

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 23rd June, 2024

*On the 47th Anniversary of the
Uniting Church in Australia*



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

1 Corinthians 3:5-11

Paul is writing to address a conflict in the Corinthian church. The people are creating factions, seemingly based on who has the 'best' spiritual leader. Paul's words are about keeping things in perspective.

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but GOD gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only GOD who gives the growth.

The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are GOD's servants, working together; you are GOD's field, GOD's building.

According to the grace of GOD given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Contemporary Reading of Grace "Hope" Kevin Treston [from "Emergence for Life, not Fall from Grace"]

Christian hope is not some kind of naïve expectation that everything will be okay simply because GOD loves us. Hope emerges in faith through the struggles with pain and despair as well as with the blessings of life.

The church in Western countries is now entering a 'dark night of the soul' at the level of declining influence in the public arena and growing disenchantment with how church life is conducted.

However, at another level, people are participating in liturgy, promoting justice and earth care, proactive citizenship, loving and caring in family and single life.

Hope is grounded in faith that the GOD of love will grace the mystery of paradox, the dilemmas, and the ongoing quest to be faithful to the gospel.

Anniversaries are important, I think. They're a moment to pause for a bit... to remember... to tell our stories... to think about who we are... and why.

When I think of our wedding anniversary, it reminds me that I've been married much longer than I was single, and that being with Cathryn is deeply part of who I am.

Being married doesn't define my whole identity, but it certainly shapes it. Shared experiences, shared parenthood (and grandparenthood!), shared delights and struggles, shared convictions and compromises, have shaped who we are today.

Today, we remember a 'marriage' of another kind: the coming together of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977. Church Union brought together Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist Christians in Australia, in a conviction that this was a calling of the Holy Spirit.

I'm a child of the Uniting Church in Australia. My baptism was confirmed in Hobart in October 1977, just a few months after Union. A couple of years after my ordination, we celebrated the 20th Anniversary in a little country town in South Australia. This church is part of who I am, too.

As a national church, and as local ones, we have many faith stories to tell: stories that I hope help us remember, and also invite us to look forward. I'm a great believer that we '*stand on the shoulders of giants*' when it comes to faith. I also fervently believe that the way to honour that, is to build on the gift that we've been given, as those who've gone before us did with their gift.

I mentioned that anniversaries invite us into reflection on who we are... and also on why. Why are we church? Why do we 'do' church?

If the Uniting Church in Australia came into being because of a conviction that this was a calling of GOD's Spirit, then this is the 'why' – the purpose: to be a community of 'Jesus people', in ministry among our neighbours. I know that many have asked over the years whether Church Union has born fruit, including me at times. In strict numerical terms – "*bums on seats on Sunday*", the answer is probably no, but I don't believe that's a particularly sacred criteria.

Personally, I think there are many measures by which the UCA has born really good fruit over the years. I'd include the Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and islander Christian Congress for one, and our decisions around Marriage Equality for another.

We can add the various movements for justice and inclusion, alongside the willingness to engage deeply with theology and practice, and to create space for a broad spectrum of theological conviction and conversation. We've sometimes seemed to be living in tension as a denomination, because we don't agree on everything, and don't pretend that we do. I appreciate that. At the same time, I continue to recognize the importance of Paul's words to the Corinthians, that our differences not become divisions which distract us from our common purpose.

So here we are. 47 years in, and wondering how we're doing.

Well, both locally and nationally, we're living with some pretty big questions right now. And in ALL of the councils of the Uniting Church, those questions have a common theme: that Australia is very different from what it was in 1977, and that this is reflected in church life as much as anywhere else in society, maybe more.

With no criticism attached to anyone, the Uniting Church (like most other churches) now exists in a world that no one really saw coming!

Nationally, the Assembly meeting in a few weeks will be giving a lot of attention to a project called ACT2, which has been working for the last few years on how we respond to that world, particularly in how we shape and structure the church to creatively engage in mission into the future - "Big Picture" stuff.

Here at The Avenue, our particular questions are more local and immediate, but related. We, like most of the rest of the UCA, are older: older than we were (funnily enough!), and older than our neighbourhood and community.

There's a depth and a richness in that which I love! I've never subscribed to the theory that older people are more conservative than everyone else, but if I did, my experience of church would disprove it.

At the same time, the age profile of our congregation invites us into conversations about our medium and long term future. That's not a bad thing, it's just a thing.

We have issues with our suite of buildings, and maintenance is becoming a real issue for our church council. We've recently had building inspections done, which have alerted us to the need for some serious expenses here: roof repairs, some underpinning and structural work. Once we know what amounts we're dealing with, we'll be working with Synod Property to release some of the funds from the sale of Eckersley Tennis Courts, which will enable us to do most of this work, but we don't want to simply spend all of that money on keeping a building going.

Alongside property issues is that of finance. We're eating into our reserves quite extensively to keep things going, including my role and ongoing costs like insurance etc. Geoff does an incredible job as our treasurer, but even he's not having any luck making money grow on trees!

People are finding it harder to take up the roles and jobs they've done in the past, and that's fair enough, but it presents us with a challenge.

Our volunteer capacity is diminishing. We're deeply grateful for those who are able to keep serving. Many of them are taking multiple roles - on Sundays, as well as leadership roles in Church Council, property, finance, Playgroup, Music Together, and the like.

Please don't hear this as me trying to 'guilt' people into volunteer roles, or holding you upside down and shaking you for more money! I'm trying to be honest in a way that is hopefully creative as well.

There are good stories as well. We have Multicap in the Avenue House. It's taken a lot of work all round, including Synod property, and we are starting to develop an enriching neighbourhood relationship.

We have a regular neighbourhood ministry with Playgroup and Together in Music, which we know is precious to the families we serve – and to the program leaders!

We have had some profound moments of celebrating life and faith recently, in the Funerals and memorial services of loved ones – times rich in story and care. And on Sundays, we find ourselves in precious company, when we come together as a Community of Christ.

So here we are. 47 years in, looking to the past, the present, and the future... Unsure what the future looks like, but pretty sure it doesn't look like the past!

What will we do with that? We'll do our best to build in care with faith and courage! Sometimes confidently, sometimes a bit uncertain, sometimes both at once.

And we'll do so, sensing that the dynamic, life-giving, creative, and imaginative energy we claim as the Holy Spirit, continues to call us forward in hope. May that Spirit be in our reflection, our dreaming, and our action!

Blessings, *Rod Peppiatt*