

Winston O'Reilly: Second Uniting Church President
(1979–1982)

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On 21 January 2000 a generous number of the Church-faithful gathered at Turramurra Uniting Church for a service of thanksgiving for the life of Winston D'Arcy O'Reilly (1913–2000). The service was conducted by the Rev. Dr David Gill. O'Reilly had been the first General Secretary and second President of the Uniting Church in Australia. The congregation that day heard the Rev'd Dr D'Arcy Wood pay tribute to O'Reilly as 'one of the century's truly remarkable churchmen'. He had left school at fourteen wanting to become a carpenter. However, a powerful curiosity and the call of God and Church to ministry interrupted those plans. Ordained in 1939, O'Reilly committed his life to the vocation of ministry, serving the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Uniting Church in Australia in a series of pastoral, educational and administrative appointments.

The congregations of Picton-Tahmoor, North Croydon, Coonamble and then Peak Hill helped to shape O'Reilly as a preacher and hone his pastoral wisdom. He loved pastoral ministry and in his last years, when drawn into conversation about the Church, spoke almost only of those days. Having fallen early under the attention of the New South Wales Methodist Conference, O'Reilly was drawn out of the vestry and appointed, firstly, to the Department of Home Missions, next as Vice-Principal of Leigh Theological College and as a member of the United Faculty of Theology and then as Principal of Methodist Ladies College in Burwood, Sydney. In 1965 he became Connexional Secretary of the NSW Conference, (the equivalent today would be the Synod General Secretary) a position which he held for nine years.

In 1974, Winston O'Reilly was appointed by the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches to be the Executive Officer responsible for co-ordinating the preparations for their union. They were interesting times with many challenges to be met across the country. The

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negotiations O'Reilly pursued, formal and informal, to ensure the safe passage of the Uniting Church's enabling legislation through each state Parliament, for example, is a story that could one day be told in its own right. After three years working to lay the foundation for the Regulations and Constitution of the new church, he was elected the first General Secretary of the Uniting Church Assembly in 1977. In 1979, he followed the Rev'd Dr Davis McCaughey to become its second President. It is a curiosity of history that, having been elected Secretary-General and then President-General of the Methodist General Conference in the 1970s, he may be the only Australian to have been the national head of two denominations.

The Assembly (1979–1982)

In June 1982, the religion writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Alan Gill, wrote that five years on from promising to be 'a lusty infant' Australia's new Christian denomination had become 'a mellow Uniting Church'. A quick survey of the various Synod newspapers hardly supports this view. It reveals the issues which created headlines within the Uniting Church during its second triennium and the issues are worth naming here for they set the context of O'Reilly's time as President. The Church issued a series of anti-war resolutions including the demand that cadet forces be abolished in church schools; criticism of Britain over the Falklands war, and support for the push by the United Nations towards general disarmament. The Church also officially supported the World Council of Churches appeal for funds for its Program to Combat Racism and, despite considerable controversy, was the only mainstream denomination to offer this support. It also lobbied in New South Wales for the decriminalization of homosexuality; opened its order of Deaconesses to men; threatened to boycott the 1988 bicentennial celebrations if Aboriginal land rights were not respected; tackled apartheid, gambling, the morality of investments, and ethical tourism; and struggled with declining membership, declining finances, and the challenge to have 'one-third women' on all church councils and committees.

Bernard Long commented on the third Assembly in Queensland's *Life and Times*, 'I've reported many assemblies of many Churches. This was in many ways the brightest and most hopeful of them all'. These sort of headlines notwithstanding, if we had to place a banner upon the Uniting Church in the years 1979–82 identifying a single issue, those who remember the years might well suggest 'making the new church and its regulations work'. All members had to put aside whatever rules had governed their church life in the preceding denomination and learn new ways. As a key drafter of the Uniting Church regulations, and now as

President, O'Reilly was frequently appealed to for interpretations and 'rulings'. At the Eighth Assembly in Perth, in July 1997, Carolyn Kitto gave a roll call of the Presidents and offered a brief description of each one prior to giving a 'President's jumper' to the newly installed John Mavor. Of Winston O'Reilly she remarked, 'he gave us the Regulations!' It was an interesting sign of how he is held in the collective memory of the Church.

The second triennium, 1979–82, was a period of consolidation of the young church. In reviewing those days, the value can be seen of the second President having such a detailed knowledge of the process of the Church's formation and its procedures. O'Reilly was able to be a source of counsel, confidence and encouragement. Of course, not everyone shared his appreciation of the Regulations. One of the most memorable legacies from that period was the occasion when Davis McCaughey told the Victorian Synod he believed the Church could throw out 'half the regulations—any half will do!' The phrase has become part of the folklore of the Uniting Church. It is therefore interesting to hear O'Reilly tell an interviewer from the Oral History Unit of the National Library in 1996 that when he was General Secretary:

Over and over again people would ask 'What is the meaning of this regulation?' or 'How do we do this?' and very often I would have to say 'Obviously our regulations don't meet your case. The needs of the people come first. We'll break this one, and I'm advising you to do so. We need regulations as a guide but not as a rope that chokes you.'

Some Key Issues for the second President

Winston O'Reilly was installed as President in a service in Melbourne in May 1979. There were two unusual features about his appointment. First, because the inaugural Assembly in Sydney did not select a President-Elect as have all subsequent Assemblies, he is the only President to have been elected by an Australia-wide postal ballot of Assembly members. Second, he is so far the only President to hold the office of President and General Secretary at the same time. The role of President was part-time and the incumbent, if an ordained person, remained in their regular placement for the duration. While holding the position of General Secretary no doubt gave O'Reilly valuable insights into the role of President, it also created a controversy when it was clear that his successor, David Gill, would not commence until January 1980, some seven months after the installation of the new President. Was it proper or desirable for the one person to hold both these national offices concurrently? The answer was no, and the

¹ Graham Downie, interview with Winston O'Reilly, 18–19 January 1996, TRC343, Oral History Unit, National Library of Australia.

Second Assembly appointed Henry Wells to act as Associate General Secretary for seven months from the rising of the Assembly until David Gill's installation. At that time, O'Reilly retired as General Secretary and completed his term as President in retirement. While O'Reilly presided over the Second Assembly in Melbourne in 1979, Kyle Waters acted as its Secretary.

Following a lifetime practice of preaching sermons from a single Biblical verse, O'Reilly chose a little known text from his favourite prophet, Jeremiah, to preach from at the opening service, 'I sought to set you among my sons, and to give you a pleasant land, and a heritage beautiful above all nations' (3:19a). He emphasized three points: that as people of the Uniting Church the Assembly would do well to reflect on *who they are, what they should take on their journey, and where they are going*. Taking his cue from a favourite portion of the *Basis of Union*, he considered the Uniting Church to be not a completed entity but a pilgrim people on a journey, always moving and changing. Yet in addition to this movement and change, he was convinced that the Uniting Church had a heritage to carry with it. In O'Reilly's view, sharing that newly enhanced heritage by the bonding of the three denominations must become part of the excitement of creating a new national church.

Winston O'Reilly died on 16 January 2000. In circumstances such as this where a former President cannot compose this paper for himself, it is a privilege to do so in his stead. We have spent some time seeking out what Winston might have considered the key issues addressed during his presidency, and what he would perhaps say if asked to reflect on what he learned about the Uniting Church during that time. His views are best gleaned from his address as retiring President to the Third Assembly in May 1982. Also of interest are an article written about him in 1982 and three oral history interviews, all conducted in the mid-1990s. Two are by students from United Theological College in Sydney and the other by the Oral History Unit of the National Library of Australia in Canberra. To all of these we have added a sprinkling of family knowledge. It should be added that one of the difficulties in recovering O'Reilly's view of life and the Church during those days is that he rarely kept a diary, except for appointments. This was a habit which he later came to regret. Furthermore, although O'Reilly was able to be completely frank with people in whom he had confidence, we also remember him as one who was meticulously careful about keeping confidences. This quality of discretion represents another (admirable) barrier to finding the 'story behind the story' and to telling the stories which will never be known.

Report of the retiring President

Members of an Assembly anticipate and value the traditional report of a retiring President as an authoritative barometer of the current 'state of the Church' delivered, as it is, from a unique and privileged perspective. Like most retiring Presidents, Winston O'Reilly commented on the absolute impossibility of referring to anywhere near everything which occupies the attention of a President in office. He could make only fleeting reference, for example, to the 'hundreds of destinations' to which he had travelled within and beyond Australia. One of those trips which he called his 'continental walkabout' took place in 1980 at the initiative of the Assembly Commission for Mission. It saw Winston and his wife Nancye make an extensive visit to northern Australia. They travelled from Gladstone to Weipa, calling at many places on the way; then from Aurukun to Darwin, island hopping on Australia's remote north coast; hence from Kununurra to Karratha, including inland and coastal settlements. O'Reilly enjoyed every minute. At other times he had met the Queen and the Pope, but he felt very privileged to visit, and very much at home in, Australia's remote communities. We heard him say on a number of occasions that he considered travel an essential part of his pastoral role as President. That pastoral work was sometimes unusual. On one occasion several Aboriginal men in the remote outback approached him with a difficult question. Each of them had several wives, which was entirely appropriate in their culture. Now that they had been told the Christian story, and had themselves become Christians, they 'knew that they should have only one wife'. These earnest men were on the horns of a dilemma: to send some of their wives away would create a life of terrible hardship for the women and yet now, as Christians, they felt they should be caring for them even more than ever. What were they to do? What did their President think they should do? O'Reilly pondered for a moment and advised the men that it would be hurtful now to reject or displace any of the wives they already had, but probably it would be wise not to take any more.

As well as speaking of his travels, the retiring President reminded the 1982 Assembly that the Uniting Church was making its missionary history 'day by day', for example 'as we recognize ethnic congregations—Chinese, Australian Aboriginal, Lebanese, Korean and more—as part of the normal constituency of our church in Australia; [and] as we widen the range of social and cultural sources from which the ordained ministry is drawn, accepting ministers from India, Korea, America, the Pacific Islands and elsewhere.' However the main body of his address was taken up in commenting on five matters which he considered to be central issues for the church at the time: The Principle of Consultation, Leadership,

Authority, Uniting, and Equipping God's People for Mission. Twenty-five years later they still appear to hold possibilities for fruitful reflection and action in the Church. They are a sign of what he considered to be matters of high importance for our future.

Having been largely responsible, in his earlier administrative role, for drafting the Regulations for the new church, and for sending hundreds of letters around Australia telling people how the new church 'would work', he now felt responsible to ask on his travels, '...and how's it all going?'. He willingly placed himself on the spot (or 'in the firing line' he might say) to help interpret the Regulations and to answer innumerable questions which he categorized as 'administrative, legal, theological, pastoral, social and political'. One reader of this article prior to publication reminded us that Winston O'Reilly was unusually gifted when it came to thinking on his feet and then speaking clearly and convincingly in a debate, with little notice and no notes. This surely helped him, and he relished most, if not all, of these interactions.

Consultation

Winston O'Reilly reminded the Assembly that it was the policy of the Uniting Church to make decisions 'largely affected by processes of consultation'. He went on to observe, however, that 'Much of what we have attempted as consultation hardly deserves the name.' This had convinced him that 'the time has come for a radical review of the methods of consultation'. Members of the Assembly at the time may have known the details to which he was referring. One imagines that there were particular matters which generated his remarks but he did not record any details. 'Unless we study the art (of consultation) and refine the processes we will be wasteful of resources, generate bad decisions, slow down the work of the church, and reap a harvest of second-rate decisions.' He commends 'some Synods' which have already undertaken reviews of 'structure and methodology' and challenges the Assembly 'in respect of its areas of responsibility' to do the same.

Leadership

O'Reilly defines leaders as 'those among us who combine in themselves far-sighted vision, purposefulness and dedication to well-conceived goals, courage and tenacity, and who have the ability to inspire others in the pursuit of appropriate goals.' 'But all too frequently', he remarks, 'potential leadership is frustrated'. He offers two specific examples. First, he speaks of 'the customary change of Presbytery chairmanship [sic] after only a year or two'. He is strongly of the opinion that Presbytery leadership needs more time to be fully effective. Secondly, there was the

custom of 'giving the various Boards and Agencies of the church the right to speak on public issues in their own name while limiting the right of Chairmen [sic], Moderators, and Presidents to do so unless the relevant council of the Church has already made an appropriate and quotable pronouncement.' This leaves the Church and the community, he says, 'hopelessly confused'. He gives these examples:

We certainly got into more trouble than we need, or were less effective than we might have been, over issues such as Noonkanbah, tax evasion, the disciplining of Service Chaplains, and the homosexual and abortion issues, than might have been the case if authorized and trusted leaders were given a larger and more obvious role.

This issue has been recurrent for many years, of course, in the guise of the question—*who speaks for the church?* The outgoing President thought that 'Leadership must not be denied, misdirected, or assumed by those who do not have the gift!'

Authority

With regards to authority in the Church, O'Reilly speaks first about 'the authority given by the Spirit, and acknowledged and confirmed by the Church when she ordains persons as Ministers of the Word':

It is a matter of great urgency that the people who hold that authority, and those among whom their ministry is exercised, be reminded of the nature, the extent, and the limits of that authority. For each of the varied specified ministries of the Church there is an authority that is relevant to that particular ministry. But while all such authority is equally to be respected, the authority given in each case is by no means the same in content and character.

Here again one imagines O'Reilly is referring to incidents or circumstances which he does not document. Nevertheless, it is of interest that later in the agenda of the 1982 Assembly the Commission on Doctrine was to raise matters of ordination and authority, and present an extensive report on the diaconate. This may be a hint as to his intentions.

Having spoken of the Spirit and its determining authority for our various ministries, O'Reilly secondly refers to the importance of properly handling 'organization and administration' in the Uniting Church. This is an area close to his heart.

There is a difference between the authority to formulate policy, and the authority to execute such policy. I regret to say that at all points, from Parish Councils to Assembly Commissions, I have noticed how

bodies comprising from thirty to sixty or more people spend hours arguing over approvals of specific proposals which should have been the task of one person to determine on the basis of the ground rules laid down by the appropriate policy making body, to which that person is then accountable.

He feels this problem to be a critical one. He sees poor organization of people's time and energies in committees and councils and sought to name it for what it was – potentially crippling for the new Church.

Uniting

The retiring President also reports on three areas of ecumenical endeavor where immediate attention was needed. The first area of need is bi-lateral conversations already underway with other denominations; for these he appeals for more resources. 'It is not good enough that ecumenical relations remain an intermittent, part-time exercise' relying as they are on 'already overloaded' members of the Commission on Ecumenical Affairs. In an intriguing suggestion, he feels one possible way forward is for the Assembly Secretary to be relieved of day to day administration to make the search for ecumenical partnership a major part of the Assembly Secretary's role. O'Reilly's own commitment to ecumenism was life-long. It was initiated during his student days at Sydney University and saw him spend four years as President of the Council of Churches in New South Wales. He would have loved to see the Church's *uniting-ness* become an ongoing enterprise.

In his Report O'Reilly sees the second area of need to be the search for unity *within* the Uniting Church as an imperative. This would be a matter of confronting:

the definition of the boundaries beyond which diversity ceases to be an advantage and becomes a problem; how to use acceptable degrees of diversity creatively; how to celebrate that diversity; [and] how to dispel the suspicions, fears, prejudices and misconceptions that lead to resisting the diversities we should be welcoming and affirming.

The call to find 'unity in diversity' is still ringing bells across the Uniting Church today.

A heading like 'The Search for Unity in the Application and Management of Resources', which is his third point under the theme of 'uniting', would always have found its way into O'Reilly's report somewhere because he was passionate about church administration. Marshalling and distributing financial resources showed 'marked deficiencies' and he sees the 'one directional' flow of finances through 'competing segments' (parish / presbytery / synod / assembly) as a

problem. He appeals to the Church to find ways of determining priorities, communicating them, and taking responsibility for stewardship which needs to be integrated across the whole church. He also notes that proposals for changed settlements procedures are on the Assembly agenda. We are surprised that Winston O'Reilly says so little about this matter, for this might well have been the issue, above all others, that he was inclined to view (with considerable regret) as having been a failure. 'This Assembly will be asked to ensure procedures that first take full account of where the gifts of particular ministers are needed most'.

People who remember Winston O'Reilly will hear the echo of one of the most contentious issues, as he saw it, in the pre-inauguration negotiations for church union. Should the placement of Ministers in the new church be by *appointment* (in keeping with the Methodist practice), by *call* (as was the case in Congregational and Presbyterian Churches) or by some form of *compromise*? The issue of settlements still bubbled under the surface of the second and third Assemblies and O'Reilly was one among those with a role in planning such matters who hoped a better way could be found to ensure ministry for congregations which, for reasons such as geographic location or financial difficulty or some other disadvantage, could not get a Minister to accept a call.

Equipping God's People for Mission

The 1982 Assembly was scheduled to receive major proposals from Dorothy McRae McMahon and Ian Tanner on equipping God's people for mission. O'Reilly wanted to encourage the favorable reception of this report. He declared he had seen the issue as an 'incoming tide' in the Church in its increasing prayer life, Bible study, and opportunities for lay education, as well as the changing role of ministers as enablers, the relaxation of 'judgmental and inflexibly moralistic attitudes', and an increasing interest in personal evangelism. And thus the retiring President's report was rounded off with a strong affirmation that he now believed 'more strongly than ever that it was the Holy Spirit who chose the time and performed the work of creating the Uniting Church'.

Articles and Interviews

A lead article in the NSW Synod newspaper in May 1982 headed 'Church leader sees many signs of hope', has O'Reilly preparing to step down as President and canvassing those issues he hopes the church will address with greater commitment in the future. The first three confirm what we know from his retiring address: the value of diversity, the importance of the laity, and of small group evangelism. These come as no surprise. In the

same article, however, he also develops another theme for the first time, but not the last. He describes it as 'the charity trap'.

I believe the Church has to solidly rethink what its position is on a whole range of community and welfare services that it is running. We must see that these things could divert our energies from proclaiming the Gospel if we're not careful. They are not an alternative means of being evangelistic.

In earlier days, O'Reilly had been a founding member of the NSW Council of Social Services and later chaired its national body, the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS). His commitment to community welfare and social justice was profound. Nevertheless, he felt there was a balance to be struck within the Church between the different ways in which we proclaim the gospel; a proper equilibrium to be achieved between the three elements of our mission as advanced in the *Basis of Union*—our worship, witness and service. His concern about the risk of the Church becoming primarily a welfare agency can be added to any list of the issues O'Reilly felt important for the Uniting Church during and after his time as President.

As has been mentioned, an extensive series of interviews were undertaken by two students from the United Theological College in Sydney, in 1995 and 1996, and a further interview was conducted in 1996 by the oral history section of the National Library of Australia. O'Reilly affirms in both student interviews that he sees his Presidential role as primarily pastoral: 'to listen, encourage, and build up the new church'. He answers a question about the highlight of his presidency by describing the joy in seeing that 'the years of dreaming, going back generations, had brought forth fruit'. It is also clear that O'Reilly came later to believe that the *Basis of Union* 'should have become a document for continuing study over the years at congregation and parish level'. This would have had 'a unifying effect [for] it merits more attention now than it has received over the years'. And he is still ill at ease with the settlements system, 'especially when it leaves congregations without a settled minister for up to two and three years. This is where the present system has most visibly failed the church.'

The most noticeable thing about the National Library's interview, which is some nine hours long and entitled, 'This was my Life', is that Winston O'Reilly makes remarkably little reference to his years as President. There are only two comments—that he saw the President's role as pastoral, and therefore he travelled widely to ask: 'Are you happy? Is it working well? Have you any suggestions?' They reveal again this sense of the second triennium being focused, at least for its President, on the theme of making the new church and its regulations work.

Concluding Remarks

Winston O'Reilly was 'a natural leader', as D'Arcy Wood described him, but he had a humble disposition. It has been a challenge to prepare this reflection because he spoke infrequently of his 'headline' appointments and the activities he undertook in their fulfillment. O'Reilly certainly had his limitations. He knew them, and would expect any appraisal of his time in leadership at the Assembly to acknowledge them. He wished he had been more deeply immersed in biblical studies when a student and was inclined to think of himself as an inadequate theologian. There are a few who would disagree. He was a marvellous listener and a skilled negotiator and mediator, but the attendant weakness of these qualities might also have been present at times, and so one occasionally would wish him to be more directive, and take a stand. Yet, his limitations did not inhibit what was a rewarding life in ministry for him and, we hope, for the Church. 'How does one sum up such an extraordinary life?' said D'Arcy Wood at the service of thanksgiving on 21 January 2000. 'Speaking as a collaborator and a cousin, I would say he was supremely skilled, yet at the same time warm and humane.'