

## **Can life begin at forty for the Uniting Church?**

*by Rev. Robert Griffith*

In 1932, the American psychologist Walter Pitkin published a self-help book entitled: *Life Begins at Forty* and it soon became a popular cliché which continues to this day. Life expectancy had been steadily growing since the days of medieval England when most people didn't make it past thirty. So by the 1930s, many more people were facing this 'new' reality of life after forty.

This week the Uniting Church in Australia is passing that forty year milestone and a growing number of people inside and outside our Church are wondering if life can in fact 'begin' at forty for the Uniting Church. Others believe we are witnessing the slow, but inevitable death of this miraculous community of pilgrims which God brought into being on 22 June 1977.

The great 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote: "*The first forty years of life give us the text: the next thirty supply the commentary.*" I think the 'text' of the Uniting Church in Australia has certainly been written in detail. I doubt that any Church or Christian organisation in this nation has produced more reports, more discussion papers or more theological reflections than the Uniting Church in Australia over the past forty years.

Some of this 'text' has been cutting-edge and Spirit-led as we grapple with what it truly means to be the people of God fulfilling the mission of Christ in modern-day Australia. However, if our commentary on the last forty years is to be objective and truthful, I believe we must accept that there has also been a noticeable departure from our roots. Those roots being the New Testament Church and our own foundation document: *The Basis of Union*. That incredible document articulates, better than anything I have ever read, what the contemporary Church might look like when it is firmly anchored to the foundation of the New Testament and focussed on the mission of Christ.

That same document also affirms that we are a 'pilgrim people' seeking to discover how the unchanging, never-to-be-compromised gospel of Jesus Christ might be preached and lived in a rapidly changing world. Tragically, as we have taken those foundational truths so clearly articulated in *The Basis of Union*, and tried to 'contextualise' them or make them 'culturally relevant' or more 'sensitive' to the multi-faith society in which we now find ourselves, I believe we may have lost sight of who we are, Whose we are and what our primary purpose is as the Church of Jesus Christ.

As we pass this forty year milestone, I fear we may have forgotten that the only mission we have as a Church is the mission of Christ. That mission has never changed and should never be changed by the passage of time or the evolving culture around us. The gospel was counter-cultural in the beginning and it's still counter-cultural today. Trying to make the gospel 'culturally sensitive' or 'compatible' with the values and ideologies of a decaying society will only compromise the gospel and have no lasting impact on the society.

Jesus Christ, Who is the same yesterday, today and forever, has a story to tell which involves every human being on the planet and that story has not changed. The centrality of the crucified, risen and reigning Christ in the midst of the Church which He is building must be defended and proclaimed to every generation. The exclusive claims of Christ as the Lord of all Creation and the only Mediator between us and God, may, in the minds of some, be 'out-dated', 'politically incorrect', 'culturally insensitive' or even divisive in this post-Christian, multi-faith new age. The problem is, truth is always truth - regardless of how it is perceived or received and the truth about Christ has always been confrontational.

Jesus clearly said, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one comes to the Father but through me."* The religious and political leaders of Jesus' day were so confronted by this Truth in their midst, they murdered Him, most of His first Apostles and millions of His followers since! Truth doesn't cease being truth because the majority of people in the world reject it. Nor does truth cease being truth because a growing number of preachers, leaders, policy-makers and congregation members in the Church ignore it or redefine it.

Like Tom Cruise's character in the movie, *A Few Good Men*, we want answers. We want to know why the world is in such a mess; why fear has replaced hope; why two entire generations are no longer represented in most mainline churches; why the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ has been repackaged so much to fit a populous audience that it's not the gospel anymore! The answers to these questions have been there all the time! The New Testament and *The Basis of Union* are shouting at us like Jack Nicholson's character in the same movie when he is being pressed for the truth and retorts, *"You can't handle the truth!"*

For over 2000 years there have been people who can't handle the truth about Jesus and over many decades now there has been a very loose handling of that Truth within sections of His Church. In the Uniting Church, we have seen a slow, but steady retreat from those foundational truths and we have paid a very high price for that departure from our roots. Little by little, year by year, the bedrock truths of the New Testament and our own *Basis of Union* have been ignored, contradicted or redefined and carefully woven into a whole new narrative which is more palatable to the growing number of vocal minorities in our society, but I fear, far less palatable to God and far less effective in changing the hearts of God's lost children.

Perhaps that's why we celebrate our 40th birthday this week with about half the people we had at our 20th birthday, as thousands of our brothers and sisters decided they didn't want to embrace what we were becoming. So as we break out the balloons and fairy bread this week and sing happy birthday, more than half our congregations have less than 10 children in them and half of those have none at all. Over a third of our Ministers are over sixty and only 6% of our Ministers are under the age of forty.

Of course many believe the Uniting Church is punching above its weight in terms of service provision, social action, justice advocacy and a number of other areas in which a very passionate part of our membership and leadership spend most all their time, energy and resources. But when it comes to the mission of Christ, to seek and to save the lost, to re-connect God's children to their loving Father through Christ, we have too often been missing in action.

In the face of these rather inconvenient and perhaps depressing truths, let me now address the question posed in the title of this sermon: *can life begin at forty for the Uniting Church?* My answer is a resounding 'yes!' Yes, life most certainly can begin at forty for the Uniting Church! If I didn't believe that I would not have responded to God's call to return to the church of my youth and help lead us into our next forty years. If I did not truly believe that our best years can be right in front of us, I would not be wasting my time here. In fact, I believe God has been planning for our next forty years for a very long time.

Over the past few years, I believe our Lord has been calling more key people into leadership roles within the Uniting Church who are deeply committed to that Church we find in the New Testament and in our own *Basis of Union*. A number of apostolic leaders, prophetic preachers and Spirit-led overseers are being strategically placed by God to help take us back to our roots, back to our foundations, back to our reality as the living, dynamic, supernatural Church which Jesus is building.

So I am praying that the eyes of our heart and the ears of our soul will be opened by the Holy Spirit right now as I share just a small part of your 'pedigree' and mine as members of the Uniting Church in Australia.

This truth is confronting, yet liberating; humbling, yet empowering; threatening, yet comforting. This is the bedrock New Testament truth upon which the Uniting Church was established and upon which this Church will soon be re-established in the months and years ahead. I invite you to listen for God's voice in the words which follow from *The Basis of Union*:

### **3. BUILT UPON THE ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST**

*"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin.*

*Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love. Jesus himself, in his life and death, made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain. In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.*

*The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself."*

Brothers and sisters, our purpose as those who bear the name of Christ; our purpose as Christians is to individually and collectively become *"an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to Himself."*

**It's all about Christ.** He is the Lord of all creation, the Lord of this Church, the Lord of our lives and the One in Whom we live and move and have our being. While we were dead in our sin, dead in our brokenness and dislocation from God, Christ lived *for us*, Christ died *for us*, Christ rose from the grave *for us*. Then Christ called us into *His* reality. He called us into His life - into His sinless, spotless, perfect performance against the law of God; He called us into His death - so all the consequences of our sin: past, present and future might fall on Him and not on us; He called us into His resurrection - His complete, once-and-for-all time victory over sin, Satan and death.

It's all about Jesus. *'For from Him and to Him and through Him are ALL things!'* (Rom. 11:36). *'Christ in us, the hope of glory'* (Col.1:27) is the mystery of the Church. Unless Christ is central; unless all that we think, say, do and pray flows from Him and returns to Him and Him alone in our lives and in the Church, we have been seriously deceived – just like our brothers and sisters in the Church in Corinth were deceived so many years ago. That's why Paul wrote these words of warning and rebuke in his second letter to them.

*"I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me! I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*

*For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.” (2 Corinthians 11:1-4)*

What was that gospel - that central message Paul preached and upon which the Holy Spirit built this entire Church? What was (and still is) that foundational message which must lie at the heart of the Church today if we want to see this sleeping giant awakened and the Lord of all Creation worshipped again? I will let the Apostle Paul answer that from his first letter to the Church at Corinth:

*“ ...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:23-31)*

This is the Word of the Lord – not just to the Church in Corinth 2000 years ago – but to the Uniting Church in Australia this week as we give thanks for the journey thus far and cry out to God to rescue us from ourselves so we don't die in the wilderness before we reach that 'promised land' we affirmed so long ago in *The Basis of Union*. A bit dramatic? I think not. If something doesn't change soon, most of our congregations will close within 10-20 years – some much sooner.

Over 3,000 years ago our Lord delivered His people from bondage and set them free from years of oppression in Egypt. He called them out of death and into life and asked them to trust Him to lead them to the promised land. If they had truly listened to God, trusted His messengers and believed that God would achieve what God promised – they could have been enjoying life in the promised land in a couple of weeks! But you know this story - you know how God's chosen, called, much-loved children failed to listen to the One Who freed them, saved them, and gave them life and hope and the promise of a glorious future. What could have been a two week journey to embrace all that God had promised them since Abraham, became forty years of wandering in the wilderness until an entire generation was lost in the desert. God's words to them, recorded in Numbers 14, send a chill down my spine as I read them again today and think of our current context:

*“How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? .... not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.” (Numbers 14:11,23)*

And they didn't. God explained why later in the book of Numbers:

*“Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - not one except Caleb ... and Joshua ... for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.” (Numbers 32:11-12)*

On the front cover of our weekly newsletter about six weeks ago I wrote a pretty confronting article entitled: **'Jesus called, and He wants His Church back.'** In reality, of course, Jesus never lost the true Church which *He* is building, but the visible church which we are building in His name, is in desperate need of Christ's presence and power - but we won't let Him back in to take charge again!

It is customary at birthday parties for us to receive gifts, but it is my hope and prayer that on the 40th birthday of the Uniting Church in Australia, we, as the Church, might give Jesus the gift He so desires: our hearts, our lives and the Uniting Church. How do we do that when we are just the 'plebs in the pews' who have no influence over those who make the high level decisions? We do that, first of all, by rejecting what I just said! We are the Church and we need to re-affirm and reclaim our calling in Christ as His ambassadors. We need to start saying 'no' when others are saying 'yes' to directions and priorities which take us away from the mission of Christ. We need to start saying 'yes' when others are saying 'no' as we publicly affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation, over His Church and over our lives – standing against the growing trend to ignore, or even deny Christ's sovereignty over everything.

We 'give the church back to Jesus' by re-affirming the foundational truths of the New Testament and the bedrock affirmations in *The Basis of Union*. We 'give the Church back to Jesus' by giving ourselves back to Jesus – just like all our brothers and sisters did that night in the Sydney Town Hall on 22 June 1977, when they all stood at the end of the inauguration service of the Uniting Church in Australia and prayed John Wesley's Covenant Prayer together.

I invite you to join with me now as we do the same today and read this prayer together. As we thank God for sustaining us and feeding us for the last forty years, may we give our Lord the gift of ourselves afresh, and in so doing, submit to His Lordship over our lives, over the Uniting Church and over the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

May the Lord empower our words now and give us the faith to believe that we, and our whole Church, will be changed forever because of the commitment we are about to make to our Lord and our God.

**JOHN WESLEY'S COVENANT PRAYER**

I am no longer my own, but yours.  
Put me to what you will,  
rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
let me be employed for you,  
or laid aside for you, exalted for you,  
or brought low for you;  
let me be full, let me be empty,  
let me have all things, let me have nothing:  
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.  
And now, glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.  
And the covenant now made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.