

# 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 25 June 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Shirley Maddox and Mr Bruce Irvine,  
former Moderators of the Synod of NSW ACT

Ezekiel 37:15-28; John 17:20-26; Contemporary Reading:  
Excerpt from *The Basis of Union* (1992 revision)

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## Rev Shirley Maddox

Hello. Thank you Margaret.

I want to tell you about some surprises I've had in this Uniting Church.

1. It was a surprise that the Uniting Church happened at all.

My mother used to say, she first heard talk of a union between the Methodists and Congregationalists and Presbyterians when she was a child ... in 1901.

Negotiations began with the mindset: "*What strengths, loved traditions, can we each bring to a united church?*"

And among these traditions they found lots in common - but insuperable differences as well.

After World War 2, some new leaders suggested a different starting point: not '*What treasures do we bring from our pasts?*' but "*What is God calling us to be and to do in Australia now?*".

Only then did it prove possible to move forward, honouring the past but not stuck in it.

So in 1977, the Irvines and the Maddoxes and some thousands of other excited people found themselves in a packed Town Hall in a great celebration of the Uniting Church in Australia. (Now I know some others of you were there too. Would you like to stand up so we can all cheer?) Some were in the choir; some were in the body of the hall. Hello!

We were celebrating "the Uniting Church" not the United Church" as we still hoped other denominations might join us.

We're "Uniting" still as more and more diverse people find a home among us.

On that day, leading the celebrations, we saw older white men, in black clerical dress or dark suits, one lone young lay woman, (Dorothy McRae McMahan) in white, and one representative of the World Council of Churches, Rev Dr Philip Potter, dressed in black but with a brown face.

They all spoke in English, and we all sang in English. That's just what the Church was in that time. But the Uniting Church didn't stay that way.

The Basis of Union that shaped the life of this Church spoke about being ‘*a Pilgrim people*’, ‘*a Fellowship of Reconciliation*’ and of ‘*Continuing Renewal*’. It was a blueprint for surprises!

2. I am surprised, now, that in gatherings of the Uniting Church, the people up front look very different from those on the stage in 1977. Among them there may be any or all of women, men, ordained, lay, gay, straight, old hands and newcomers, Indigenous, Korean, Pacific Islander, Sri Lankan, African, Asian, Indian, Filipino, Syrian, Bangladeshi ... I could go on ... all people of God.

And in Uniting Church congregations somewhere in Australia today, there will be people singing, praying, chatting, preaching - in any one of 60 or more different languages.

In many congregations the same Bible readings will be repeated in two languages, people will be invited to say ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ not only in English but in “*the words that come most readily to your lips*”.

Some time in the 1990’s the Uniting Church declared itself to be “*A multicultural Church*”. Then, I didn’t know what that would mean. But all of the above is what came out of that declaration. That declaration opened our hearts and minds to each other.

3. As Moderator I was constantly surprised at the piles of documents I had to sign to implement decisions of Uniting Church bodies.

And so it was, one evening in the mid-nineties, I found myself signing, on behalf of the Synod of NSW and ACT, a Covenant, between the Uniting Church and the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress!

If I ever knew them, I no longer remember, what the terms of that Covenant were but I have seen some of its outcomes:

- Indigenous people having a respected place and voice at meetings of the Assembly and the right to speak and vote; and they do!
  - Aboriginal people of the UAICC taking responsibility for congregations in their own communities.
  - And when I go out to United Theological College in North Parramatta, there are Aboriginal students studying there to enhance their skills in ministry: some undergraduates, some postgraduates, some headed towards ordination, some not.
4. In 1994 when I was Moderator (a long, long time ago), I was not surprised by how much I enjoyed visiting congregations all over NSW and in the ACT, listening to stories, and telling stories about the Uniting Church in other places:

- stories about the people I met when I went with a Frontier Services Padre to remote parts of the Northern Territory. I met lone families: gold mining, raising cattle, raising children; some escaping from an unwelcoming world, some hopeful of a new future. But all glad to welcome the Pastor who came '*just for them*' without any hidden agenda.
- stories about sitting with Aboriginal women around a campfire in the Northern Territory, half deafened by the diesel generator, listening as they sang, prayed, and talked gently about their hopes and fears for children and grandchildren. I was in my sixties; they were much younger than me but prematurely aged by poor health care, difficult living conditions, violence ... but faithful people of God.
- stories about the time I was sent to Korea to meet with deaconesses in two of our sister churches: wonderful women, denied ordination, but dedicated, insightful, passionate, with few resources and less recognition, working among the poorest and most disabled people there.

The surprises won't stop, but I must.

I pray that in God's grace, we may continue as Pilgrims, a Fellowship of Reconciliation and Renewal, glad of tradition but not bound by it, rejoicing in the present but not stuck in it.

Open to the new things God keeps calling us to be and to do in our 'now'.

Amen

### **Bruce Irvine**

The Inauguration of the Uniting Church, particularly the inspiring service, but also all the things that were happening at the start of the Uniting Church, inspired me to become active in my congregation and beyond. I began reading a lot of stuff about new ways of being the church - then spent 30 years trying to change the church.

But what happened was the church changed me - over and over again. Eventually I realised that the only person I could change was me! All I can do is tell the stories of those changes. Let me focus on two stories.

At the time of Union, the regulations stipulated that "*all councils of the church must include one third women in their membership*". We blokes thought that wasn't possible.

However, within a few years, the regulation had to be changed - to "*at least one third women and at least one third men*"!

In most Church Councils now, as here, there is a fairly equal balance of women and men.

From the beginning, it was stipulated that representation at Presbytery, Synod and Assembly must be a balance of lay women, lay men and Ministers. A much greater proportion of Ministers in Placement are now women - and I think we're probably close to an even balance now.

So, I think the Uniting Church has done quite well in the area of gender balance!

But then - I'm a bloke, so I'd be interested to hear what some of the women have got to say about that!

I know there are a few areas where we lag - for example we are nowhere near having had a gender balance in the roles of Moderator and President of the Assembly - just as we have not had a balance of lay and ordained people in those roles.

Of the 27 NSW Moderators in NSW, only 5 have been women and only 5 have been lay people (3 women and 2 men - and only one rural person).

My second story is about social justice.

I grew up in a conservative country town and went to a conservative boarding school in the city. So my social, political and theological ideas were all very conservative. My journey in the church has repeatedly challenged that conservatism and radically changed my attitudes on so many things.

Almost every time the church proposed a statement or policy on a social justice issue - such as the congress, such as Multicultural Church and many others - I would feel conflicted and I'd want to oppose it. But wiser heads, again and again, managed to seduce me and convert me.

For example, in the 1980s, my attitude to LGBTI people and issues had been slowly changing as I mixed with people.

But, just before I was installed as Moderator in 1990, I had a real Epiphany. John Shelby Spong finally liberated me from my confusion over literal interpretations of the Bible.

That epiphany emboldened me to start quietly advocating for LGBTI inclusion in the church. As Moderator, I led many workshops with groups of Elders in congregations and presbyteries. And I always raised the topic of inclusion of LGBTI people - to the horror of some of the participants! But many seemed relieved to at last be able to talk about it within the church.

At the end of my year as Moderator, in my report to the Synod as retiring Moderator, one of the things I said was: *I have discovered that many people in the church are obsessed with personal sexual morality - to the exclusion of almost every other issue. Not their own sexual morality, mind you. The sexual morality of OTHER people.* I think that's still true, but not as much.

I think we have made some progress in the 27 years since then.

6 years after I was Moderator, I chaired the Business Committee of the Assembly in Perth, where we addressed a major report on sexuality.

I'm a bit of a meeting junkie – I loved being in the chair or facilitating meetings. Process stuff is what I really love. So I relished the task of developing a process to enable 300 members of the Assembly to address 80 or 90 different proposals on the various parts of the report on sexuality!

I grouped and rewrote proposals so that all the ones that addressed the same topic could be addressed in one or two motions. So we ended up with less than a dozen proposals from the 80 or 90.

The Assembly readily dealt with proposals on divorce and pre-marital sex – huge progress we made on those issues!

But after 6 days, we had not reached any consensus on 2 issues – leadership of LGBTI people - and marriage equality.

LGBTI leadership is not such a fraught issue because it is a decision made by Presbyteries, and many presbyteries, including our own, approve ministry candidates who are gay.

My greatest frustration is that the Assembly (and the government) has still not made any policy on marriage equality!

The church has made policy decisions and statements on almost every other social justice issue – but seems reluctant to even discuss Marriage Equality.

However – I do live in hope!

In 1991, the Assembly adopted a Vision Statement that begins:

*We seek to be A Uniting Church in Australia which risks living the way of Jesus.*

***Risks living the way of Jesus!***

My hope is that we will risk supporting Marriage Equality.