

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNITING CHURCH
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Mr Robert Sanderson
Psalm 122; John 15: 1-8**

“Into Uncharted Waters”

I

The three churches that became the Uniting Church in 1997 all had a strong commitment to justice and human rights. The red piece of paper contains the Uniting Church [*Statement to the Nation*](#) and I urge you to take it home and read it. It contains these words:

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 emphasise 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 the poor.

We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

What a remarkable statement! Written in 1977, it could have been written yesterday. It still acts as a guide to the church today. It is also a powerful reminder to all its congregations and their members because what it says is firmly based on the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels.

There are two aspects to this.

First, there is the prophetic role of the church, and I often think that this is forgotten at the grass roots level of the congregation. Just as the prophets of old warned that to pursue a particular path would lead to disaster, so the church and its preachers should be prepared to point out the human, and other, consequences of all social, political, legal and economic actions. The church must be free to call the society to account – to have an independent voice outside the power structures of the society.

Second, as this statement indicates, theoretical idealism is not sufficient. It is a pledge. It speaks to how we, as followers of Jesus, should engage with society. It demands action. What we believe is a reflection of how we view God. And when we are confronted by the difficult questions in society, we are duty bound to ask what does our faith say about this?

Let me illustrate this.

We are all aware that one of the most emotional and complex issues of the times is that of refugees

and asylum seekers. Today is the beginning of World Refugee Week and there are so many voices and emotional outbursts in the media that the facts about asylum seekers and refugees are obscured. There can be no meaningful discussion at all if the meaning of words and the actual facts are confused (or manipulated). Where does the average person find the *facts* set out in a clear and succinct form? Obviously, you can search for yourself – easy for some and not so easy for others. Or, you could have come along to *Mind~Body~Spirit* last month to hear Prof John Tobin’s talk! But the church provided up to date information in April of this year. Uniting Justice published its Fact Sheet on [Asylum Seekers and Refugees](#).

There is an enormous amount of material that the church provides about what it is doing and how it is doing it, but it is not filtering through to congregations. I often think that every congregation should have one person appointed to be a bridge between the church and the congregation. I hasten to add, this is not an extra burden to add to the Minister’s load.) It should be someone who can faithfully and regularly *inform* the members. And this does not mean put up a poster on a board dripping with outdated and inconsequential publicity! It means telling people what is happening and reminding them that they are members of the UCA.

II

Our church, at its formation, was designed to be a living entity. Its title says it very well, “*Uniting Church*”. It is not “united” – something fixed in time and place. It is always changing, always growing, always making mistakes and re-adjusting. It is a process, a living thing that is designed to adjust to changing situations. If it ceases to change, it has nothing to say to the future and will be an irrelevant anachronism.

I’d like to give two important examples of change which are of fundamental importance to the Uniting Church.

A. The revision of the [Uniting Church Preamble to the Constitution](#) sets things right between the Uniting Church and the First Peoples. Here is part of it.

2. Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.
3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.
4. Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their well being, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.
5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.
6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this

land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

B. The statement at the 2009 Assembly on [Jews and Judaism](#). This is a very detailed document which all members of the Uniting Church, indeed all Christians, should read as it clearly sets out the errors and misinterpretation of Judaism in the Christian Church. Here is the beginning:

The Uniting Church acknowledges:

1. that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be understood apart from the Judaism of his time as he was born, lived and died a faithful Jew, looking to the establishment of God's kingdom as the fulfilment of God's promises;
2. that Judaism is a living faith today, and was at the time of Jesus, possessed of its own integrity and vitality within its own developing traditions,
3. that historically, understandings of Judaism have been imposed from without, and that Judaism should be understood on its own terms,
4. that both Torah and Gospel are expressions of God's grace, calling forth a response of thankful obedience;
5. that Christianity stands in a unique relationship with Judaism because:
 - a. Christianity emerged from Judaism of the first century and cannot be understood apart from it;
 - b. Judaism and Christianity, as living faiths today, have developed significantly from this common root;
 - c. Christians and Jews share a common heritage in the unique testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) to the One God;

Both these are important because they reflect the process nature of the Uniting Church to acknowledge and embrace those who have been misunderstood and treated with disrespect. In the first case, there is unequivocal respect for the history and spirituality of the First Peoples and their understanding of the Creator God. In the second case, there is a setting right of the history and relationship between the two faiths which are so intimately bound together.

The developing role of the Uniting Church as one of a willingness to understand its differences with others in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect can, as we have seen, lead to a shared and better world.

III

And now we must turn to look at the world. As I have already indicated, the church must interact with the world. It cannot hide from it, nor can it pretend to dominate it. We all appreciate that the world is changing rapidly and bears little resemblance to the world when the Uniting Church came into being. I would like to give us a framework for understanding the changes.

We live in what is called a *post-modern* world. People may disagree with my descriptions of these but you will get the gist of what I am saying despite the over-simplification.

The *modern* world basically started with the printing press. Whereas the depository of books was mainly in Church libraries, the printing press produced multiple copies which could be distributed throughout the world. The publication of books meant that people had an incentive to learn to read, to think and be rapidly exposed to new ideas. Luther seized on this to disperse his translations of scripture and his commentaries. The reformation had begun. This gave rise to the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, rationalism and science. In terms of religion, the many different Protestant denominations flourished. There were other results as well. Columbus's visit to the Americas involved the discovery of indigenous cultures which were ripe for domination and soon colonialism spread throughout the world to feed the nation-states with booty and slaves.

Likewise, the *post-modern* age is linked to technology – the computer – in the 1960s. This aided in the rise of multi-national global corporations and the consequent decline in the power of the nation-states. Today, with the speed of development of communication technology, there are profound questions as to the impact this will have on society. You only have to think of the changes in mobile phone technology in the last three years. They are far more deep seated than those in the previous ten years.

One of the most dramatic changes in the post-modern age is the rise of *pluralism*. Charles Jenks defines this as “the end of a single world-view – a resistance to single explanations, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular.” This means that there are other ways of Western cultures dealing with non-European and non-Western cultures than by domination or conquest.

Social issues are not black and white. There is a spectrum, a range of interests to take into account. Look at any of the complex issues in the news and you will see what I mean. Using the methods of the modern world (elitism, patriarchy, dualism) to control the post-modern world are, however, limited. You often have the feeling from what people say that science and reason are no longer important. People can just make up their own view on those. That is ridiculous. In many ways, these are even more important. The problem really lies in the fact that people do not understand what science is or how it operates.

This is the world that the church must come to terms with. The two examples I have given above show that the Uniting Church is prepared to face this challenge, hard as it may be. The setting right of the relationships with the First Peoples and with Judaism are the first steps to setting right the relationships with other faiths.

There is a new cultural paradigm starting to emerge where relationships between cultures are seen as inter-dependent. They need one another to benefit both. The church would have no difficulties with this I am sure. But will it be able to go the next step and set right the relationships between itself and other faiths? To accept the validity and integrity of other faiths without the urge to proselytise (convert to Christianity). After all, we expect others to respect the integrity of our faith. A fundamental teaching of Jesus is to treat others as you would wish to be treated. This is also to be found in all the major faiths and, I suspect, by most who have no faith. This is a great start to building a better world.

Our reading from John talked about Jesus being the vine that bears much fruit. These fruit are called justice, compassion, freedom and peace. Let us move forward into the uncharted waters building a better world with these fruits of the vine as our offering to others.