

READING 4: REPORT ON GUIDELINES AND REGULATIONS FOR NEW CONGREGATIONS', NSW SYNOD, SEPTEMBER 1996

Convenor: Rev. Dr Dean Drayton

A. SETTING THE SCENE: 1. THE CHURCH

1.1 "The Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (Basis of Union, para 2). In its theology and organisation it is a church which belongs to the evangelical and reformed traditions which form part of that Catholic church.

1.2 At the heart of the UCA is the conviction that ministry belongs to the whole people of God, and that decision-making and organisational oversight also rest with all those who have the gifts and graces for the building up of the church (Basis of Union para 15). The UCA expresses its life through a series of inter-related councils, the foundational one being the Congregation. As the Basis of Union says:

The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the spirit of Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. (para 15a).

1.3 The Basis of Union then specifies the other councils of the church – Elders Council, Presbytery, Synod, Assembly. Each of these councils is dependent upon the prior existence of the Congregation. Accordingly, the formation and nurture of the Congregation is essential to the continued existence of the church as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.

1.4 A congregation is a relational unit. The members relate to God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit; they relate to each other; they relate to their surrounding environment. As the Basis of Union declares, the Congregation expresses these relationships as it worships, witnesses and serves. They are mutual relations and it is inappropriate to separate relationship with God from relationship with either, other members or with the community/environment. In the same way it is inappropriate to legislate which of the three activities of a Congregation – worship, witness or service – shall take chronological priority. New Congregations may begin to form around any one of these activities.

2. CHANGING FACTORS IN CHURCH/COMMUNITY

2.1 According to the work of Loren B Mead of the Alban Institute, "Congregation" and "parish" arose out of two very different understandings of the church. [Loren B Mead, *The Once and Future Church: reinventing the church for a new mission frontier.* (The Alban Institute, NY 1991)]. Congregations arose in what is termed the "Apostolic Paradigm" and were composed of the faithful people who gathered together out of a hostile or at least indifferent environment. The Church was placed within the mission field.

2.2 The concept of parish developed in what is termed the "Christendom Paradigm" when Christianity became synonymous with the Empire. Everyone born within a specific geographical area was automatically both a citizen of the Empire and member of the church. A parish became a region within which a priest may be able to receive sufficient financial support in order to minister to the people there. The mission field was far beyond the boundaries of the Empire.

2.3 A number of changes have occurred. First, the church finds itself once more placed within the mission field. The Congregation gathers together people who live their lives in a diverse, secular community within which the church is increasingly marginalised.

- 2.4 Second, the neighbourhood to which the church is called to relate is for many people no longer geographically defined. People live in neighbourhoods, they sleep in geographic areas ... We live with the people we work with, share recreational time, have common interests and so on. The term "dormitory suburb" in cities is not accidental. Our homes are primarily where we store our belongings and sleep. We in fact "live" in relational neighbourhoods (Dean Drayton, Carolyn Kitto, David Manton and Suzanne Clark, *Planning for Mission and Neighbourhood*. Middle and Regional Congregations. p.23)
- 2.5 Another major change which has occurred has been in people's attitude to religion. Prior to the sixties, 95% of the Australian population were either actively or nominally associated with the denominations. The National Church Life Survey (1991) has shown that the post World War II generation no longer accepts the institutional church as the reference point for belief. They see themselves as the reference point! The positive side of this is that people take responsibility for their faith. The negative side is the danger of individualism and lack of commitment to any particular Congregation. People move to another Congregation or denomination rather than struggle through difficulties in the one they are attending.
- 2.19 There is now a radically different context in which the reference point is not the denomination but people's own religious life. People's first thought is not, "is there a church of my denomination where I can express my faith?". People no longer assume that the living God is found only in mainline churches. They do not assume that the organised church is necessary to their spiritual search.
- 2.20 If the church is to enter into relationship with people who do not naturally see the church as part of their lives, and if it is to respond to those things which naturally draw people together into community, then this needs to occur in Congregations as relational communities. A focus on geographic parishes will not help since parishes are functional and administrative structures, not relational communities.
- 2.21 The formation of parishes as a grouping of several Congregations in a geographic area has to do with provision of ordained ministry for Congregations that cannot afford to employ such a person on their own. It may have little to do with an appropriate strategy for the mission of the Congregations as such.
- 2.22 A new way of linking a group of Congregations in our time is to focus on mission strategy in a common context, not necessarily in the same geographic region. The linking will develop in order to provide the mission leadership required, ordained or lay. New models for doing so are emerging as we focus on Congregations at mission, and will eventually replace the parish as we now know it.

3. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

- 3.1 The term "Congregation" implies a group of Christian people needing an opportunity to be called together, and being ready to take responsibility within the church for the governance of the church. It assumes a church culture and, usually, a geographical understanding of Congregation.
- 3.2 There may still be a need to begin this sort of Congregation, although it must be recognised that in our day this may be a plant-costly exercise.
- 3.3 Another possibility is to enter into relationship with people who are exploring faith issues but are not yet part of the church and not ready for, or even intentionally heading towards, a share in the governance of the church.
- 3.4 Given these diverse possibilities, it is crucial to clarify our understanding of the mission task of the church, particularly how we see ourselves in relation to God's continuing activity in the world.

- 3.5 We have often acted from an assumption that the only way God acts is through the church. Under this assumption, mission becomes our going out to tell people what they need to know in order to believe, and our bringing them into the church.
- 3.6 But we believe that mission is an action of God, that from the very moment of creation God has sought and continues to seek to nurture people - all people - towards wholeness, fullness of life, just relations and hope. We believe, not only that God is still in the world working out the divine purpose, but that we may become partners with God as we name, celebrate and join God's mission of life-giving, inviting others to do so with us.
- 3.7 Mission, therefore, is a relational activity, a way of being in the world, not in the church. The persons with whom the church forms relationships may not, therefore, be easily sorted into those who have faith and those who do not, those who belong and those who do not, church and non-church, member and non-member. The church has the task of nurturing people through the various stages of the journey of faith.

4. NURTURING STRUCTURES

- 4.1 A large part of the church's role in nurturing people along the faith journey is to provide or recognise catalyst points for the journey, to relate to the numerous networks and contexts of the society, and to recognise when the Holy Spirit is at work in bringing people together to share the journey.
- 4.2 Traditionally, when the church has recognised the activity of God in calling people together, it has defined these groups within the organisational life of the church. They have become Congregations, both in the sense of the "ecclesia" ("the called out group") and in the sense of being the "primary corporate expression of the organisation".
- 4.3 Given that a Congregation is not only called to worship, to witness and to serve but also to fulfil a number of organisational responsibilities, relational groups of people newly embarked upon the journey of faith may be unable to fulfil all these requirements. Another nurturing structure needs to be acknowledged.
- 4.4 It is recommended that the church recognise as another nurturing structure the "Faith Community", being that grouping of people who, seeking to explore the implications of faith in God, have formed a community around either service, witness, pastoral care or worship, whose initiative has been recognised by the Presbytery, and who wish to relate to the Uniting Church as a sponsoring or parenting body which may provide nurture and support.
- 4.5 A Faith Community would not be required to adhere to Congregational structures of administration, Elders or Parish councils, and the community need not be defined/legitimatised by the presence of an ordained person. However, it is likely that gatherings around prayer, sharing, study of the Scriptures and the Eucharist would be a central focus of nurture.
- 4.6 A Faith Community would have its own integrity as a nurturing structure within the life of the Uniting Church. It is an alternate form of the Congregation. Whilst a Faith Community may seek to be recognised as a Congregation, and therefore take on all the characteristics and responsibilities of that structure, it is also possible that some existing Congregations would be helped by being restructured and recognised as Faith Communities, especially in small rural areas, or older suburban parts of the cities.
- 4.7 It is recognised that a Congregation is, by nature, also a Faith Community. However, not all Faith Communities are Congregations. The specific use of the term in this way does not deny the more general understanding.