

# ***The Crisis of '77***

*A speech delivered by Bob Thomas  
at the Ministers' Conference  
held at  
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**'The Crisis of '77'**  
by the Rev Bob Thomas

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# Introduction

by Stuart Bonnington

*'Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.'* (Deuteronomy 8:2)

**A**s one of the younger ministers in the Presbyterian Church today, though I am becoming aware that I am moving beyond that category, I believe it is very important for us to remember the past, and particularly to remember back to that year 1977. That is actually the year before I became a Christian believer, and 1977 originally had the greatest impact on me because it was the year in which Elvis Presley died. But as I became a Christian in 1978 and then moved into the 1980's as a Christian believer I became more and more aware of the importance of this particular date.

Thinking about that date we are confronted straight away with why it was that the Presbyterian Church of Australia in the form that we know it resolved at that time to continue on as a Christian denomination in this country. As we think about 1977, we are also stimulated, I believe, to reflect upon those events of a long time ago, nearly thirty years now, as to what they teach us about how we should be a church today. Recently I looked through the 'Year Book and Church Directory', and I discovered in the Victorian section that there are only two ministers in our Victorian General Assembly who were ordained in the Presbyterian Church

before 1977 and are still in active ministry. The Very Rev E.R. Pearsons, our Clerk, is one, and Bob Thomas is the other. There are other ministers who were ordained before 1977, but they either weren't in the Presbyterian Church at that time or are now retired.

In considering the events of 1977 it is important to hear from those who actually took part in the events which led up to the great split in the Presbyterian Church. Some people call it a church union, but it was actually a church split. It does us good to hear from people who were actually part of those events, so that from their understanding of the past, and the present situation, we can receive the guidance of God concerning our future destiny ...

# 1. Four Stalwarts

If you go into the Assembly Office at 156 Collins St, Melbourne, you will be confronted by two portraits hanging there, and there is, I hope, space for two more portraits to go there in the fullness of time. The first one you see is of the Very Rev Dr Neil McLeod on the left. He was the Moderator of the NSW General Assembly in 1973. You might say, 'What is the portrait of a NSW Moderator doing in our Victorian Assembly Office?' and I will address that question below. The other portrait, on the right, is of the Rev Bill Loftus who was the minister of Camberwell for many years and Moderator of the Victorian General Assembly for three years in a row from 1974.

But there are two other pictures which should be placed there by and by. One is of Mr F. Maxwell Bradshaw, a lawyer of some note at the Victorian Bar and the Procurator (chief legal adviser) of the Presbyterian Church of Australia since long before I can remember. I was ordained in 1971, and Bradshaw had been the Procurator for many years before then, in fact since 1959. He held this position through all the years leading up to church union until he and the others walked out of the General Assembly of Australia at a particular point in the 1974 Assembly, serving as Procurator of the continuing church until his death in 1992. He was widely acknowledged, even by people on the other side, as a man who really was 'learned in the law'.

The other vacant spot that should one day be filled is that of the Very Rev E.R. Pearsons, the Clerk of our General Assembly, a position he has held since 1974. In the years

leading up to church union he was the minister of Cheltenham, who showed himself to be a man of some ability in terms of clerking and administrative matters, so Bradshaw and Loftus took him on board for the continuing cause. He has been the Clerk of Assembly here in Victoria since 1974 as we reckon it, and was Clerk of the General Assembly of Australia from 1974 to 1985, when he became Moderator General.

These four men more than any others, particularly in the southern states, stood in the breach and without them, humanly speaking, there would be no Presbyterian Church of Victoria or of Tasmania or of South Australia, and arguably of Western Australia. There would be a much smaller, and a much less enabled, Presbyterian Church of Australia.

## 2. Picking up the Pieces

**W**hen union took place in 1977, all but one congregation of the Methodist Church of Australasia entered the Uniting Church. One stood out in a suburb of Melbourne called Caulfield. The lawyers of the Uniting Church wouldn't allow them to call themselves 'the Methodist Church', and they are now 'the Caulfield Evangelical Methodist Church'. We know them well. They are good friends of ours and we are pleased to be in a close relationship with them.

Of the Congregational Churches in NSW, 75 of the 100 churches entered the Union. In other states almost all of them entered the Union, with only one or two continuing as Congregational Churches in a denomination known as 'the Fellowship of Congregational Churches'.

Overall in the Presbyterian Church, about two thirds eventually entered the Uniting Church. A third to a half overall continued in the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The majority of these churches were in NSW and Queensland. Approximately 60% of the church in NSW continued, a slight majority of the Queensland church continued, about 25% continued in Victoria, and then smaller groups in the other states continued. But we were almost wiped out in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia, with just a handful of parishes in these three states.

The four men mentioned above represented the front line of the Presbyterian Church's defence team, but others were also much to the fore in preserving the life and witness of the Presbyterian Church.

A majority of members of the NSW General Assembly were continuing, so that in NSW the church was in a strong enough position to remain in the undivided courts of the church between the time when the GAA resolved to unite (in 1974) and the actual inauguration of the Uniting Church on 22 June 1977. A 'shadow assembly' was set up under the auspices of the Presbyterian Planning Committee. This body in turn set up sub-committees covering every portfolio of the General Assembly, each of which operated under a convener and made preparations for the ongoing work, ensuring that immediately following the inauguration of the Uniting Church, the work of the Presbyterian Church went on without missing a beat.

In Queensland the Very Rev Ken Gardner, then minister of Cairns, emerged as the driving force for the continuing church both in Queensland and nationally, with the Rev Sam McCafferty, then minister of Ann St Church in Brisbane, upholding a bright testimony to the Reformed faith.

The Very Rev Alan Stubbs in Hobart and the Rev Robert Miller in Launceston gave strong leadership to the continuing cause in Tasmania. Tasmania was fortunate to have Robert Miller almost to the time of church union when he came to Melbourne to be the Professor of Church History at our newly re-formed Presbyterian Theological College. The Very Rev Alan Stubbs was one of the finest statesmen our church has ever known, and he will doubtless hold the record for moderatorships for all time, having been Moderator of Tasmania on numerous occasions, of South Australia, Victoria, and effectively twice of the General Assembly of Australia.

The Rev Edgar Johnston went over to South Australia, where the situation was particularly difficult, and the



Rev Bruce Fraser held the fort in Western Australia.

So these were the men in the various states who really ensured that the Presbyterian Church of Australia and its constituent state churches would continue as a viable entity. All but Ken Gardner and Ted Pearsons have now gone on to Glory.

### 3. Two Crises

This address is called '*The Crisis of '77*' but it should really be called '*The Crises of '77*'. I am going to talk about two crises which occurred in 1977, and they occurred within days of each other.

The first crisis was the very existence of the Presbyterian Church at all. The Uniting Church people had worked hard on everybody who had decided to continue. They did their utmost to ensure that there would not be a Presbyterian Church of Australia, and following 22 June 1977 they lived in denial for a long time. A few years ago the Very Rev Norman Faichney died. He had been the minister of Glen Iris many years ago and Moderator of the Victorian Assembly and Moderator General of the General Assembly of Australia. Though uniting, Norman Faichney was a fair-minded man, well respected by all of us in the church. Davis McCaughey (first President of the Uniting Church in Australia) made this point in writing Faichney's obituary for *The Age*, and if any of you saw it, you may have noticed that McCaughey goes into the most elegant circumlocutions to describe and name our church, trying to say that it wasn't really the Presbyterian Church of Australia that continued. Nevertheless it has been established at law that the Presbyterian Church of which we are members today is the Presbyterian Church that was established on 24 July 1901, and it was established in law because the Uniting Church people themselves brought legal action against us – and lost.

The second crisis occurred immediately following union, and it was this: would the Presbyterian Church of

Australia get back to its roots and be evangelical and Reformed, or would it be a moderate, traditional type of Presbyterian Church? On the evening of 22 June 1977, *ABC Radio National* ran a feature program about the Uniting Church and the 'Continuing Presbyterian Church', as they called it. They interviewed Professor Crawford Miller, who had been the professor of theology at what had been until that time the so-called 'United' so-called 'Faculty' of so-called 'Theology' in Sydney, where I had the misfortune to train. Crawford Miller actually put his finger on the button. He said in that radio interview that the Presbyterian Church was not just one church. The Presbyterian Church was in fact two churches striving within the one framework against each other. He seriously doubted that the Presbyterian Church of Australia would hold together for any great length of time following 22 June 1977 – and he was one of us. The Uniting Church, of course, seriously doubted if we would hold together too, and did their utmost to insinuate that doubt into the minds of any would-be continuers. I think many other people might have had the same kind of doubt.

Crawford Miller succinctly defined the problem, the crisis, and in some ways it was the bigger of the two crises. If the post-union church had just become a traditional old 'haggis and bagpipes' Presbyterian Church, the religious wing of the Caledonian Society, we might as well have gone to the Uniting Church. The only valid reason for us to continue was to get back to our roots and be Evangelical and Reformed. So that crisis was upon us almost straightaway.

## 4. Church Union's Long History

**B**ut let's go back to the first crisis for a moment. It had a long history. When I was upgrading my teacher training from two year to three year status I had to do an assignment on Ned Kelly. To do this assignment I had to go back to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and to the microfiche in the college library. As I went back to the times Ned Kelly inhabited and the day Ned Kelly raided the bank in Jerilderie, I discovered that as well as reporting on the latest exploits of the Kelly Gang, the *SMH* also reported on the visit of the President of the Methodist Conference to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of NSW, and that he floated the proposal that the two churches should unite – right back then!

Now there might be some irony in that. Remember what Wesley did to Whitefield. The irony, though, is really this, that throughout the 1960's the Methodist Church did all that it could to take everything it could off the Presbyterian Church, and really it nearly had us dead and buried before union ever occurred. The irony of Australian church history is that it is the Methodist Church which no longer exists, except in Caulfield. It has gone out of existence itself. There is a lesson here: that we shouldn't be on the attack against other churches, because the danger is that we might end up putting ourselves out of the picture instead. Like Samson, we can bring the house down, but the danger is that we bring it down on ourselves as well. Anyway, at the time of the union of the

state Presbyterian Churches on 24 July 1901, proposals for a wider union were already being floated, so it looked like the PCA might have a short life, and that early in the piece it might become part of a united church. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, union was constantly on the agenda both here and overseas.

In 1925 the United Church of Canada was formed in a similar way to the way the UCA was formed in 1977 and with a similar result: a large and viable Presbyterian Church in Canada remained. Around about 1973 the Rev Gordon Powell, then Minister of Scots Church, Melbourne, and a devotee of church union, wrote a little tract called 'How to Avoid a Tragic Split in Our Beloved Church', and of course the way to avoid the split was for everyone to vote for union. As long as everyone voted for union, we could avoid that 'tragic split in our beloved church'.

In the providence of God it became possible for Alison, my wife, and I to make a trip to Canada in 1975. I was fixed up with supply in a city called Sudbury in Ontario and we decided to have a good look at the Presbyterian Church in Canada because all the naysayers were telling us how that church had withered on the vine and what a terrible thing it had been, and so we went to see for ourselves. We had a very good experience, discovering that while there had been some decline in recent years in the PCC, the membership of the United Church was in free-fall. We realised, though, that the Presbyterian Church in Canada was not everything we hoped the Presbyterian Church of Australia would become.

The reason for this was that the PCC made the mistake in 1925 of retaining its liberal teachers in its theological colleges and so it never really became a reformed evangelical church again – despite the fact that J.G. Machen

did his best to offer help to it. These offers were basically rejected and so the Presbyterian Church in Canada isn't everything we hoped for the Presbyterian Church of Australia, but it certainly hadn't withered on the vine, and it certainly hadn't been a tragedy, and there were certainly many, many people in the pews of sound faith and spiritual disposition. So we came home and told the story as first-hand witnesses, and suddenly people stopped talking about the Presbyterian Church in Canada withering on the vine. We were able to go back in 1976 to attend Summer School at Regent College in Vancouver and to work again in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. As a result of our Canadian experiences I can tell you this, that everything that was happening in Australia in the PCA in 1975 had happened in Canada in 1925. You could simply change the dates and the name of the country around, but the story was exactly the same: a great deal of deception, a great deal of threatening, a great deal of hurt and a great deal of legal action against the continuing Presbyterian Church. I suspect that that has been the case in every similar situation around the globe.

The Presbyterian Church *in* Canada was always referred to by the United Church as the Presbyterian Church *of* Canada. The wrong preposition was used on purpose. The United Church people tried to make out that the Presbyterian Church was finished; that on this date they were entering the United Church and the Presbyterians were setting up another church. Presbyterians have always said, 'No, we're in the same church; the Presbyterian Church is continuing and you are leaving it for the United/Uniting Church'.

In 1947 there was the inauguration of the Church of South India, a wider union than the typical one of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational. It also involved the

Anglican Church. At its inauguration there was a service of reconciliation so-called, which included an act whereby Anglicans laid hands on Presbyterians and Presbyterians laid hands on Anglicans. If I may say so, it didn't really matter that the Presbyterians laid their hands on the Anglicans, but it did matter that the Anglicans laid their hands on the Presbyterians. Some of the Presbyterians, such as Leslie Newbiggin, became bishops, and this 'act of reconciliation' was necessary to satisfy those who hold to the mechanical view of the Apostolic Succession.

Then in 1972 the United Reformed Church was formed in England. The Presbyterians and almost all of the Congregationalists joined together. Can I leave you to guess which Congregational Church in inner London did not enter the United Reformed Church? Westminster Chapel, of course, and some others had nothing to do with it.

In the early 1970's the Congregational Union of New Zealand walked into the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa-New Zealand and was just received holus bolus, one or two congregations staying out of what is now a very radical, liberal church, with whom we have no real bonds of fellowship. From it has emerged the Grace Presbyterian Church, which is or would have been in New Zealand what we are in Australia, except that the wider church union didn't happen there. In the fullness of time, the PCANZ reached a stage where our brothers and sisters in the Grace Presbyterian Church felt they just had to leave it. The line in the sand had been crossed.

## 5. Back Home

**B**ut to come back to Australia; in 1964 the first Basis of Union was proposed. It was a very controversial document for two reasons. One was that it provided for three offices in the church: bishops, presbyters and deacons; and the other that it proposed that for the sake of worldwide ecumenism it would be a good thing if when the Uniting Church was inaugurated there could be a concordat between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Church of South India. The bishops would not have all the powers that we think Anglican and Roman bishops have, but were to be 'bishops-in-presbytery', that is, they would be cut off at the knees, and of course through the concordat with the Church of South India (who would send their bishops over to make our bishops) they would be sort of back-door bishops, but they would be in that mechanical Apostolic Succession. Now I don't decry this. No doubt it is good for Anglicans. But while Anglicans and Presbyterians all believe that if anyone desires to be a bishop, he desires a noble task, there is a quantitative difference in our understanding of the term. And our view of the Apostolic Succession is that of John Knox – that we are truly in the Apostolic Succession on account of our faith being that of the apostles and not because we have received a certain tap on the head.

After strong opposition, the First Basis was departed from, and a Second Basis of Union was put up, without the bishops, without the concordat – and without a clear commitment to the truth and authority of the Scriptures. After a lengthy process it was approved by the GAA in 1971. Then



in 1972 the first vote was taken in congregations. It had been crafted in a particular way. Instead of being asked one question, 'Are you in favour of the inauguration of the Uniting Church or not?', people were asked two questions. They were asked first of all whether or not they wished their congregation to become part of the Uniting Church in Australia, and they were to answer 'Yes' or 'No'. The second one said: 'In the event of the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia, would you remain in membership of any Presbyterian Church continuing to function on the previous basis?' Again, they were to answer 'Yes' or 'No', and you might notice the circumlocution contained in that question to describe the continuing church, deliberately made in order to make a point.

There were obviously many combinations and permutations that were possible with this. You could have left both of them blank, not knowing what to do. A lot of people did this – there were an awful lot of blank minds in the church, I'm afraid. You could have answered 'Yes' to the first question, and not answered the second. You could have answered 'No' to the first question, and not answered the second. You could have not answered the first, and said 'Yes' to the second, and you could have not answered the first, and said 'No' to the second. Each of these combinations delivered a particular message, but whether the people answered the second question with a 'Yes' or a 'No' was the all-important factor.

There were four combinations, however, which were really in the mix. You could answer 'Yes' to the first question ('Yes, I am in favour of the setting up of the Uniting Church in Australia') and 'No' to the second question (No, I will not remain in any Presbyterian Church that might continue'). 'Yes–No'. That was what you were supposed to vote and it

was taken as a clear vote in favour of union.

Everything had been carefully promoted and crafted to obtain a 'Yes-No' vote. 'Yes', we are going into the Uniting Church – 'No', we are not going to be in any continuing Presbyterian Church. And in any congregation where two thirds of the congregation voted 'Yes-No', it and its property would be taken into the Uniting Church. The unionists thought this would be a breeze, thinking they could easily get two thirds of the vote in any congregation.

Conversely, you could answer 'No, I am not in favour of the setting up of the Uniting Church in Australia' and 'Yes, I am going to remain in any Presbyterian Church which might continue. 'No-Yes', that was the other alternative expected. Expected it might have been, but intended it was not. You were not supposed to answer that, but quite large numbers of people did. However, you could also answer 'No-No' ('No', I am not in favour of the Uniting Church, 'No', I am not going to stay in the Presbyterian Church') – a plague on both your houses! There were actually people who did that, and for perfectly good reasons. I know of a couple who voted 'No' to church union and 'No' to continuing because their minister was a liberal, and neither they nor he were in favour of the Uniting Church, but they weren't going to stay in the Presbyterian Church if it meant continuing to sit under his liberal ministry. So when church union happened they went to the Lutherans, and there were plenty of people in that boat.

But then there was the 'Yes-Yes' vote. That is the one I promoted (being me). The 'Yes-Yes' vote said 'Yes', I am in favour of the Uniting Church being set up, but 'Yes', I'm going to continue in the Presbyterian Church'. You guys go and you be happy over there, and we'll stay and be happy over here'. That's the meaning of the 'Yes-Yes' vote. Now, do

you understand that? It's not hard to follow, is it? But do you know that, try though they may, the uniting people just could not follow it, despite all their cleverness, and all our patience in explaining it to them in words of one syllable. No, sadly, for all their cleverness, they were mystified by this result.

The plain fact was that the vote had not delivered enough property, and in particular it had not delivered the cathedrals. They didn't get Scots, Melbourne; they didn't get St Andrew's, Canberra; they didn't get St Stephen's, Sydney; they didn't get St Andrew's, Brisbane. All the cathedrals remained with the Presbyterians. So they had to be mystified because they needed an excuse to hold a second vote and really get to work on these recalcitrant Presbyterians!

Well, not all cleverness resided with the unionists. Maxwell Bradshaw had crafted those questions. He was the one who was 'learned in the law' – equity law. With his Free Church background and sympathies he knew what had happened at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the majority of the Free Church of Scotland entered the Church of Scotland, and in the light of all that and the House of Lords decision in favour of the (continuing) Free Church people, Bradshaw knew what he was doing in crafting these questions in this way. The unionists went along with it for the sake of getting the matter over and done with, and as I said, thinking they would easily prevail.

So we had to have a second vote, in 1974. I still voted 'Yes–Yes', and a lot of people still did, but it delivered enough property to the Uniting Church for them to be able to 'understand' the vote the second time.

In 1974 the GAA met in Melbourne at the Assembly Hall in Collins Street, but the night on which they were to debate the Basis of Union for the last time, they felt there

would be a big congregation, so they hired the Dallas Brooks Hall on Eastern Hill. I wasn't actually a member of the Assembly (I was only ordained in 1971, and this was 1974, and you have to wait for a little while before you can get a guernsey to the GAA) but I came down anyway because I thought this was history in the making, and I wanted to be there to observe it.

There was really a very poor debate in the Dallas Brooks Hall regarding the Basis of Union itself. By now, pretty well everything that could be said both for and against union had been said, over and over again, and everyone was running out of steam. Basically the uniting people just got up and said it was a good thing and the Presbyterians got up and said it was a bad thing. Call me biased, but I did think the better speeches were made by the continuers. Ken Gardner and Neil MacLeod in particular nailed the Basis of Union for its departure from Biblical standards and watering down of the subordinate standards of all three uniting churches.

A moment of light relief was provided by the Rev John Perkins, minister of Lismore (NSW) and one of the 'characters' of the NSW Assembly. The Very Rev Fred Mackay, successor of Flynn of the Inland and a former Moderator General, spoke in favour of the Basis, telling the Assembly that he had been out on patrol in the Outback one night when he rolled out his swag under the stars and just before going to sleep he took out the Basis of Union and read it, and it made him feel excited. Perkins interjected: 'Some people are easily excited!' Then it came Perkins's turn to speak. 'I suppose we'll all go down Bourke Street tonight', he said, 'and there we'll find Fred boiling the billy and reading the Basis ...' He went on to do a complete demolition job on Fred's speech. In the end they resolved to accept the Basis of

Union. The Methodists and the Congregationalists had already done this; we were the last to be drawn in.

## 6. The Deed Is Done

**T**he next day the Assembly met back in the Assembly Hall in Collins Street, and in the evening it resolved to enter into union with the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Congregational Union of Australia. General mayhem broke out at the point when the ballot was declared after a count, a division, a division with names recorded, and Norman Monsen, one of our heavies in NSW, pointing out that there were discrepancies in the numbers the tellers had put in (although it didn't affect the total vote, but all these little things become big things at such a time). When the result was announced, the Rt Rev Neil McLeod, who was the Moderator of the NSW Assembly and minister of St Giles Presbyterian Church, Hurstville stood up and made a speech which, it was rumoured, borrowed heavily from Chalmers' speech when he left the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1843.

'I crave leave to DISSENT and I PROTEST that this resolution just passed is unacceptable to those of us who in conscience cannot enter this union; and I lay on the table this PROTEST on behalf of those who elect to remain in the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

'In humble dependence on God's grace and the aid of the Holy Spirit, and maintaining the Confession of Faith and standards of the Church as hitherto understood; it shall be lawful for us to adopt such measures as may be competent to us for the continuance of the Presbyterian Church of Australia to the advancement of God's glory, the extension of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour throughout the world, and the

orderly administration of Christ's House according to His Holy Word.

'And we finally PROTEST before the great God, Searcher of all hearts, that we and all who adhere to us, are not responsible for this schism in the Church or for any consequence which may flow from this enforced separation.

'In humble submission to His Will we give this our testimony. To him we commit our cause, and we pray that in the days to come, His richest blessing may rest upon the Church of our fathers, which Church we are resolved by His help to maintain.

'And I invite all those who adhere to this PROTEST, since there is not room in this place for two assemblies, to follow me to another place, namely 46 Russell St, 'The Amethyst Hall', where we, the continuing General Assembly of Australia, shall resume the sittings of this house.

'In olden times that Bush flamed – *nec tamen consumebatur*. Let no one say that we here stamped on the ashes of that fire.'

MacLeod, Bradshaw, Pearsons, Loftus and most of the continuing people walked out from there and they went diagonally across the road to what was then the Amethyst Hall. The minutes of the meeting of those who remained in the Assembly Hall, 156 Collins St, record that 'after the reading of this Dissent and Protest, some 20 members followed the Rt Rev Neil MacLeod out of the Assembly to 46 Russell St.' (See GAA Blue Book 1974, Minute 45.) I came down from the gallery and followed them over because I thought, 'well that's where I belong', and by my estimate the above minute suffers from either poor proof-reading or dishonesty, as there were more like 120 who followed MacLeod. So I followed them over and watched the proceedings of that night.

They had it all organised down to a tee. The minister of St Andrew's Canberra was a venerable old fellow, the Very Rev Hector Harrison. He had been there for many years and had been Moderator General in 1952. Hector was already in the Amethyst Hall, waiting for them, and he inducted MacLeod as Moderator General of this group, that had walked out of the Assembly, claiming on good grounds (because they were Maxwell Bradshaw's grounds) that the moment the GAA voted to unite they altered the essential doctrine of the 1901 Basis of Union and were no longer legally entitled to be the Presbyterian Church of Australia. They then set themselves up as the shadow, or what we believe, was the real General Assembly of the real Presbyterian Church of Australia.

They rescinded many motions that had been made by the GAA over quite a number of years. They reinstated the eldership vows to be the same as the minister's vows. The elder's vows had been weakened for the express purpose of making it easier for them to kick over their vows and not feel too bad about it in order to enter the Uniting Church. They actually rescinded the decision of an earlier GAA to ordain women to the ministry. That has been passed over very lightly by many people in the NSW church who did not want to be bothered with that particular problem, thank you very much. But that is a fact; on that night they rescinded that motion and various other things as well. They became known as the Camberwell Group and they had an assembly office in Hawthorn Church, where they set up the theological college. Assemblies were held in Camberwell Church, where Bill Loftus was the minister. If you look at the old Moderator's board in the Assembly Hall you might just notice that at the year 1974 someone has attacked it with some steel wool, and whoever's name the unionists had put on as Moderator for



1974 has been wiped over and replaced with Loftus's name. The same goes for 1975 and 1976, when Bill Loftus was re-elected Moderator, and for 1977, when the Rev Hector Dunn, minister of Warrnambool, was elected Moderator.

There was another group, called the Russellites. Ray Russell was the assistant minister at Scot's Church Melbourne, and as sure as Gordon Powell, then minister of Scots, was uniting, Ray Russell was continuing. But he thought he should stay in the Assembly until 22 June 1977, and there were some others of that mind. They had their own good reasons for doing this, but were a very, very small and ineffective minority from 1974 through to 1977. The Camberwell group were really the ones who saw the action, but from a legal point of view it did no harm to have both groups operating. Everyone thought there would be difficulty in bringing the two groups together again, but when the time came, they came together with a minimum of fuss, as we will see below.

In NSW we had an outright majority in the General Assembly. In Queensland I think it was similar but not quite as strong. Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia were virtually wiped out as far as the Presbyterian Church was concerned. Particularly Tasmania and South Australia leant heavily on the Camberwell group for their leadership in those years leading up to church union. Many leaders of the church in NSW at that time have brought no credit upon themselves by trying to make light of the position maintained by the Camberwell group.

During 1975,76,77 preparations went on apace for union. Some ministers had to move because they were in a parish that was going to unite while they were going to continue and vice versa. There was a little bit of movement on

that account.

The property all had to be settled too. It wasn't just a matter of the congregational property; it included all the bequests, all of the departments of the church. The egg had to be unscrambled. So they set up the so-called Handley Commission under the chairmanship of Ken Handley who was Chancellor of the Diocese of Sydney and a QC, and has since become a judge. He was a fair-minded man, but we continuers didn't feel we got the best deal we could have. It was not necessarily the fault of the so-called independent commissioners. There were three independent commissioners on the Property Commission, three Uniting and three Presbyterian. My own belief is that the Uniting commissioners were too cunning for ours and the Presbyterian commissioners were too interested in institutions and not sufficiently interested in congregations. There were many congregations where we had a viable number, which should have been awarded property rights, but they weren't. My suspicion is that because they went so hard to retain institutions such as Scotch College, PLC, Scottish Hospital in Sydney, Scots College and PLC in Sydney we lost out on the congregational property. If that is so (and we'll never ever know because their deliberations were in private) they went for the wrong thing. That process took years, even after union, and it's not all that long ago that it has all been settled; in fact I'm not sure that it is all settled yet, there was such a big egg to unscramble.

## 7. Friends in Need, Friends Indeed

**I**n going their way, the uniters tried to tie our hands in every way they possibly could. For example, once it reached the point of 1974, we knew that men who started their training for the ministry weren't going to be ordained in the undivided church. They were going to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church, and we said to the uniters, we will train them. Oh, no, no, no, said the uniters, they had to go to the United Faculty of Theology. They changed their mind when we threatened to withdraw all GMP contributions from continuing congregations and when, in the providence of God, Moore College came to our rescue. I am delighted to have Archbishop Jensen here (as chief speaker at the conference), because Dr Broughton Knox (then Principal of Moore College) and Dr Jensen (then his deputy) were very helpful and sympathetic to us in those days when they offered to train our students at Moore College, and I want to say thankyou to him for the help Moore College and the Diocese of Sydney gave us. A large proportion of our present-day ministers trained at Moore, and have since made an enormous contribution to the life of our church.

This help from Moore College, and indeed the tacit support given us by Archbishop Sir Marcus Loane and the Diocese of Sydney, gave an enormous boost to our morale. We who had been depicted as the rump, we who were the bottom of the food-chain of the Christian Church, maybe even below that, we suddenly had friends in the Anglican Church.

They also helped us in Christian Education, which was my portfolio at the time. Many Anglicans gave us great encouragement in the years leading up to union, and ever since. There are some places, such as Cobram, where the Anglican Church or the Lutheran Church or the Seventh Day Adventist Church was lent or hired to us for services while ever we needed it.

I might just tell a little story which illustrates the fact that we were not the pariahs the uniting people were making us out to be. I was the minister of Bowral-Mittagong (NSW) at the time of union. At the first minister's fraternal after church union, my good mate Howard Dillon was the local Anglican rector and the chairman of the fraternal. We were all there from Moss Vale, Bowral and Mittagong. Suddenly Howard started squirming in his seat and said, 'I, um, suppose we should, um, sort of say to Ray Weiss (the Methodist, now the Uniting minister) congratulations on the inauguration of the Uniting Church.' He looked at the rector of Moss Vale, 'Bill, you might like to say a word'. But Bill said, 'Sorry, my sympathies are all with the Presbyterians'. Howard looked at John Emery, the rector of Mittagong, but then thought, 'If Bill won't do it, John certainly won't'. So he looked to Bert Hawley, the Baptist minister. But Bert replied the same. Then he looked at Colin Thomas (no relation) the Church of Christ pastor, but realised that wasn't on either. He knew it was no use asking the Salvation Army fellow, because since I was a teetotaler he was on my side too. So eventually I said, 'I'd be happy to do it', and the Presbyterian minister moved a vote of congratulations in the Southern Highland Ministers Fraternal to the Uniting Church. I can tell you it came from the bottom of my heart. After all those years it was wonderful! The unionists had been saying all along, 'Church union is the will of God!'

We'd been saying 'No it's not!' 'Yes it is!' 'No it's not!' 'Tis!' 'Tisn't!' But in the end we had to agree with them. Church union was the will of God because it gave us the opportunity to get back to our roots and be faithful to our heritage.

## 8. The Hour Has Come

**O**n 21 June 1977 the GAA met in Sydney for what was to be in the unionist's mind its last meeting. They were going to close down the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. We decided we would leave them to it, except to announce that a second sederunt of the Assembly would be held at 10am on 23 June in the Assembly Hall, and distributed a White Book to the commissioners who were continuing and to those who would be stepping up to replace the ones who united on 22 June. We also decided we would not do anything on 22 June, the day of the inauguration of the Uniting Church. We would let them have their day. On 23 June 1977 at 10am in the forenoon, the canonical hour for the General Assembly of Australia to meet in those days, we all filed into the Assembly Hall, which had been awarded to the continuing church. Hector Harrison and Neil Macleod went up to the Moderator's chair. It had been proposed that Ken Gardner from Queensland would be the Moderator General. MacLeod led off devotions with the call to worship: 'This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it'. And rejoice we did! We sang the Old 124<sup>th</sup> Psalm with great gusto. Hector Harrison inducted Ken Gardner, and we went on with business as though nothing had happened.

In fact a lot had been happening. We had set up a body called the Presbyterian Planning Committee, overseeing a number of subcommittees, one for each committee of the Assembly itself. This 'shadow assembly' had been meeting for two or three years, so that we were all ready to go on 23

June, and the church did not miss a beat. We praise God for that!

As I have indicated, many reprehensible things went on in the years leading up to union. There was a great deal of deception, misinformation and false hope held out, but here is one experience that is representative of the sort of thing that went on. Goulburn Presbyterian Church had voted to continue on the first vote, but voted to unite on the second vote. I had a feeling that there must be enough Presbyterians in such a large town to get a congregation going, so I rang Bill Loftus who had been the minister of Goulburn before he came down to Camberwell. I got names off all sorts of people. I went around to them and asked them, 'When you voted on the *second* vote, did you vote 'Yes—No' or 'No—Yes'? All of them said, 'Now that's funny, we voted "No—Yes" (to continue) on the first vote but we didn't get any papers for a second vote. No, we only had the one vote. They told us that because we had voted "No—Yes" the first time, we didn't have to vote the second time.' That sort of thing happened on a rather large scale all through the years leading up to union.

Given the size of the continuing minority, we should have been awarded a church, but they weren't going to give us anything. I went up to the Property Commission with a handful of statutory declarations saying what had happened with Goulburn. Eventually they gave us the use of one of the suburban churches for five years. In the week before union I went up to the minister of Goulburn and asked for the keys. He threw them at me and said, 'Good luck. I wouldn't want to build a church with people like that.' I wish I had said, 'Well, I'm not building the church. Jesus has promised that He will build His church'. But I didn't think of it until I was driving home, so that little golden moment was lost.

At 7pm on Sunday 27 June 1977 I conducted the first service in Goulburn after union, and to my surprise found a congregation of some 50 people waiting when I arrived. We had a splendid service followed by supper, at which everyone was walking around as if in a dream, saying things like, 'We didn't know you were continuing; they told us we were the only ones.'

The Rev John Mercer was assistant minister in St Andrew's Canberra at the time, and the two of us had been working on getting Goulburn going again in conjunction with the nearby continuing parish of Taralga-Crookwell to become a viable parish. We had a home missionary there for some time before Ken Martin was inducted as an exit student, and he had a great ministry there. The cause continues strong today under the ministry of the Rev Keith King.

In the middle of Goulburn there is St Andrew's Presbyterian Church and the Methodist, now Uniting Church. In South Goulburn is the little hall we were awarded to use for five years, and in North Goulburn was another little hall which in the fullness of time the Presbyterians were able to buy and use as their church for some years. Some years after union the Uniting Church decided they didn't need the former Presbyterian Church, so they sold it to the RSL. That seems to have been their policy, incidentally – to sell redundant churches to anyone except the Presbyterians if they possibly could! The RSL eventually discovered they didn't need it and so they sold it back to us! When I was Moderator of the Victorian Assembly in 2002 they invited me up to Goulburn because it was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that first service we had held that night in Goulburn on 27 June 1977, and my joy over Goulburn was complete.

I should add that we who continued weren't guiltless



either. There are things that we wish we had done in a different way, but I don't recall any large-scale or wilful deception. Neither do I recall any dire threats being made to uniting people, except that we used to say to some of them, 'Wait until the Methodists get their hands on you!' We actually frightened some of them into continuing! Although that might sound somewhat unworthy, if you knew how the Methodists operated you would know that we were doing them a favour.

## 9. The Second Crisis

The Lord has taken us a long way since then, but the euphoria, like all euphoriae, did not last long. The second crisis was soon upon us. The old guard, who had stayed out of union for a number of reasons, some of them because they suddenly realised that it was a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Methodists, but most of them because they loved the external trappings of Presbyterianism more than the prospect of a united but heritage-free church, stepped up to take charge. The Masons indulged in an orgy of self-promotion, and the liberals started coming out of the woodwork. They banded together to try and ensure their position of power would remain. They had held the pre-union Presbyterian Church in an iron grip and they weren't about to surrender it now. In the courts of the church they used to engage in what I called 'pot-and-kettle theology'. They said things of us evangelicals such as that we were 'block voting', but it was the Masons who were doing that themselves. They were propping up the liberals. If they could not put a Mason in a position, then a liberal was the next best thing.

Those who wanted to see a traditionalist Presbyterian Church imported moderate ministers from New Zealand, Scotland and America, though not all the imports turned out to be as moderate as the traditionalists had hoped; a number of them threw in their lot with the evangelicals.

It would be true to say that most of the people who went to the Uniting Church were liberal, but not all. Some went for perfectly right and proper reasons: the way they understood John 17 led them to go to the Uniting Church. All

honour to them! It would also be true to say that most who continued in the Presbyterian Church were evangelical of one shade or another, but not all of them. We had a struggle on our hands, as the old guard were entrenched and they knew how to preserve their position. They were short on theology but long on polity. They fought with might and mane to preserve the status quo.

In the early days after church union there were vicious attempts to keep down the evangelicals. I can raise two instances that I know of in NSW. One was in the City of Tamworth where a bright young minister, a Moore College graduate, was appointed by the evangelical interim moderator to be a supply minister in a vacant parish. He said one or two things that certainly would have been better not said, but the Masons and liberals turned it into a 'federal case' and it ended up on the floor of the NSW Assembly. It should not have got there and it should not have been dealt with in the way that it was. The upshot was that he left and founded his own independent church which is still going strong under his ministry today. Given the contribution he would have undoubtedly made to the Presbyterian Church, it is not unfair to say that the liberals were willing to see the church 'cut off its nose to spite its face' as long as they could hang on to control for a little while longer.

The other case is that of John Mercer, who moved on from Canberra to Kogarah, a hive of Freemasonry. John preached the Gospel and performed a dedicated and powerful ministry. The elders were almost all against him and they blew some matter out of all proportion and brought it to the Assembly. They 'won' in the Assembly, but it didn't make any difference to John. He just carried on regardless in a ministry marked by both numerical and spiritual growth in the

congregation and the raising up of a large number of men who are now ministers of our church.

New ministers in old parishes can be like new wine in old wineskins, but in time the new ministers began to prove themselves. Some of the old Pressies grew spiritually. We praise God for that. Some people were converted, and we praise God for that. The church took on a mission mentality, as we were of a mind to go into all the world and preach the gospel.

God raised up a large number of missionaries in our church, out of all proportion to our size. He raised up a tremendous number of men for the ministry. We couldn't get over the numbers who came forward, the quality of the men, their backgrounds, their scholarship, the sanctity of their lives. We knew – and so did the Masons and liberals – that as the college goes, so goes the church. There was a pitched battle in NSW which had its epicentre on theological education. Eventually the evangelicals prevailed. There was a pitched battle too over Christian Education and over the National Journal ('Australian Presbyterian Life'). Immediately after union, the journal had been taken over by the liberals and had been used by them to propagate liberalism in the continuing church. Subscriptions plummeted, and eventually the editor and business manager did their sums and came up with a big red figure, and so they left. I was asked to take it over and by and by we were able to bring it back and around. Today of course 'Australian Presbyterian' serves us magnificently as our national journal.

We did have an agenda to pursue through this crisis. We had to get theological education right, with believing scholars in all our colleges. A lot of people thought they were professorial material. I was one of the first to find out that I

wasn't! Lots of people did a few lectures, and the liberals would put up somebody, and we would put up somebody. We evangelicals were pitifully outnumbered in the presbyteries and assemblies in those early days, but by and by some of the students, as well as other men of evangelical conviction, were ordained to the eldership and then commissioned to the assembly and to presbyteries, and the Masonic-liberal gerrymander was broken. We were able to get theological education right. One young minister once said on the floor of the NSW Assembly in a debate about whether a certain appointee would be theirs or ours, 'Well at least his heart's right' (referring to the evangelical candidate), and the roof nearly fell down. The others protested loud and long. 'Does that mean that *my* heart is *not* right?!' bellowed the other candidate. Times change. He is no longer with us, and Bruce Meller is now the Superintendent of Ministry and Mission in NSW and Deputy Clerk of the GAA. However, the story has a happier ending still. A mutual friend of the other fellow and myself was able to tell me that this man, who had been an arch-liberal, came to faith in Christ as his Lord and Saviour a few weeks before he passed on.

There was so much to do, and the way to do it was fraught with difficulty. We had to restore biblical standards on ethical matters. We had to deal with the problem of Freemasonry. We had to get APWM and PIM back on track. No pun intended ('On Track' being the newsletter of the PIM)! APWM had been the Board Of Ecumenical Mission And Relations. Its function pre-union had been to go to places like India and Pakistan and 'help' Christians there to get on with the Muslims, not to convert them – nothing nasty like that! We had to deal with the question of the ordination of women. We had to deal with heresy, in the Cameron case in Sydney.

How did we do it? We did engage in serious prayer. We used to have regular monthly prayer meetings in various manses and would pray for the whole situation of the church. We became very serious in our study of the Scriptures and of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Older ones mentored younger ones. We had help from the Sydney Diocese. We learned to support one another and back up one another. If one of our younger men was under attack by the old guard, one of us would get up to defend him and to deflect the attack. We broke the gerrymander that the traditionalists had in the assembly, and we waited on the Lord's timing. We made decisions regarding positions on committees, boards and positions in the church. When I say we, I mean Bruce Christian, David Burke, Paul Cooper, and myself. We made a decision that we would not go after any positions that were held by older men, but that when those positions became vacant, we would go after the position with all our might. We felt that that was an honourable way to proceed. Some might have liked to go earlier on some things, but we waited. All of this was hard-won territory. The liberals fought tooth and nail, gave no quarter and showed neither mercy nor appreciation of our policy of waiting. But today we have a church that has been turned around.

## 10. Where Are We Now?

**W**hat of the Presbyterian Church of Australia 28 years after church union? It was not a homogenous body when it found itself again on 23 June 1977, nor is it today, nor will it ever be this side of heaven. But the mix today is vastly different to what it was in 1977. Like G.K. Chesterton, the PCA could say: 'I'm not what I ought to be; I'm not what by God's grace I hope to be in the world to come; but I'm not what I was, and I thank God for that.' Prior to 1977 a heroic quartet of ministers had kept the Reformed Faith alive in NSW: the Rev Dr Neil MacLeod (Hurstville), Donald Campbell (Inverell), Jonathon Boyall (Bondi, now emeritus, and son of the liberal Charles Boyall,) and John Campbell (Campbelltown, now emeritus in Adelaide). Other younger ones came on board by and by, and the pendulum began to swing (or, as Graham Miller, MacLeod's successor at Hurstville, used to say: 'The blood-count is rising.')

There were not two or three, but at least four groupings within the PCA at the time of church union, with a certain amount of overlap between some of them: the Reformed Evangelicals, Conservative Evangelicals, Traditionalists and Liberals. Within these groupings there were sub-groups, and in all of them, though in varying degrees (or perhaps I should say 'numbers') there were Freemasons, hardly any among the Reformed, a fair few among the Conservative Evangelicals, and most among the Traditionalists and Liberals. There were complicated dynamics and loyalties within and between the various

groupings and the fact that the PCA was ever able to declare Freemasonry to be incompatible with Christianity, let alone at such an early time after church union, was a masterpiece of human endeavour and a triumph of grace. As best we can tell, the proportion of Freemasons in the present-day PCA is getting close to the proportion of Reformed Evangelicals in the PCA in the early 1970's, and falling.

I would estimate the proportions of the above groups in the courts of the church at the time of church union to have been in the order of: Reformed Evangelical 20%, Conservative Evangelical 20%, Traditionalist 30%, Traditionalist-Liberal 20%, Hard-core Liberal 10%. The Liberals and Traditionalists were working in coalition and although they had quietly positioned themselves well to make the running in the early years following union they did not manage to put a viable succession in place. There were two main reasons for this. First, there simply were not any successors, and secondly the calibre of the evangelicals God raised up to meet the need of the hour meant that in time, like cream, they rose to the top.

Contrast this with the situation today. I would not be prepared to judge any serving minister in the PCA today as being 'Liberal'. A small number are Traditionalist, but no-one would go anywhere near qualifying for membership in the Angus-Vines school of liberalism. A person could enter any Presbyterian Church in Australia today in the expectation that the Word of God would be rightly handled, and could go on his way rejoicing. For the most part Christ would be preached and a full-orbed Gospel proclaimed. Evangelicals, most of them Reformed, are at the fore or on the verge of holding all super-parochial positions, convenerships and committee memberships in the PCA. Our three theological colleges and



all who teach in them adhere firmly to the Reformed Faith.  
The only problem I am aware of as convener of the PCV's  
Theological Education Committee is a shortage of money.

# 11. A Third Crisis?

**A** third crisis faces us today: we are a boutique church, a small denomination. We are making our way and getting ourselves together, but it is high time we really decided that we are going to be a church which is truly Evangelical and Reformed, mainstream and Bible-believing. We need to find our niche and move on.

Despite all that has gone on, I want to affirm that Christian unity is a thing of beauty and is something to be desired. Our view of the church (WCF 25) is one that looks upon all true believers as part of the one great church of Jesus Christ. We might differ over secondary matters, but if we love the Lord Jesus Christ, and come into the Christian Church at entry level (repentance of sin and trust in Christ for forgiveness and salvation) we all belong to the one church.

We need to proclaim loud and clear our unity with all Christian people. Denominations are a very secondary thing. They have been brought into prominence by these events. Just because 1977 went wrong is not to say that there should never be unions of churches. There might be circumstances upon us in years to come, there might be bases of union that we can heartily endorse, and we may very well find that there is a situation before us when a union with someone else will be appropriate. We would want to be sure that it was on a biblical basis, that it was for the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. We would want unanimity if at all possible in the membership of both or all churches. Just because 1977 went wrong does not mean that union is always necessarily wrong.

Thirdly, we need to do God's work in God's way, or as Spurgeon said, 'You cannot use the devil's weapons in the Lord's warfare'. When people have to press as hard as the unionists did for their position to prevail, say the things they said and do the things they did, we have a right to question their motives. More importantly we must not adopt such tactics ourselves in whatever cause we are promoting.

Fourthly, we must find our niche and take our place in the whole church. We would do well to conduct our services and preach the Word in such a way that, for example, they are sufficiently formal for an Anglican on the one hand to feel at home, yet sufficiently informal for a Baptist on the other to come along and feel at home. We take a firm stand on the Scriptures, the Word of God, we are mission-orientated, evangelistic, open to saving the lost and we want to remain true to the Scriptures in this day when other churches that used to be strong are now weakening their stance. We must take our place in the wider church, as 'a constituent part of the Holy Catholic Church', and not think of ourselves as an elite group or act like a sect.

We need to beware of becoming the ingrown toenail of the body of Christ. We are in danger of this, and to avoid it we need to accept responsibilities for the wider Presbyterian and Reformed world. I've always believed that the Presbyterian Church in Canada could have done so much, without costing them hardly a cent, to encourage us and help us in our struggles during the 1970's. They did next to nothing. When we hear of churches continuing, when we hear for instance of a church like Grace in New Zealand, we need to stand up and say that we are with these people, as we did in the Commission of the Victorian Assembly some months ago, and as we are going to ask the GAA to do. We need to

stand tall and firm beside Bible-believing Presbyterians around the world. We need to continue to establish relationships with bodies like the Presbyterian Church in Bangladesh, the Presbyterian Church of India. We never knew there was a Presbyterian Church of India until after church union, that information had been withheld from us. We need to be involved with the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (Colin M'bawa's church).

Wherever we find traditionalist Presbyterians we really ought to go out after them with the Scriptures, and demonstrate that Bible-believing and main-stream are synonyms. One of the beauties of being the minister of St Kilda is that we have an international motel just around the corner, and Scots, Dutch, Americans, New Zealanders, and other visitors come along. They think it will be like the Church of Scotland or the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand, or the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and they come to our church, where I trust they hear the Gospel preached – and some of them go on their way converted. I had a session clerk from New Zealand come up to me after church one day and say, 'I have gone to a Presbyterian Church all my life, and I never heard the Gospel until today', and he could have said that if he had gone to any of our churches. People from overseas who come to our churches hear the Gospel; Christ is preached; the Word of God is proclaimed. Their appreciation of our ministry during the brief time they are with us means that we have a mountain of work to do to bring all of our fellow-Presbyterians around the world up to speed.

Having faced and overcome two earlier challenges, it's time to move on and face this next one in the grace and power of God and for His glory.