

## General Secretary

*General Secretary* Rev David de Kock

Much of this year has been taken up with the Synod Strategic Plan to be presented at this Synod meeting. It has been a hard but rewarding process in which I have engaged with many of our committees, staff members, school principals and Agency CEO's.

In my report last year, I spoke about being at the "Tipping Point" – that place where we are either at the edge of failure, or success. If you were at the Synod meeting, you will remember the video clip I showed of Michelle Ryan, a talented ballet dancer who's career nearly ended when she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

Soon after the diagnosis she was invited to join a dance company. She said that she couldn't, that she was scared of falling down. The response challenged her, "But wouldn't you just get up and carry on?"

She went on to be a ballet teacher for company in Adelaide focused on helping mentally and physically disadvantaged adults to find meaning in life.

Michelle chose not to give up on life, but to redirect her energies. This needs to be our attitude in the WA Synod.

Recently someone gave me a copy of John Evans' report to the WA Synod in 2007. He had come to the end of his term of office as General Secretary. He said that he was often asked what a General Secretary does.

His response was that he downsizes Christendom he said that with the aging profile of the Uniting Church, fewer placements, budget constraints, the increasing demands of government bureaucracy and constant squabbles in a stressed organization, his main focus was on finding the gentlest landing for an aircraft which had lost its fly power.

Not much has changed in ten years, BUT he did point out that there were two good things in this process:

It forces us to embrace missional opportunities, and it forces us to be the church differently.

This has not changed on that front either.

My journey with others in attempting to seek, with God's help, for a better way forward for the Church has significantly taken me "back to the future".

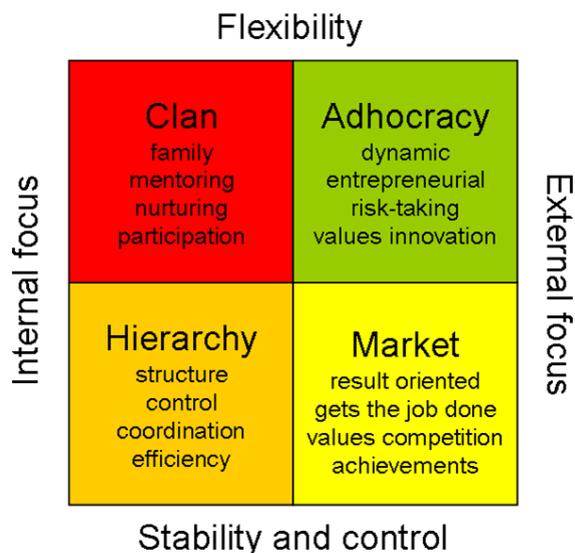
I found, not only Rev Dr John Evans' parting words, but also the Papers of the 1996-98 Strategy and Extension Working Group which, quite surprisingly, sketched an almost identical plan to the one we were in the process of developing for presentation at this Synod meeting.

What happened that a plan should lie dormant for 20 years, only to be rediscovered when a startlingly similar plan is in the making? I don't have the history to answer that, and perhaps it doesn't really matter anyway. My thoughts are only that the drafters of that plan 20 years ago were either ahead of their time (and some may, in fact, be reading this!) or that the kairos moment is now, and was not then.

The thrust of both strategies lie in John Evan's positive responses for declining Christendom – embracing the missional opportunities and focusing on doing church differently.

My fear regarding the success of any plan to do things differently – and we must, if the Uniting Church is to survive – is whether we have the culture to do it. Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn developed a model for observing culture according to a competing values matrix, as show below.

## Competing Values Framework By Cameron and Quinn



On the one hand, the internal focus competes with the external focus, while on the other, a desire for flexibility competes with a requirement to be stable and controlled.

As I look at the Uniting Church, I see a culture which is firmly entrenched on the left hand side of the diagram. Our focus is internal, we like both the “clan” concept (we are family, “all of this is us”) and we thrive in hierarchy (despite our claim to an inter-conciliar structure). We love order, rules and regulations, believing that these give us efficiency and better co-ordination.

To pick on John Evans again, perhaps the decline of the Church has forced us into the “clan” quadrant. Despite the fact that our last few Presbytery and Synod meetings have focused much more on structure, control and law, we are, at heart, I believe, much more relational than hierarchical.

This is good. Families are flexible, they can put up with a bit of mess. They adapt to situations, and most of the time, despite awkward moments, they cope pretty well together.

It is good also, because if the tipping point of the Church is to move from the edge of failure to the edge of success, we need to be adaptable and we need to shift to the right

hand side of the diagram. We need an outward focus.

The usual route for growth takes the organization from “clan” to hierarchy. In the process bureaucracy increases and the organization loses focus on the main purpose. It then has a couple of options, it can reinvent itself as a market-focused entity (Microsoft) or as a dynamic, entrepreneurial adhocracy (Apple under Steve Jobs) or either dies or become smaller and it shifts back into the “clan” mode. The last seems to be the route we have followed – we are back in “clan” mode. (Are you thinking about Keith Suter’s retreat back into the Early Church model?)

The positive outcome though (and this is where I pin my hope), is that it is easier to shift from the more flexible “clan” model to an external focus, than it is to move into an external focus from the bureaucratic model. This was the shift made by the early church. In Acts 15, we see the debate between the “clan” (Paul and Barnabas verse 2) and the bureaucrats (the believers who were of the party of the Pharisees verse 5). In the end it was resolved by being creatively flexible, and the church began to grow. Indeed, Jesus often challenged the bureaucrats to be less rigid. Without this flexibility, the church, if there ever was to be a church, would have been bound up in Old Testament legalism.

We are in the “clan” quadrant, we are family with only a few degrees of separation. The threat is that we are losing (or have lost) the succeeding generation. Without biological growth we do need to become externally focused, we need to go out and make disciples (Matthew 28:19).

Can we do it? It will need a paradigm shift in our thinking but it is certainly possible. As I have preached in, and visited many congregations, I have sensed a deep yearning amongst the people to move into a different space – to be more outward focused, to be able to touch the hearts and lives of the community in Jesus’ name – but they don’t know how anymore.

The Strategic Plan seeks to provide the means for there to be enough energy for this to begin to happen. It is not the solution, but

only the means to an end. The Uniting Church will only move to the more positive side of the tipping point when the people shift to a greater focus on those who are beyond the walls of our Sunday morning buildings.

The Strategic Plan might seem to be mainly about properties and money, but these are only the limitations. The real strength will be found in the energy of a people who are less focused on property and money and more on people, including them in their prayers and finding ways to share faith, hope and ministry with them.

**Rev David de Kock**  
**General Secretary**  
**9260 9800**  
**[general.secretary@wa.uca.org.au](mailto:general.secretary@wa.uca.org.au)**