

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

35th ANNIVERSARY UCA

SUNDAY 24 JUNE 2012 PENTECOST 4

Rev'd Anneke Oppewal

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

“One Spirit, one Lord, one God”

Thirty five years ago the Uniting Church was born from a vision of Church Unity. That vision, that enthusiasm and passion for Church Unity didn't just eventuate, it was something that had built up under pressure. The pressure of an increasing secularism since the enlightenment, and the questions and social changes the devastation of two world wars had brought. Pressure that has continued, or has possibly even increased over the last three decades.



And we have discovered, over the last 35 years as a Uniting Church, that under those kinds of pressures unity does not just happen, but needs commitment and dedication to make it work. That love, hope, faith and trust have to be practiced for the Church community to flourish and to become a place that is safe, nurturing and inspiring. If there is no love, conflict and lack of tolerance for each other's faults and foibles will rip the place apart. Lose hope, and you're left with a depressed and depressing community that cannot move forward. Lose faith, and you're nothing but a disparate group of people with no call or purpose. Lose trust, and all communication, both vertically, with God, and horizontally, with each other, breaks down.

Over the last 35 years the Uniting Church has had a remarkable run of hanging on to love, hope, faith and trust and making it work both inside and out, most of the time. The world and the Church have changed over the last 35 years though, in every aspect. Unity has taken shape, but also, at times, collapsed under pressure. Alliances have formed, teams come together, and fallen apart. Hope has been found, while at the same time some have found themselves throw up their hands in despair. The shape faith takes has changed, and trust in God, the Church and its people has been put under pressure in many different ways. All through the 35 years we've had to work at the uniting we committed to 35 years ago, while what we were working with has grown more and more complex.

Right now there are many challenges we face as a Church, and I want to name just three I think are going to challenge and change the Church beyond recognition.

The Uniting Church agencies that have been set up to give shape to our commitment to social justice, education and our call to bring healing to the world are outgrowing and outperforming the Church that has given birth to them. The relationship, the unity, between the two, is under pressure. Government funding makes a lot possible but threatens the independence of these agencies. And how will we shape Church involvement with less Church involved volunteers available to make sure a committed Christian presence is maintained within these institutions? What is the relationship between Church and action, between the Church as a conglomerate of congregations and the Church as an institution running hospitals, schools, aged care facilities, charities and aid agencies? How do we

keep these unified? How do we keep the building up of faith and spirituality and our involvement and commitment to action in the world together?

The second challenge I want to name this morning is the ever growing multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism of our community. Our president in his address to the nation announced very proudly we, as a Church, are now worshipping in over 40 different languages, and uniting many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds under one umbrella. A wonderful, colorful, variety. The challenges are enormous though. From equipping people for ministry whose first language is not English, and who haven't mastered English as their second language by a long stretch of the imagination, to trying to negotiate different worship styles, ways of communicating, theological issues, issues of governance and stewardship etc. We experienced a bit of the complexities involved over the last year and a half as an amalgamated Church. The possibilities of misunderstanding each other multiply exponentially the more languages and cultural backgrounds there are involved in a conversation and the issues run much deeper than just trying to understand someone with an unfamiliar accent. At the same time: these discussions are incredibly enriching and inspiring, adding value and generating new ideas, opportunities and possibilities for us all. With ethnic congregations growing and anglo congregations decreasing in numbers the pressure is on to connect, to relate, to unite, to work together and make room for each other. To become familiar with each other's strengths and weaknesses and think about how we want to proceed from here into the next 35 years of Uniting Church.

Last but not least the fact that our world is no longer self-evidently Christian poses another significant challenge to the Church and its people. Not only are there many other faith and value systems out there competing with ours, we face a world where commitment to Christian values of community, social justice, healing and wholeness for all God's people is losing ground. A world where violence, hunger and suffering are rife and is in dire need of people prepared to commit to building hope, love, faith and trust, create safety, promote wholeness and help generate peace wherever possible. If we, as a Church, want to play a role in that and share what hope and faith we have for the world, we will not only have to commit ourselves to working together as people of faith and find ways to witness to the gospel that will make a difference to the world, but also, at the same time find ways to strengthen our own love, hope, faith and trust in God and for each other in a world where that faith is no longer accepted and respected in the same way as before.

It is one Spirit says Paul, one Lord, one God who activates the works of faith, hope and love in everyone for the common good. One Spirit who gives wisdom and knowledge to some, faith and gifts of healing to others, working of miracles, prophecy or the discernment to others yet again, and to others tongues or the interpretation of tongues. All activated by one Spirit and allotted to each individually just as the Spirit chooses.

In other words: God gives to the body of Christ all it needs to work. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy and discernment, tongues and interpretation of tongues. They are gifts from God given to us to make a difference for the common good, to enable the Spirit to do her work and for Christ's way to take shape in our community.

What it needs from us is to trust that God has indeed given us all we need, and that in all the variety and complexity we face as a Church, God is blessing us with the tools needed to be what God calls us to be: Christ's body in the world. Trust and have faith that although

we may sometimes wonder, God has given us all we need to face the challenges and changes we meet, and God will travel with us as we go forward into the future.

To trust that the Spirit gives to us all, each one individually and differently, and to our communities individually and differently, not to live our lives in isolation, but to unite and grow a community where the Spirit can do her work, where Jesus' body takes shape and where God can continue to bring life to a world challenged by death and darkness. Amen.