

the wider church can do is to encourage the process. A theology of change encourages the development of change processes that are inclusive, transparent and that invite participation.

m). **In what ways would you like to see change? Or should we stop talking and do more?**

3 THE CHALLENGE: THINKING AND ACTION

Many want to see action as a result of this discussion. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner wrote that we often want to think our way into a new way of acting; instead he suggested that we act our way into new ways of thinking. If we leave our consideration of change just to our words we will lose a great opportunity and we will continue on the current pathway. So, the challenge is for all congregations to take the issue of change seriously and to think about how the future might be different from the present. The way of change is likely to involve letting go of some things from the past rather than adding more and more activities. In other words we are likely to have to be more selective, more coordinated and perhaps more intentional in the future.

Standing Committee would like to have initial responses to the study material from all congregations and agencies by the 31st JULY 2008.

This will provide time for the information to inform the live-in Presbytery weekend in August 2008. Ideas, comments, writings, and poems-any form of response, will be welcome. **Remember, change will depend on all of us.**

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**GETTING
OUR
FEET
WET:**

a theology of change



1.1 INTRODUCTION

The title of this material is drawn from the story of the Hebrew people crossing the River Jordan (Joshua, 3-4). It has provided me with a metaphor for the people of God facing change. One not so much about our arrival in the Promised Land, but of our willingness to start the crossing, to get our feet wet if you like. There are many other stories of the people of God responding to change. Which one would you choose?

Consideration of change in the church is timely. National Church Life Survey data show starkly the decline in church membership and the aging of congregations. This shows that we are not reaching many people with the message of the gospels. We need to change not because of numbers, or for the sake of change, but so that the gospel of Christ may be heard more clearly in a world distrustful of the church. We have to be open to the Spirit calling us anew to tell the story of Christ in, and for, the world.

It is a good time, an exciting time, for the people of God to reflect on the why, how and when of change. This is what we have been calling a theology of change.

The aim of this material is to stimulate discussion about how we will meet the challenges of the future. I hope that it will lead to questions about who we are and what we doing. A theology of change involves asking the questions that move us forward as Jesus often challenged those around him with questions.

Let us make no mistake; this is a great challenge; one that if accepted will lead to many unexpected places. If it is ignored the outcome for the Uniting Church is clear; a quite rapid slide into oblivion.

1.2 IN PREPARATION: GETTING ONE FOOT WET: a summary

This section is a summary of the material in part 2. Its purpose is to give some of the key ideas that you will meet in the main part of the study material.

A summary

This is what we are saying about change. It is not complete yet. We would like to hear what you have to say too, because the UCA has always thought change is an important topic. Maturity, like growth, involves change – of heart, spirit and mind. So we need to discuss change in order that we can dis-

outside the church know the basic stories of our faith. Nor do they know that the Christian church embraces a range of interpretations of the faith.

There is a significant challenge for us to solve. On the one hand we want to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the world, and, on the other, all too often we remain locked into the ways of the past that mean little to those we would invite into the church. An important mission challenge is to provide different ways to help people to develop their relationships with God. A theology of change calls for such diversity. But, more than this it calls for the recognition of the value of different approaches and cautions us against relegating different forms of worship and being church to a second rank.

A theology of change recognizes that human beings have many and varied needs, and that no one community of faith can meet them all. Varying styles and approaches developed by different communities of faith can help to provide meaningful worship opportunities for people. Inter-community co-operation and resource sharing and ecumenism can assist in this regard and thus have a place in a theology of change. This is an effective and efficient use of resources. Competition between Christian communities is real. The question is whether this helps us in telling people about the love of God or whether it merely proclaims our selfish needs? I believe that competitiveness is unhelpful to the cause of the gospel. If this is to change I believe that we have to address issues about the cultures of congregations, of ordained ministers, and the presbytery and its leaders, and of the relationship between the various levels of the church. It is not clear that we always understand our own culture very well.

k). What do you value about the diversity within your own congregation?

l). In what ways is your congregation supportive of regular cooperation with other Uniting Church (or other denominational) groups?

2.7 Opposition

Change does not come without opposition. A theology of change recognizes that between the minorities who want radical and rapid change, and those who want none, the majority of people are open to change

provided it is worthwhile, carried out at the right pace and emerges from within the community. Change cannot be imposed. It will arise out of the energy, enthusiasm and ownership of people within faith communities. All

A church with a positive culture allows for, and learns from, its failures as well as its successes. Such a church is prepared to operate at the edges caring for the marginalized and dispossessed, being the prophetic voice of love and proclaiming the resurrection faith. It does not stop seeking because something has not worked. The church without failures is probably the church without life caring more for comfort than for challenge.

We will not all be pioneers and start new activities. However, all of us can allow and encourage others into new ways of being the church and not undermine them with negative criticism. We can rejoice in the use of the gifts of all people, not just those of a few. We can avoid patronizing those who develop new ways of being church in suggesting that the traditional forms of worship are “real” and the others are merely “playing” at church. Similarly those who develop new ways of being church can affirm the values of tradition and history that are so important to many of their fellow Christians. In a theology of change there are no right and proper ways of being church, there are only ways that help the people of God to worship, to learn and to mutually support each other in their mission in the world.

Risk taking is enhanced if there is trust between people and communities. Lack of trust promotes conservative risk-averse strategies. Therefore a theology of change is one of trust wherein people can exercise their gifts and take risks. Trust is only developed through relationships, and through the commitment of time and effort to develop such relationships. As long as we continue to blame others (“them”) for the state of the church we will continue to decline.

i) In what ways is your community of faith prepared to take risks? Can you identify examples of risk taking and the outcomes?

j) In what ways are people trusted in your community of faith?

2.6 Cooperative acceptance of diversity

Much of our worship is pretty uniform in style and timing. While this meets the needs of some in the church, others wish for different ways of worship and of being church. Outside the church our language, imagery, and worship practices are incomprehensible to many, even if they have a sense of the “otherness in life”. We can no longer assume that those

cover what practices might help us to mature and to grow. Change affects relationships with God, our neighbours, and ourselves. Scripture shows us that the history of God’s people has been one of change and that, often, we must change in order to respond to changes around us. Our response to change needs to be built upon strong relationships. Our response must therefore become an essential mission if we are to maintain and enhance those relationships. There are many ways to enhance relationships with God, community and self. Some of them require us to be creative in finding ways to grow the Kingdom and to step beyond familiar boundaries of comfort and conformity. Some of them require us to improve organizational efficiency to release energy for relationship building. An effective response to change requires people to feel involved and so culture is important in responding to change. Change processes must be inclusive, open and invite participation. Leaders therefore need to involve people in responding to change. To respond to change requires trust and freedom because we must trust and permit each other to exercise our gifts and, sometimes, we must take risks. We are also saying that self examination helps us to respond to change and so we invite you to reflect and pray and to join with us as we begin to explore how change affects us and how we can best respond in love, with courage and with faith.

2 GETTING BOTH FEET WET: ideas about change

2.1 Change and Scripture

Change is a normal part of the journey of the people of God. The stories of scripture tell us something about that journey; they can guide and comfort us as we make changes. From the creation to the Exodus, from the pain of Exile to the joy of restoration, from the promise of Jesus’ birth to the resurrection, the story of God’s people is one of change. Change is not something just to be endured but to be celebrated. The church recognizes this and many of our rituals celebrate significant times of change in people’s lives.

Given our history we should not be concerned that we are considering change in today’s church.

a) What have you appreciated about the changes in the church in your lifetime?

b) Do these changes provide us with useful clues about managing change?

2.2 Change is necessary

Change is not unique to our age. Human curiosity creates new opportunities, technologies and challenges. The question is not whether change is necessary, but how we deal with its challenges. Change is happening now faster than ever before e.g. the IT revolution and the ways we work, shop and play. Change is real and always with us. There will never be a time when it will be finished. The challenge is how we adapt to this changing world and find meaningful ways to tell the story of Christ and develop communities of faith.

c) What excites you about the possibilities of the gospel in the 21st century?

d) What is so important to you that you want to make sure it is part of the new church?

2.3 Change is an integral part of the Basis of Union

The Uniting Church recognizes the reality of change and continual renewal. The Basis of Union uses phrases like “continuing renewal” “readiness to go forward” and “constant reform” (Para 1 BoU). “The Uniting Church is a pilgrim people always on the way to a promised land; it does not have a continuing city” (Para 2 BoU). Sometimes the pilgrimage will involve the wilderness, a place where we ask questions and make decisions about the future.

We have not arrived in the Promised Land! The journey of the pilgrim people goes on!

e) What are the essentials that you believe that we need for our pilgrimage?

f) What can we let go and what must we keep?

2.4 Change is primarily about relationships

A theology of change has a positive view of both creation and humanity. It accepts the basic goodness of both, while recognizing their destructive and negative capabilities. Similarly, it rejects notions that humanity is worthless, or that it should be perfect, and would be, if only we tried harder. Humanity is not, never has been, nor ever will be perfect. Our honest struggles with our

imperfections may be one of the most valuable things we have to offer to others.

A theology of change recognizes the love and grace of God in the world and suggests that we remain open to change because we wish to know God, each other and ourselves more deeply. Our journey with God (our spiritual journey, or the journey inwards), is about the discovery of that love and grace. This spiritual journey leads inevitably to changes in our understanding of God and of ourselves, and therefore of how we might respond to God in community. Our individual journeys of faith are an important part of sustainable change in the church.

A theology of change is not primarily about organizational arrangements, management structures or the rationalization of buildings, but is about relationships. We wish to deepen these relationships and, in so doing, to make Christ known to the world. **A theology of change therefore places primacy upon relationships, with GOD, with our fellow human beings and with an enhanced understanding of ourselves.** Our action in the world is a response to these relationships and is sustained through them. If our actions become separated from them we will fail in our attempts to help the world.

Mature faith comes from exploration with heart, spirit and mind throughout our lives. In this quest we have often failed. Too often the learning of our minds has become separated from the learning of our hearts. Unfortunately the outcomes of mainstream biblical scholarship are not generally known amongst the laity. The disciplines of prayer, meditation and contemplation have all too often become neglected. Theology of change is about the equipping of each person for the journey of faith with God. Change happens as we change. It is not about waiting for other people to change.

g) In what ways has your relationship with GOD changed during your life time to date?

h) In what ways has your understanding and practice of faith changed over time?

2.5 Taking risk in a climate of trust

Being serious about change means a willingness to take risks. It means being willing to be uncomfortable and to be challenged. Communities that take no risks remain stuck. Those that take risks may fail, but only they can create a new future. If we are not willing to take risks we will not change and the Uniting Church will die.