

What Inspired Uniting in “Uniting Church”?

A Reflection by Bill Loader



What inspired Uniting in “Uniting Church” was not that three denominations were uniting together in 1977, but something much wider and deeper. In the mid twentieth century there was a growing recognition among many churches that unity had to be about more than an abstract idea such as we are all one in Christ despite having nothing to do with each other.

It had to be real. They realised that when Jesus in John’s gospel prayed that his future followers would be one, it meant doing things together, loving one another. Called the “ecumenical movement”, this recognition inspired action, informed by what was called the Lund principle of doing those things together that we best do together and those things apart that we best do apart. That relieved any anxiety that the aim was to destroy or abandon distinctive traditions.

As a result we saw a whole range of local manifestations of gospel uniting, not just among the former denominations of the UCA, but with Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists and more. Regular ecumenical worship services, shared Lenten or Advent studies, ecumenical conferences for church members, pulpit exchange, visiting and hosting people from neighbouring churches, joint church community newsletters, celebratory marches, social get togethers, local outreach together from evangelism to meetings with politicians, developing information centres, parent education courses for the community, and much else, including – very important – opportunities for meeting and fellowship. In many places local people identified not only with their particular church but also with Christians from other churches because they actually met. You can’t love one another unless you know one another and you can’t know one another unless you meet. On a wider scale attempts were made to coordinate regional activities, clergy trained together where practicable, and church leaders met. Sometimes the local clergy association was a source of inspiration. Sometimes it was a local ecumenical council.

There are still places where this uniting spirit is alive, often in rural areas, but many where it has died out and the message is: “We are strong enough. We don’t need you”. It is time to revive the spirit of uniting, but within a much broader perspective. Such uniting can now be seen across areas not so much in focus then, including cross-cultural meeting, engagement with first Australians, and finding common ground with other faiths, especially with Muslim communities. Here, too, the Lund principle is relevant. Celebrating “Uniting” is best when it is celebrating and promoting uniting as bigger than the UCA and as not an extra but as core to the gospel.