

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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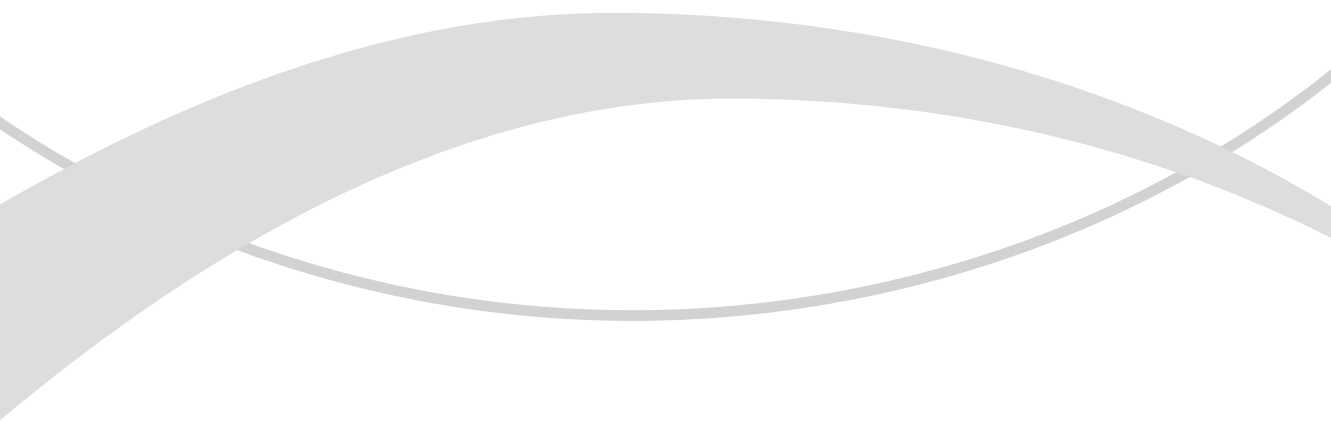
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Editor:

Rev. Dr. Geoff Thompson
geoff.thompson@pilgrim.edu.au

Review Editor:

Rev. Liam Miller
liamandrewmiller@gmail.com

Subscriptions Editor:

utc@nsw.uca.org.au

Editorial Committee:

Rev. Heewon Chang
Rev. Dr. Sally Douglas
Rev. Dr. Ockert Meyer
Rev. Liam Miller
John Oldmeadow (Chair)
Dr. Damian Palmer
Rev. Dr. Geoff Thompson
Rev. Dr. Peter Walker
Rev. Dr. Ji Zhang

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Editorial

Geoff Thompson

It is both a privilege and pleasure to have been appointed Editor of *Uniting Church Studies*. At the outset I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Rev. Dr. Chris Budden, not only for his oversight and development of the journal since 2017, but also for the advice he provided as I took on the task. Chris's work with the journal can rightly be added to the long list of his contributions to the Uniting Church.

This is also the occasion to note the appointment of Mr John Oldmeadow as the Chair of the journal's newly-expanded Editorial Committee. After 20 years in publishing, John joined the Synod of NSW & ACT as Executive Director of the Board of Education for 12 years before taking up a Synod role with the UCA schools in NSW. The other members of the committee are Rev. Heewon Chang, Rev. Dr. Sally Douglas, Rev. Dr. Ockert Myer, Rev. Liam Miller, Dr. Damian Palmer, Rev. Dr. Peter Walker and Rev. Dr. Ji Zhang. This committee brings to the oversight of the journal a wealth of experience in publishing, academia, ministry, the life of the Uniting Church and connections with the global church. Already it is exploring ways of expanding the accessibility and reach of the journal, including some new forms of an internet presence in due course.

For over a quarter of a century, under the leadership of its previous editors, book review editors, various editorial consultants and management committees the journal has provided a regular forum for the publication of research into and about the Uniting Church. As such it has resourced (and often provoked) discussion, debate, and learning. It has critically studied the Church's steps into being a multi-cultural Church and its entry into the Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. There have been special issues on, among other things, the Preamble, the Basis of Union, Education and Faith Formation, the Uniting Church and Neo-liberalism, Pasifika theology, John Calvin, the Australian Missionary Movement in Korea, Atheism, and Liturgy. It has published commentary on, and analysis of, the Uniting Church's various controversies, including those around baptism, ordination and sexuality. The authors have included theologians and historians, exegetes and educators, sociologists and philosophers, lay and ordained, academics and practitioners. The authors have reflected much of the cultural and theological diversity of the Uniting Church. The journal has also been a forum for proposals about, and critical discussions of, the Church's future. With all this and much more, *Uniting Church Studies* has done the sorts of things that academic journals do amongst and for their constituencies.

The impact of academic journals is not simply or narrowly academic. The very existence of a journal has a certain symbolic function beyond the publication of its contents. It is a statement that this field of enquiry is important and invites study. It is a statement that there is a field of enquiry which is sufficiently distinct to gather conversation around some level of shared assumptions, however much the conversation may test and/or expand those assumptions. It is a statement that there is a community of writers and readers who have expertise in this field of enquiry. It is also a statement that that expertise needs to be tested and refined, not least for benefit of the wider community that, in various situations, might be asked to trust that expertise.

For *Uniting Church Studies*, the field of enquiry is very specific and, from its beginning, so too has been its commitment to a particular mode of enquiry. The statement of the journal's purposes sets this out very clearly.

Uniting Church Studies is a fully-refereed, multi-disciplinary journal focused on a specific subject – the Uniting Church in Australia. The journal aims to promote scholarly reflection and understanding. It does so by means of dialogue: between the academic and the practitioner; between church and society in Australia, and between the Uniting Church in Australia and other Uniting and United Churches throughout the world.

By the measure of that criterion, the above overview of the breadth of the issues covered in the course of the journal's life suggests that *Uniting Church Studies* has stuck closely to this purpose. Strikingly, the specificity of the stated subject – the Uniting Church in Australia – has produced multiple trajectories of enquiry. The life of the Uniting Church is, by any measure, incredibly rich, and in that richness it has been and remains ripe for critical study.

The three dialogues referred to in the journal's purpose also warrant reflection. Within the broader life of the UCA, the relationship between “the academic and the practitioner” is a contested one. It comes to the surface in long-standing and highly-charged debates about theological colleges and the role of *theological* education in *ministerial* formation. But wider discussions also impact this relationship. Few academic disciplines have been left untouched by the “practical turn” of recent decades, to the point where the academic/practitioner binary has been superseded by more complex understandings of the production of knowledge and of the relationship between those who produce it. Of course, Christianity has its own reasons for resisting abstract knowledge and for orienting itself towards *phronesis* and the cultivation of wisdom. This is not to dissolve all the distinctions between the Christian academic and the Christian practitioner, but it does give them a common cause, and makes both of them alert to the diverse modes of knowledge generated by the knowledge of God. To this end, the journal welcomes research articles that constitute dialogue between the academic and practitioner as part of the church's quest for wisdom. To this end, the Editorial Committee is also exploring ways in which the journal can include reflective writing, poetry and art as a way of opening up other forms of dialogue between the academic and the practitioner.

The dialogue between “church and society in Australia” has already figured in this journal in significant ways. And the contours of this relationship are more or less well established: the church and colonization; the church and cultural diversity; the church and social justice (including the churches' various community service agencies); the church and child sexual abuse; the church and marriage, gender and sexuality. In the period of the journal's life, two dimensions of the “church and society” relationship have changed and taken hold. One, for well-documented reasons, is the growing distrust shown by the society towards the church. The other is the fact that the church is now a minority community within Australian society. It is timely to think about how the Australian church adopts a minority imagination – not defensively or fearfully, not in a reactionary mode, and not with the self-righteousness that often attends the “faithful remnant” minority imagination. What aspects of being a minority grants the church new insights in the gospel? What new forms of witness to Jesus Christ are evoked from a minority imagination? What can be learnt from other minority Christian communities (in Asia, for instance) or existing minorities within the

Australian Christian community (Indigenous Christians, for instance) who have been forced live out their vocations without cultural imprimaturs or economic security? Might being a minority be precisely the place from which the church regains the trust of the society? As the journal continues to invite contributions addressing the dialogue between church and society, exploration of such themes is welcomed.

The third dialogue mentioned is that “between the Uniting Church in Australia and other Uniting and United Churches throughout the world.” Whilst not absent from the journal, this is not a dialogue that has assumed any prominence. As churches which, for the most part, had their origins in the twentieth-century ecumenical movement, their respective journeys towards union were resourced and justified by well-developed (if now contested) theologies of union. Strikingly however, there has been little *scholarly* attention paid to the theologies that emerge *after* and because of union. Are there post-union theologies, and perhaps especially post-union ecclesiologies, common to this family of churches? To explore such questions, and to cultivate this dialogue, plans are in place to ensure that from time to time, the journal will intentionally feature articles by theologians and practitioners from other United and Uniting churches.

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And now, to the current issue. The authors of our four papers constitute a mix of academics and practitioners. Each of them addresses issues which emerge from the life of the Uniting Church. Each of the papers is a mixture of critique, analysis and construction.

Sean Gilbert challenges the “instrumentalist” use of language which he believes currently prevails in the Uniting Church. He argues that this has a detrimental effect on the uses of language in ministry. With some prompts from Davis McCaughey and Indigenous understandings of country, he draws on Charles Taylor and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to propose, instead, the development of “expressivist-constitutive” language. So understood and used, Gilbert argues that language can be a “parable of embodied grace” which draws us into the renewing ways of Christ.

Janet Staines draws attention to the disparity between the Uniting Church’s early rhetoric about gender equality and the actual gender ratios in the domains of ministry and leadership. Her focus is the Queensland Synod, but the story she tells is not unknown in the other parts of the church. It is worth noting that at Assembly level, despite the current President, Ex-President, President-elect and General Secretary all being women, the only other woman President who held the office did so in the mid-1990s. It was another two decades before Assembly again elected a woman as President, and the current President is the first ordained woman to lead the church since union 45 years ago. With her focus on Queensland, however, Staines employs Joan Acker’s theory of “gendered organisations” to analyse the problem and Judith Butler’s idea of “resignifying practices” to make constructive proposals. It is noteworthy that Staines’s article was first presented as public lecture from where it provided some of the background to discussions and decisions about synod policy. Here we see interactions between academic research, public discussions of theology, and church practice.

Daniel Mossfield explores the Uniting Church's theology of ordination against the background of discussions in the NSW & ACT Synod about the shortage of ordained ministers. Employing the work of James Puglisi as a methodological tool, he explores the *theologia prima* which is present in the Uniting Church's service of Ordination to the Ministry of the Word. In doing so, Mossfield draws attention to the ferment that has accompanied the Uniting Church's discussions of ordination. He argues that these discussions have not paid sufficient attention to the theology of divine action underlying the theology of ordination.

In a final – and invited – essay, Peter Walker reflects on the recent reconvened meeting of the 16th Assembly (held at Alexandra Headlands, Queensland, in May 2022). Walker pays particular attention to the project which was a specific focus at the meeting: *Act2: On the Way*. The project, initiated by the Assembly Standing Committee, is exploring ways in which the church's structure and resourcing can be better oriented to contemporary challenges. It addresses the widely held view that many of the UCA's structures are no longer fit for purpose. Walker locates the project in a longer history of human efforts to address and overcome the difference between who we are and what we are meant to be.

The issue rounds off with four book reviews. Together, these books address a rich and provocative mix of studies of scripture, philosophy and contextual theology. Although each book or its author is variously related to the Uniting Church, there is much, even in the reviews, which will undoubtedly, stimulate and nourish their readers.

Out of silence: an exploration into the language of faith

Sean Gilbert

Abstract

Drawing on the insights of Charles Taylor and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this essay draws attention to a linguistic dilemma that the Christian Church – and by extension the Uniting Church in Australia – is experiencing at present, namely, the pervasive cultural pressure to use instrumental language. Such reductionism of religious language and its correlated symbols has broad ministry and missional implications. Building on examples of biography, prose and poetics, suggestions are made for cultivating expressive-constitutive speech in the ministry of the Uniting Church.

Introduction

Fundamentally, there is a great silence which meets language; all words come out of silence. Words which have a depth, resonance, healing and challenge are words that are loaded with ascetic silence. Language, which does not recognise its kinship with reality is banal, denotative and purely discursive. The language of poetry issues from and returns to silence. In modern culture, conversation is one of the causalities...¹

It is not uncommon when introducing ministry students to the expansive world of poetics to spy the rolling of eyes or to hear from braver souls, “I don’t do poetry.” Akin to the lingering experiences of a music teacher who told us we couldn’t sing or the English lecturer who forced us to unravel a poet’s complex forms, my strategic use of poetry in ministry-related units is often met with initial bemusement and even weighted notes of resistance. Given poetry’s cultural discordancy – a non-informational, indirectness of speech – of what practical use can it be considering the pressing demands of ministry and mission currently facing the Uniting Church in Australia?

In 1994, the first President of the National Assembly (and key wordsmith of the *Basis of Union*), Rev Dr Davis McCaughey, gave an address to the Victorian Synod’s Historical Society, “The Formation of the Basis of Union.”² What is striking about the lecture, read now 28 years later, is McCaughey’s easy reliance upon poetics and arresting prose. W. H. Auden and Czeslaw Milosz are quoted at length and, in major part, he builds the substance of his lecture around the soulful questioning of Samuel Coleridge: *What is*

¹ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (London: Bantam Books, 1999), 143

² Davis J. McCaughey, “The Formation of the Basis of Union,” *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society, Synod of Victoria 1*, no. 1 (1994): 8-17.

the meaning of presenting realities? McCaughey then holds Coleridge's question in contrast to the self-orientated empiricism of Jeremy Bentham: *Is it true to what I know already?*

Both in literary form and content, McCaughey's lecture exemplifies the theological principle of *tropos* that is integral to the *Basis* itself.³ Namely, a turning beyond what is presently known in the quest for deepened levels of faith, meaning and purpose in relation to the triune God. In fact, the *Basis* implies a clear dissatisfaction with any sense of rigidity so far as office, belief, or ecclesial form is concerned.⁴ For McCaughey, then, the Uniting Church is only true to its aspirational identity and calling as a pilgrim people when a creative enlargement of spirit transcends any deathly *stasis* of opinion, structural forms, and ecclesial practice.

McCaughey's theological and philosophical underpinnings of the Uniting Church as a spirited, ecumenical movement of grace and truth have, I believe, ready implications for the language we use to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ. For example, will it be sure and certain in designative, abstracted tones or, *via* more constitutive and soulful forms, might it search for even greater meaning amid life's uncertainties and the daily reality of innocent suffering?

As a brief deliberation on the weighted questions posed above, this essay seeks to make a case for a renewal of speech within the Uniting Church, both in shape and content. Practically speaking, that means a conscious shift from pronouncement to searching inquiry, from settled knowledge bases to an imaginative unsettling of them, and from the white noise of church business to the peace of contemplative silence, out of which new and discerning words may arise. In sum, what I am encouraging is a greater *inhabitation* of our words framed and voiced in Christ, the eternal Word, thereby a discernible depth and dexterity of speech more congruous with the life of the risen, crucified One.

To guide these considerations, I will summarise pertinent aspects of Charles Taylor's recent work, *The Language Animal*.⁵ I will then consider what I consider to be an affective turning within Dietrich Bonhoeffer's language from theological prose to an experimentation with the *theo poetic*⁶ in the year leading up to his execution. Finally, I will suggest how a renewed language and pastoral bearing within the Uniting Church in Australia might become more culturally resonant, and thus compelling. However, before I begin considering the above trajectory, I want to introduce an illustrative and analogous point of reference by means of a narrative from the annals of Australian colonial history.

³ See, Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary thought and the Eastern Christian tradition* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 57.

⁴ McCaughey, "The Formation of the Basis of Union," 16-17.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶ A descriptive yet resonant term that the Rev Alistair McCrae introduced me to following the 2012 Assembly meeting in Adelaide. Since that time, and initially through the writings of Amos Niven, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2001), and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Theological Aesthetics '1: Seeing the Form'* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982), my own teaching, research and writing has sought to not simply analyse theo poetics but to the best of my ability, to participate in its unfolding, i.e., *making essence*.

An Illustrative Analogy

With the steady arrival of free settlers to New South Wales in the 1820s and an increased demand for habitable, fertile acreage, incursions further inland within the Hunter Valley led invariably to contact and violent conflict with First Peoples. As a result, local Indigenous guides were hired by newly arrived farmers such as John Brown and Robert Scott making their way to a land grant at Glendon in the May of 1823. As was the colonising practice, their chosen guide was given the British name of Ben Davis, a well-established farmer of the Newcastle region. His real name was probably Munnion.⁷ Brown kept a journal account of the journey. In it he writes:

We set off with Ben Davis as a guide and he seemed very much pleased and kept talking all the way he went but we did not understand him but by what we could make out he was telling us about the country.⁸

The historian Mark Dunn then comments:

Here Brown offers a tantalising glimpse of what Aboriginal guides like Ben Davis might have conveyed to the first wave of British settlers about their relationship to the Hunter Valley... The country that Ben Davis was describing would have been defined by his multilayered understanding of the place. While all this was new to Scott and Brown, for Ben Davis and other Aboriginal people the Hunter was a known place, inscribed with stories, knowledge, history and meaning learnt through generations.⁹

As First Peoples repeatedly remind Second Peoples, country is constitutive of multidimensional and interrelated parts. For instance, Margo Neale, editor of the “First Knowledges” series, writes in the Introduction to *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming*:

For us it is not land, but Country. Country is a worldview that encompasses our relationship to the physical, ancestral and spiritual dimensions, and involves the kind of intimacy evident in the oft-quoted expression “The Country is our Mother. We belong to the country; it does not belong to us.” Indigenous people think of Country as they would a family member. We worry about Country and sing to Country. We care for Country.¹⁰

By way of significant contrast, the colonising Brown and Scott hired ‘Ben Davis’ to relay information pertinent only to their physical safety, soil quality and water reliability. In sum, their primary language

⁷ Mark Dunn, *The Convict Valley: The Bloody Struggle on Australia's Early Frontiers* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2020), 119.

⁸ Dunn, *The Convict Valley*, 121.

⁹ Dunn, *The Convict Valley*, 121.

¹⁰ Bill Gammage & Bruce Pascoe, *Country: Future Fire, Future Farming* (Port Melbourne, Vic: Thames and Hudson, 2021), 5-6.

was utilitarian and suggestive of linear beliefs about reality and time.¹¹ Yet from the ebullient perspective and disposition of Munnion, one shaped over countless generations, both country and language were expressive of a soulful and even joyful wisdom. As Auntie Denise Champion, an Adnyamathanha elder and Uniting Church Deacon has written, hers is a circular worldview with no definitive starting point, yet it is entirely dependent upon the accumulated wisdom and stories of the past to walk “confidently into the future.”¹² Furthermore she states in her recent book, *Anaditj*:

Anaditj is a state of being. A good way to speak of it is the commonly used phrase, ‘Always was, always will be.’ We go back in time and recognise and acknowledge the past as we walk into the future. You have to know who you are and where you come from to walk confidently into the future. You’re not making it up then; you’re walking with the weight of history behind you.’¹³

Charles Taylor on the uses of language in the West

Commensurate to the preceding illustrative analogy, Charles Taylor’s *The Language Animal* (2016) has traced two recognisable Western philosophical approaches to the use of language. Firstly, he outlines the “designative-instrumental” practice named after the influence of Hobbes, Locke and Condillac. Secondly, he examines the “expressive-constitutive” practice named after Hamann, Herder and Humboldt.¹⁴ I will briefly describe each category in turn and then summarise Taylor’s response to them.

Representative of a scientific, empiricist and even Cartesian paradigm, the designative-instrumental understanding and practice of language is at home in objective designations, whereby verbal or written forms describe a pre-existing reality or idea. Therefore, language acts as might an instrument, that is, a tool whose task it is to give accurate information via a largely top-down (expert to non-expert, powerful to the not-as-powerful) communicative process. Logically speaking, rational and exacting definitions of reality preclude any linguistic use of metaphor or trope.¹⁵ Akin to Plato, poets are to be banished from the city, yet not because of proven vanities. Rather, they seek to make greater meaning during life’s disassembling experiences of suffering and uncertainty. For the designative-instrumental stream of thinking, such a basis for communicative language is unsubstantiated or subjective, thus non-valuable to social or educational discourse.

In light of the above summary, Taylor’s contention that a holistic phenomenon of language is far greater than a designative function is reflected in what he describes as the expressive-constitutive nature of linguistics.

¹¹ See Grace Karskens, *People of the River: Lost worlds of early Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2020). “The other essential and fundamental contrast between Aboriginal and European ways of knowing concerned the nature of time, and the relationships of people, animals, events and phenomena with time. For decades, anthropologists and archaeologists assumed and wrote as if ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture only existed before colonisation.... Yet in Aboriginal understandings, time does not flow inevitably and irrevocably from past to future, ‘alpha and omega, beginning and end’. Instead, the world is ‘unfolding across all time, from the beginnings of the phenomenal world into the future, assimilating “new” phenomena along the way (496):”

¹² See Denise Champion, *Anaditj* (Port Augusta, SA: UAICC, 2021), 19.

¹³ Champion, *Anaditj*, 19. See also Grace Karskens, *People of the River: Lost worlds of early Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2020), 484-520.

¹⁴ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, ix.

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 129.

Quoting the well-known phrase of Heidegger that language is a “house of being,” Taylor suggests that “the language that we speak at a given time relates things, disposes of them, is seen as a kind of active arrangement. Such relating is essential to language.”¹⁶ As such, there exists a dynamism of making and remaking at play, not merely the communication of a determinative or linear conclusion. Language, therefore, is expressive of vision and *re*-vision. It is constitutive of many revolving and meaning-making parts.

In the concluding chapter of his celebrated *A Secular Age* entitled, “Conversions,” Taylor expresses hope in the “world-making” nature and transformative energy of poetics. In doing so, his perspective represents a clear contrast and choice to the fixity of Descartes, Locke, et al. Imaginative and adaptive expression of thought is pivotal to what Taylor envisages to be a participation within just and hospitable social futures. Responding to the faith convictions of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Taylor concurs with the Jesuit’s theological conclusion: “God didn’t just make us that we could live according to the laws of his creation, but to participate in his love.”¹⁷ “Constitutive” in this context, then, meaning a due humility of perspective and a deep sense of belonging. It is an acknowledgement that meaningful and *inclined* language, including the practice of prayer, is conversational in both form and substance. Furthermore, the right word often arises out of respectful space or silences within conversational process. Here encounter and the possibility of conversion are everything. Accordingly, Taylor states:

The matrix of language is conversation, and this remains so throughout human life. The famous line from Hölderlin captures this: “Since a conversation we are / and hear from one another.” The “we” here is we humans, as essentially linguistic beings. Language comes to us through exchange, and this is the primary locus where it is maintained, altered and renewed.¹⁸

For Taylor, then, language is not given to inform cognitive and self-serving imperatives (“Just tell us where the best pasture and water for our livestock is!”) but to shape the whole person in closer relation to others within a multidimensional and complex universe. As such, the gift of language is potentially the grace of embodied Shalom wherein the rightness of a particular word is determined by its close working relation to another’s, not by singular pronouncements of opinion. If there be a goal or telos of language, it is communion whereby

the maturing human self emerges out of a shared take on “the” world, through a gradual and growing sense that my take is different from yours. We grow toward a complex, two-level understanding. There is still the one world, “the” world, but we live out different perspectives on it.¹⁹

As a practicing Catholic, Taylor expresses concern about the prevalent designative-instrumental practice of language in the West, particularly in its indifference towards the possibility or fullness of transcendence. And by “fullness,” Taylor is proposing, almost against the odds, a deepening of affected religious experience within what he calls the “immanent frame” of Western thought and economic activity. He contends, “The

¹⁶ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 764.

¹⁸ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 58.

¹⁹ Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 67.

immanent order can thus slough off the transcendent. But it doesn't necessarily do so. What I have been describing as the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West, or at least that is what I am trying to portray. Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed."²⁰

In Taylor's mind, therefore, closed or framed systems of epistemology – religious beliefs included – are unable to facilitate the communal fullness he envisages. This means that potentially converting conversations between divergent groupings are limited by bordered, thus "idolatrous" experiences of reality which, by means of their tightly secured nature, will need to be defended. In such a social climate, the rowdy contest of ideas becomes normative and is even envisaged to be dialogical! This has certainly been my experience of the Uniting Church at certain times in its recent history. Holding divergent life perspectives in creative tension rarely appears to be a workable option, even for the sake of a greater understanding and genuine peace. Taylor notes with due warning:

So religious faith can be dangerous. Opening to transcendence is fraught with peril. But this is particularly so if we respond to these perils with premature closure, drawing an unambiguous boundary between the pure and the impure through the polarisation of conflict, even war. That religious believers are capable of this, history amply attests.... Idolatry breeds violence.²¹

Consequently, the social fullness envisaged by Charles Taylor is contingent upon what he defines as an expressive – constitutive use of language in public discourse. By noting the limitations of the prevalent Western mode of instrumentalist communication, whereby linear efficiencies seem unquestionable in both secular and ecclesial contexts (though one wonders if the great uncertainties presented by the COVID and a war-torn world will challenge or dismantle this assumption), Taylor suggests that there are other ways to practice meaningful speech, particularly within faith-based, symbolic environs.

Imagining such a hope-filled possibility, I would suggest that within primary liturgical, evangelistic, and educational levels of Christian discourse, the renovation of language is not simply a matter of sharpening skills of social relevance. Instead, it would seek to demonstrate a soulful resonance,²² whereby union with Christ (John 15:5) through the freely given Spirit (Romans 5:5) is both spoken and enacted from an affected, thus inclined, spiritual experience.²³ And with that linguistic principle in mind, I will now turn to the trusted and arresting voice of a Christian martyr.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542-544.

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 769.

²² For a helpful contrast between the often-used words, relevance, and resonance, see, Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 199-214.

²³ See Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 27-30. See also Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018): "How stale our spiritual language can sometimes seem in the face of a rare, clear spirit. I don't really believe in atheists. Nor in true believers, for that matter. One either lives towards God or not... I know the necessity of religion. I know we need communal ritual and meaningful creeds. And yet I know, too, that all of this emerges from an intuition so original that, in some ultimate sense, to define is to defile. One either lives toward God or not (83)."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's affective turn

Intuitively, a re-visioning of Christian language and its practical implications for Christian ministry in the pandemic season led me back to the persuasive voice of the imprisoned Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45). Reflected in his theological letters to Eberhard Bethge beginning in the late April of 1944, Bonhoeffer underwent an affective turning in both thought and written expression.²⁴ This *tropos* represented a further movement beyond conceptual or ideological frameworks of Christianity in favour of felt experiences of faith and a more “unconscious” expression of discipleship.²⁵ Significantly for Bonhoeffer at that time, a renewal of experiential language was key to its affecting power of communication. In a baptismal sermon composed in prison and personally addressed to his newly born nephew Dietrich, Bonhoeffer wrote in May 1944:

It is not for us to predict the day – but the day will come – when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be a new language, perhaps quite nonreligious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus’s language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power – the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God’s kingdom is drawing near.... Until then the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God’s own time. May you be one of them.²⁶

Influenced by his prison reading of Spinoza, well known for his observance of affect’s impact on human experience and decision making, the form of Bonhoeffer’s own literary expression took him by surprise.²⁷ Facing imminent execution due to the failed coup attempt on Hitler’s life, he responded to the need to express a yearning depth of soul, something that his scholarly precision of prose could not convey as readily. Indeed, the first poem he sent to Bethge in early June of 1944, entitled “The Past,” was prefaced by the admission, “I feel like a silly kid, keeping from you that I’ve been trying my hand at poetry here from time to time.” Then further on, “It was strange how the rhymes just came by themselves. The whole thing was written at once, in few hours, and hasn’t been polished.”²⁸

“The Past” is remarkable for its immersion into the resonant soundings of human desire and affect. Throughout the poem Bonhoeffer allows his truest self to speak openly, risking in the process a certain

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, eds. C Gremmels, E. Bethge and R. Bethge with I. Todt, trans., I. Best, L. Dahill, R. Krauss and N. Lukens, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Contemporary cultural and affect theorists often reference ‘the affective turn’ or the ‘turn to affect.’ See Patricia Ticineto Clough and John Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorising the Social* editors. (London: Duke University Press, 2007). See also Sean M. Gilbert, “Spiritual Affections and the Pastoral Disposition,” Unpublished PhD Thesis (Flinders University, SA, 2020), 31-48.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 491. This is succinctly defined by Bonhoeffer as the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 390.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 494. In his miscellaneous notes from July 1944, Bonhoeffer loosely yet significantly quotes Spinoza: “Affects are never overcome by reason but only by stronger affects.” In his own socio/political context, Bonhoeffer has seen and felt the dark and menacing side of this principle. One also senses that he is also awake to its potential so far as the development of the spiritual life is concerned.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 416-417.

incongruence with his own theological convictions and persona, that is, by virtue of the *given*, raw and even ambiguous verse:²⁹

Evil enters my eye, my soul.
 I hate what I see,
 I hate what moves me,
 I hate all that lives and is lovely,
 that claims to compensate my loss.
 I want my life, I demand my own life back,
 my past,
 You.

Unwittingly perhaps, Bonhoeffer's theology was being rewritten by a more constitutive use of his own considerable breadth of vocabulary. Specifically speaking, he was being re-positioned subtly, even *rehabilitated* in relationship to God and the then ravaged world by virtue of his own experience. For within the dehumanising restraints of prison life, protected theological concepts of divine transcendence had largely turned to dust. However, as he suggested to Bethge at the outset of a renewed theologising, "God's 'beyond' is not what is beyond our cognition! Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God's transcendence. God is the beyond in the midst of our lives."³⁰ Or, as he even more eloquently suggests within the "Outline for a Book," the Christian life is, "The human being living out the transcendent."³¹

Further to this realisation and through his covert correspondence, Bonhoeffer contended that "holy" ideas about God actually push the living reality of God "out of the world," allowing the Christian's God to function only as, "*a deus ex machina* in the so-called ultimate questions, that is, God as a consumer object becomes the answer to life's questions, a solution to life's needs and conflicts."³²

At the heart of Bonhoeffer's affective turning was his much-quoted realisation that, "only the suffering God can help."³³ That is, against most conceptual and philosophical assertions of God's who, what and why, divine impassibility became an ill-conceived fiction for him. In fact, it was antithetical to the very nature of received grace when encountered, figuratively speaking, out of the silence, through the valleys of anxiety, in nuance and metaphor, *via* ambiguity and paradox, and primordially from within the abyss of Golgotha. He writes in full:

Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and on to the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side to help us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his

²⁹ In a later letter to Bethge which includes the poem, "Fortune and Calamity," and a note of gratitude for his friend's criticisms of "The Past," Bonhoeffer states, "Confronted by these newborn children [poems] of mine, I feel rather at a loss and without any yardstick" (Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 439).

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 367.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 501.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 450.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 479.

omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! This is the cruel distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people towards the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.³⁴

The poem, “Christian and Heathens”³⁵ sent to Bethge with the revealing “Who Am I?” and the chilling, “Night Voices,” is illustrative of the turnings suggested above. In three short stanzas, Bonhoeffer teases out the difference between a common utilitarian expression of faith (shared by all walks of life) whereby God is conceived to be a consumer item or human needs dispenser, when the graced reality he experiences is shockingly different. His poetic framing of theology jolts the reader for the sake of a greater receptivity, therefore a greater potential for transformation:

People go to God when God’s in need,
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness and death.
Christians stand by God in God’s own pain.³⁶

In Bonhoeffer’s reframing, Christianity is not defined by religious beliefs, works, denomination or race. Rather, it is expressive of Jesus’ radical friendship,³⁷ moved by his active stances of compassion and justifying grace. (John 8:2-11) Christians see, feel, and join the swell of the Spirit during life’s vicissitudes and not by avoidances of them, e.g., the two kingdoms theory or even the promise of heaven itself.³⁸ These participants in life, then, are Bonhoeffer’s unconscious or non-religious Christians (with whom he numbers himself). They act and *speak* differently. Due to their originality and vitality of language, the converting presence and memory of Jesus is kept alive.³⁹ In other words, the felt experience of participation in Christ expands, energises, and attractively colours the language of faith, giving it creative flight to be a vehicle of disruptive grace to and for others. It is *embodied*; God’s living word made flesh. As Bonhoeffer states emphatically in *Ethics*, “God did not become an idea, a principle, a program, a universally valid belief or a law; God became human.”⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer’s final poem, “By the Powers of Good,” written on the eve of 1945 reveals an ease with religious metaphor, suggestive that any lingering embarrassment around his newfound medium of speech had

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 480. Bonhoeffer then adds: “Being a Christian does not mean being religious in a certain way, making oneself into something or other according to some method or other. Instead, it means being human, not a certain type of human being, but the human being Christ creates in us. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life(480).”

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 460.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 460.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, “The Friend,” 526.

³⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works – Reader’s Edition, trans. R. Kraus, C. West and D. Scott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015): “There are not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world. The reality of Christ embraces the reality of the world in itself. The world has no reality of its own independent of God’s revelation in Christ. It is a denial of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be “Christian” without being “worldly,” or [to] wish to be worldly without seeing and recognising the world in Christ. Hence there are not two realms but only *the one realm of the Christ-reality* in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united (10).”

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 500.

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 44. Later in the book he writes, “The commandment of God revealed in Jesus Christ embraces life as a whole. It does not merely guard, like the ethical, the boundaries of life that may not be crossed but is at the same time the centre and fullness of life. It is not only ought, but also allowed. It not only prohibits, but also liberates us for authentic life and for unreflective doing (289).”

begun to dissipate. Stanza 3 is notable in this regard. For although resigned to imprisonment and death, Bonhoeffer speaks from a continued experience of God's incarnated goodness. Praise remains in the land, even in a scorched and humiliated one. In this context alone, his language *is* meaning making, that is, it sings of a re-creative way forward for himself and others who might hear its clarion call.⁴¹ Clearly, the God addressed here (in Christ, through the Spirit) is no mere spectator to human evil but a loyal travelling companion, a light illuminating and bearing the present darkness:

And should you offer us the cup of suffering,
though heavy, brimming full and bitter brand,
we'll thankfully accept it, never flinching,
from your good heart and beloved hand.⁴²

Conclusion

By drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's affective turning and weighing the linguistic analysis of Charles Taylor, this essay has sought to encourage a conscious practice of "constituent-expressive" language in contemporary faith and social environs. Extended to the Uniting Church in Australia, this would, I contend, involve a burgeoning freedom from overly discursive and ideological concepts, assumed then practiced, for example, within the linguistics of liturgics, evangelism, and theological education. For as I have posited through various voices, the encompassing mystery of God cannot be reduced to an idea, strategy, liner stance, or static proposition. In Christian parlance, the eternal Word became flesh (John 1:14) and lived among us. A poetic or constituent faith language, therefore, most congruently reflects the irreducible human/divine paradox of Christ that it seeks to bear witness to. It does not prefigure it, nor seeks to overly define it. At its connecting and converting best, faith-imbued language is offered with a desirous humility,⁴³ grace, dexterity and *beauty*, the expression of it being harmonising to its core in keeping with the promised reconciliation of all things.⁴⁴ In short, a graced and expansive language of faith is integral to the evangel itself, not merely a designative tool in the hands of the officially sanctioned liturgist, evangelist, or teacher.

That stated, significant shifts in linguistic practices do not come easily. The English theologian and poet, Malcolm Guite, suggests that a "cultural apartheid" still exists between the empiricist driven world of science (*Scientia*) and that of a wisely affected imagination (*Sapientia*).⁴⁵ And demonstrably this is as true within the theological academy's curriculum as it is within the secular world of higher education. Thankfully, such hierarchically marked landscapes are beginning to fuse through the voices of poets and

⁴¹ The original poem has been widely used and modified in hymnals around the world. E.g., Song 617 in *Together in Song* (East Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1999). The liberal adaptation to its hymnody arguably robs the poem of its original flow and affective energy.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 548-550.

⁴³ See, Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 131-140.

⁴⁴ See, Trygve David Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist: Metaphor, Identity and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 24-26.

⁴⁵ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 4.

thinkers who can imaginatively bridge both worlds,⁴⁶ though not without prejudicial caricatures of poetics and poets in general.

I would lament any further distancing between a flat, descriptive language consistent with the immanent frame of secularism and a faith-imbued language that bears witness to the beauty of God's being and transcendence. In this regard, a theo poetic is hardly an optional extra for those called to the reconciling ministry of Christ, articulated so eloquently of in the early paragraphs of the *Basis of Union*. Speaking truly of the mysterious, saving designs of God from within veiled and painful realities demands not only an originality of language but a making and remaking (*poiesis*) of it. Jesus was an imaginative master of this which suggests that his disciples need to be well versed and practiced also. As a ministry candidate said to me recently, "I am beginning to understand that being a Minister of the Word means that I pay even closer attention to the words I frame and use in the practice ministry." I say amen to that!

The credibility of the church and its various ministries is arguably at stake here, particularly amid a seemingly endless pandemic, then beyond. By further reducing the language of faith to discursive methods in accord with secular culture's assumptions and informational addictions, we avoid soulful conversations that constitute genuine *communio* and graced consolations. Indeed, a purely descriptive language about the Christian faith diminishes the being of Christ into a utilitarian function – yet another curious piece of information to fathom, or another consumer product to try out. As Bonhoeffer asserted, by virtue of religious pontifications and self-justifications, we then move Christ out of the world in preference to technologies of belief or, in our era, the digital marketplace.

Expressive-constitutive speech cannot save the Uniting Church as a programmable or strategised function. But as a surprising and arresting parable of poetic, embodied grace, it has the latent capacity to conform us more holistically to the "strange" and renewing ways of Christ, further strengthening McCaughey's reminder of the resistance to rigidity embedded in the Basis of Union. Following the initially embarrassed Bonhoeffer, a conversant theo poetic reading and communication of the Christian narrative calls for daring practice or even experimental play on our part. It will mean trusting that resonating words and phrases born of truly graced experience will readily arise and flow out of silence.

⁴⁶ Christian Wiman is one such apologist for a contemporary poetic expression of [intelligent] faith. Now teaching on the faculty of Yale Divinity School, Wiman's poetics and prose offer a new and accessible language that maintains a searching fidelity to the multilayered experience of life, faith, and language.

“To lead the People”: resignifying gender in the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia¹

Janet Staines

Abstract

While blatant forms of gender discrimination are increasingly rare due to laws and organisational awareness, organisational practitioners and researchers continue to explore the various reasons for the perpetuation of gender inequality in the workforce. Feminist scholars have been drawn to organisational culture as a place for the study of discriminatory practices, focusing on the gender bias located in the structures, practices, and patterns of interaction within organisations. Applying a feminist reconstructionist hermeneutic, this paper demonstrates the disparity that exists between the theological statements of the Uniting Church in Australia and the institutional practices of the Queensland Synod. It will critique the continued absence of women from senior leadership roles and briefly present the ways that gender has been constructed in the church by referring to Joan Acker’s theory of gendered organisations. The paper will interrupt the authorial ontology of gendered leadership by identifying with Judith Butler’s resignifying practices for transformative action that will allow the Uniting Church in Australia to accomplish its liberating vision where both women and men are valued equally as the whole people of God.

Introduction

Since its union in 1977 the theological statements of the Uniting Church in Australia have affirmed the role of women and recognised those women called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, share in government and to serve those in need in the world.² The March 1990 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved to approve the document, *Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?* to express the biblical and theological reasoning which leads the Uniting Church to ordain both women and men to the Ministry of the Word. This document clearly states: “We ordain both women and men to the Ministry of the Word because we believe ordination without discrimination on grounds of gender is a fundamental implication of the gospel of God’s love in Christ for all human beings, without distinction.”³ The impetus for this document was the acknowledgement that this was not the practice of the whole Church and there

¹ This is a revised version of a public lecture by the same title at Albert Street Uniting Church, Brisbane, on March 24th 2022 as part of The Cooperative Albert Street Lecture Series.

² UCA Assembly, “Basis of Union 1992 Edition,” Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, accessed March 12 2020, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union>.

³ Social Responsibility and Justice Committee of the Assembly Commission for Mission, *Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?* (Sydney: Uniting Church Assembly, 1990).

was a deep concern that it was not an assumed practice in the Uniting Church in Australia. As a result, the document sought to affirm a theological position of the equal place of women and men in ministry in the Uniting Church, for those within the tradition and those outside.

The purpose of this paper is to wrestle with the ongoing disparity that exists between the theological statements of the Uniting Church and its institutional practices, with particular reference to the Queensland Synod. While the issue of gender in terms of theological legitimacy has, by and large, been resolved, women continue to be underrepresented amongst senior leadership roles in the Queensland Synod. In its forty-five years since union the Queensland Synod has had only one female Moderator, whilst in the same period three women have served as General Secretary, it remains the case that women are underrepresented in these senior leadership roles.⁴ Women are underrepresented as Presbytery ministers, with currently two women and eight men assuming Presbytery minister roles. In relation to placements within the Queensland Synod, 64% are held by males and 36% are held by females.⁵ Since women make up 63% of congregational attendance clergy women are substantially under-represented in leadership.⁶ The historic voting patterns by the Synod in Session reveal an under-representation of women appointed to the Synod Standing Committee. Whilst the number of females who nominate for the Synod Standing Committee is below that of males who nominate, the previous five Synods also show that the number of elected females is consistently below the number who nominated.⁷ Indications are that despite being presented with suitably qualified female nominees, the Synod favours the election of male nominees over female nominees. There continues to be a culture of gender inequality bias within the Queensland Synod, whereby the majority presence of women is not reflected in leadership and qualified women who offer themselves for leadership roles are not given the opportunity to exercise that leadership.

This paper will critique some of the impacts of this failed integration between policy and practice. It will briefly present the ways that gender has been constructed in the church by referring to Joan Acker's work which identifies how organisations gender their members proactively through a range of processes.⁸ It will challenge the assumption that union welcomed a new era for women's participation in leadership and 'neutralised' its gendering processes with its new theological statements. The Uniting Church is not and has never been gender neutral and given its pre-union structures and cultures, is a gendered vestige of its historical development. Once again, the concern of this paper is that the Queensland Synod has not produced a growing participation of women in senior leadership despite its theological statements and we are left with the question *why?*

But rather than staying with the critique of how gender is *done*, I want to move then to a focus on how gender is *undone*. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I will seek to interrupt the authorial ontology of gendered leadership in the church by identifying *resignifying* practices, which is the title of this

⁴ Queensland Synod, "Minutes of the 33rd 2017 Synod meeting," (Brisbane: Uniting Church 33rd Synod, 2017).

⁵ Queensland Synod, "Gender Representation for Synod Standing Committee from 36th Synod," General Proposal 5 (Brisbane: Uniting Church 36th Synod, 2022), 4.

⁶ 2016 National Church Life Survey, web accessed February 2, 2022. <http://www.2016ncls.org.au/>

⁷ Queensland Synod, "Gender Representation for Synod Standing Committee from 36th Synod," General Proposal 5 (Brisbane: Uniting Church 36th Synod, 2022), 3.

⁸ Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender & Society* 4, no.2 (1990): 145.

paper.⁹ Scholarship on gender and organisations has demonstrated that both in definition and practice, *leadership* is intimately connected to the construction and enactment of hegemonic masculinity. I want to particularly highlight the contested gendered practices and negotiations of women in leadership and the work women do to construct identities within an enduring male dominated discourse. I will identify *resignifying* practices to move this work away from the responsibility of women to become the responsibility of the church to attend to women's experiences in leadership.

Joan Acker: Interacting gendering processes

In 1990 Joan Acker's work "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations" developed an approach to challenge the notion that organisations are gender neutral by identifying the gender inequality located in the context of institutional structural processes and dynamics.¹⁰ This work was ground-breaking for gender and organisational theorists seeking to understand the lack of women in executive leadership positions despite legislative measures to ensure equality of women in the workplace. It has produced a body of research on the deep structure of organisations, which includes the collection of values, history, culture, and practices that form the normal unquestioned ways of working within organisations.¹¹ Acker's work established that organisations are not gender equitable in their own functioning and as a result they are less likely to effectively address gender equality within themselves. She stressed four interacting processes that need to be considered as part of a systematic theory of gender and organisations.

Gendered ideologies and theologies

The first of the ways in which Acker suggested organisations may be gendered is through the construction of divisions along the lines of gender.¹² Extending this to the concerns of this paper, the church, throughout its history, has maintained and reinforced very clear distinctions between the roles of men as decision-makers and leaders and of women as nurturers, servers, and carers.¹³ Women's experience in the church has been traced to a hierarchical, patriarchal, functionalist view of the world in which the lesser exists to serve the greater.¹⁴ While Christianity has expressed an intrinsic value of personhood, in practice women have historically been perceived and treated as inferiors and defined by their reproductive function and passive submissive role. These expectations placed on women by ecclesiastical authorities and reinforced theologically have ensured the historical construction of divisions along lines of gender.

Gendered symbols and images

The second dimension of the gendered organisation identified by Acker's work claims that gender in an organisation consists of symbols, images, and ideologies.¹⁵ Applied to Christianity, this point can be seen in the fact that among the many possible biblical names and models for the church, the church has

⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (Routledge, New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰ Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," *Gender & Society* 4, no.2 (1990): 146.

¹¹ Aruna Roa, Joanne Sandler, David Kelleher and Carol Miller. 2015, *Gender at Work: Theory and Practice of 21st Century Organizations*, (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015) ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed October 3, 2020.

¹² Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," 146.

¹³ Ann M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 76.

¹⁴ Tony Kelly, "Christian conversion and the feminine," in Margaret A. Franklin. *The Force of the Feminine*, (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 175.

¹⁵ Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," 146.

used gendered familial themes to define and represent its ecclesiology. The church as the *bride of Christ* matrimonially *wedded* and *adorned for her husband* to become *one flesh* is an influential image in the gospels and letters of the New Testament.¹⁶ Of these familial themes one of the most potent symbols in post reformation Protestantism has been that of *family*. In Protestant homes, the roles of women were restricted to those of motherhood and homemaking, tasks that were elevated to the status of a vocation ordained by God. The Protestant home became an important religious centre of cultural and intellectual activities in which wives were models of obedience and charity.¹⁷ This household model maintained a woman's economic, legal, social, and political dependence on her husband and reinforced patriarchy in the home, the church, and the public realm into the nineteenth century.

Gendered interactions as discourse

The third set of processes Acker identified are those which produce gendered organisations is around workplace interactions.¹⁸ These include interactions between men and women, between women and women and between men and men, including all those patterns that enact dominance and submission. Acker sites studies of interaction to illustrate how Western men use language to create and demonstrate their power in both institutional and conversational talk.¹⁹ This orientation to the hegemonic norms of masculinity through various linguistic strategies are a striking feature of men's talk.²⁰ Stereotypical masculine strategies include interruption, topic control, swearing, aggravated comments, avoidance of personal topics and self-disclosure, boastful storytelling, unsupportive conversational behaviour and delayed minimal responses.²¹ In the life of the church these linguistic strategies are subtle and polite. Men are more likely to share their opinion about what should happen, rather than offer a contribution to the conversation for discussion. Or rather than sharing their experiences in a conversation, will wait and share a solution to the problem after everyone else has shared. Or be unaware of 'mansplaining', assuming no one else is fully aware of the context and requires educating. Applied to Christianity, this is evident in the church's ongoing nostalgia for male authority and leadership, and often results in deferring to or seeking the man's advice before moving on. Studies demonstrate that while the theory and practice of leadership have undergone a significant shift in the realities of today's workplace, heroic male models of leadership continue to persist.²²

Gendered identities

Acker's fourth set of gendering processes concerns the identity of men and women in organisations and the way these processes help to reproduce the implicit and explicit norms of masculinity and femininity.²³ Historically, women were the church's most loyal and numerous supporters and were its subjects in quite distinct ways. Much of the church's teaching was directed at women – at curbing their sexuality, at prescribing

¹⁶ Matthew 9:14-15, Ephesians 5:23, Galatians 2:24, Revelations 21:2

¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, (London: SCM Press, 2001), 92.

¹⁸ Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," 146.

¹⁹ Joanne McDowell, "Masculinity and Non-Traditional Occupations: Men's Talk in Women's Work," *Gender, Work and Organization*, 22, no.3, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2015): 273-291.

²⁰ Jennifer Coates, *Men Talk, Stories in the Making of Masculinities*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 196.

²¹ Joanne McDowell, "Masculinity and Non-Traditional Occupations," 273-291.

²² Joyce K. Fletcher, "The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, no.5 (2004): 647-661. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2004.07.004>

²³ Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," *Gender & Society* 4, no.2 (1990): 147.

their reproductive lives, at valorising their motherhood, and installing them as moral custodians.²⁴ They were also its most numerous workers. Over the years between 1892 and 1931 women made up 70% of missionaries sent by the Methodist Missionary Society, a pattern replicated in other missionary societies.²⁵ Religion was an important component in the social, cultural, and spiritual lives of most Australian women in the 19th century and they sought to find legitimate ways to serve the church and the community. The Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union, for example, raised funds to support overseas missionaries. The Methodist Ladies Church Aids arranged the flowers or cleaned the church and attended monthly Mothers' Unions.²⁶ While women's ordination was accepted in all three denominations prior to union, women frequently predominately continued to legitimise their domesticity in the church through women's groups, consequently reproducing societal norms.

In 1977 church union represented the start of an unfolding journey to establish the egalitarian vision of the new church. Since then, the Uniting Church has actively sought to employ ecclesiology, Christology, and biblical hermeneutics to engage with current societal issues that affect women and present an alternative view to conservative social stances. However, despite this action and aspiration the Uniting Church in Queensland has struggled to achieve its desired ambition. Joan Acker's theory of gendered organisations offers an explanation for the enduring gender inequality and a lens through which to view the complex historical processes of gendering in the church. But rather than staying with the critique of how gender is performatively produced, I will now move to a focus on how gender might be deconstructed by identifying with Judith Butler's *resignifying* practices.

Judith Butler: Re-signifying practices

In the early 1990s philosopher Judith Butler's construct of gender performativity inspired a body of research to engage theoretically with rethinking gender as a lived experience and explore gender undoing in organisational work and practices.²⁷ In Butler's theoretical lens of gender performativity, gender is constructed through an individuals' own repetition of practices or by mimicking the hegemonic norms of gender given by a particular society.²⁸ For Butler the concept of gender as historical and socially determined is rooted in assumptions about performances of gender. "When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic, and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments, an ontology (an account of what gender is) that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make."²⁹ Butler suggests that knowledge and power work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking about the world and we

²⁴ Anne O'Brien, "Playing second fiddle for Christ's sake": women, religion and history," *Women-Church: an Australian journal of feminist studies in religion*, Issue 27(2000): 13.

²⁵ O'Brien, "Playing second fiddle for Christ's sake": 13.

²⁶ O'Brien, "Playing second fiddle for Christ's sake": 14.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (Routledge, New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁸ Tingting Liu, Mimi Li and Monica Wu, "Performing femininity: Women at the top (doing and undoing gender)," *Tourism Management*, vol. 80: 53.

²⁹ Tingting Liu, Mimi Li and Monica Wu, "Performing femininity": 94.

are compelled to ask how the organisation of gender comes to function as a presupposition about how the world is structured.

Butler's approach aims at de-centring the gendered identity imposed by patriarchal discourse and the unconscious mind. Her conception of gender is twofold: *doing* – an acting which considers the heterosexual conventions into the possible play – which she names as gender reiterations; and *undoing* – a transformative position towards the presupposed legitimate classification which she calls gender *resignifying* practices.³⁰ Butler destabilises gender by offering new ways of enacting gender, placing the traditional expectations of gender under scrutiny and introducing multiplicity to broaden the parameters of how gender is enacted.³¹ In essence, Butler advocates that if gender can be performatively *done* it can also be deconstructed and *undone*. Butler's *resignifying* practices offer practical guidelines for how the church might reconstruct gender performatively and address the conscious and unconscious gendering referred to through Acker's work. They locate the responsibility for change in the organisational structure of the church and away from the work women in leadership do in negotiating a leadership identity.

Develop a heightened gender consciousness

According to Butler, the first and essential work in this resignification is to develop a heightened gender consciousness. Raising awareness of the roles that society and discourse have imposed on women is key to understanding how gender ordering is constituted hierarchically.³² Assuming that women and men are treated equally just because our theological documents say so is naïve and dismissive of the lived experience of women in the Synod. It is also very convenient for those who benefit from how things have been.

Part of the work women do in negotiating a leadership identity is to become aware of the social construction of gender in organisations and the embeddedness of power. Researchers examining women's presence in male dominated arenas have argued, that men are not asked to undertake the gender self-censorship that seems to be part of the regular performance of leadership by women.³³ Without an understanding of gender bias, people use stereotypes to explain why women have failed to achieve parity with men: it is because they "don't ask," they are "too nice," or they simply "opt out" when things get tough. These messages tell women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently assertive or committed to the job, and women who have managed to succeed, that they are the exceptions.

Church union represented a time of great aspiration for the new church. Reverend Dr J. Davis McCaughey, the first President (1977-1979) of the Uniting Church in Australia, shared his aspirations for church leadership: "Any understanding of the proper working of authority within the church would be the work of the next generation of leaders, who would preserve the distinctively Reformed witness to the freedom of Christian conscience."³⁴ Leadership at union, like many other aspects of church life, was intended to be redefined by

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of gender*, (Routledge, London: Routledge, 1990), 142.

³¹ Butler, "Gender trouble", 25.

³² Patricia Yancy Martin, "'Said and Done' Versus 'Saying and Doing': Gendering Practices, Practicing Gender at Work," *Gender & Society*, 17, no.3 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003): 342-66.

³³ Barbara Pini, "The Third Sex: Women Leaders in Australian Agriculture," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 12, no.1 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005): 86.

³⁴ Julia Pitman, "Our Principle of Sex Equality": *The ordination of women in the Congregational Church in Australia 1927-1977*, (Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly, 2016), 148.

this new vision of ecclesial life. This continues to be the work the church is called to do. A lack of gender consciousness results in a failure to recognise and disrupt the dominant nature of institutional power and the gender dichotomies at play.

Resolve to make masculinities visible and name men's advantage

According to Butler, the second step toward structural change is for organisations to consciously make masculinities visible.³⁵ Educating women about gender biases does increase their awareness of how they might engage in the leadership discourse. Nevertheless, without making masculinities visible to men, women are once again left to carry the burden of organisational change.³⁶ Researchers argue the need to address the drift of discourse emphasising women's disadvantage, in favour of an emphasis on men's advantage. Focussing on women's disadvantage serves to normalise men's advantage by dropping it from sight and rhetoric. In seeking to understand difference we need to turn our attention to exploring how and why that difference is constructed by power relations and discursive practices in organisations.³⁷ Men's advantage will continue to remain invisible until there is a movement from the belief that women are the problem, to a broader view of seeing the problem as a structural one.³⁸ In recent conversations around the nominations for moderator men have asked, *where are the women who could be nominated for moderator?* as though there were something lacking or inadequate about women.³⁹ Until men are willing to accept that the lack of women available for these roles is a consequence of their advantage, nothing will change.

One of the challenges of the church is to answer the question: *How do we talk about masculinities to make them visible?* The recent 2022 Federal Election and the emerging Teal movement highlighted the need for public conversations to address men's advantage.⁴⁰ Journalist Nicole Hayes recently wrote an article on the sacking of Fox Sports journalist, Tom Morris, for allegedly using sexist and homophobic slurs about a female colleague. She says, "Women in sports media are exhausted. But so are women everywhere. We're sick of carrying the emotional and psychological load of having to fight for the right to feel safe – at work, at home, at the football, at our political institutions – a right that most men can take for granted. It is well beyond time for men to speak up... It is time for men to step up and shoulder the load because, quite frankly, it is their problem as much as it is ours."⁴¹ Despite a relative consensus on the need to include men and make masculinities visible, public discourse still predominantly places the onus on women to dismantle and reconstruct the status quo. Gender then, is still a women's issue.⁴²

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of gender*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 139.

³⁶ Joan Eveline, "The politics of advantage: Managing 'work' and 'care' in Australia and Sweden," in Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline, *Mainstreaming Politics: Gendering Practices and Feminist Theory*, (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1017/UPO9780980672381>

³⁷ Eveline, "The politics of advantage," 229.

³⁸ Eveline, "The politics of advantage," 230.

³⁹ In the four Moderator elections since including 2013 there have been 9 male nominees and 3 female nominees.

⁴⁰ Calla Wahlquist, "Teal independents: who are they and how did they upend Australia's election?," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/23/teal-independents-who-are-they-how-did-they-upend-australia-election>

⁴¹ Nicole Hayes, "Women in sports media are exhausted, it is well beyond time for men to speak up," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/mar/21/women-in-sports-media-are-exhausted-it-is-well-beyond-time-for-men-to-speak-up>

⁴² Anna Frederica Stumpf, "Making Masculinities Visible. A gender discourse analysis," *Centre for Peace Studies*, (PhD diss., The Arctic University of Norway, 2019). <https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/17006>.

Reorientate the leadership discourse away from enacting hegemonic masculinity

In making masculinities visible, organisations must also reorient the leadership discourse to disrupt the masculine ontology of authority. Butler draws on Foucault in arguing that discourses provide positions which subjects adopt and the power of the discourse lies in its ability to determine which subjects are produced.⁴³ This *resignifying* practice explores the ways the leadership discourse is legitimised theologically, organisationally and performatively as male.

Scholarship on gender and organisations has demonstrated that both in definition and practice, the concept of leadership is intricately linked to the construction and enactment of hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁴ Literature has shown that while there is compatibility and coherence between constructions of masculinity and leadership, there is no such corresponding coherence between constructions of femininity and leadership.⁴⁵ One of the significant causes for this lack of integration is the way gender has been conceptualised in scholarly literature. Most organisational theories were developed by men and most organisational scholars are men, whereas gender scholarship was developed by feminist women. In contrast to gender studies, organisational theories have generally ignored gender and claim to be gender neutral.⁴⁶ The leadership discourse is also legitimised as male theologically and historically through the dominant patriarchal interpretation of scripture and the clerical practices of the church. As a result, the leadership discourse is constrained by the assumption that people are divided into leaders and followers; males are leaders, separate from females, who are non-leaders.⁴⁷

In the Queensland Synod the leadership discourse has failed to effectively address the intricate links between the leadership discourse and the construction of masculinities. At the 32nd Synod in 2016, it was resolved that a diversity task group be established to increase diverse representation on boards, committees, and commissions. The task group presented strategies to improve diversity in leadership positions across the whole of the church to the Synod Standing Committee in 2017. The first recommendation was to implement a deliberate developmental strategy for identifying and preparing people to take on roles. It was discovered that when it came to strategic leadership roles such as Synod Standing Committee, boards, chairs, church council leaders, the male to female representation was 75% male to 25% female.⁴⁸ As a consequence, in 2020 the Synod initiated the Plentiful Leadership Women in Leadership Program to address these inequities. The program aimed to increase effective leadership capacity across the Synod, increase skills and engagement of senior leaders, increase the pool of women for future governance roles, increase feelings of inclusion and connection with and across the Church, increase awareness of hidden gender bias within the Synod and increase the engagement across the Synod of a lived-out faith and spirituality.⁴⁹ During 2020, as the Synod

⁴³ Judith Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40, no. 4 (Washington, D. C: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988):523.

⁴⁴ Barbara Pini, "The Third Sex: Women Leaders in Australian Agriculture," *Gender, Work & Organization*, 12, no.1 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005): 86.

⁴⁵ Pini, "The Third Sex: Women Leaders in Australian Agriculture": 87.

⁴⁶ Patricia Yancy Martin and David Collinson, "'Over the pond and across the water': developing the field of 'gendered organizations,'" *Gender, Work & Organization*, 9, no. 3 (Oxford, UK and Boston, USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002): 245.

⁴⁷ Michele A Bowring, "Resistance Is Not Futile: Liberating Captain Janeway from the Masculine-Feminine Dualism of Leadership," *Gender, Work and Organisation*, 11, no. 4 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004): 381-405.

⁴⁸ The Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod, "Gender Representation for Synod Standing Committee from 36th Synod," General Proposal 5 (Queensland: Uniting Church 36th Synod, 2022): 4.

⁴⁹ The Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod, "Gender Representation for Synod Standing Committee from 36th Synod," General Proposal 5 (Queensland: Uniting Church 36th Synod, 2022): 5.

considered the impending impact of COVID-19, the Synod Standing Committee announced that due to COVID-19 the program would be expanded to males and females with a reprioritising of developing leadership in the Synod to effectively respond to changing contexts. This decision demonstrated the prioritisation of immediate concerns over long-term inequities and a failure to address the ongoing embedded bias.

During the meetings of the 33rd and 34th Queensland Synod, conversations around the role of Moderator resolved that the Synod allow that a Moderator's term could be extended to six years.⁵⁰ During these conversations reference was made to the style of institutional leadership now required of the Moderator to lead the Synod into the future, citing the need for visionary and strategic leadership. Proposal 3 to renominate the moderator under this amended term locates the Queensland Synod Leadership Development Framework as the place where the Queensland Synod has tried to capture some of the conversation around leadership. This framework makes no particular reference to gender. These references to the Synod's public conversation on the topic of leadership suggest that the synod is not critiquing or prioritising the significant impact of gender in the leadership discourse.

The subtle gendered authorial ideals of male leadership has meant that Western hegemony has a tendency to venerate leadership for individualism, competition, aggression, rationalism and pragmatism, and to discount relationality, generosity and inclusion. As a result, organisations reinforce a double standard for women and create a psychological impasse that perpetuates the belief that women are less suitable for leadership positions.⁵¹ Women opt out of contention for leadership positions because the positions come at a greater cost than they do for their male colleagues in terms of likability, sacrifice and competing demand.⁵² Women are also less likely to be interested in positions that involve political game playing. Decision makers then assume that women are less motivated or willing to make the sacrifices for these positions. Moving forward requires reorienting the discourse of leadership away from the traditional masculine identity and assumptions towards a more inclusive critique.

Supporting women in developing a leadership identity

In performing as a leader, women are faced with the challenge of developing a style that balances the expected behaviours of a woman and the behaviours expected of leaders. A body of research has identified how women navigate around perceptions and expectations of behaviour.⁵³ For example, women find they need to carefully monitor what they say and how they say it. Using a directive communication style breaks female gender norms, while using tentative or emotional language breaks the norms for competent leaders. A woman in leadership also experiences intense scrutiny of her performance and appearance. Women are expected to be nurturing, not self-serving and entrepreneurial behaviours viewed as appropriate in men often seem distasteful in women. Self-promoting behaviours provoke backlash for women, being accused of appearing "tacky and shameless."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ The Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod, "34th Synod 2019 Minutes," amendment to by-law Q2.3.3.(Queensland: Uniting Church 34th Synod, 2019).

⁵¹ Helena Liu, "Leadership from the Margins: Practising Inclusivity with 'Outsiders Within,'" *Inclusive Leadership* 2017:1–20. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60666-8_1.

⁵² Liu, "Leadership from the Margins": 7.

⁵³ Amy B Diehl and Leanne Dzubinski, "An overview of gender-based leadership barriers," *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017): 271-286. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785363863.00030>.

⁵⁴ Deborah L Rhode, "Gender stereotypes and unconscious bias," *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785363863.00030>

The result is to discourage women from performing in ways that are useful in obtaining leadership opportunities. In effect, women face trade-offs that men do not and many women internalise these prejudices, diminishing their sense of self as leaders and their aspirations to positions of influence.⁵⁵ Creating a safe space for learning, experimentation, and community is critical in leadership development programs for women.⁵⁶ Coaching relationships, a women's leadership program, and a support group of peers allows women to interpret these gendered messages and navigate a response, which is critical to their leadership development.⁵⁷

Implement gender management strategies

At the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977, women were present alongside men as elected members and a quota system for the election of women to church councils became part of the practice of the church.⁵⁸ It was hoped that the quota system, which until 1983 required church leaders to identify women who were willing and able to serve in the councils of the church, would eventually become unnecessary.⁵⁹ As Julie Pitman has noted, *The New Times*, the monthly paper of the Synod of South Australia, explained that at first “[I]t was a problem’ to find women to serve on Uniting Church committees, but now all councils of the church were ‘sufficiently conscious of the need to include the contributions of women that they will continue to do this as a matter of course’.”⁶⁰ The hope that a quota system would no longer be of use was based on the assumption that gender equality would become assumed in the life and practice of the church. This assumption, however, failed to recognise the enduring cultural and structural gender biases. The abandonment of quotas in the Queensland Synod as a sign that the church had ‘solved the problem’, only highlighted the lack of awareness of the dominance of masculinities and the neglect of ongoing examination of the leadership discourse.

At the 36th Synod meeting in May 2022 however, the Queensland Synod accepted General Proposal 5 to implement Gender Representation for the Synod Standing Committee from the 36th Synod. There was much debate about the reintroduction of gender quotas, however it was recognised that “Just as the Uniting Church’s value for equality between lay and ordained is without question embedded into the governance life of our church, so too should the Uniting Church’s value for equality between female and male, be reflected fully in the governance life of our church.”⁶¹ While it was argued that further work on gender and leadership was required, a gender quota would act to interrupt the historic voting patterns by the Synod that resulted in an under-representation of females appointed to the Synod Standing Committee.

The implementation of quotas for women on decision making bodies of the church, correlates with a heightened awareness of how gender functions in organisations and offers a structural strategy for managing gender. The observations of Lpinard and Rubio-Martin are pertinent:

⁵⁵ Rhode, “Gender stereotypes and unconscious bias,” 317.

⁵⁶ Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely and Deborah Kolb, “Women rising: the unseen barriers,” *Harvard Business Review*, 91, no.9 (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2013): 65.

⁵⁷ Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely and Deborah Kolb, “Women rising: the unseen barriers,” 65.

⁵⁸ Julia Pitman, *Our Principle of Sex Equality: The ordination of women in the Congregational Church in Australia 1927-1977*, (Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly, 2016), 156.

⁵⁹ Pitman, *Our Principle of Sex Equality*, 156.

⁶⁰ Pitman, *Our Principle of Sex Equality*, 157.

⁶¹ The Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod, “Gender Representation for Synod Standing Committee from 36th Synod,” General Proposal 5 (Queensland: Uniting Church 36th Synod, 2022):2.

The disqualification of women as citizens in the past was a central structural feature of the modern state, where autonomous male individuals could only thrive or continue to reproduce themselves socially by requiring women to perform tasks in the private sphere. It is only when women actively participate in the public sphere in significantly large numbers that the system will be forced to confront and solve the problems of dependency and social reproduction. Unless women are visibly participating in public institutions of the state, it can be assumed that the sexual contract is firmly in place.⁶²

Conclusion

The Uniting Church's vision for an egalitarian approach to women and men in ministry was not to simply make space for women but rather to aspire to a reconstruction of the church.⁶³ The nature of this vision offers a clear challenge to ensure equality is mandated, instituted, implemented, and rehearsed as a guiding value and practice of the church. While it is clear the church is impacted by what is evident in society, there is an imperative, given our formative and theological statements, that the church will be different from society. In this paper I have concluded that our perceptions of who we are and what we are called to, need to be expanded and reconstructed.

The Queensland Synod continues to reflect societal trends of women in organisational leadership instead of its claimed theological stance. I contend that while this may not be the intention of the Queensland Synod, its failed consciousness around this issue and its lack of attention to disrupting these trends has enabled gendered processes to continue. What is required is a focused critique and the impetus to seek solutions to address resistance to equality. Without intentional critique it is difficult to identify gendering processes. Much of what women experience is unrecognisable as intentional discrimination and often dismissed as hearsay and inuendo. These experiences on their own are easily ignored, yet when critiqued as gendering processes offer insight into the ongoing patriarchal tendencies of leadership within the church.

Clearly, there is much work to be done for the Queensland Synod to live out its theological vision for women's full participation in the life of the church. But in confronting these shortcomings, feminist scholars have always pressed on in hope. It is in the spirit of such hope that this paper is offered, in the spirit of a church ever reforming. As the final paragraph of the Basis of Union declares "The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen."⁶⁴

⁶² Eleonore Lpinard and Ruth Rubio-Marin, "Gender Quotas: Towards Parity Governance?" *Global Governance Programme Policy Briefs*, 08 (Firenze, Italy: European University, 2013):4. <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/30500>

⁶³ The development of the church's inter-conciliar councils is an example of this approach.

⁶⁴ UCA Assembly, "Basis of Union 1992 Edition," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, accessed March 12 2020, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union>.

God still calls: Towards a *theologia prima* of ordination in the Uniting Church

Daniel Mossfield

Abstract

In 2019, the NSW & ACT Synod discussed an impending shortage of ordained leaders in the Uniting Church. Yet the denomination has paid little attention to the ordination rite as a source of *theologia prima* (primary theology). This paper adapts the methodological framework of James Puglisi to examine what the structural, ecclesial, liturgical, and juridical components of the rite reveal to the Church about ordination for the 21st Century. This liturgical theological approach finds that God, rather than the Church, is the primary author of ordination. Consequently, it reminds the Church that any perceived scarcity of ordained ministers is illusory.

Introduction

Since its inception in 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia has produced six major ordination rites (and four further revisions) for the office of Minister of the Word.¹ Such liturgical instability reflects an ongoing contest over the meaning of ordination in the denomination. Seemingly, each time the Assembly gathered it faced new questions about the ongoing place of ordained ministry in an Australian social and missiological context: the relationship between ordained ministry and general baptismal ministry; the relationship between the offices of Minister of the Word and Deacon; and, the role of God in calling and ordaining people

¹ The major rites are those of 1977, 1983, 1988, 1992, 1995 and 2009, with revisions in 1980, 1985, 1997 and 2013. For a summary of those services up to 1997, see Paul Harold Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995: The Uniting Church in Australia 'within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church'" (PhD Griffith University, 2010), 185-93, 488, https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/366640/Walton_2010_02Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. For the 2009 service and the 2013 revision, see UCA Assembly, *Assembly Standing Committee Minutes, November 2008* (2008), Minute 08.86, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/ASCMinutes/2008/asc0811minutes.pdf>; UCA Assembly, *Assembly Standing Committee Minutes, July 2013* (2013), Minute 13.34, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/ASCMinutes/2013/July/13.07.MINUTES.pdf>.

to leadership.² As the Church's *lex credendi* (rule of belief) evolved, so did its *lex orandi* (rule of prayer).³ Yet, while the Uniting Church has hitherto spilled significant ink over its theology of ordination and its expression in the ordination liturgies mentioned above, the rite itself as a source of *theologia prima* (that is, primary theology) has received little attention.

This essay seeks to rectify this situation by examining the ordination rite for the Minister of the Word in its current form.⁴ Here, I will adapt the methodological structure of James Puglisi in order to develop a framework which begins not from secondary theology, but from the elements of the rite itself. By grouping these elements into their ecclesial, juridical, and symbolic liturgical functions, and considering them within the overarching structure of the *ordo*, I will seek to articulate the *theologia prima* revealed through the ordination liturgy. Consequently, in a time when the future of ordained ministry within the Uniting Church seems once again to be under critical consideration, I will conclude that the Church's *lex orandi* bears witness to a God who still acts through the Church to call and ordain people into the particular office of Minister of the Word, in order to bless and strengthen the general ministry of the baptized.⁵

Methodology

Liturgical theology begins from the experience of divine encounter in the act of worship. Through liturgy, God reveals Godself to the Church and, to quote Alexander Schmemmann, "actualizes the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ."⁶ Consequently, liturgy serves not only as a source of theology, nor an expression of the Church's doctrine, but as the very foundation of the Church's theological reflection – its *theologia prima*.⁷ It is, according to Schmemmann, "the ontological condition of theology."⁸ Consequently, James Puglisi argues that in ordination rites the Church should expect to 'see clearly how God encounters humanity and how humanity encounters God.'⁹ For this reason, a framework which simply answers doctrinal questions

² While the early revisions sought to finalize the work of union and the balancing of expectations from the three founding traditions, by the 1990s the debate became more explicitly about the role and value of ordained ministry in general. At the surface, this debate appears to be between those arguing for a missiological and sociological emphasis (evident in the 1992 rite), and those arguing a theological and ecumenical one (evident in the 1995 rite). For example, Walton notes that several critiques contained within the 1994 report *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*, "may be a (none too subtle?) reference to the 1991 Report on Ministry, and the emerging tendency within the Uniting Church to look at ministry from a missional viewpoint that seemed to the Commission on Doctrine to be primarily sociologically and contextually driven rather than being informed theologically and ecumenically." I caution, however, against overstating the differences. The issue is not so much that the Church abandoned theology in favor of sociology, or her *lex orandi* (rule of faith) for mission. Rather, as Graham Hughes warns, the Uniting Church as part of the Reformed tradition remains particularly susceptible to colonization by secularism. In other words, the risk is that the Church's *lex orandi* itself might become predominantly anthropological, and the place of divine action removed from its liturgical rites. See, Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 419-20; Graham R. Hughes, *Reformed Sacramentality*, ed. Steffen Lösel (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2017), 137-40; For an outline of the evolution of this debate, see Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson, eds., *Theology for Pilgrims* (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 206-482.

³ For a helpful introduction to these terms, see Paul De Clerck, "'Lex orandi, lex credendi': the original sense and historical avatars of an equivocal adage," *Studia Liturgica* 24 (1994): 178-200.

⁴ It is important to note here that the 2013 form is a minor revision of the 2009 rite, which includes one additional sentence in The Charge related to the covenant between the Uniting Church and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Except when discussing this part of The Charge, I will treat these as one liturgical rite. The value in examining this form of the rite (other than being the current rite and therefore a reflection of the Uniting Church's current theology) is its representation of a period of relative stability in the Church's ordination liturgy, lasting now for 13 years and having displaced the previously longest serving 1995 service. See, UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word* (2013), <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/228>.

⁵ A similar point could also be made of the Ordination Rite for the Minister of Deacon, but this is not the focus of this paper.

⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (London: The Faith Press, 1966), 12.

⁷ For a helpful discussion of this theme, see David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology*, Second ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004).

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 18.

⁹ James F. Puglisi, *The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry: A Comparative Study*, trans. Michael S. Driscoll and Mary. Misrahi, vol. 1: Epistemological Principles and Roman Catholic Rites (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 27-28, n.50.

with elements of the liturgy is insufficient. Rather, this project requires the development of a methodology which begins from the rite itself and moves towards propositions about what God is doing through it.

The methodological framework of Puglisi creates a helpful foundation for articulating such a *theologia prima*. In his detailed compendium of ordination rites in various denominations, Puglisi observes three common functions of the liturgical elements: an ecclesial function (they serve as an act of the whole church), a juridical function (they install one into a particular office), and a liturgical function (they affect an outcome through a symbolic system).¹⁰ Of course, Puglisi's method is not the only valid approach. For example, Kevin Irwin outlines the value of historical comparative study to discern the particularities of any given rite.¹¹ While I will make use of elements of Irwin's comparative method, particularly by referencing changes the current rite made to its predecessor, the reality is that to do a full historical study is beyond the scope of an essay this size.¹² The benefit of Puglisi's structure is that by grouping common elements of the rite together, it enables an examination of theological insights in a way which is relatively concise but nevertheless enables the Church's *lex orandi* to inform its *lex credendi*. As Paul Walton argues, "rather than being imposed upon the material, the three dimensions of this schema reflected actual practice, and therefore provide a secure framework for a discussion of the rite of ordination."¹³ Yet, Puglisi's method contains one significant omission: it does not make explicit provision for considering the structure of the ordo.¹⁴ As such, in this essay I will first examine the outline of the service *as a whole*, before turning to Puglisi's schema.

Structure of the ordination rite

The Uniting Church's ordination rite occurs within the context of the Eucharist.¹⁵ The World Council of Churches notes that such a setting is ancient and common to a large part of the universal Church.¹⁶ Robert Gribben explains the reason for this context as follows: "it may be argued that, as the church's characteristic way of making its joyful thanksgiving, the eucharist is the proper context for the beginning of a new ministry."¹⁷ In other words, the pairing of Eucharist with ordination conveys that in the ordination rite, God is doing something worthy of thanks. The exact location of the ordination within the overall rite confirms this suspicion.

By placing ordination between Word and Table, the Uniting Church expresses that ordination depends upon the Word of God. In his work on the Eucharist, Schmemmann asserts that "in the sacrament we partake of him who

¹⁰ In his own words, Puglisi describes the functions in this way: "In them [the ordination rites] we may better observe the structure of the Church, because the process is at the same time an *ecclesial act* (we will see that the whole Church is active in the process) which reveals the relationship existing between the ordained ministry, the other ministries, and the responsibility of all Christians; at the same time it is a *liturgical act* which is celebrated within the Eucharist, where normally all the members of the Church are present and which includes a symbolic system (some of the liturgical gestures, such as the imposition of hands) and the epiclesis; lastly, this process is also a *juridical act*, because a concrete charge is conferred on a member of the community by God and received by the entire Church." Puglisi, *The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry*, 1: Epistemological Principles and Roman Catholic Rites, 27-28, n.50.

¹¹ Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 185-88.

¹² For example, Walton's comparative study of the rites of the Uniting Church from 1977 to 1995 alone provided enough material for a PhD dissertation. See, Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995."

¹³ Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 58.

¹⁴ Arguably, Puglisi might include examination of structures under the heading of a *liturgical act*, but it is not clear that this is the case. By contrast, someone like Schmemmann makes explicit provision for this structural study. See, Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 18-21.

¹⁵ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, Outline.

¹⁶ Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), M41.

¹⁷ Robert Gribben, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1990), 130.

comes and abides with us in the word.”¹⁸ By placing the act of ordination after the service of the Word then, the rite implies that ordination is subsequent to this act of Christ’s abiding. In his sermon at the Inauguration of the Uniting Church, the first president of the Assembly, Davis McCaughey, made this point very clear:

[W]e shall require, as our Basis of Union commits us, to recognize men and women as Ministers of the Word [...] so that the great tradition into which we have entered, may be made vital for our day. Their commission comes from a living Lord, who lays upon them and upon us all, the obligation to teach men [sic] all he has commanded us. *To listen to him is the supreme calling of the whole Church* [my emphasis], of every member, and to do so, we need an educated ministry – men and women, who, in a special sense, have heard the call to preach the Word.¹⁹

McCaughey’s argument is that *all* ministry, lay or ordained, begins first in the act of listening to the living Lord. While Ministers of the Word no doubt have a special role in proclaiming this Word (a point to which I will return in the juridical function of the liturgy below), that purpose can only exist if the Word preexists it. First, the living Lord speaks, calling people into ministry. Then, and only then, can people answer that call. What the structure of the liturgy reveals then is that ordination is only possible because the Word of God has first addressed the Church – and it is for this reason that the ordination culminates in the act of thanksgiving in the Eucharist. Everything else that can be said of ordination hangs on this point. And, as ordained ministry (and indeed all ministry) depends upon the call of God, the first elements of the ordination liturgy worth examining are those which express how that call occurs.

The Ecclesial Function

The liturgy makes clear that the ordination service does not belong to the local congregation but to the Presbytery as representative of the wider Church.²⁰ The notes to the service and the rubric stipulate that the act of ordination in the laying on of hands must include at least two ordained and two lay members of the Presbytery.²¹ In this, the Uniting Church differs both from those denominations which place ordination in the hands of a bishop, and those through which it is conducted by a college of those already ordained.²² Christiaan Mostert speculates that the reason for this practice is a view that the ordination requires the presence of both lay and ordained members to symbolize an action of the whole Church.²³ Indeed, the liturgy repeatedly claims that the act of ordination is one done “in the name of Christ as the sovereign head of the Church” and that through this rite “the Uniting

¹⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 68.

¹⁹ J. Davis McCaughey, *Inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia – Part 5*, Sydney Town Hall, 22 June 1977, video of sermon, 6:00, <https://vimeo.com/100960880>.

²⁰ Nine out of the 14 introductory notes to the rite are specifically about the presidency of the Presbytery, exercised through the Chairperson. This is especially evident in the provision that, though set during a Eucharistic service, the ordination does not ordinarily occur on a Sunday morning but “at a time and place determined by the Presbytery” in order that members of the Presbytery may attend. See, UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, nn. 1-5, 7,10-11, 13.

²¹ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, n.10, s.15.

²² This is a point of tension for mutual recognition of ministry between the Uniting Church and both the Anglican Church and Lutheran Church in Australia. See, Christiaan Mostert, *Church, Ministry and Ordination: what Relation?*, Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Church dialogue group (2003), 12-13, http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Faith_and_Unity/Church_Ministry_Ordination.pdf.

²³ As opposed to a more traditional conviction that Christ exercises agency for ordination through those whom he has already called into this ministry. Mostert’s view is consistent with debates throughout the history of the Uniting Church about the relationship between ordination and baptismal ministry. See, Mostert, *Church, Ministry and Ordination*, 12.

Church in Australia acts and speaks within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”²⁴ The liturgy also claims this participation of the whole Church through two changes made by the 2009 rite. Firstly, it capitalizes the word ‘Church’ in the phrase ‘Church of God’ at several points in the liturgy.²⁵ Secondly, the service includes the Nicene Creed, stressing shared participation in the received faith.²⁶ Thus, despite disagreements with other denominations over who should lay on hands, the Uniting Church understands itself to be acting on behalf of the Church universal within this rite.

Such ecclesial features of the rite orient ordained ministry toward the safeguarding of the received faith. The Uniting Church’s *A Brief Statement on Ordination* says, “the call of the Church to be an ordained minister is a call to represent the living tradition of the Church, the universal nature of the Church, the oneness of the Church, and the mission of the Church.”²⁷ Consequently, the ecclesial elements of the liturgy include a focus upon the act of *election* – that process by which the Church has discerned that this person is “worthy to be ordained a minister of the Word in the Church of God.”²⁸ Paul Bradshaw explains that the early Church viewed the act of election as that which made someone ordained. However, by the fourth century, the Church understood that the bestowal of office came instead through the symbolic acts of prayer and laying on of hands.²⁹ The Uniting Church liturgy stands within this second tradition, as the declaration of worthiness for ordination which accompanies the “narration of steps” assumes that the candidate is *yet to be ordained*.³⁰ Bradshaw stresses, however, that in both cases “it was God who chose and ordained the ministers through the action of the Church.”³¹ Consequently, the ecclesial elements of this ordination rite disclose that God calls people to ordained ministry *through* the Church *in order to* uphold the unity of the Church.³² But, calling alone is not what ordains them.

The Symbolic Liturgical Function

The Uniting Church stands with the Church catholic in claiming that ordination occurs “by prayer and the laying on of hands.”³³ This act of ordination bears close examination.³⁴ First, the chairperson invites the

²⁴ The above quotes come from the introductions to The Charge (s.13) and The Questions (s.14) respectively, but such claims are stated also at the Welcome and Greeting (s3), the Presentation of the Ordinand (s.12), the Ordination (s.15) and the declaration of the Ordination (s.16).

²⁵ For example, in the epiclesis at the moment of ordination (s.15).

²⁶ The Creed, which had been a feature of all previous ordination rites in the Uniting Church, was inexplicably removed in 1995. See, Walton, “Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995,” 436.

²⁷ UCA Assembly, *A Brief Statement on Ordination* (2008), 54, <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/501>.

²⁸ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.12.

²⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, “Theology and Rite AD 200 – 400,” in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones et al. (London: SPCK, 1992), 357-59.

³⁰ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.12.

³¹ Bradshaw, “Theology and Rite AD 200 – 400,” 358.

³² There is another ecclesial element which I do not have space to explore in full here, but which reinforces this point. Significant debate exists as to whether or not the newly ordained minister should preside at the Eucharist during the service of ordination. This in essence is a debate over whether the Eucharist serves an ecclesial or juridical function. Bradshaw sees the Eucharist as a completion of the juridical rites of installation to office, with the people’s willingness to receive communion from this minister a final act of affirmation of their office. Gribben, by contrast, argues strongly that presidency by a member of the Presbytery other than the newly ordained minister emphasizes ministry as a gift of God at the hands of the Presbytery, not a “Graduation prize.” The Uniting Church rite itself is ambivalent, noting that the Presbytery Chairperson (if ordained) should preside, but that they may delegate this role to another, including the newly ordained minister. Given what I have included in this paragraph, however, and that the Uniting Church does not include assent by the people elsewhere in the service on the basis that election is conducted by the Council of Presbytery, perhaps it would be better if the rite did prohibit the newly ordained minister from presiding. See, Paul F. Bradshaw, “Ordination as God’s Action through the Church,” in *Anglican Orders and Ordinations: Essays and Reports from the Interim Conference at Järvenpää, Finland, of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, 4-9 August 1997*, ed. D.R. Holeton (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1997), 9; Gribben, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*, 128; Walton, “Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995,” 438.

³³ UCA Assembly, “Basis of Union 1992 Edition,” *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations* (2018), <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/307> s.14.a.

³⁴ Here I am referring to section 15 – The Ordination.

congregation to a time of silent prayer for the ordinand, followed by a hymn to the Holy Spirit. Benjamin Gordon-Taylor refers to silence as a form of “mystery language” which implies God is at work in the liturgy.³⁵ The chairperson then leads a prayer of thanksgiving to the Triune God. The last stanza of this prayer states,

Now we give you thanks that you have called N
whom we ordain in your name
to be a minister of the Word in your Church.³⁶

The Church gives thanks to God for the election of this one, because it is precisely God who has elected this one to ministry and in whose name the Church now dares to engage the great symbolic ritual. Now, the members of the Presbytery do just that, by laying hands on the candidate, as the Chairperson prays the epiclesis:

God of grace,
through your Spirit –
burning fire, gentle dove –
empower your servant, N,
for the office and work of a minister of the Word
in the Church of God
that your people may be strengthened
and your holy name glorified;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.³⁷

The people then respond “Amen” and share in the words of the Aaronic Blessing.

These symbolic acts point decisively to God’s action in the ordination. The rubric which opens the next section of the rite reads, “the newly-ordained minister stands and faces the people.”³⁸ This instruction precedes the Church declaring that “NNN is now a minister of the Word in the Church of God.”³⁹ In other words, the Church’s declaration does not *effect* the ordination, it only *recognizes* that which has happened through prayer and gesture. Yet, it is the church which performs these symbols of divine action. They are at once anthropological *and* theological. As William Willimon explains, the laying on of hands ‘both symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit and the bestowal of authority by those who have preceded the candidate in ministry.’⁴⁰ But, as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* argues, it is precisely this holding together of anthropology and theology which is the point of the liturgical symbols:

³⁵ Benjamin Gordon-Taylor, “Mystery and Revelation in Ordination Rites: Towards a Liturgical Theology of Ordination,” *Studia Liturgica* 33 (2003): 117-20.

³⁶ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.15.

³⁷ This prayer has received some cosmetic changes from its 1995 form, but these go to style rather than substance. For example, in 1995 it read ‘burning as fire, gentle as a dove.’ See, Walton, “Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995,” 444.

³⁸ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.16.

³⁹ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.16.

⁴⁰ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 32.

Although the Church's epiclesis depends on the freedom of God, the Church ordains in confidence that God, being faithful to his promise in Christ, enters sacramentally into contingent, historical forms of human relationship and uses them for his purpose. Ordination is a sign performed in faith that the spiritual relationship signified is present in, with and through the words spoken, the gestures made and the forms employed.⁴¹

The God who has spoken the Church into being through the Word, and called the candidate to ministry through the Church, is the same God the Church trusts now to act through the symbols of the Church to enable and ordain the one God has called.⁴²

The Juridical Function

Notably, changes to the juridical components of the rite made in 2009 strengthened this sense of divine action. Gordon-Taylor warns that in Protestant churches a tendency exists to overprescribe the nature of ordained ministry such that God's work becomes opaque.⁴³ In particular, he sees the use of active verbs within the juridical elements as emphasizing the actions of human agents to the detriment of divine mystery.⁴⁴ Certainly, this appears to have been the case with the detailed vows included the 1995 rite (see Appendix 1).⁴⁵ Indeed, Walton argues that the Uniting Church inherited a "vow-centred spirituality" in which many members popularly understand the vows as the moment of ordination.⁴⁶ By contrast, the current rite changes the heading of this section to "The Questions" and asks the candidate only about their willingness to receive and work within the historic faith of the Church, and to accept the discipline of the office.⁴⁷ In doing so, the rite both remembers God's act of calling through the Church *and* preempts God's ordaining act through the prayer and laying on of hands.⁴⁸ Like the structural, ecclesial, and symbolic features before them, these juridical components point to ordination as a gift of God.

⁴¹ Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M43.b.

⁴² This is not to deny the freedom of God to not show up, to not empower and to not ordain the candidate. Indeed, many denominations will share anecdotes of "ordained" ministers in their midst who the passage of time revealed the Church had called erroneously. The rite is not "magical". Rather, as the *BEM* document claims, this is an act of faith that God will act through the sign performed.

⁴³ Gordon-Taylor, "Mystery and Revelation in Ordination Rites," 121-25.

⁴⁴ Gordon-Taylor, "Mystery and Revelation in Ordination Rites," 125.

⁴⁵ Walton refers to the 1995 vows critically as a "job description". See also, Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 331.

⁴⁶ Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 324-92.

⁴⁷ Of these four questions, three were vows in the 1995 service. The last is effectively an amalgam of several previous vows. The current questions are:

Do you confess anew Jesus Christ as Lord?

I do.

Do you believe you are truly called by God & the Church to the office and work of a minister of the Word?

I do.

Do you embrace the faith and unity of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as set forth in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and described in the Basis of Union?

I do.

In your life and work within the Uniting Church

will you be guided by its Basis of Union,

and will you submit yourself to the Church's discipline?

With God's help, I will.

UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.14.

⁴⁸ Indeed, the preface to the questions is explicit about this point, stating, "Therefore, that we may know that you desire to receive [my emphasis] this ministry of Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we ask you these questions." UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.14.

The unique contribution of the juridical components to the liturgy is the understanding that ordination is not a matter of ontology but office. The liturgical changes of 2009 reinforced a sense of *particularity* in ordination. In 1995, the Charge had not contained a set form of words. According to Stephen Burns, this had resulted in the “propagation of merely local, or highly idiosyncratic, understandings of ordained roles.”⁴⁹ This presented at least two problems. Firstly, as discussed earlier, the orientation of ordination is towards safeguarding the received faith. This gives ordination a universality which such local idiosyncrasies could undermine. Secondly, Graham Hughes warned in 2002 that an undefined ordained ministry could undermine the primary, baptismal ministry of the Church.⁵⁰ Through the lens of sacramentality, Hughes argued that ordained ministry is necessary for the wellbeing of the Church’s mission as a form of condensed sacrament in which the people of God may encounter the abstract idea of ministry in the concrete *particularity* of the ordained minister.⁵¹ Such an outcome is only possible, however, if the particular ministerial tasks of the ordained offices are “articulated and adhered to with scrupulous exactitude.”⁵² The Uniting Church ordains to two such offices: Minister of the Word and Deacon. The decision to move the majority of the 1995 Vows to the charges of these two offices helped give clarity to these ministries.⁵³ The use of the passive voice in the Charge, however, avoided the temptation to reduce ordination to a set of human tasks.⁵⁴ Rather, the Charge points to a God who sets apart Ministers of the Word to: *receive* and proclaim, preside over, and care for the received faith in the body of Christ (charges 1-3); maintain the unity of that body within both the Church universal and the Uniting Church particularly (charges 4-6); and then encourage the Church to reach beyond itself, to those in the wider community and the Uniting and Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (charges 7-8).⁵⁵ Finally, the Minister is to live a holy and disciplined life worthy of God’s calling, made possible by the power of the Spirit.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The future of ordained ministry in the Uniting Church is once again under consideration. In his *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, Andrew Root spoke of a “pastoral malaise” which has left many ministers and denominations despondent and wondering at the future of pastoral leadership.⁵⁷ In the Uniting Church, this pastoral malaise is evident not only through conversations with individual ministers, but also within the councils of the Church. For example, in 2019 the NSW & ACT Synod supported a proposal for “A Renewed Vision of Formation.” The proposal itself stated that a key motivation for the changes it contained was an

⁴⁹ Stephen Burns, “‘Limping Priests’ Ten Years Later: Formation for Ordained Ministry,” *Uniting Church Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011): 13, n.69, <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/8832710>.

⁵⁰ Val Webb was critical of the Church’s theology of ordination in part for the way it has undermined the mutual ministry of the people of God (though for different reasons to those articulated here). Hughes responded that it is not ordained ministry *per se* which is the cause of this problem, but *undefined* ordained ministry. Cf. Graham Hughes, “‘Limping Priests’: Ministry and Ordination,” *Uniting Church Studies* 8, no. 1 (2002): 5-6; Val Webb, “Is it permissible to ask why we ordain at all?,” *Uniting Church Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 13-38.

⁵¹ The Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman makes a similar observation to Hughes, arguing, “If the priesthood of all believers is the only form in which believers encounter the priesthood, before long there will be no encounter with the priesthood whatsoever.” See, Hughes, *Reformed Sacramentality*, 30-36, 166-69; Stephen Freeman, *Everywhere Present: Christianity in a One-Storey Universe* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2010), 39. Kindle.

⁵² Hughes, “‘Limping Priests,’” 6.

⁵³ Especially as the order of the Charge differs in each ordination rite. See, Appendix 1 for a comparison of each charge.

⁵⁴ E.g., “You are called to receive the witness to Christ in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”

⁵⁵ By contrast, the Deacon is called also to receive and proclaim the faith, but firstly beyond the gathered congregation (Charges 1-2); then maintain the wellbeing of the gathered body within the historic faith (charges 3-7); before receiving the same last two charges to maintain covenant with the Congress and live a disciplined life.

⁵⁶ Charge 9. See Appendix 1.

⁵⁷ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

anxiety that the Church was not producing enough ordained ministers for the future.⁵⁸ Indeed, the report wondered, “what could we [my emphasis] do to form 150 new ministers over the next 5 years?”⁵⁹ Currently, the placements committee of this same NSW & ACT Synod has commissioned studies on the Church’s theology of ordination as it wrestles with a declining number of paid placements and various limitations on the ability of ordained leaders to move outside the Sydney basin.⁶⁰ The temptation for the Church in such moments is to begin by seeking solutions to perceived problems.⁶¹ Indeed, one wonders whether this is true in more parts of the Uniting Church than simply its approach to ordained ministry. Andrew Root, however, makes clear that the cause of the Church’s current pastoral malaise is not predominantly structural, but rather “the loss of a theological vision for divine action,” resulting from the disenchantment of our secular age.⁶²

In this study, therefore, I have modelled an alternative approach – one which begins not from anthropological tasks, nor even from doctrine, but from the experience of God in the *lex orandi* of the Church. Here, I have adapted Puglisi’s methodological framework in order to consider the structural, ecclesial, juridical, and symbolic elements of the Uniting Church’s service of ordination for a Minister of the Word. What this study has demonstrated is that each of these liturgical components reveal the work of *God* in ordination. In the rite, we give thanks that God has called people to the ministry of Christ through the power of the Word. We celebrate that this same God has spoken through the Church to call some to ordained ministry, so that the received faith “may be made vital for our day.”⁶³ We trust that the same God who has called this person to ministry will also faithfully empower them by the Spirit through prayer and laying on of hands. And we are reminded that God continues to ordain people to the *particular* office of Minister of the Word, so that through worship, witness and service all Christians might receive nourishment for their own baptismal ministry. In other words, the rite serves as a powerful reminder to the Uniting Church that, as Willimon states, “it is theologically impossible for there to be a shortage of priests or a paucity of vocations in the church.”⁶⁴

⁵⁸ The Uniting Church in Australia Synod of New South Wales and the ACT, ‘Appendix D: A Renewed Vision for Formation,’ Minutes of the thirty-eighty meeting of the Synod of New South Wales and the ACT, 5 July – 7 July 2019, 10, <https://nswact.uca.org.au/media/7552/synod-2019-minutes-final.pdf>.

⁵⁹ The Uniting Church in Australia Synod of New South Wales and the ACT, ‘Appendix D: A Renewed Vision for Formation,’ 12.

⁶⁰ The author is a member of the team undertaking these studies but does not speak on its behalf.

⁶¹ For example, by developing ‘A Renewed Vision for Formation’ with the view to how we might produce more ministry agents.

⁶² Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, xi.

⁶³ McCaughey, Sermon, 6:00.

⁶⁴ Willimon, *Pastor*, 34.

Appendix: Comparison of the Charge and the Vows

	2013 MOW Charge ¹	2013 Deacon Charge ²	1995 MOW Vows ³
1	As a minister of the Word, you are called to receive the witness to Christ in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and to proclaim from them the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.	Charge 1 'As a deacon, you are called...'	Vow 3 'Do you receive the witness to Christ in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and do you undertake to proclaim from these, the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed?' ⁴
2	You are entrusted to preside at the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, instituted by our Lord as signs and seals of the gospel and his gift to the Church; you will celebrate these sacraments with the people of God.	Charge 5	Vow 4 'Do you receive baptism and the eucharist, instituted by our Lord as signs and seals of the gospel; and do you resolve to celebrate these sacraments with the people of God?'
3	Taking Christ the Good Shepherd as your example, you are called to lead God's people in worship, witness and service, to equip them for their ministry and mission; and to work with them in building up the body of Christ.	Charge 3 Taking Christ the Good Servant as your example, you are called to be a faithful pastor of God's people, equipping them for their ministry	Vow 5 'Will you endeavour to be a faithful pastor of God's people; will you equip them for their ministry and mission, and work with them in building up the body of Christ?' ⁵
4	You are called to strive for peace and unity among all Christian people, especially among those whom you serve.	Charge 4	Vow 10 'Will you strive for peace and unity among all Christian people, and especially among those whom you serve?'
5	You will receive the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as safeguarding and witnessing to the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and use them in worship and instruction.	Charge 6	Vow 8 'Do you accept the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as safeguarding and witnessing to the faith of the holy catholic Church; and do you intend to use them in worship and instruction.'
6	Learning from the Confessional Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, you will diligently teach Christ's people, reminding them of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the grace which justifies them through faith.	Charge 7	Draft Vow 11. 'Learning from the Confessional Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, will you diligently teach Christ's people, reminding them of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the grace which justifies them through faith?' ⁶
7	You will announce the good news of God in Christ to those beyond the community of faith, stand alongside those who suffer, and work for justice and peace in the world.	Charge 2	Vow 6 'Will you announce the good news of God in Christ to those outside the community of faith, stand alongside those who suffer, and work for justice and peace in the world?' ⁷
8	You will affirm and commit yourself to the covenant made between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Uniting Church and accept the obligation to serve both First and Second peoples. ⁸	Charge 8	—
9	Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be diligent in the study of the Bible, you will seek to live a holy and disciplined life and be faithful in prayer.	Charge 9	Vow 7 'Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, will you be diligent in the study of the Bible; will you seek to live a holy and disciplined life; will you be faithful in prayer?'

¹ UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Minister of the Word*, s.13.

² UCA Assembly, *A Service of Ordination of a Deacon* (2013), s.13, <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/226>.

³ These vows are drawn from the original version of the liturgy included in the working papers of the Assembly Standing Committee meeting that approved the 1995 rite. However, the minutes from that meeting state, "In the discussion that followed a number of alterations were approved, and various requests for further alteration were made to the Commission." These alterations are discussed by Walton, and those affected vows included in their final form in his work. Where there is a difference between the Assembly Working Papers and Walton, I have therefore included the final form of the vow from Walton, with the unedited language included in the footnotes. Notably, vows 1-2 and 9 of the 1995 rites are not included here, as they remained or were readapted in "The Questions" section of the 2013 liturgy, rather than "The Charge." See, "Document 11: Assembly Commission on Liturgy," Assembly Standing Committee Working Papers: 1-3 September 1995, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney; Assembly Standing Committee Minutes, 1-3 September 1995, Minute 95.81, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney; Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 440-43.


⁴ In the Assembly Working Papers, this vow read, "Do you receive the witness to Christ in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; and do you undertake to preach from these, proclaiming Christ as saviour of the world?" See, "Document 11: Assembly Commission on Liturgy," Assembly Standing Committee Working Papers: 1-3 September 1995, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney.

⁵ In the Assembly Working Papers, this vow read, "Will you endeavour to be a faithful pastor of God's people; will you equip them for their ministry, and work with them in building up the body of Christ?" See, "Document 11: Assembly Commission on Liturgy," Assembly Standing Committee Working Papers: 1-3 September 1995, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney.

⁶ This vow was included in the first draft of the 1995 vows in a different form but was removed by Assembly Standing Committee. It originally read, "Do you commit yourself to the study of the confessional documents of the church as enjoined in the Basis of Union?" This updated version was reintroduced as an amendment to the 1995 rite in 1997. See, "Document 11: Assembly Commission on Liturgy," Assembly Standing Committee Working Papers: 1-3 September 1995, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney; Walton, "Presbyteral Services of Ordination, 1977-1995," 488.

⁷ In the Assembly Working Papers, this vow read, "Will you, by word and deed, announce the good news of God in Christ to those outside the community of faith, stand alongside those who suffer, and work for justice and peace in the world?" See, "Document 11: Assembly Commission on Liturgy," Assembly Standing Committee Working Papers: 1-3 September 1995, UCA Assembly Archives, Sydney.

⁸ This line was added to The Charge in 2013, and therefore does not appear in the 1995 vows. See, UCA Assembly, *Assembly Standing Committee Minutes, July 2013*, Minute 13.34.



On the Way? A reflection on the 16th Assembly

Peter Walker

Abstract

This paper offers a short reflection on the reconvened meeting of the 16th Assembly, the national council of the Uniting Church. It focuses on the Assembly's engagement with the *Act2: On The Way*, a project initiated by the Assembly Standing Committee as a process to structure and resource the Uniting Church nationally in ways that fit it for current challenges. The paper locates this project in a longer history of human efforts to address and overcome the difference between who we are and what we are meant to be. With reference to broader religious history and to the foundations of the Uniting Church, it is argued that being 'On the Way' is more important than the destination.

Presidents are in the habit of selecting an official Assembly theme for their three-year tenure. The 9th Assembly gathered under the banner, 'Here we are Lord, send us'. Members of the 13th Assembly were summoned to 'Life Overflowing'. For the 16th Assembly, which reconvened on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland from May 6-9, President Sharon Hollis had chosen 'Dwelling in Love'. The first meeting of this triennium was held entirely by Zoom in July last year and so it was good, whether the climate of our dwelling was love or otherwise, to at least be dwelling together in person.

Around half the Assembly's dwelling was focused on a single proposal, now recorded in the minutes as *Act2: On the Way*. 'On the way' was an active ingredient in the Assembly's deliberations, as it has been in many discussions of the nature and identity of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). *Act2: On the Way* came to the Assembly as a result of a series of surveys and consultations, initiated by the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC), and including perspectives from across the Church, that led the ASC to determine that 'our structures are no longer fit for purpose'. *Act2* named the imperative to change in strong terms: 'Our structures, practices, and ways of working are impeding the ability of the Uniting Church to live out our vision and calling'. In a nutshell, we are having trouble getting on our way because these things are getting in our way. Given the weight of deliberation that *Act2* attracted, this brief reflection will focus upon it. There is no effort or intent to assess *Act2*. Rather, its lineage will be traced against what may be a surprisingly long span of history so that we can take stock of the way it frames *the problem*. More on that in a moment.

Of course, there were other important discussions and decisions at the Assembly and readers are encouraged to search for one of the many summaries available via Assembly and Synod websites. To name just one of those other significant moments, perhaps the most moving experience of the Assembly was the renewal of the Covenant between the UCA and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). That recommitment to the 1994 Covenant took place during the opening worship. President Sharon Hollis and UAICC Interim Chairperson, Mark Kickett, led the Assembly members in a confession of past failings

and a commitment to future reconciliation. If one thing was to be elevated from this Assembly as a sign that we are indeed ‘on the way’, that was it. And as the recommitment to the Covenant demonstrated, and the *Act2* proposal intentionally highlighted in its title and text, this form of words is right at the centre of how the UCA tends to narrate its identity. Why do we think of ourselves as ‘on the way’? And what does *Act2* have to do with being on the way?

During the first millennium BCE, humanity took to what Karl Jaspers has called the habit of ‘standing back and looking beyond’.¹ Teachers, sages, and prophets began appearing and voicing their opinion (perhaps their revelation?) about *a problem*. The detail of the problem was portrayed differently by, for example, Zoroaster in Iran or the Upanishads in India or the prophets of ancient Israel, yet the common theme emerging in the millennium before Jesus was a narrative about gone-wrongness. Sages and prophets began naming a gap, a distance, and even a threatening gulf between the *real* and the *ideal*. We are on the wrong path. We are astray. We are not where we are meant to be. The problem was located in this distinction between the real and the ideal, which was given a conceptual home in most of the systems of thought and practice we now name as religions. And each one had a solution. The distinction between who we are and who we are meant to be, where we are and where we are meant to be, indeed the distance between our current meanderings and the place that is our proper home was solvable.

It was Zoroaster who made history, both literally and figuratively, as Yuri Sleskine observes, by prophesying the absolute end of the world.² There will be a final reckoning of *the problem* and, arising from that reckoning, there would come a last judgement of all human beings who had ever lived. And then bliss; there would then be nothing but everlasting perfection: no hunger, no thirst, no violence, no more death. Thus it was that humans began to conceive of time as linear; forward moving. We are moving in the direction of our proper place. Life is not cyclical, like the seasons. Life is a straight pathway that starts behind us and ends somewhere out in front of us; a pilgrimage. As an aside, this new concept of a reckoning at ‘the end’ of life’s pilgrimage meant the stakes surrounding the moral choices made by individual pilgrims became very high indeed: not everyone was going to make it beyond the reckoning, and no one was going to get a second chance.

It was the ancient Israelites who took the lead in promoting this idea of time as a straight line. The Exodus from Egypt is a migration narrative that, among other things, seeks to legitimise a wandering troupe’s claim to land in Palestine. Yet it is also a classic example of this sort of story: a hazardous journey from a wrong place to the right place. Furthermore, the Exodus story purports to provide a permanent solution to *the problem*: the gulf between who (and where) we are and who (and where) we should be. Having escaped Egypt, the Israelites did not establish a new version of that form of community. To do so would be to stay in the wrong place, regardless of their location. No, instead of a this-worldly king, they identified for themselves an other-worldly king whom they also proclaimed as Ruler of all. They handed themselves over to this transcendent Ruler in covenant. And, within that covenant commitment, the distance between the real and the ideal was spanned by a new phenomenon: the personal presence with the people of their God. Yahweh could (and

¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 3.

² Yuri Sleskine, *The House of Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 76. I am indebted to Sleskine’s discussion of the history of millenarian movements at chapter 3 ‘The Faith’, 73-118.

should) be loved, not simply served, and was always watching and always listening. A dedicated pilgrim people, dwelling near to God in loving covenant, would not lose the way in their search for the right place.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.³

The rationale for the *Act2: On the Way* proposal commences with four points made under the heading of 'Identity and Vision'. The four points are immediately recognisable to those familiar with the UCA *Basis of Union* (1) we live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, (2) we are committed to serve the world for which Christ died, (3) we are called to be a fellowship of reconciliation, and (4) we are a pilgrim people, always on the way towards our promised goal.

Those portions of the *Basis* that identify our lineage within the above long canvas of history were heard often throughout the Assembly's discussion of *Act2*. They are worthy of naming in full to set them in this context of humanity's habit of 'standing back and looking beyond':

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way, Christ feeds the Church with word and sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.⁴

The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life ...⁵

In its own way (perhaps even its own strange way?), *Act2* is a fresh rendering of *the problem*. It was named at union, of course, and has been named in a myriad of ways by people of faith throughout time and across place: we are not where we ought to be. The real does not equate to the ideal.

Where did *Act2* say we are? And where did it hope we might be? The nitty gritty of our problem was not spelled out by the report and proposal in great detail, perhaps because this was an interim report, and its proposals were designed to move the review forward rather than prescribe the outcome. Yet we clearly heard that 'Our structures, practices, and ways of working are impeding the ability of the Uniting Church to live out our vision and calling'.

³ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁴ Uniting Church in Australia *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3.

⁵ Uniting Church in Australia *Basis of Union*, paragraph 18.

The ‘Next Steps’ of work to be undertaken gave a clearer indication of where those who framed *Act2* think our problems reside. The ‘project outcomes’ need to (1) identify the structures, practices, and ways of working that will create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service, and discipleship formation, (2) foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church, and (3) fulfil the Church’s legal, ethical, and social obligations.

Most revealing of *the problem*, however, was *Act2*’s recommendation that specific consideration be given to (1) how the interconciliar model is being ‘lived out’ across the Church, (2) the number of councils that may be required in the future, and (3) how resources can be equitably made available across the UCA. Too many councils? Councils not collaborating well? Some folks hogging resources? The overall tenor of Assembly membership did seem to be in harmony with these concerns. There was less singing with one voice, however, when it came to identifying the best way forward.

As our dwelling on the Sunshine Coast drew to a close, the outcome of the *Act2: On the Way* report and proposal may have been a disappointment in equal measure to both realists and idealists. A new Working Group will be appointed by the ASC to:

- identify and strengthen ways of developing local expressions of worship, witness, service, and discipleship making and formation
- explore what ‘an evolving interconciliar process that is responsive and agile’ might look like
- further develop the UCA’s theological culture and its framework for theological education
- develop a resourcing framework for the whole church, and
- the Working Group will approach all of the above with due regard for the UCA-UAICC Covenant, our commitment to be a multicultural church, and our ethical, legal and social obligations.

These next steps for the ASC and the new *Act2* Working Group are, no doubt, critical work for the Uniting Church. By the grace of God, with the Spirit’s leading, we may one day reach the right place. Yet, there are no guarantees.

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain – that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees – as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there’. Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.⁶

Perhaps *the way* is the heart of it all, more so than any long-desired destination? After all, the first followers of Jesus seem to have described themselves as people of the way.

⁶ Deuteronomy 34:1-5.



Reviews

ANNE F. ELVEY. *Reading the Magnificat in Australia. Unsettling Engagements*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2020 (ISBN: 9781910928790)

How does one read the Bible in a profoundly ethical and honest way, in the face of its association – or even complicity – with colonialism, patriarchy, racism, anthropocentrism and other forms of oppression? How can a biblical text, even one such as Luke 1:46–55 that speaks of reversal and liberation, open conversations that are genuinely liberative and located? How can readers of the Bible listen deeply to the voices of First Peoples and others who have been silenced? How can we listen to the voice of creation itself, so that when we speak, our words magnify rather than silence marginalized voices and insights?

These are questions that exercise the minds of people engaged in interpreting the Bible in contemporary Australia – or perhaps *should* exercise us more than they do. This is a book intended to unsettle the assumptions of settlers in Australia and beyond. But it is not one that does so by claiming the high moral ground, as though the author is exempt from white privilege herself. It is in fact a remarkably self-reflective and invitational book. Anne Elvey is uniquely well placed to tackle the questions set out above. She is a New Testament scholar, a child of devout pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic parents, yet is also an acclaimed poet, a feminist, a leading exponent of ecological hermeneutics and, I would add, a cultural theorist and critic (though she herself may not agree with this categorization). Elvey's creative output straddles all these influences, and is undergirded by her determination to demonstrate in practice what many of us avow at the opening of our gatherings—that we pay our respect to the custodians of the

land on which we meet, elders past and present, and we acknowledge that we meet on land that was never ceded. This is a book that sets out how one can actually do this.

A key premise of the book is that the Magnificat, Mary's Song in Luke 1:46-55, has many "after-lives" in this country which we now call Australia, and these "after-lives" invite us to self-reflection. One could call this book a work of reception history, as it examines various historical, literary and artistic refractions of the Magnificat in Australia. But that may not adequately convey the hermeneutical thread that binds these refractions together. They are not offered from an objective or innocent stance, but from one which is located on and benefits from Boon Wurrung country. This reading situates itself not only by location, but also by the ethical determination to move away from what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the "White Possessive" (the ongoing manifestation of desire and will in "and as property", through Australian legal, social and cultural organisation) (6).

Elvey sets out her strategy of reading as "unsettlement". She shows how "the Magnificat, recited or sung daily, captured the imaginations of settler Australians as an important part of their colonial and religious heritage," and also "formed a kind of template for exploring experiences of the sacred sometimes in a more-than-human frame" (35). The purpose of the book is this: to consider how, in a non-linear way, "a creative reading practice, in conversation with literature and the arts, including work by contemporary Indigenous women, might develop biblical interpretation beyond certain ecclesial attachments to the Bible as normative, in a way that is productive for ecological responsibility in the ongoing colonial context of Australia" (3). If

that sounds complex, it is. But it is also eminently practical. It offers a “multi-axial hermeneutic” that proceeds via three key practices: restraint, intertextual engagement, and creative witness (20-21). These are three valuable lenses for each of us to understand. I will be setting Chapter 1 as required reading for students of Biblical Hermeneutics, as it distills the challenges and opportunities of contemporary engaged hermeneutics.

The focus of Chapter 2 is on reading the Magnificat in contexts of conflict. Elvey introduces the concept of entanglement, which in ecological hermeneutics refers to the way beings are interconnected or enmeshed with one another. Elvey considers in particular a short story entitled ‘Magnificat’ by Henrietta Drake-Brockman published in 1939. The entangled nature of Drake-Brockman’s critique of and complicity with the “white possessive” becomes illustrative of other later entanglements in contexts of conflict (particularly the Northern Territory Emergency Response, known as the Intervention). This is not standard biblical exegesis, but rather a hermeneutical engagement that seeks to bring our cultural ‘imaginary’ into consciousness. She argues that the Magnificat may offer new ways of imagining war and peace, reversal and liberation. Following the Magnificat, Elvey magnifies the “small”, and concludes the chapter with her own poetry, giving attention to our interrelationality with things (63).

Each of the following chapters draws on other aesthetic genres. Chapter 3 extends the focus on poetry, giving attention to the Maternal, as well as engaging with non-binary and queer readings. This chapter also brings the issue of institutional child sexual abuse into the conversation. Chapter 4 has a focus on the visual arts as they refract the Magnificat in Australia. Here she discusses the abstract expressionist art of Stanislaus Rapotec, and in particular his Magnificat III. The chapter theorizes matter and materiality, and goes on to consider speechlessness. Here Elvey reflects on

her own younger sister, whose complex health conditions meant that speech was not her form of communication. Elvey suggests that the divine/sacred can be encountered unpremeditatedly in relation toward another, whose different experience is a “call to renounce the social (de)valuation of that difference as defining” (122).

Chapter 5 explores the Magnificat via the other-than-human phenomenon of bird song. This chapter will stimulate not only those who love nature, but also those who run retreats, as the approach of biosemiotics allows us to draw the Holy Spirit as dove, Australian birds and the song of Mary into a delightful and enlightening conversation.

Who will benefit from reading this challenging book? Anyone who is wondering what feminism or ecological hermeneutics has been doing recently. But more particularly, this book would lend itself to a book group where the participants are willing to read a chapter each meeting and take the conversation further. They will have their cultural imaginary reshaped, and find themselves listening more attentively and responding more appropriately to the Magnificat’s vision of reversal and liberation.

Vicky Balabanski

ERIC NELSON, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019 (ISBN 9780674240940)

Eric Nelson’s background in European intellectual and political history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries serves him well in his latest book. His argument is that the ‘liberals’ of these centuries were essentially Pelagian in emphasis (Chapters 1 and 2). He then moves on to suggest that John Rawls, the outstanding liberal of the late

twentieth century, was anti-Pelagian in orientation but ultimately unconvinced by the theology of anti-Pelagianism (Chapter 3). From here the succeeding chapters (4-6) involve close argument about incoherencies that have developed in various strands of liberalism since Rawls's *Theory of Justice* (1971).

Why is this study of liberalism relevant to Christians identifying with the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA)? On the one hand, there is the view that the UCA is predominantly 'liberal' in its theological orientation, as manifested in its support for marriage equality and the support from some of its members for 'progressive' Christianity. On the other hand, there is a widely held assumption that Australia is strongly influenced by modern liberalism (as are most Western societies), emphasising the autonomy of the individual and progressive social aspirations.

This book enhances one's understanding of the character of liberalism. Despite the contemporary assumption that liberalism is predominantly secular in orientation, *The Theology of Liberalism* highlights the (Christian) theological orientation of liberalism. Nelson points out that the thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who might today be described as 'liberals' did not use that term; they were proto-liberals or precursors to liberalism. The book provides insights into these thinkers, while also exploring the theological assumptions in Rawls's thinking. The latter part of the book is less theologically engaged but is helpful in arguing the incoherencies in some of the major post-Rawlsian liberal philosophies.

In Chapters 1 and 2 Nelson argues that the proto-liberals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were Pelagian, using that term "for those who either deny the doctrine of original sin outright, or accept it in principle while denying that it brought about any effective change in the ability of human beings to avoid sin" (4). He elaborates this point in relation

to John Milton, Gottfried Leibniz, John Locke, Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Two conclusions follow from the Pelagian assumptions of the proto-liberals. One was the promotion of a "religion of reason", meaning that God's justice required "that everything necessary for human salvation must be accessible to human reason" (15). The other was the promotion of religious toleration, based on the argument that religious coercion could not be justified if one believed "that only freely chosen religious observance has salvific value" (19).

In Chapter 2 Nelson elaborates the argument in reference to Locke and Thomas Hobbes. He suggests some 'muddle' in Locke in that Locke supports the Pelagian/Royalist tradition that Adam could not have represented the human race (consent and 'authorization' were required), while in practice defending the Whig/Parliamentarian cause (referring to the English Civil War (War of the Three Kingdoms) and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689). Hobbes (who was involved with a group of Arminian Oxford divines) also upheld a Pelagian/Royalist position.

Turning to the exposition of Rawls (Chapter 3), we find that in relation to the proto-liberals Rawls took an anti-Pelagian position, Pelagianism being associated with heresies denying the divinity of Jesus, "Judaizing" or "Hebraizing" doctrine, and the sin of "pride" (51). Rawls was preoccupied with theology and philosophy while an undergraduate at Princeton in the early 1940s but rejected Christianity in 1945 because he could not make moral sense of the anti-Pelagian God. While Rawls took issue with the Pelagian proposition that one can earn merit, his own position as a "dignitarian" liberal (emphasising the autonomy of persons) is deeply inegalitarian in Nelson's view (70-71). The "better endowed" will have much greater life chances than those less well endowed (71). For Rawls, Christianity required an anti-Pelagian God, but in the form of the doctrine of predestination (and even more so,

double predestination) such a God would be a tyrant and “incompatible with any plausible idea of the divinity” (72).

In the last three substantive chapters the discussion focuses on three types of liberalism that have emerged post-Rawls: luck egalitarianism (chapter 4), institutionalism (chapter 5), and right- and left-libertarianism (chapter 6). For luck egalitarians, no theodicy is possible given that “luck”, not God, leads to putative injustices (75). Nelson’s argument is that while one cannot establish that the existing distribution of natural assets is just, one cannot know that this distribution is unjust (76).

In the case of institutionalists the type of equality proposed by Rawls is not so much a distributive ideal, but a freestanding “social and political ideal” (110). This approach undermines the argument that the distribution of moral advantage is morally arbitrary: “we simply cannot know” whether this is the case (111). If society is viewed as “a cooperative scheme for mutual benefit”, the question becomes which distributive norms would be appropriate (p. 126). Nelson concludes that institutionalism cannot avoid the theodicy challenge about the justice of God; if it does attempt to do so, “it is not an egalitarian theory” (132-133).

The third focus in this section of the book concerns an argument between right- and left-libertarians. Right-libertarians defend “a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth” (Locke) on the grounds of there being an individual right to appropriate natural resources in the state of nature. The commitment of left-libertarians is to egalitarian ownership of natural resources; Thomas Paine saw the earth as “the free gift of the Creator in common to the human race” (p. 135). Nelson’s position is in line with the right-libertarians, quoting approvingly from Edmund Burke that there is justice in upholding an unjust distribution if that distribution were entered into faithfully (157).

Reviewing the three broad areas in this book, the main contribution is the enhanced understanding of liberalism, with particular reference to its theological roots. While the proto-liberals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might not have explicitly described themselves as Pelagian, Nelson makes a reasonable case for identifying a Pelagian tendency.

With Rawls we also emerge with a deeper understanding of the theological roots of his philosophy. However, Nelson is perceptive in pointing out that there are problems in reconciling Rawls’s anti-Pelagian position with his objection to moral arbitrariness.

Nelson similarly is acute in his assessment of three contemporary manifestations of liberalism; the luck egalitarians, the institutionalists, and the right- and left-libertarians. One emerges with a better understanding of these perspectives. Nelson highlights the contradictions, but without committing himself to any meta-philosophy of contemporary liberalism.

From a UCA perspective engagement with the contemporary manifestations of liberalism is clearly an important task, given the dominant role of liberalism in various forms in Western society. While one can attempt this task at a political level in different contexts, there is also the truism that underlying every political manifestation there is an implicit philosophical basis. It is well to remember the complexities of liberalism, and Nelson’s book helps us to do that. It is also the case that from a Christian perspective, liberalism is not completely a foreign beast. It has Christian roots, some of which might be deemed heretical, such that engagement with liberalism is in part a theological exercise.

Derek McDougall

VICKY BALABANSKI, *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary: An Eco-Stoic Reading*, London: T&T Clark 2020 (ISBN: 9780567674395)

Vicky Balabanski begins by plunging readers into an imaginative scene, with academics from different fields pictured in animated discussion. Within the confines of biblical analysis, in which creativity is often eschewed, this is an enticing and disruptive point of departure. Balabanski's clear, creative, and invitational writing style throughout, make this volume accessible and engaging for those working in the field of biblical studies and for those beyond the academy.

In the introduction Balabanski explains that this work is not a traditional commentary. Instead, tightly woven around themes in Stoic thought, passages in Colossians are brought into dialogue with ecological considerations. The focus of this volume within the Earth Bible Commentary series is Eco-Stoicism. Through her close reading and translations of Stoic texts, and passages in Colossians, Balabanski underscores the need for biblical scholarship to take seriously the significant place of Stoic thought in the reception and development of early Christian thought and to attend the ecological implications of these sources.

After discussing the authorship and dating of Colossians within the introduction, in Chapter 1 Stoic philosophy is introduced and evidence of its widespread appeal in the Common Era across the Mediterranean is demonstrated. Balabanski argues that the Stoic world view served as the "spiritual soil" for the "rapid, successful transmission and reception of the Christian Gospel across the Roman Empire..." (19).

Each subsequent chapter highlights a strand of Stoic thought and discusses this in relation to sequential passages in Colossians. Hermeneutical reflections are offered, and chapters conclude with the imaginative

reflections of Nympha, a woman and early church leader, who is named in Colossians 4.15.

In Chapter 2 Balabanski explores the Stoic conceptions of happiness, heaven, and hope, and demonstrates the points of continuity and discontinuity between the Stoic world view and the Christian Gospel. Balabanski demonstrates that it is in the field of hope that the greatest disjuncture is apparent. While Stoic philosophy considered hope a distraction, focusing on Colossians 1.1-8, Balabanski argues that hope is an integral feature of early Christian communities, as they are grounded in Christ, crucified, risen, and indwelling.

Balabanski discusses the importance of both consistency and integrity in Stoic thought in Chapter 3. In attending to Colossians 1.9-14 Balabanski highlights that consistency and integrity are also key priorities for the author(s) of this letter, for her Timothy and Paul.

Chapter 4 focuses on embodiment and the cosmos. Balabanski outlines the importance of embodied reality in the Stoic world view, demonstrating that this contrasts with contemporaneous philosophical traditions. The Colossians hymn (1.15-20), with its dramatic depiction of Christ who infuses, sustains, and reconciles all things, is then discussed. Balabanski notes the risks of pantheism, but convincingly argues that in this hymn:

we don't have a vision of pantheism (equating all things with God), but panentheism (in Christ), pandiatheism (through Christ), paneistheism (for Christ) and pansuntheism (held together by Christ). If God sustains the world in every moment in and through Christ, then we humans can and must embrace the world as kin (77).

Stoic concepts of cognition, cosmic sympathy, and restoring kinship are introduced in Chapter 5. Drawing from these understandings, Balabanski

discusses Colossians 1.21-23. Of particular importance, Balabanski rightly underscores that the scope of reconciliation includes not only humans, but the whole of creation, within this letter (see 88-90).

The problem of suffering is considered in Chapter 6. Balabanski underscores that within the Stoic world-view suffering is not understood as good or bad, but rather cultivating virtue in the face of suffering is essential. Closely reading Colossians 1.24-2.5 Balabanski highlights cadences with Stoic understandings of suffering, while also demonstrating that in early Christian texts suffering is enfolded into a larger narrative—the suffering of Christ, the crucified and risen one.

In Chapter 7 Balabanski situates Stoic philosophy and Colossians, within the wider context of competing philosophies in the Common Era. Concerns raised by the author(s) in Colossians 2.6-23 about ‘empty’ philosophies are usefully analysed and the complex set of arguing partners in both Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts are discussed.

Chapter 8 explores Stoic concepts of vices and virtues. It is demonstrated that practices of love and thanksgiving, as well as expanded understandings of duty to others (beyond blood ties) are important Stoic virtues. In attending to Colossians 3.1-4.1 Balabanski identifies parallel values and offers a contextualised commentary on the Colossians household code.

In Chapter 9 the Stoic priority of concord is underscored. Balabanski discusses Colossians 4.2-18, elucidating points of translation and offering reflections on the possible challenges to concord that existed between the assemblies in Colossae and Laodicea.

The book concludes with a summary and highlights emerging work in the theological field of deep incarnation. Readers are entreated to take seriously

the cosmic christology and soteriology embedded within Colossians, for here, because all things are infused with Christ, the call to care for all things is a non-negotiable imperative for Christians.

This book offers an important reading of Colossians, yet some themes were worthy of further exploration. Balabanski rightly argues that “It is part of the biblical scholar’s task to consider what sort of ontological framework the original audience would have had” (173). However, the significance of the incarnation in Colossians for understandings of soteriology, and the Wisdom christology undergirding this framework, are often overlooked. This leads to assumptions that this letter’s soteriological dynamic must be one of “cross, resurrection, exaltation” (for example 75; 90), without sufficiently exploring the incarnation as a site for understandings of salvation. Likewise, in relation to practices, while Balabanski offers important reflections about the ethical implications of this Eco-Stoic reading, readers could have been pushed further about the costly extent of faithfully living with all creation.

Balabanski’s attentive reading of Stoic texts and Colossians, her open communication style and creativity, and her willingness to engage with critical global issues, all contribute to *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary: An Eco-Stoic Reading* being a rich resource for the academy and the wider church. For those interested in the philosophical contexts that informed the construction of early Christian texts, and those who wish to engage with contemporary questions of ecology and Christian faithfulness I highly recommend this book.

Sally Douglas

ROBIN BOYD, *Beyond Captivity: Explorations in Indian Christian History and Theology*. (Studies in Gospel Interface with Indian Context 24), Bangalore: Centre for Contemporary Christianity, 2014, [xxvi] + 341 pp.

It is a pleasure to write this review of studies by the eminent northern Irish-Australian Presbyterian-cum-Uniting Church minister Robin H.S. Boyd (1924-2018). As a 'swan song' Boyd put together all his essays published and unpublished about exchanges between the Gospel message and Indian religion, works written between 1959, when he had settled down in his twenty-year-long stint as a missionary among Gujarati-speaking peoples in western India, and 2011, when he had time to reflect on theological issues more broadly after his roles as Head of the Irish School of Ecumenics and Uniting Church Minister of Wesley Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne CBD.

I was talking to a group of Zoroastrians a year or so ago about the importance of Christian missionaries for latter-day Parsis (or Indian Zoroastrians) gaining access to their sacred texts in printed Gujarati and in English translations during the nineteenth century. The very first piece in Boyd's collection (Chapter 1) probes this interesting issue, because Protestant missionaries made a crucial "Contribution to Scholarship" by writing Gujarati grammars, and printing Bible translations and other books into Gujarati script (cf. Chapter 27). Why, what would the Indian Isma'ili followers of the Aga Khan, who have made their special contribution to Australian cultural life, be without these developments? Most importantly for our readers, good scholarly groundwork laid the foundations of Gujarati Christianity, and Boyd's essays reveal how high a level Indian Christian theological work has attained since its "Early Impulses" in India (Chapters 20-21) and the first expressions of "Gujarati Theological Literature" in particular from 1831 (Chapter 3). Indeed, it has been Boyd's important role, as Principal of the Gujarat United School of Theology,

to foster mature and critical Indian Theology (best known to us through Nagaland's M.M. Thomas) (Chapter 13), and provide guideposts for doing Theology in full engagement with the rich spiritual traditions of 'Hindu' India (as shown in the pieces on Indo-Spaniard and 'Vedic-Catholic' Raymundo Pannikar [Chapter 8] and especially Gujarati spiritual teacher Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai, who sought to bring together the path of Christian love with Upanishadic apprehensions of the divine in his *Kristopanishad* of 1965 [Chapter 7, cf. Chapters. 18, 22]) and whose writings were selected and edited by Boyd a decade after that.

Boyd did not go without criticism for his concessions to Hinduism. In Chapter 23 (albeit in passing) and Chapter 26 Boyd engages the criticism from contemporary Indian theologians that his was a Brahmanical theology indifferent to the question of power and caste. His main challenger, the late Dr (Habil) James Massey in particular, known for founding theology for the Dalits (Untouchables, and victims of the caste system) and for his fine Liberationist work *Rethinking Theology in India* (2013), had a much more radical agenda theologically. Boyd responded by saying that they were "many authentic types of Indian Christian theology" (p. 260). If he chose high-level comparative and dialogical work (akin to John Farquhar, backed up by my late colleague Professor Eric Sharpe), Boyd was radical from the start, in his early book on India and the Latin Captivity of the Church (1974) really giving the 'old guard' something to think about in terms of indigenization and the need for a regional Reformation spirit.

Boyd has a good sense of historical change, being the author of *A Church History of Gujarat* (1980), so we can expect a good deal of "Looking Back" (Part II), although it is more in terms of institutional trends (*inter alia* towards The Church of North India [begun 1970]) and key theological issues, and not such big questions as the impact of 'modernity'

and ‘secularization’ as we find in such an up-and-coming regional historian as Kaveh Yazdani). Boyd’s chapters are arranged in order of publication date, though, so historical data has to be extracted by patiently glancing through the Contents. Significantly, he ends up with a very powerful 2013 theological article about teleology (rather or more than eschatology) and true fulfilment (*teliôsis*) in the New Testament as highly relevant to the Indian churches (ch. 30), a chapter indicative of the whole volume being as much about “Looking Forward” as backward (also Pt. II). Boyd was always wrestling with contextual issues to be faced by Indian theologizers – the Lord’s Supper (Chapter 2), Christology (Chapter 6), Resurrection (Chapter 10), Fulfilment (Chapter 25), devotional music, etc.—and any of his essays reflect his open quest for culturo-spiritual resolutions in the Global-Western/Indic interface that seem fascinatingly summarized in his final musings about the meaning of a divine End (*telos*) or Ends. A fine testament to a rich life in high service to the Master.

Garry Trompf



Contributors

Vicky Balabanski is Associate Professor and New Testament scholar at the University of Divinity, and the Principal of Uniting College for Leadership and Theology in Adelaide. She is the General Editor, together with Gerald West, of the acclaimed Earth Bible series. Her Earth Bible commentary, *Colossians: An Eco-Stoic reading* (Bloomsbury T & T Clark 2020), draws on Stoic philosophy as a framework for deepening ecological ways of reading. Vicky is an ordained minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, and is part of an indigenous family in the central desert of Australia.

Sally Douglas is a Uniting Church minister, who works in the mode of ‘scholar pastor’. She ministers with an inner-city parish, lectures at Pilgrim Theological College and is an Honorary Research Associate within the University of Divinity. Her doctoral research, spanning biblical studies and theology, was published to critical acclaim as *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine: The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity* (T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2016). She has recently published *Church as Salt: Becoming the Community Jesus Speaks About* (Coventry Press, 2021).

Sean Gilbert is Lecturer in Ministry Practice at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology, Adelaide. Prior to joining the faculty in 2012, Sean spent over twenty years as a Minister of the Word in congregational ministry within the Uniting Church in Australia. He enjoys bringing the richness of that experience to pastoral formation through teaching in theological areas related to ministry practice. His recently awarded PhD thesis is entitled, *Spiritual Affections and the Pastoral Disposition*. It received the 2019 Flinders University Vice Chancellors Award for Thesis Writing Excellence.

Daniel Mossfield is a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia, serving several congregations on the NSW Southern Tablelands. He lives and works on the lands of the Mulwaree, Tarlo, Burra Burra, Wollondilly, Wiradjuri, Gundungurra, Dharrook, Tharawal, Lachlan, Pajong, Parramarragoo, Cookmal and Ngunnawal peoples.

Derek McDougall is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, specialising in international relations. He also holds an M.Div. from the University of Divinity (Melbourne) and is a member of the Ethics Committee for the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. He has published previously on the work of Eric Nelson in *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* and the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*.

Janet Staines is an ordained Minister of the Word in the Queensland Synod at Chermiside Kedron Community Church in the norther suburbs of Brisbane. She is the newly elected Chair of the Moreton Rivers Presbytery and is passionate about shaping discipleship communities. In her spare moments she enjoys watching drone footage of Scottish Castles on YouTube.

Garry Trompf is Emeritus Professor in the History of Ideas at the University of Sydney and was formerly Professor of History at the University of Papua New Guinea. Of his various books, those on missiology include *Melanesian Religion: Payback; Religions of Melanesia; and Melanesian Religion and Christianity*.

Peter Walker is Principal of United Theological College and Lecturer in the Charles Sturt University School of Theology. Among other appointments, he has been a Visiting Fellow at Dunmore Lang College, President of the Australian Capital Territory Council of Churches, Assistant Director of the Charles Sturt University Centre for Public and Contextual Theology, and is currently Assistant Editor of the International Journal of Public Theology. His research interests include theology and climate, Christian theologies of religion, and the Renaissance theologian Nicholas of Cusa. He is also a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia.



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