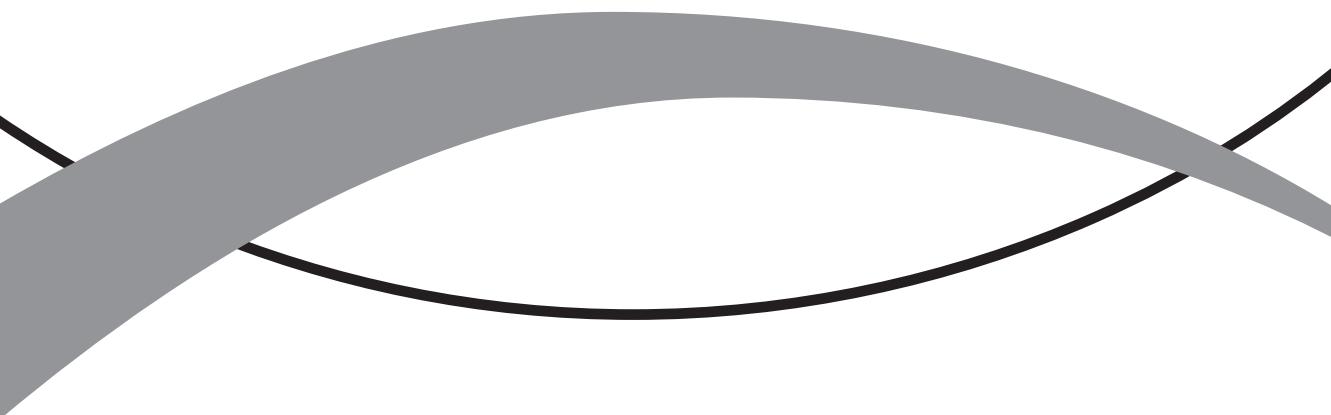


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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Reviews

Things that Matter: Essays on Theological Education on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of United Theological College,

William W. Emilsen and Patricia Curthoys (Editors), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025 (ISBN: 979-8-3852-1331-3)

Geoff Thompson

Theological Colleges occupy a highly contested place in the life of the Uniting Church. Moreover, the place they occupy is distinct, privileged and complexly multi-layered. They are communities which variously frustrate, inspire and excite those who teach and study in them and those in the wider church and Churches which they serve. Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of United Theological College (UTC), the ten essays in *Things that Matter* provide important insights into this complexity and contestation, at least as manifested in one significant Australian theological college, and as presented through well-chosen and illuminating topics.

Precisely in their concreteness, the essays not only illuminate the life of UTC, they also help us understand the many things that colleges – their faculty and students – do under the somewhat deceptively simple heading “theological education.” For that reason, this volume is timely. Timely, in part, because the Uniting Church in Australia – the Church which UTC most immediately serves – is itself currently engaged in what is arguably the most serious exploration of its own theological culture and the role of the colleges in that culture which it has ever undertaken.

It is timely also because the issues the Uniting Church is facing in regard to theological education are not parochial: they are global. Churches across

the Western world are often unsure of the purposes and value of theological education, or indeed of theology *per se*. And, quite apart from issues of decreasing student numbers, limited finances, and institutional decline, the very nature of theological colleges as communities has been vigorously interrogated – in recent times perhaps most acutely by Willie James Jennings in his *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, a book that is rightly referred to at various places in *Things that Matter*. At the same time, in the majority world, there is a flourishing of theological education, indeed a hunger and enthusiasm for it that is not so obvious in the West.

This collection of essays shows not only how UTC is addressing both the particularities of the Uniting Church in Australia, but also how it is allowing those particularities to be informed by its own engagement with the global conversations. Or to put it even more sharply: UTC is demonstrating that those global conversations are intrinsic to the particularities of the UCA. This is an example of UTC constructively navigating the various tensions that are embedded in the complexly multi-layered nature of a college. Each of the 10 essays in some way attends to the navigation of those creative and productive tensions.

In the opening chapter, Ross Chambers explores the “intersection” of Church and University, and the challenges and opportunities of constructively navigating that intersection. Importantly, he notes that participating in School of Theology at a public university was conceived by the Synod as “a form of mission and public engagement” (5) – a rationale for *academic* theology which I would argue is not widely grasped in the Church.

Ben Myers' chapter exploring 25 years of Systematic Theology at UTC is, perhaps, the one that most explicitly brings to the surface the theological tensions that have surfaced in the college, posing the question of how the "larger inheritance of Christian thought" (39) will shape the Chruch's identity and the formation of ministers.

In their essay, Peter Walker and Nicole Fleming explicitly name the "formative" nature of the tension generated in the college by the diversity of the ministry candidate community, noting, very importantly, the "naïve distinctions between evangelical and liberal theology do not even begin to map the theological diversity of the college community" (48).

Employing an auto-ethnographic approach, Rebecca Lindsay brings the lived experience of being a student to the book through describing the college in David Ford's term, a "community of the heart" (56). She relates the sometimes daunting and overwhelming 'unmaking' that comes with theological study. She forcefully notes the continuing influence of the whiteness of the culture of theological education.

Using oral history, Seforosa Carroll and Carolyn Craig-Emilsen take the question of "Multiculturalism, Theological Learning and Community" head on, employing with great effect the concepts of space and place as filters through which to address the topic and to describe the kind of learning that occurs here. They too pick up the theme of "intersection," describing UTC as a place where learning, culture and faith intersect.

Clive Pearson's chapter, "Pasifika Voices Flourishing in the Presence of Others," offers a very comprehensive account of the Pasifika presence in the college and the many consequences of that for the college and the church. These consequences are not trivial. This presence has, he writes, "initiated

fresh methodologies, addressed difficult issues, wrestled with issues to do with belonging, identity and homemaking" (106).

Also using an oral history approach, Myung Hwa Park, also brings the voices of past students to the book, in this case the specific voice of Korean students. We are given an insight into the rawness of the experiences of minority, difference, hybridity, and also discouragement. Nevertheless, something that struck me forcefully in this chapter was the sense of enthusiasm and importance attached to theological study and formation. For all those raw challenges, these students deemed that theological study was worth persisting with.

William Emilsen's chapter on the Camden Theological Library is a very important inclusion. Libraries are vital to any community. He tells the story of how the Library Manager, Moira Bryant, has worked to ensure that the Camden library offers such vitality to both the academy and the church. It is a chapter which also names and deals with one of the abiding tensions that shape theological colleges: the finite nature of the Church's financial resources, a tension that has strongly shaped discussions about theological colleges in the UCA in recent decades.

Mark Hillis's chapter on Life-long Learning outlines the impressive schedule of conferences hosted by UTC pitched at a variety of audiences, but all reflecting the ways in which UTC has served that interface between academy and church by keeping scholarship available to a wider audience, but also, as he says, by being a place of encounter between people from all walks of life.

The final chapter, John Squire's "With Heart and Mind: Research and Publications at UTC," is a nice follow on to Hillis's. It is a reminder that UTC has not just hosted scholars, it also is the business of producing and nurturing them. Squires acknowledges that some would argue that the kind

of research undertaken and which he has outlined is not among “the things that matter.” I agree that it does. If our Church’s founding document encourages us to thank God for “continuing witness and service of ...scholar”, then we should be intentional ourselves about producing scholars who themselves contribute to global scholarship.

The chapters in this book are serious essays. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the authors have been closely associated with UTC, their essays are neither nostalgic nor romantic about the College. Nor are they either defensive or reactionary in their explorations of the tensions embedded in its life. All are written with honesty, insight and clarity as well as deep appreciation for the college. And none of them seek unduly to glorify the college. This is a well-conceived collection of essays, and it has been very well edited Emilsen and Curthoys.

Scholarly studies and analyses of the Uniting Church’s theological colleges are rare, despite, as I noted at the outset, the contested place which the colleges occupy in the Church. This absence is one factor contributing to the cross-purposes that often characterises discussions about them. This alone is reason to welcome this volume. Despite being occasioned by an anniversary, the volume is not an historical study *per se*. Its thematic approach invites a different kind of perspective on the College’s past. This is well captured by Stephen Pickard in his Foreword to the volume when he writes: “Whilst *Things that Matter* seeks to avoid the triumphalist temptation to eulogize the past, it nonetheless has been written in the hope of encouraging people to look at the College’s history anew, expecting to be surprised and, just maybe, reflect on what has happened” (xiii).

The book deserves to be read by faculty of the Uniting Church’s other theological colleges, decision-makers in Presbyteries, Synods and the Assembly, as well as anyone who would like to

expand their own understanding of what the phrase “theological education” embraces.

Geoff Thompson is a retired Uniting Church Minister, having served in congregational and academic placements. The author of various books on Uniting Church theology, he has also published essays and journal articles on Karl Barth and more general matters of doctrine. He is the author of *Christian Doctrine: a guide for the perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2020). Thompson is a Research Fellow of the University of Divinity, a Fellow of the Wesley Centre, and Editor of *Uniting Church Studies*.

About Uniting Church Studies

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>AssMin</i> | Assembly Minutes |
| <i>BOU</i> | Basis of Union |
| <i>CS</i> | Covenanting Statement |
| <i>RP</i> | Revised Preamble |
| <i>UCMC</i> | The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church |
| <i>UCAConst</i> | Uniting Church Constitution |
| <i>UCARegs2025</i> | Uniting Church Regulations 2025 |
| <i>UIW2</i> | Uniting in Worship 2 |

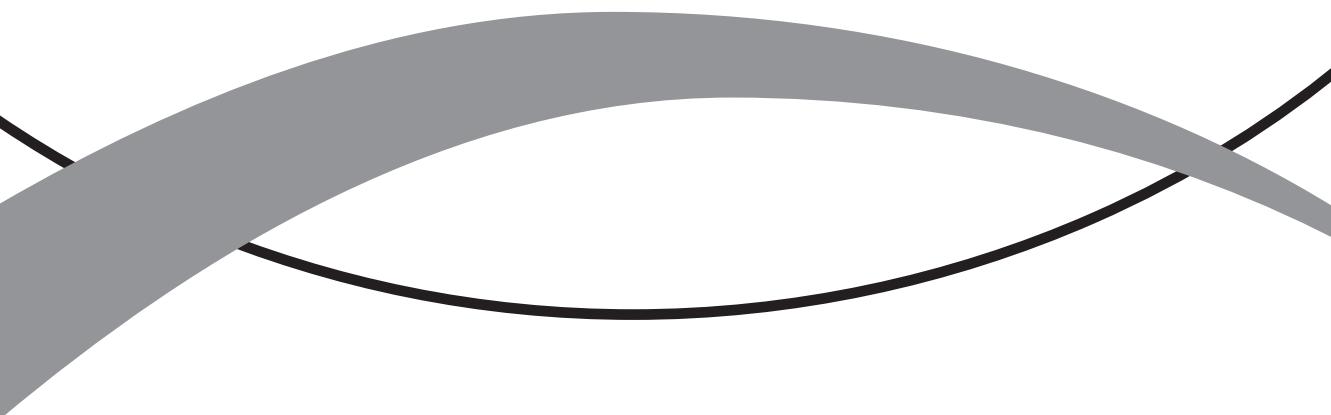
Institutions and Organisations

| | |
|--------------|--|
| <i>UCA</i> | Uniting Church in Australia |
| <i>UAICC</i> | Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress |
| <i>WCC</i> | World Council of Churches |
| <i>ASC</i> | Assembly Standing Committee |

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

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| <i>UCS</i> | Uniting Church Studies |
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