

Uniting Church in Australia

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Chapter 6 - The Uniting Church in Contemporary Australian Society

Since its establishment in 1977, the Uniting Church has been forming its identity out of the variety of traditions from which it emerged. In that process it has also drawn on the wealth of traditions and the wider Christian heritage that lie in the past. It has been encouraged in this process by its ecumenical base and desire for greater unity with the other mainstream churches. At present a variety of styles of worship and theological emphases are found within the Uniting Church.

The church has worked at defining its own structure and polity, styles of worship, and attitudes to issues and methods of dealing with social concerns. The process of forming that identity continues within the context of a changing social environment. The church has struggled to involve women in decision-making, leadership and ministry on an equal basis with men. It has struggled to work with Aboriginal people and to recognise their rights within the Australian context. It has worked hard on many social and moral issues confronting modern society. At the same time, it has sought to adjust its own patterns of life to the social context in which it finds itself. For example, the multi-congregation parish is giving way to the single-congregation parish, particularly in the cities. In some rural areas parishes have united into 'missions' to share paid ministry and other resources.

However, since its inception the Uniting Church has lost many people, partly to other denominations but mainly to 'no religion'. As local communities have declined in importance, attendance in local community churches has declined. The Uniting Church has failed to keep those young people who have grown up in it, and to attract people under the age of 40. Younger single people are noticeably absent from Uniting Church life. Few blue-collar workers or people without post-secondary qualifications attend its services. Thus, it has become a church in which older people, particularly those with professional backgrounds or, in the rural areas, farm owners, predominate.

As it declines in size, changes are occurring in the structures. State synods are facing declining incomes and are having to cut levels of staffing and service. The widespread sale of properties that resulted from the union, where often several churches in one area merged, has provided something of a financial buffer for some parishes, congregations and some aspects of the ministry of the Uniting Church. That buffer is disappearing.

Nevertheless, many people active in the Uniting Church, both young and old, are deeply committed to it. The majority of those who make up the average Sunday congregation are there almost every week, attending groups midweek, and spending much of their time in the life of the church. The Uniting Church continues to serve the community through its churches and through its vast, widespread network of community organisations, schools, hospitals, aged care, children's and youth facilities, missions and other services.