

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Posture towards the world

"The orientation of the church to the world in witness and service was a major theological breakthrough in the negotiations towards church union. It was this orientation which gave the Joint Commission the theological leverage it needed against the self-preservation which undergirded the churches. This means that from its origins the UCA has resisted any ecclesiology which would lead to a ghetto or sectarian existence. In short: **the church is in and for the world or it is not the church.**"¹

This quote struck me when I read it as I prepared for the National Incorporation Conversation I attended last Wednesday. I was struck firstly, because it causes us to reflect in this 40th year on a matter significant to the formation of our Church. Secondly, much of what I've been engaged with since the last ASC meeting and indeed much of our ASC agenda can be framed in terms of this "theological breakthrough".

Self-preservation not an option

Looming large for some of us here is the fact that more than likely we will be part of a panel appearing before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. On our agenda for this meeting are the updates for this hearing. I acknowledge the work of the Executive Officer, John Cox and the dedicated team who together with the National Task Group and the General Secretaries and synod staff have prepared information for this hearing.

We cannot shrink from the reality that we are as Christ's ones in the world and we have a responsibility, under God, to be for the world: for the broken, the poor, the prisoner and the oppressed. Self-preservation has never been an option for the followers of Christ.

Flexibly institutional

I particularly like Geoff Thompson's notion: "The polarity of the church is not so much between being a movement or an institution; it is between being **flexibly institutional** and becoming institutionalised."² Geoff's proposition is that the "church's organisation is one of the ways God doesn't let the church lose its way". Indeed then organisation is *gift* to ensure we are on track.

It is for these reasons, recognising the Church is in the world and for the world, that we accept our responsibility to engage in the conversations to reframe the way we are organised.

The church committed to serve the world

The Uniting Church in the world and for the world must not limit itself to the longstanding and significant relationships we have in the Pacific and Asia. Over the years relationships have also grown in Africa in the South Sudan and Zimbabwe; and with China. We have too, through ecumenical relationships, expressed a growing concern for peace in Israel and Palestine, supporting a two state solution, advocating and strengthening a number of important relationships.

Now Middle Eastern ministers and leaders in our Church here have challenged us to build relationships more widely in the region. The global refugee tragedy demands a church who is for the world. And so in January Rob Floyd, Rev Dr Emanuel Audisho, Rev Gabby Kabrossi, Rev Dr Krikor

¹ Extract from 'Theological Principles', a paper prepared for the Vic-Tas Synod Legal Incorporation Task Group July, 2016

² Extract from 'Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union, Geoff Thompson, Melbourne UAP, 2016

Youmshajekian, and myself visited Beirut, to express personally the UCA's solidarity in the circumstances the Christian church in the region face. We sought in meetings to build relationships with three evangelical protestant denominations, the Middle Eastern Council of Churches, and the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Churches of Lebanon and Syria. We also met with Orthodox and Catholic leaders, the Australian Ambassador and his staff, and the Lebanese President. We are reminded in the *Basis* that: "The Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died".³

Just terms

It's not clear to me yet but the difficult questions we are yet to speak about in our conversations with UAICC are also set in the context of what does it truly mean to be an authentic Australian church, and is institutional survival a silent obstacle to the conversation? Geoff Thompson talks of being flexibly institutional, are we far too rigid, will we break rather than be transformed?⁴ I believe this question equally applicable to becoming truly an *intercultural* church.

It was my intention in my message on the 26th January, Celebrating Survival, to be provocative in using the expression "just terms" for renegotiated life together in this land.⁵

Hope filled - renewed

Finally, Yuróra 2017, a community within our Church who by the grace of God are passionate and who are culturally, linguistically and theologically diverse and yet one in Christ; a community who fill me with hope, renewed in the knowledge that Christ constitutes, rules and renews his church. A community that is in and for the world and who expect this to be the way of the Uniting Church in Australia.

³ Para 1

⁴ 'The green reed which bends in the wind is stronger than the mighty oak which breaks in a storm.'
Confucius

⁵ Just Terms – section 51.xxxi The Australian Constitution