

## On the Way Together -

### A theological reflection

It has been said that how we choose to begin a journey influences how we end the journey. Our disposition at the beginning of a journey is critical to how we travel.

As we consider the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania's *On the Way Together - a Spirited journey towards the future*<sup>1</sup>, there are several dispositions we might adopt. We could respond to the prophetic elements of our character, in which case we might find ourselves railing against the injustices in both church and community. We would begin the journey aware of the issues that alienate, marginalise and oppress, and seek a place of confession and lament, insight and calling, from which we might imagine a very different future. Or we could respond to the priestly elements of our character, in which case we might find ourselves beginning the journey by attending to the spiritual practices of Christian faith. We might lament both our neglect and dispirited connection with God. We may confess a need for renewed practices that engage our heart to take us into daily encounters with God.

We choose to begin this journey from a disposition of gratitude, acknowledging God's grace in our experience, because in doing so we understand that we are a part of God's movement, *on the way to a promised goal*.<sup>2</sup> This disposition of gratitude is deeply rooted in our Judaeo Christian heritage. Every time we gather to worship, we do so in gratitude for the grace God has lavished upon us. Grace and gratitude are partners. Karl Barth noted that *grace and gratitude belong together, that grace evokes gratitude like voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder and lightning*.<sup>3</sup> We begin by rehearsing our stories in worship through gratitude, confession, lament, praise and adoration. Together, we find our place in relationship with God, who forgives and restores, reconciles and heals.

The Jewish community expressed gratitude in response to God's grace, and incorporated the practice of gratitude into its worship. Consider the Psalms. Walter Brueggemann notes that each of three categories of Psalms<sup>4</sup> includes gratitude in words and acts of thanksgiving and re-remembering. For the early church, each of the Gospels reveals a particular context, showing something of the congregational realities each community struggled with. Yet, each Gospel speaks to a greater reality – the experience of God's grace - and in the light of that experience incites hope for a different future. Paul's letters, and those who write having adopted Paul's style, often begin with a statement of gratitude for the people to whom the letters are addressed.<sup>5</sup> It is only after an expression of gratitude for grace received that Paul gets into the specific difficulties each community struggles with.

When we are aware of God's grace, gratitude becomes a natural response. This is the way *The Basis of Union* begins.<sup>6</sup> We can appreciate our lives and the life of our communities through the lens of God's goodness to us and with us. Sometimes, it is in the light of this awareness that we are confronted with our shortcomings, alerted to ways in which we might have refused or withheld all that



God has for us. Perhaps it is our wilful behaviour that has caused our problems. Maybe it is our limited vision, our tendency to stick to the known and the safe, even obsession with our difficulties, that has given rise to the issues we face. Confession is appropriate, if accompanied by repentance and turning to face God's grace once again. Only then will we move from scarcity back to God's abundance.

As we gather and listen to stories of appreciation for all that God has given to us and done for us or through us, this is the time to ponder how best to express our gratitude to God. Consider the gifts of God's Spirit liberally given to each and every community of Christian faith. Think of the many opportunities to join with God where God has been at work in the past. Reflect on the benefits we have enjoyed simply because at some time each of us has said "Yes!" to God. Perhaps each of the communities of which we are a member has also said "Yes!" to God. Consider the legacy that the saints of the past have bequeathed us, the heritage which they have handed on. Take time to savour the many stories of lives turned around, of healing and reconciliation, of extravagant compassion let loose, of liberation made real through the ministries of so many sisters' and brothers' who were faithful to God's calling. Think, too, about how best to confess, lament, repent, accept forgiveness and turn around. Taking time to repair our perspective, we will listen together and again for God's calling us to be God's compassionate, liberating community. Listen then, as we journey on the Way together, asking two essential questions:

- Who are we

and

- What are we called to?

John A. Emmett.  
February, 2008

---

<sup>1</sup> *On the Way Together – a Spirited journey towards the future* is the title of the UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania's Strategic Plan Project (Synod Strategic Plan). This project responds to the Synod meeting of 2007's call for a new Strategic Plan to be presented to the Synod meeting in September 2008. The *On the Way Together* project is overseen by the Synod General Secretary and a Project Team, assisted by a Reference Group representing each of the Presbyteries and agencies of the Synod.

<sup>2</sup> *The Basis of Union*, Para 3

*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.*

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Mark Lau Branson, in *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*, Alban Institute, 2004; Ch3, p63. (From *Church Dogmatics IV*, as used in *Weavings*, 7, No. 6 Nov/Dec 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Three categories: Psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. These three categories, recognized and developed by Walter Brueggemann provide an appreciation of the role the Psalms played in providing an essential instrument to the self understanding and worship of the Jewish people over a long period.

<sup>5</sup> For example, consider Romans 1:8; Corinthians 1:4-9; or 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10.

<sup>6</sup> The Basis of Union Para One ...

*"...enter into union under the name of the Uniting Church in Australia. They pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They give praise for God's gifts of grace to each of them in years past; they acknowledge that none of them has responded to God's love with a full obedience; they look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people."*

