeed during the 1950s and probably through to the 1970s the key way in which the Uniting Church and its precursor denominations “made disciples” was through the enculturation that took place via the Sunday School, indeed often at the expense of any other form of approach.

There was no Plan B.

“English church attendances have been decreasing ever since 1851 ... church decline did not start in the last thirty years.”

For some years the church has tended to dive under the doona and declare that “It is not happening! It is not happening!”

But there is no question we are in a time of significant decline in church attendance; and across the church this is causing much anxiety and stress.

Congregations are struggling to know how to respond. The time when a denomination would decide to “plant a church” by looking at the growth trends of a city, putting a sign up and waiting for the people who were Methodist/

Congregational/Presbyterian or whatever to show up are long gone! Right before our eyes we are entering a new chapter in the history of the church. And very earthy questions reflecting serious fears about the institution are being aired in the meetings of the church:

- Why don't the patterns of church life and ministry bear fruit anymore?
- Who is going to take over the roles of local leadership?
- How are we going to pay the minister?
- We had three ministers once, now how do we afford one?
- Will we be here in five years time?
- What if any legacy will we leave to others?

By reason of circumstance, we are being forced to struggle about re-imagining the mission and ministry of the church—asking questions seriously about why we exist and whose we are.

We really do have to let go of static parochial models of church life. The antecedents of the Uniting Church had settled into a model not unlike the English parish model before they came to Australia: but the comfort of this model is crumbling before us.

We may have mouthed the words of the *Basis of Union* about being a pilgrim people: like it or not we are beginning to discover that this might be more than a cliché. Like it or not we are being called to faithfully follow Christ into a future very different from the past we know and live in with relative comfort. Is there not something at the heart of the gospel about death and resurrection?

Really what does mission and engaging in mission mean?

What does it mean to share in the *missio Dei*?

The amount of literature that is being produced that seeks that offer help in this struggle is truly phenomenal.

In thinking about evangelism in our time, for example, the following elements of any Fresh Expression of church have been suggested by Bishop Graham Cray, the Archbishop of Canterbury's missionaryer:

- it is missional—it seeks to benefit non-churchgoers;
- it is contextual—it seeks to fit the context;
- it is formational—it aims to form disciples;
- and it is ecclesial—it intends to become church.⁵

The order is significant: too often conversations about mission and evangelism start with church.

While there is much uncertainty in the life of the church, this is not to say that there are not many signs of vitality in the community of Christ in this land. Indeed, there is much life and hope. I keep coming across communities of faith who are rediscovering the gospel notion that we are called to be a people whose

life is to be given in sharing in God's mission of love to the world. Communities of faith who recognize that this can be a most freeing calling, because it is not all about us and what we do or don't do.

In a conversation recently with leaders of a small ageing congregation, the leaders spoke about engaging in a new mission related project for perhaps only a twelve month period. This conversation gave me great heart. They had no idea whether the congregation would be around for the long term, but they were seeking to be faithful to the call of Christ to share in God's mission of love in the here and now.

Increasingly I am also hearing echoed amongst the people with whom I have contact the following affirmation "We are not sure what the future will look like ... but that is okay, we are a people of hope".

As I have said to a number of people recently, "These may not be easy times to be church, but they are a very interesting time to be church".

With all the uncertainties, there are many signs that the people of faith are learning about mission by doing mission. People continue to risk the way of crucified and risen One even in an era when perhaps more risk is required than in days past.

PAUL STEPHENS is Presbytery Minister for Mission and Education in the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra.

⁵ From series of slides presented at the International Fresh Expressions Conference in Cambridge in September 2011.

on Areopagus Hill

Elizabeth J. Smith

Sacred Union Ceremony

an Anglican response

Uniting Network Australia is a network of care and advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people and their families, friends and allies, within the Uniting Church in Australia. UNA's "Sacred Union Ceremony" is a resource offered for the pastoral and liturgical recognition of gay and lesbian couples in the Uniting Church. The proposed ceremony seeks to provide liturgical resources for same-gender couples. Since 1992, Uniting Church policy has forbidden "recognizing same-sex relationships in any service which resembles the marriage service". Twenty years on, the UNA liturgy acknowledges that policy. It makes the disclaimer that the liturgy "is not intended to be and should not be presented as a Marriage Service", and proceeds to present resources that nonetheless demonstrate a close kinship with marriage services. Indeed, one strand of the resources is presented as an adaptation of the Marriage Service from *Uniting in Worship 2*. In this way, the tensions between policy and pastoral practice are revealed in ways

that the UCA will need to address with new vigour and theological sophistication.

I am writing about this ceremony as an Australian Anglican. My denomination, nationally and internationally, is no less conflicted about the whether, let alone the how, of full inclusion for gay and lesbian church members. I am writing as a liturgist of the constructive kind, who relishes the challenge of finding words of theological integrity and ritual efficacy for all kinds of pastoral and ecclesial occasions. And I write in clear solidarity with the gay and lesbian Christians of many denominations who have, over the past three decades, shared their faith and their lives with me. These men and women of faith and integrity have left me utterly convinced that God calls, blesses and treasures them in singleness and couplehood, not in spite of but because of their sexual identities. I think that the Church needs its gay and lesbian members at least as much those gay and lesbian Christians need the Church, and I look for the day when their presence among us is truly

recognized and duly celebrated as the gift that it is.

This review article was requested and is published not by UNA but by *Cross Purposes*, which has a wide theological brief and a diverse readership. Nonetheless, in this article I want to break the habit of speaking about, rather than to, a marginalized or minority group within the church. So I am going to change my pronouns for the remainder of this article, and address myself to UNA directly. I am thereby asking the regular readers of *CP* to work a little harder than usual, and to listen in on a conversation in which there is so much at stake for gay and lesbian people in the UCA. I thank you in advance for your willingness to do so, and I ask the members and friends of UNA for your patience as this Anglican wades into the conversation you have begun within your own denomination. As you try to build spiritual shelters in the disputed territory where you live and which you seek to imbue with the holiness to which you are called in Christ Jesus, I have some comments, cautions and questions for your further investigation.

The Importance of Love

Each of the three strands or sources from which you draw your material clearly names “love”, divine and human, as the key to the ceremony. You unmistakably set before us God “whose name is love”; love that is “generous”, “great”, “enduring” and “authentic”; the “lifting up” of love, “growing in” love, and love teamed, again and again, with “commitment”. The most

evocative and memorable language for this focus on love comes from Source A, in the texts of Dorothy McRae-McMahon among the Declaration of Purpose options.

One of the factors changing wider Australian attitudes to same-sex couples is precisely the window you give us into your relationships as places where love is found, shared and deepened. We have come a long way from the bad old days when gay men particularly were over-identified with sexual behaviour (assumed to be casual, promiscuous and exploitative) far more than with loving relationships. Now, you bear witness to a different reality with your lasting, loving relationships as we meet them in our families, workplaces and wider communities, as well as in our churches.

I would ask you, though, not to omit from your ceremony a proper recognition of the sexual component of your relationships. “Intimate” is used several times, perhaps as an alternative for “sexual” to qualify the nature of your committed relationships. Please don’t betray the embodied reality of your sexual desire for one another by leaving it out of the ceremony altogether or pushing it to the unspoken edges. At present, you have a rubric suggesting a kiss after the proclamation of the union; one of the eight options for vows includes a line promising “to stand by your side and sleep in your arms”; and some robust (if originally heterosexual) celebrations of bodies are found in the Bible reading options from Song of Songs. Only your adaptation of the UCA Marriage Service

clearly names “the full expression of physical love between the two partners”. How else might you invite us to give thanks to God with you for the literal, bodily, incarnated reality of your love for one another? How does this ceremony help to consecrate your sexual desire and pleasure, which are a God-given part of your love?

*The Importance of Learning
with and from Others*

Around the Western world, the resources for both secular and Christian religious ceremonies for same-sex couples are proliferating. Some are denominationally authorized; others, like your own, are not. You make reference to partner churches in your own tradition in other countries, and you present, as Source B, material from the service of blessing developed in the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster in Canada. You can also take pride in the exceptional liturgical writing of your own Australian colleague, Dorothy McRae-McMahon, and the thoughtful contributions of your group members including Warren Talbot and Robert Stringer. Then, as Source C, you include your adaptation of the UCA Marriage Service, hammered out theologically and liturgically by and for your own church.

With such borrowing and adapting, you stand in a fine tradition. Over the past fifty years of liturgical renewal, we have seen much interchange both within and between denominations of all kinds of texts, from baptism to funerals, from daily prayer to eucharistic

prayers. Why reinvent the wheel when so many resources can be shared and locally adapted? I would ask, though, that you recognize that there is variation between countries and denominations not only of theological rationale but also of linguistic “accent” and liturgical style. You propose a “Sacred Union Ceremony”—in the singular. You offer a single sequence of structural units: Greeting, Prayer, Declaration of Purpose, Scripture Readings and Sermon, Declaration of Intent, and so on. Within each of these structural units, though, you provide material from each of your three sources. Your three sources speak in quite different accents.

How interchangeable do you intend the elements from the three sources to be, from unit to unit? What is the risk of dissonance, both linguistic and theological, if a ceremony is constructed from some elements taken from Dorothy McRae-McMahon, others from New Westminster or your own group’s creativity, and still others from the adapted UCA Marriage Service? Please don’t succumb to the postmodern mania for unfettered choice from among unlimited alternatives. I would ask you to respect your sources by allowing each of them to speak in its own accent, rather than encouraging a patchwork of themes, styles and voices. This may mean providing not *a* ceremony but *several* ceremonies, each with its own integrity of theological emphasis and distinct linguistic resonances. And at that point, you may need to borrow and adapt less from others, and instead increase your

own local creativity, basing it on your agreed theological values. (Agreeing together on those values may be one of the most challenging prerequisites for your creative task!) You will be helping to find a genuinely Australian-accented, Uniting Church liturgical voice with which lesbian and gay couples may speak your truth in your community.

The Importance of Being Countercultural

I am not speaking here about the way same-sex couples are marked as countercultural in a heterosexist world. I

hurdles than most. You know better than most what it costs to persevere together through adversity, to make sacrifices for each other's good, to act with courage in the face of physical, emotional, social and political danger, and to speak the truth about your relationships with authenticity and integrity.

So I would ask you not to veil the grittiness of your experience in sentimental language that owes much more to the marketers of wedding paraphernalia than it does to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Please don't give in to the liturgical

“You know better than most what it costs to persevere together through adversity, to make sacrifices for each other's good, to act with courage in the face of physical, emotional, social and political danger, and to speak the truth about your relationships with authenticity and integrity.”

recognize that part of the impetus for a Sacred Union Ceremony comes from the entirely understandable desire of many same-sex couples for your fair share in the cultural celebrations and community validations already available to opposite-sex couples. The countercultural dimension I want to highlight is the Christian understanding of love, which must diverge radically from the commercialized, romanticized versions of love which permeate 21st-century Australian society.

Most love worth celebrating has had to triumph over at least some obstacles and setbacks. Your love, as lesbian and gay couples, has had to clear more

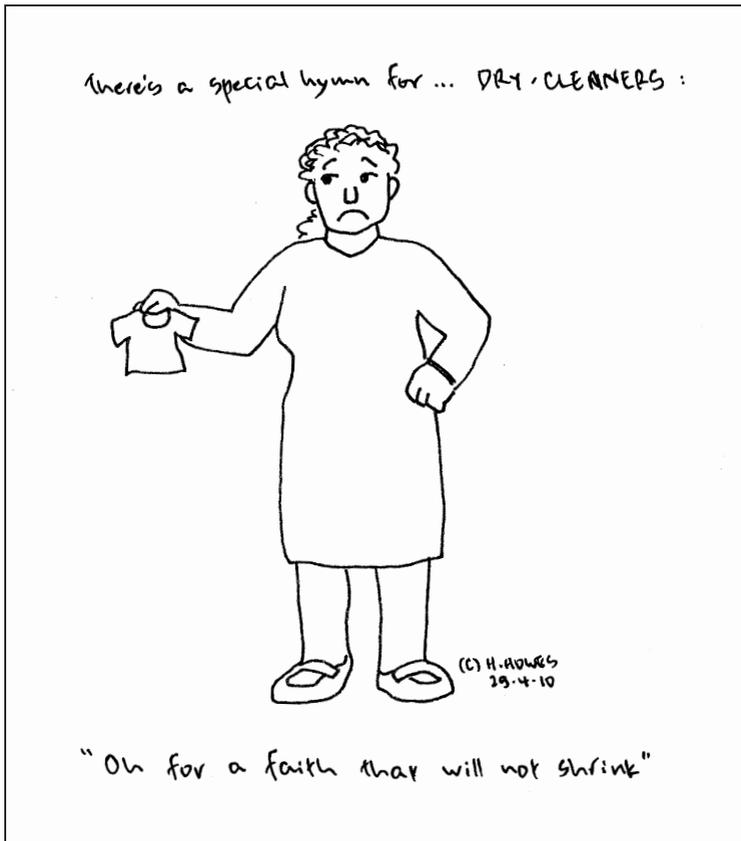
equivalent of soft-focus wedding photography. Most mainstream denominations' marriage services still pay lip-service to the notion that the man and woman marrying each other are fresh from their parental homes (or their chaste single-person dwellings) and that a radical change in their relationship is about to be inaugurated. Youthful optimism is the order of the day. You come with a different set of prior experiences. How might you name love in your ceremony with more of the costly wisdom of the cross, with more of the foolishness of sacrificial commitment, with more foot-washing and less hand-holding?

The Importance of Mission

Your ceremony has a very strong focus on the couple, on the love and commitment between them, and the future ahead of them upon which they are seeking God's blessing. It is entirely proper that as same-sex couples you have your moment in the sun, making your commitment to each other, receiving together your community's affirmation, and praying for God's grace for the years to come. This is indeed the "pastoral care" that many Synod and Assembly motions over the years have called

upon the church to provide for you, our lesbian and gay fellow-Christians.

What this ceremony does not quite do, though, is to invite you, our lesbian and gay fellow-Christians in committed relationships, to make your contribution to the church. Are you willing for your relationships to become a powerhouse of the church's mission? It is not really surprising that we are slow to issue this invitation. We have not issued it very effectively even to our heterosexually-married members. Instead, perhaps hoping to evangelize the unchurched or to retrieve the dechurched, when couples



come to us asking about marriage or other kinds of relationship blessing, we tend to offer what looks like a simply celebratory rite, a no-strings-attached, no-obligation blessing. While a couple's primary ministry will indeed be in love to each other, I wonder if it is not time to name more clearly the Christian couple's call to active mission in the world.

In a few places, your ceremony does hint at the couple's significance beyond the boundaries of their mutual love. Thus the New Westminster material says that the couple are "living expressions of God's promises to us and sources of hope to others". The adapted UCA Marriage Service resources declare that the partners in a marriage "help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound". Could you risk making stronger statements about the ways in which the basic unit of a Christian couple can add to the Church's capacity for mission? Could you call the couple to look beyond the love in each other's eyes, to the needs of the world around them? Even Warren Talbot's prayers, which ask for God's blessing on "all who are suffering from neglect or exclusion", do not quite call on the couple to help to bring this and all other kinds of injustice to an end.

Concepts which could, perhaps, be more richly expressed in this ceremony are hospitality and community. Along with love, hospitality has both divine and human dimensions that are well-attested in the bible and are capable of rich theological elaboration. A Christian couple can be an icon, even a sacrament,

of holy community, open to strangers, and strengthened by their mutual care for active and transforming mission in the world. Love that equips for mission beyond the relationship may not be as readily marketable as love that enables commitment within the relationship, at least for couples who do not share an active Christian faith. But a focus on the couple as being in a missional relationship may help to challenge the assumption that ministry and mission traffic is necessarily one-way, *from* the Christian community *to* the same-sex couple. Please call us all to pray for the day when lesbian and gay Christian couples will be recognized as leaders in mission and agents of the Church's ministry, not just as recipients of the Church's pastoral care.

The Importance of the Bible

Choosing bible readings for a Sacred Union Ceremony is a difficult task indeed, though finding bible readings for the 21st-century, post-patriarchal marriage of a woman and a man is also difficult! So you apply to Christian couples advice from Paul and John to churches trying to live together graciously; Song of Songs offers to celebrate desirable bodies both male and female; and other extracts from wisdom literature give honour to friendship. Jesus' commandment to his disciples to love one another with his kind of love is an obvious inclusion; and the words of Ruth to Naomi, and the covenant of Jonathan with David, have long been cherished by same-sex couples as affirming a depth of intimate

commitment within the community of God's people. However, with just one gospel reading suggested, from John 13, it seems that Jesus himself does not have much to say to you as same-sex couples.

So I wonder what other forms of biblical text, beyond examples of friendship and exhortations to mutual love, might expand our understanding of what God's word has to say to you as same-sex couples and to the families, friends and allies who want to worship God with you. Are there some parables of the kingdom that might evoke God's life blossoming in the world because of your relationships? Are there some wisdom-sayings of Jesus' own to provide guidance for couples as well as for individual disciples or for Christian communities? What about some first-person-plural psalms of praise for God's providence, or some prophetic demands to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God? What about the action of foot-washing that precedes Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you"? I would ask you to give those who will preach at your ceremony a rich feast of scripture to be read, interpreted and applied to your relationships.

Even though our churches have been hypnotized for too long by a bare handful of biblical passages that seem to prohibit your love, there is much more in the bible that is liberating for you and for others who struggle to find their place in the life of the church. I would ask you to explore the bible deeply, searching all the scriptures for the Good News of freedom and peace.

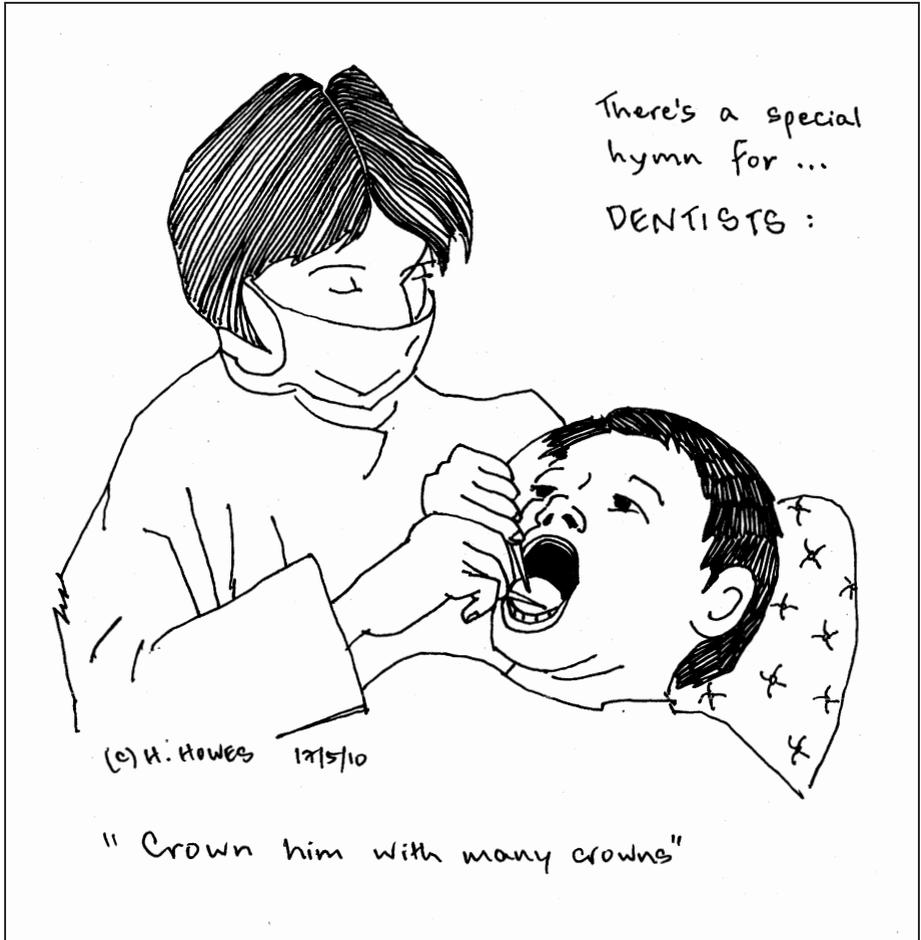
The Importance of Your Work

You are engaged in the work of liberation theology. In offering to the church this Sacred Union Ceremony, you perform an act of resistance to evil, and you claim the Holy Spirit's power to make lives holy. I ask you to keep on resisting courageously, claiming audaciously, loving missionally, and celebrating passionately. My faith and ministry will once again be richer for your leadership and example.

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double take

Hilary Howes



Ross Carter & Rosalie Hudson

Bioethics and “Grounded Theology”

The Bioethics Committee of the Synod of Victoria has been discontinued after 25 years of service to the church. Following a review by the Victoria/Tasmania Synod Standing Committee, it was determined on 31 August 2011 that the Bioethics Committee should be replaced by a process more reflective of the divergent views of the UCA.

The basis for the former Committee’s work was clearly articulated in its Terms of Reference:

In the *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church in Australia, the church acknowledges the Old and New Testaments as “unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated” (§5). The Bioethics Committee understands that the witness set forth in the Scriptures is the framework that should inform all its discussions and reports. The aim of the committee in exploring contemporary matters of bioethics is to reflect theologically on these issues. In so doing, the committee’s task is to help the church to reflect faithfully the truth given to us in Jesus Christ.¹

The reviewers (appointed by the Synod Standing Committee) were concerned that “the theological perspective of the current committee may not reflect the diversity of, or the views to be found within the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania”. On this judgement a new committee is to be formed by the Standing Committee. How and when it will be formed remains unclear. However, it will comprise members who “may need some theological in-service training to ensure that they understand the ‘grounded theology’ of the UCA”. In his September 2011 letter to ministerial colleagues, Revd. Rob Brown (General Secretary) explained the reasons for the decision. “Due to the changing nature of society and the changing needs of the Church, this committee will be discontinued...”

the CTM Board (to whom the Committee reported since 2008), an additional note was added. “The public submissions and statements issued by the Bioethics Committee are to reflect the consensus reached by the membership of the Committee and with due regard to the breadth of theological diversity within the Uniting Church.”

¹ When the Committee’s (1996) Terms of Reference were reviewed in 2010 by

The Standing Committee's decision implies that discussion of bioethics within the church needs to be determined on different grounds. The former Committee understood its task, when discussing bioethics, to reflect faithfully the truth given to us in Jesus Christ. If the cross of Christ stands at the centre of the world's political and public life, rather than on its periphery, then the church's discussion of bioethics must begin at this centre. Grounded in this reality, the church is called to resist captivity to cultural forces when formulating statements on contemporary issues such as abortion and euthanasia. In the context of the review, it was considered that the Bioethics Committee was spending an inordinately long time discussing these issues, in anticipation of a comprehensive publication to guide the church. It was also implied that the theological discussion at the heart of these life-and-death issues was not sufficiently "grounded".

The process by which the review's determination was reached included a formal meeting with the Bioethics Committee Chairperson and Secretary by the three-person review committee (appointed by the Standing Committee). In addition, according to the report, "advice was given by a member of the (Bioethics) Committee". This person was not named in the report, and the views of the other six members of the Committee were not sought. While one could argue at length about this process, the more important point concerns the grounds on which the church bases its thinking on bioethical issues.

In what sense are the "changing needs of the Church" cause for discontinuing the Bioethics Committee? If the needs of the church are understood in terms of faithful obedience to the lordship of Jesus Christ by upholding the apostolic faith defined in its own *Basis of Union*, then the Bioethics Committee may have many times been in need of correction. If, however, the needs of the church are determined by other criteria (defined in the reviewers' report as "reflecting the diversity of, or the views to be found within the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania"), the church's response to abortion and euthanasia could be calculated by a sociological survey. This would involve shifting to a different ground.²

On what ground are the deliberations of the new bioethics committee to be based? According to the General Secretary, those who are now to prepare position papers on various ethical issues must ensure they understand

² It is important to mention here that in the recent history of the Bioethics Committee, the only matter referred to it by the Synod was to request a statement on late-term abortion in 2004. While our ecumenical partners have produced statements, submissions, discussion papers on abortion and euthanasia (to name just two), the UCA has been largely silent on these issues, both regionally and nationally. Where, in Victoria, an ad hoc interfaith committee has produced comprehensive statements signed by many heads of churches and other religious leaders on contemporary bioethical issues, the UCA remains "represented" by a small number of individuals.

the “grounded theology” of the UCA. The implication here is that the previous Committee’s Terms of Reference, grounded in the unique, prophetic testimony of the Scriptures and framed by the *Basis of Union* now needs to be replaced by some other, undefined, (?more earthly) “ground”.

In grounding its Terms of Reference in the *Basis of Union*, the Bioethics Committee declared that doctrine and ethics cannot be separated. As stated in the introduction to the proposed publication:

The reconciling love for the world made known in Jesus Christ is by no means irrelevant to the profound psychological and physical effects on individuals faced with their own or others’ imminent death, or the myriad questions posed by unwanted, inconvenient, or potentially catastrophic births. The Bible presents a God who is not divorced from our history but who shapes the lives of individuals even as communities wrestle with unprecedented scientific knowledge and medical techniques.³

Although not all members of the Bioethics Committee agreed with this (trinitarian) starting point, the proposed publication states:

The starting point for Christian ethics is the doctrine of the Trinity, which implies that beginning-of-life and end-of-life decisions stand always within a caring community. “The Uniting Church in Australia believes that human beings

are created in the image of God who is three persons in open, joyful interaction ... Thus ... every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God’s children.”⁴

It appears, by the decision to discontinue the Bioethics Committee, that the church has determined a different starting point for discussing bioethical issues. The reviewers’ report recommends that new members (it is unclear whether there will be a new committee or whether various issues will be taken up as needs arise) may need “in-service training in grounded theology”, to be offered by the CTM. The clear inference is that the former Bioethics Committee’s statements and discussions were not sufficiently “grounded”. The majority of members believed that for Christians, doctrine, worship and ethics may not be separated. In the incarnation of the Son of God our humanity is joined to his. On this “ground” we are called not to some other-worldly realm but rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit we are called to faithful, ethical living in this world for which Christ has died and which is, and will be, the sphere of his rule. Neither can ethical living be divorced from worship. The proposed study guide on abortion and euthanasia thus concludes:

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams claims that the church’s ambiguity and disagreements about ethical issues

³ The final draft, *Abortion and Euthanasia: A Study Guide for the Church*, is currently being considered for publication.

⁴ “Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Human Rights” (Eleventh Assembly, July 2006, Resolution 06.20.01).

arise from “an impoverished doctrine of the Church and of the will of God”.⁵ Ambiguity flows from the view that doctrine is merely about words while the Christian life is about action. In worship, supremely in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, we praise the Trinitarian God who *communicates the living Word*. The Father, through the incarnate life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, creates in us new, transformed lives. The Holy Spirit enables us, even us, to glorify God in our daily living.

⁵ Rowan Williams, “Afterword”, in Stanley Hauerwas & Samuel Wells, “Part 1: Studying Ethics through Worship”, Hauerwas & Wells, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 495-98, 497.

It remains to be seen whether, from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, responses to bioethical issues will be drawn from some other “ground”.

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coming in issue 28...

Andrew Dutney

in service

Martin Wright

on the same-sex marriage debate

Kevin Yelverton

on the *Basis of Union*

& Uniting Church schools