

General Secretary

Rev David de Kock

As you are aware, it was a reluctant decision for me to take up this role as General Secretary but I have believed it to be the call of God and, in a sense, that almost my whole life has been a preparation. I have loved coming to work each day and facing the challenges which have arisen. I have found benefit both from my years in congregation ministry and from my earlier years in business encompassing the areas of finance, economics, law and banking.

That does not mean that it has been easy. We have had much anxiety in the Uniting Church Centre office as talk began to focus on changes and new directions. We do have to change, and dramatically so. We need to refocus on our core calling (what we have called Worship, Witness and Service, or, in other words, living and sharing good news). And we need to reconnect with our primary stakeholders (the people who are and who need this good news – both in congregations and in the world at large).

Dallas Willard in his book ‘The Divine Conspiracy’ – which is written as a challenge to the church to rediscover Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God and the Christlike life – tells the story of a test pilot who was putting a new jet plane through its trials. After a series of somersaults and loops, the pilot finds herself in the middle of a storm cloud. In seconds, the Control Tower screams into her headphones, “Ascend, ascend!” She pulls the joystick backwards into the ascend position and hurtles into the ground. She didn’t realise that she was flying upside down!

In some ways, this is a parable of the church. We’ve been put through our paces and now find ourselves upside down in the middle of a storm cloud. And even if we do the right thing, our actions may well lead to disaster. We need to be careful. (I shared this story with someone who suggested that the only way out of the dilemma would have been for the control tower and the pilot to have had a conversation about what was going on. That’s always a good idea.)

Let me put this in perspective. We have a strongly managed Resources Division in the Uniting Church. You will hear a report of our finances and our budget today. We are tightly managed and despite a negative economic climate, we have done reasonably well. Our Resources Division understand clearly that their role is to resource the ministry of the church – they manage the properties and other assets to ensure that the ministry of the church has what it needs to achieve its goals.

The problem is that we have no goals. In our Risk Management Review, wonderfully managed by our Insurance team of Muralee Nair and Jue-Le Wong, it was found that our single most significant risk is that we have no strategic management plan. We have no course of action, we are simply flying blind in the storm cloud.

Rev Prof Andrew Dutney, when he was President, commissioned a review of the Uniting Church in 2013. The results are startling. And if you haven’t heard about them, here is a summary –

	1990	2013	Per Cent Difference	Number Difference
AUSTRALIA NATIONALLY				
No. of Congregations	3,011	2,078	Down 31%	933 fewer
Number of Sunday Attendees	162,800	97,200	Down 40%	65,600 less
General Notes	Average attendance is 35 adults and 3 children 93% of congregations have less than 20 people. 50% have no children			
WESTERN AUSTRALIA				
No. of Congregations	238	144	Down 39%	94 fewer
General Notes	Average attendance is 37 adults and 5 children			



The number of congregations in WA has declined by a further 19 to 125 congregations since 2013 and only 29 can afford full time ministry (others have part-time ministry and/or grant assistance, or lay ministry volunteers. Incidentally three of our four multicultural congregations do fully support ministry. Only the newest, the Samoan congregation does not yet have fulltime ministry). According to the results, 5,705 people attended Uniting Church congregations in WA on a Sunday in 2013. More than 75% of all active and retired ministers in WA are older than 60 years and only five (in 2013) are under 40-years-old.

However you read the statistics, or try to excuse them, we are in serious trouble! We do praise God though for the hope which exists in those congregations which are healthy and growing, for the vitality in our multicultural groups and for the very many loyal and faithful people of the Uniting Church.

Nonetheless the Resources Board cannot keep drawing down on our assets to keep a sinking ship afloat. We need another plan. At General Council we have pondered the “renovate” versus “rebuild” model in relation to other scenarios, but “rebuild” cannot be an option with regard to the whole church. There is no way that we can demolish what we have to start again, but it’s worth thinking about, even if it’s just a dream. What would we do if we could start again, with nothing except good news, around 5,000 people and a hundred million dollars? Where would we establish congregations? How would we populate them? What would be our mission? Who would be the drivers?

Practically though, the “renovate” option, or some variation of it, is a more likely scenario. The sinking ship analogy is the one which strikes my heart – we need to build another ship on top of the old one. We need a ship which will carry us when the old one finally breaks apart and sinks, and we have to be careful of how we use the timber from the old ship because we need the hull (even though it is full of leaks) to keep us afloat while we build something new. (Note: We will be forced to do this sometime anyway, but if we wait until the last moment, we will end up clutching to a few boards lashed together. The sooner we start, the more likely we are to have something which is viable, safe and substantial enough to support our ongoing mission. Time

will not stand still for us.)

Are you getting the picture? We started out with this magnificent galleon. We have gathered in stores and passengers. On our journey we have used up a lot of the stores and many passengers have died or jumped ship for sleeker, more fashionable craft. Our schools and agencies have needed to almost develop separate lives, for a number of valid reasons, not the least of which relates to legislative requirements. Our old boat is creaking and the leaks are getting harder to manage. The crew is getting old and we are finding it hard to have much enthusiasm. We are more focussed on keeping ourselves afloat than we are on sailing the oceans towards a destination. This is exhausting us, and many are wondering if it is all worth it. But, if we don’t do something we will become like the legendary ghost ship.

So how do we build this new vehicle (redefine our direction and get ready for a new future) on the old substructure? And keep it afloat (fulfilling our mission, doing what needs to be done) without spoiling those things which do work well and which might be very useful for a new future? How do we grow in our relationship with First Peoples and hold to our covenant with UAICC? How do we renew our commitment to intergenerational ministry through First Third, and how do we strengthen our connection with our schools, UnitingCare West, Juniper and Good Samaritan Industries? These are serious considerations addressed in Keith Suter’s Four Scenarios for the Uniting Church in Australia. We do though need more than pictures of what could happen, we need to be involved prayerfully and practically with God in defining how and why it happens.

At the heart of it all though should be our commitment to *Missio Dei* (God’s mission in the world). Any study of church history will reveal that God is continually renewing the church, calling people into community, into prayer and back to the Scriptures. I, personally, am committed to seek God’s wisdom and direction for the renewal of the church of our time.

Here are my ideas. They are significantly built on the principles outlined in ‘Good to Great’ by Jim Collins 2006 but also succinctly describe the process which I have used in similar circumstances heading up the Church Development Commission of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.



1. DISCIPLINED PEOPLE

In his book 'Good to Great' Jim Collins talks about building a team of leaders who are focussed first and foremost on the purpose. Everything else is put aside in their fierce resolve to make good that purpose.

I have called this a cohort of like-minded people who have a clear idea of the missional purpose of the church and give their every effort to ensure that this purpose is achieved.

I intend to form a 'Different Future' Team of

like-minded people (a think tank) who have a clear idea of the missional purpose of the church and who will give their every effort to ensure that this purpose is achieved. This Different Future Team to work independently but to report regularly to Standing Committee on progress and for permission to act, to interact frequently with other commissions/committees and to submit a detailed presentation and report to Synod in 2017.

2. DISCIPLINED THOUGHT

The sense of building another craft on the substructure of the old boat makes the explicit assumption that we have a hopeful future, no matter how critical everything may seem at this point. (We are, after all, not an organisation in the secular sense, but the Body of Christ and the People of God. Hope is what sustains us! Hebrews 11:1. And the history of God working with and through the church confirms this).

This Different Future Team (and the whole Church) needs to have unwavering faith that God's intention for the church will and can prevail in the end, regardless of present difficulties. Collins calls this the Stockdale Paradox, named after Jim Stockdale, a US soldier held in captivity for eight years during the Vietnam War. It recognises that candy-coated fantasies do not give you a different future, but that you need to face up to the brutal reality of the present and be certain, without doubt, that a better future does lie ahead.

(<http://goo.gl/QwG0rK>)

For example, we can no longer say that we are the third largest denomination in Australia! The latest statistics from the Bible Society show (<http://goo.gl/9ULzBW>)

that we have dropped to fifth. We can no longer hope that simply opening the doors of a building on Sunday will fulfil the call of Christ to the church.

We need to focus on a future which embraces at least the following three things:

1. What could we, as the Uniting Church Western Australia do best?
2. What are we, as the Uniting Church Western Australia deeply passionate about?
3. How can we best drive our resource engine so that we spend less time worrying about money and more time fulfilling our mission?

As a denomination, we take pride in involving everyone, through our conciliar councils, in our decision making. The reality is that we do not do this. Ministers and Church Councils often do not respond to requests for information or challenges to be involved. Why not? Could it be that they see it as an exercise that goes nowhere. Having said that, we do need to have the eyes, ears and heart of the church in order to discern the aggregate passion of our members.

3. DISCIPLINED ACTION

Collins says that in developing a more hopeful future, people do not have 'jobs,' they have responsibilities. They work out of their conviction and passion. There is no single defining action, no grand plan, but a persistent drive towards that future, one step at a time, relentless in determination.

The Church Development Team, which I headed in South Africa, had been instructed by the General Assembly to establish 100 new congregations within 10 years. We had no budget – it had been expended in following an

old model (build the building and supply the minister) which had produced just two congregations, one of which failed to survive. It required a rethink of everything. We created a new form of lay ministry, a new definition of congregation and a new way for funding ministry. In retrospect, it looked ordered and planned, in fact, it was chaotic.

Each one of us, were pastors of busy and flourishing congregations.



This was part time work, it required us to travel hundreds of kilometres for meetings and to rely on our congregations to buy into and fund this work. We spent days and nights talking and dreaming about what could be. We had to overcome the ‘machine’ of the denomination, the ‘blue book’ of regulations (which actually was green – how hard it is for traditions to die!), significant culture differences across three countries and the resistance of those who still longed back to another time in which God

had acted to bring about renewal. But we persevered, step by step, we moved forward with our eyes fixed on the goal.

In the course of the next 12-18 months we will need a strong team of passionate and dedicated people who will be prepared to make significant sacrifices of time and energy in order to press relentlessly forward to a future which will last.

4. A FUTURE THAT WILL LAST

A future that will last depends on two main things: first, it must not rely on any particular leadership talent but rather the commitment of the community and, second, it needs to have a clear set of core values (what we stand for).

The heart of our core values for the UCA are found in the Basis of Union, and in March 2015, the Presbytery of Western Australia adopted the four strategic directions in the following resolution:

That the Presbytery:

1. affirm the primary core of the church as expressed in the Basis of Union “to be a fellowship of reconciliation, ... an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to Himself.” (para 3) and that this is embodied through its “worship, witness, and service” (para 15)
2. toward this goal, adopt for future planning the four strategic directions of:
 - developing a culture of open communication;
 - increasing the church's capacity for community engagement;
 - developing and/or promoting relevant education, training, and leadership development resources, programs, and projects; and
 - promoting a culture of faith formation and faith sharing.
3. request that each council, commission, committee, board, and working group of the Presbytery prayerfully discuss and develop

specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely strategies by which these strategic directions can be enacted within each area of the Presbytery.

In summary, this statement could read:

THE GOAL: To be a fellowship of reconciliation

THE STRATEGY: Through open communication, community engagement, relevant education, and faith formation and faith sharing

THE PROCESS: Pray, discuss and work out the next steps

Taking the resolution of Presbytery in March 2015 into account, we need to consider and develop the core values of the Uniting Church Western Australia, recognising that there may be other values which are core to who we are as the Uniting Church in Western Australia. (Unity of Believers Basis of Union (BoU) Paragraph 2, Centrality of Christ BoU Paragraph 3, Constant Renewal BoU Paragraph 4, Biblical Witness BoU Paragraph 5, Concern for marginalised, multicultural connections, rural, family focussed, schools connections, agencies and so on). Initially these preliminary core values are:

1. Open Communication
2. Community Engagement
3. Relevant Education and Training
4. Faith Formation & Faith Sharing



5. CONCLUSION

I present this report and its challenges with a deep concern for the future of the Uniting Church Western Australia. We are at a Tipping Point, which Malcolm Gladwell defines as “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire”. It can go either way, at the moment it doesn’t look good – the momentum of decline is advancing rapidly. It will tip badly if we do nothing, but, according to Gladwell’s Law of the Few, little incremental shifts by seriously committed people can shift the fulcrum to the point where quite the opposite can happen. I look forward to that.

This is not about numbers or about making the Uniting Church great again, it is about our role as part of the Body of Christ and the contribution we can make as the Uniting Church in the Kingdom of God. What part of God’s intention would be lost if the Uniting Church no longer exists? Who would God want to take-up that responsibility?

I have included a series of questions based on this paper which could be used for Table Discussion at the Synod meeting.

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