



THE UNITING
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA

From the Moderator's Desk

Where to for the UPCSA from here?

My brief for today was to create a picture of where the Church should be going in the next 20 years. That is a very hard job because there have been so many changes in the last 50 years, predicting the future is very difficult. I thought I would begin by sketching where we are at present. I am using South African statistics. I suspect, the number in Zambia and Zimbabwe might be slightly better, but the trends will be similar.

In 2019, the population of South Africa was around 58 500 000. About 70% - 80% of those would self-identify as Christian – between 41 000 000 and 47 000 000 people. Approximately 50% of those who align to Christianity (around 20 000 000) are **never in worship** – they never attend a service of any kind. Of the 20 000 000 or so that could or should be in worship on any given Sunday, amongst the traditional Christian groups, there are +/- 4 million people in corporate worship. Almost 50% of those who self-identify as Christians date their involvement in church to the fact that they were **baptized as a baby**. The **peak age** of finding faith is **mid-teens**. A staggering 70% of people find their faith by the time they are 20. The peak age for stopping coming to church is the late teens and early twenties - the student years. Those that do re-start church are in the late twenties and early thirties: the age when those who left have now begun their own families and want them to be baptized or want their children to have some moral or spiritual teaching. In the teen years, the majority of **church leavers** will be male and in the later years the majority of those **returning** will be female. The older members (55 plus) are presently the most supportive of any Church or denomination. They form the backbone of Church structures and programmes. For our purposes, let us say they represent 40% of Church attendees. In twenty years most of them will be gone. They will then be replaced by the current 35 to 54-year-olds and Church attendance will then drop from 40% to 25%. That middle-age group will be replaced by today's under-35 group, with a decline of attendance from 25% to a mere 15%. And lastly, today's adults under 35 will be replaced by today's teenagers and their younger siblings – a group that could possibly be the least exposed to the gospel in today's South Africa.

In the Church of Scotland, there has been decline in membership in every year since 1960, from a high of 1.3 million members in 1956 to just 350 000 in 2015. So dire is the situation that they have adopted a radical new strategy to try and turn things around, including taking £25 million out of their reserves to try and reverse this trend

In the PC(USA), in 2015, the total number of members was listed at more than 1.5 million. Within a year, membership declined by nearly 90,000. Last year, the decline was just over 62,000. The number of churches leaving the denomination between 2015 and 2016 totaled 203. In 2018, it was 34. The number of Confirmations also continues to decline from almost 12 000 in 2015 to under 10 000 in 2018.

In the Uniting Church in Australia 31% of congregations that were in existence in 1990 have closed down. The church attendance has dropped by 40%. The average adult church attendance is 35 adults and 3 children.

Modernity / where we currently are:

1. Expressive Individualism

This first issue we need to contend with in this uncertain future is what is sometimes called “expressive individualism”.

Yuval Levin in *The Fractured Republic* describes “expressive individualism” this way:

... a desire to pursue one's own path . . . [and] a yearning for fulfillment through the definition and articulation of one's own identity. It is a drive both to be more like whatever you already are and also to live in society by fully asserting who you are. The capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence by defining their personal identities is increasingly equated with liberty and with the meaning of some of our basic rights, and it is given pride of place in our self-understanding.

“Be You” and “Be True to Yourself” are society’s favorite slogans—the first and greatest commandments for this way of life.

Expressive individualism poses a challenge for the church because God’s Word challenges the “Me” with the “Us” and then sets the “Us” under God. The human tendency is to look inward when God’s Word says we should look upward. We resist the upward look because it implies that someone or something is above us, and that someone might have authority. And, formed by Western assumptions about freedom and happiness, we chafe against claims of moral authority over us, or institutions that ask something from us. We resist anything that might stifle our self-defined freedom.

“The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever” is what the catechism says. Expressive individualism turns that around. “The chief end of religion is to glorify the human person so he / she can enjoy himself / herself forever.”

2. Consumerism

The second big challenge is consumerism. People who do go to church are looking to be entertained, and if one church doesn’t meet their needs for entertainment they will go to one down the road. Our people are Presbyterians by day and Pentecostals by night.

3. Church refugees, de-churched (the "dones")

The third challenge is from those who have left the church, those who are “done” with church. Many people are on a spiritual quest, but they think the church has nothing to offer them on this journey. While many others are done with the church because of the scandals surrounding the church – violence against women and children supported or covered up by the church authorities.

4. Secularization / Post Christendom

The fourth challenge comes from living in an increasingly secularized world where many people just don’t give church attendance a thought – it’s not that they are not interested in church but that they just don’t think about it at all. Church has moved from the centre of people’s lives to the outer periphery.

Meaningful Expressions of Church

As Prof Boesak challenged us yesterday to take seriously the poor, the marginalized and those who are cast aside by the rich and powerful, we must become a Church that will provide a space for people to find meaning in their lives. To do so, the future church will have to have some of the following characteristics:

1. Grounded in the Trinity - relationships, interdependence, joy

The life of the church arises from the love of the Triune God. We have to take seriously the life of the Triune God and that we are invited into the very life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This relational reality will be the basis of the

future church. The future church will be driven by relationships. We will value relationships over almost everything else, people are searching for connection and belonging and interdependence: being faithfully present to God and grounded in love, enables one to be present to the others.

The life of the church in relationship will be characterized by great joy as a responsive act of exaltation and thankfulness. Our churches should become communities of grace as we come to reimagine Sunday worship as an emphasis on the joyful act of praising God.

Our praxis should be based upon the development of relationships. This could include:

a. Meals of Joy – the church provides spaces where people can spend time eating together as an invitation into communion with, and to be reconciled to, one another, including the *rediscovery of the Eucharist as a meal of thanks*: moving from a tightly controlled liturgical formality to a true community event where the community gathers in a liturgical space to give thanks to God.

b. The church be at the forefront of new expressions of hospitality: demonstrating the love and acceptance of the stranger.

The future church will be relational in its core and praxis and the challenge will be on us to develop contextually relevant expressions of church

2. Relational Truth

Rather than regarding truth as a detached reality sent to us from outside and above us, we will discover truth out of our relationships with others as we choose not to condemn others, but accept, love and learn from them. This is not truth imposed from outside, but truth that comes from within and below: truth that is developed in community and that comes from the lived experience of different groups of people relating to one another.

3. Community Building

Community is important to us as persons – in an increasingly divided world, the church will be one of the places where people will be able to find real engagement with other persons in genuine community.

4. Ecumenical Partnership

In the future, the divisions between us will begin to break down as we begin to realize that we need one another; that mission and unity belong together.

Missionality

The risks for the church as it heads for an uncertain future are that we must go forward because we can't go back: that world no longer exists. If we can't go back, then what is there ahead, and how do we get there? What kind of missional leaders do we need and what the churches they lead look like?

1. *From attracting to attaching* - much more emphasis on going rather than coming. In the past we built church buildings and invited people to come. Then we went out to find people, to bring them into the church building. The church building was seen like a lighthouse, a beacon of light in the surging and restless sea. Today, the world is still a restless sea, but there is no lighthouse anymore. There are only people struggling to survive on makeshift rafts, on the beach and in the sea. These small rafts represent networks where people connect with others and feel secure. Missionary leaders are those who will climb on the rafts and connect with and attach to people.

This must be led by what is missional (focused on people outside the church); contextual (attuned to local needs); formational (committed to disciple making); ecclesiastical (a full expression of the church).

2. *From reorganization to reimagining* – we need a radical paradigm shift, a fundamental change in our assumptions; we will need a whole approach to church. Instead of large and imposing, we must see the possibility of small actions that might lead to people seeing the world in a whole new way. We must be prepared to look under the surface and approach life, faith and discipleship in a whole new way.

This is not just about making adaptive changes (changes in structures and procedures), but changing our entire culture

- Passion focused rather than problem focused - see opportunity over obstacle
- More network than neighborhood - can't afford to draw hard boundaries
- More fluid than fixed - creativity to do new things in new ways
- More fragile than finished - embrace process
- More seasonal than permanent – we must be prepared to launch ministries that only last for a season and might not go on forever. We need to embrace the ebb and flow of structures that might change often.
- More coaching than courses – the commitment to journey alongside people in one-to-one ministry
- Blended rather than mixed - people will be able to cope with new forms of worship once they have been connected relationally
- More lay than ordained - lay people, who are better connected than the pastors, will need to lead the way; this movement needs to be "lay led"
- More pre-faith involvement and inclusion than post-faith instruction – we used to say, "Believe / baptize / belong" (you need to believe correctly before we will baptize you or your children and then you will belong). We need to change this to "Belong / Believe / Baptize" (you belong, now let's talk about what you believe and then about baptism)

3. *From orchestrating to improvising* – the church will need to be less like an orchestra (where there is precision and very strictly controlled order under the leadership of a conductor – the ministers) and more like a jazz ensemble (where each instrument plays off the others, but there is room for innovation and experimentation). A move from a tightly structured organization to a deeper understanding of the music and one another in which we take on board a new set of values connected by our organizational DNA.

4. *Leaders who are more cultivating than controlling* – the missional leader combines the styles of the poet and the gardener. The leader doesn't assume he / she has all the answers but surrounds himself / herself with capable people. The leader is like a gardener who creates an environment where the people can flourish.

5. *From releasing to reproducing* – rather than releasing people to do the work, we need to focus on reproducing. If you cut off a piece of a spider it dies, but if you cut off a piece of a starfish it re-grows. We need to be careful and aware about what we hold on to and why and what we release and how. It's like when our children first get their driver's license and ask for the keys: Are we prepared to give away the keys to the car?

In all this, we are called to walk ahead, lead, pioneer, in leading the church into a new reality.

Your partner in the gospel.



Peter Langerman
Moderator of the General Assembly
Isaac Wolfson Stadium: 28 September 2019