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Uniting Church Studies is a fully refereed, multidisciplinary journal focused on a specific subject—the Uniting Church in Australia. The journal aims to promote scholarly reflection and understanding. It does so by means of a dialogue: between the academic and the practitioner; between church and society in Australia, and between the Uniting Church in Australia and other Uniting and United Churches throughout the World.

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Uniting for the Common Good: 
The prospects of a Public Theology

Clive Pearson

The Moderator’s address

The theme for the 2013 meeting for the Synod of New South Wales and the ACT was most apposite. Fresh from the previous exploration of new and risky paths, this time the Moderator selected the wording of uniting for the common good. The Revd Dr Brian Brown spoke of how he now felt emboldened to declare a link between that initial reference to risky paths and this new theme for the next eighteen months.

From a current theological perspective this theme was a good choice. It immediately lifted the horizon away from internal and structural concerns to questions of how the Synod should aspire to look beyond itself and play a part in nurturing a civil society. The rhetoric of uniting for the common good was effectively an invitation to grapple with the purpose and practice of the emerging discipline of public theology. Here the task becomes one of exploring how the church enters into the public forum of ideas, issues and policies. That forum exists at a variety of levels from the global to the local neighbourhood.

That revised focus has the capacity to realign the energies of the church. The pressures that have been brought to bear on ageing, mainline, often financially stricken denominations have a capacity for the church to turn in on itself. The language of mission and outreach can be freely used but often in a way that cloaks an underlying anxiety surrounding institutional viability. This temptation is the well mapped out by Douglas John Hall in his enquiry into what Christianity is not.¹ The way ahead can so easily then be determined by setting alongside the finances and altered structure a mass of populist thought and feeling, a good idea here, another there. What the Lord requires of us is discerned quickly and through a web of filters that Walter Brueggemann² might suggest would be anything but conducive to the common good. The theological hard work on what it means to be a church seeking to serve the kingdom of God in a complex world is simply not done. We end up instead apprehending a ‘gospel greatly reduced’ where little is expected of us.

Seeking the church

For a church committed to the common good, its self-understanding and ecclesial identity warrant close scrutiny. In order to engage with the public sphere a denomination needs to be worldly wise and cognisant of how the church in general is widely perceived. And here there are blocks. In the present period, the capacity of the church to attract labels like serving the good of others is under question precisely

because of its complicity in various forms of trauma and abuse. What happens in one denomination is likely to affect all in how the Christian faith is publicly viewed.

The most obvious examples of such bad press lie in the legal exposure of sexual misconduct among the clergy and in church schools. The regulations of the Uniting Church bestow upon the office of the Moderator the imperative to protect the good name of the church but there is an increasing scepticism about how well the institutional church is itself a moral community able to reflect its call to embody Christ. That level of suspicion is consistent with the general rise in the level of moral blindness and everyday insensitivity discerned by Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis. There is a casual turning away of the ethical gaze from the suffering of others. The church is not the only institution subject to searing critique. It stands out nevertheless because of its moral and religious claims concerning doing good to all and loving one’s neighbour as oneself. The oft-repeated contemporary theological reference is for a penitent church and an ecclesiology in a minor key. Mary Grey writes of ‘the dark night of the church’; H. M. Kuitert prefers the language of the ‘trauma of the church’.

Such descriptions should not come as a theological surprise. There is a ready-made tension between an ontological and phenomenological understanding of the church: that is, between what the church is called to be in Christ, and what it happens to be and do. In a busy frenetic church, preoccupied with its own internal life and the common good, the temptation is for its plausibility structures to be seriously compromised. For the slogan unifying for the common good to work in the public sphere there is need to ensure that the church is setting its own injustices and inequalities to right. The very idea and practice of a public church requires a working ecclesiology which values the integrity of what it means to be a community of Christ, ‘to belong to the Lord’, in practice. The risk is that the highly intentional language of the Uniting Church of being gracious, generous, inclusive and hospitable is deemed to be a completed reality rather than an aspirational goal.

It is here that Stephen Pickard’s notion of seeking the church can assist the Uniting Church’s quest to serve the common good. There is a surface resonance of terminology upon which to build. Some of the words Pickard uses to describe the church are the same as those that permeate the Uniting Church’s self-understanding. His preferred term is a ‘travelling church’ which looks towards a ‘coming church’ that is always in the process of unfolding. The focus falls on the pace of its emergence. Pickard suggests a model of a slow church: it is designed to represent a movement of God in our direction rather than opting by default for the moribund, sleeping or frenetic church which rely upon all-too-human initiatives. The slow church embraces the transcendence of God. The matters of pace and presence are related. It takes time to become disciples; it takes time to form a companionship of the gospel and for peace and justice to take root. This model of a pilgrim church should enable space for vagabonds, nomads,
tourists and other travellers to be part of the company. It takes time for the slowness of God to work its way into our post-modern life together. The presence of Christ takes time and its manifestation within the church can be episodic. Pickard draws on the work of Peter Dula\(^7\) to suggest that the realisation of the church as the body of Christ is always fugitive. It comes and goes. It cannot be imprisoned within a consumer managerial model and a desire for a neatly unified message.

The foundational documents of the Uniting Church commit this church to be a people on the way. It sees itself as a pilgrim church, willing to engage with the public life of the nation. The seminal *Basis of Union*, which implies movement and a Christ-inspired unease with human structures, ought always to be placed alongside the church’s *Statement to the Nation*\(^8\) made at the inaugural assembly. That moment was seen to be historic; the coming together of three separate denominations into unity was deemed to be a sign of the reconciliation which we seek for the whole human race. The internal life of the church—its way of being—was thus tied to public witness.

At its inception the Uniting Church affirmed in this *Statement* its eagerness to uphold basic values and principles. Those included the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race. This declaration of intention was startling in its level of prophetic concern for the well being of the most disadvantaged. It covered education, adequate health, freedom of speech, freedom from discrimination and the widening gap between rich and poor. Those members of the first Assembly made a liturgical stand against acquisitiveness and greed and the disregard of others. The *Statement* recognized that the ‘first allegiance of Christians to God … may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day’. It was also ahead of its time in anticipating environmental concerns: ‘We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth’s resources for their use and enjoyment’.

The implied ecclesiology in these foundational documents is one of movement and of what Jürgen Moltmann called the therapeutic relevance of the gospel.\(^9\) The gospel needs to be good news and relevant to concrete—rather than imaginary and abstract—situations. This kind of ecclesiology is well suited to a Uniting Church wishing to serve the common good. It is porous and not too tightly bound. And at the same time it possesses a richness of ecclesiological images and metaphors which enables a solidarity with others in the concerns of God.

The public witness of faith requires a strong and flexible doctrine of the church. It is an area where the Uniting Church might become more robust and intentional. The church could, for example, work

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\(^7\) Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, pp. 224–233.


with a study guide like Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s *The Public Church.* Moe-Lobeda was writing for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States. For that purpose she drew upon the theology of Luther and the denomination’s own confessional and public statements. She provided a means for making connections between the church’s self-understanding and its public witness through letting its identity in Christ engage with public issues. Moe-Lobeda took seriously the church’s own profession to be a public church constituted by God for its public vocation. She discerned the obstacles and lines of resistance before demonstrating how this vocation and church can be a gift of God to the well-being of the world. The common good requires a church that knows what it is and what is seeking to do and why. Cheryl Peterson’s discussion of denominational strategies in *Who is the Church?* should be placed alongside Pickard and Moe-Lobeda’s ecclesiologies. For a church to function in the public domain it must be sure of its self-understanding and how and why it professes to believe in the reconciliation of the whole creation.

**The need for a public missiology**

The Moderator did not address this core ecclesiological theme. The pervading mood was rather to affirm that the Synod is a missional rather than a public church. There was no perceived need to delve into the relationships between a public theology and missiology. That was unfortunate. The text of the *Statement to the Nation* had bound a ‘Christian responsibility to society’ to the level of being ‘fundamental to the mission of the Church’. The Synod in recent years has become heavily involved in the Sydney Alliance. This loose affiliation of religious groups, unions and non-governmental organisations sets out to ‘advance the common good and achieve a fair, just and sustainable city’. It sets out to provide opportunities for people to have a say in decisions which affect them, their families, and everyone living and working in Sydney. The Alliance provides training across various districts in the city in a way that seeks to release local power for the common good. That good is conceived in a variety of ways ranging from public transport and community care to health and social inclusion. The Synod is well represented and has a high profile in the Alliance. Its commitment to this coalition is an excellent example of what it might mean in practice to demonstrate the public nature of being church. But there is a weakness requiring attention. The theological grounds for the Synod and its members’ participation are still not well developed in terms of an explicit Christian sociality. That weakness can lead to an undercurrent in some quarters: why is not the same level of energy and attention given to mission, evangelism and conversion?

There is a present imperative to be addressed then, given the widespread interest in the Uniting Church now being presented as a missional church. What is the relationship between the mission of God and the common good? Are they the same? How do the disciplines of a public theology and missiology intersect? Can the two be brought together under the goal of the ‘reconciliation of creation’ to be found in paragraph 3 of the *Basis of Union*? How does the desire to be evangelical in terms of repentance and

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52 The purpose of the Sydney Alliance is set out at http://www.sydneyalliance.org.au
personal salvation relate to a desire to improve the general well being of all? The purpose of a public theology is not to make disciples per se, after all. That may happen but it is not the explicit aim.

The pursuit of the common good relies upon a reading of democratic culture in terms of various spheres. It is not conceived in terms of faith, mission and evangelism. The most commonly invoked description of these spheres by a range of leading public theologians is taken from Jürgen Habermas. The first refers to government, civil service, the judiciary, parliament, political parties, elections and an ‘inner periphery’ of regulatory institutions; the second incorporates business associations, labour unions, and private organisations; the churches belong inside the third sphere along with other voluntary associations, new social movements, and public interest groups; and the fourth designates those ‘sensors’—including the media—who form public opinion. There are variations on this basic design and, recently, Greg Jericho\textsuperscript{13} included the social media and blogging under the heading of the fifth estate.

The mere positioning of the church within the third sphere is an index of how terms like ‘public good’ and ‘missional’ are not coterminous. The apostolic nature of the church lies in the fact that it is sent into the world as an instrument of the kingdom of God. That purpose signifies another order where the spheres identified by Habermas are secondary to the will of God, the particularity of Christ, and the work of the Spirit. The vocation of the church is to be sought out by God and for the body of Christ to seek to be responsive. That participation in the transcendence of God is reflected through the history of doctrines like that of the two kingdoms and the confession that discipleship involves being a citizen of ‘heaven’ as well as of whatever political entity one happens to find oneself in.

The too close identification of the common good and the Christian faith is such that some theologians are nervous about the term public theology itself. Charles Mathewes,\textsuperscript{14} for instance, believes it lends itself to an ‘accommodationist’ tendency where the affairs of the world set the agenda. The primary audience for Mathewes’ theological work is ‘Christian believers’ and the possibility of their ‘faithful citizenship’. His preference is for a theology of public life; his interest is in the ‘ tepid’ and ‘frail’ faith of ‘lousy believers’. They may exhibit a ‘rich style of civic participation’ and suspect that faith should somehow shape their everyday life, but there is no theological rationale for living like this in what Mathewes refers to as life ‘during the world’.

The tactics of a public theology are not the same as those of the missional church. The common good relies on a strategic ability to secure the right to be heard in the public sphere. Its rhetoric and technique is depends upon persuasion and a willingness to listen (and to be corrected, if necessary) rather than dogmatic override. The Christian voice is one voice among many and it possesses no privileged space.

Within the confines of his address, the Moderator saw no particular need to dabble in this territory and perhaps to map out a few bridging points. The breadth of a public theology is not necessarily

\textsuperscript{13} Greg Jericho, \textit{The Rise of the Fifth Estate: Social Media and Blogging in Australian Politics}, Melbourne, Scribe, 2012.

The common good and a public theology

The Moderator’s address to the Synod did not venture into this territory. It opened instead with a brief introduction of the notion of the common good. This ethical and social aim was described as being ‘in a nutshell’ a concern for the flourishing of all and the whole of creation. The clear intention of this definition was to expand the scope of the common good beyond the merely human. Such a reading of the current understanding is now frequently assumed, but it was not always so.

The common good has not always been the preferred term. On the theological scene the alternatives have included ‘the public good’ and ‘a civil society’. The focus was often more on our shared humanity and the structures of our public and private lives. The language has gradually altered with the growing realisation of our common dependency upon the whole of creation for the future sustainability of life.

None of these terms are, of course, particular to the Christian faith. Their appearance in ecclesial discourse is relatively recent. One of the consequences of this comparative novelty is the potential for slight but telling inaccuracies. The common good, the public good, the nurture of a civil society do not depend upon the Christian faith. They do not rely upon some explicit reference to the God of Jesus Christ. The Moderator had suggested near the beginning of his address that the common good is ‘the ultimate in generous hospitality and inclusive love, in the very nature of God’. The intention lying

17 Chung, Public Theology, p. 2.
18 Chung, Public Theology, p. 5.
behind such a claim was essentially apologetic. The Moderator was furnishing a bridge between talk of the common good and the church's interest in hospitality and inclusion. His address was designed to find resonances within a particular community gathered at a specific time for a specific reason. Its audience was scarcely representative of the multiple voices and modes of communication available in a contemporary democracy. And indeed that became clearer towards the end of the address, where the Moderator turned from a concern for the wider world to what it might mean for the Synod to be uniting for the common good in a time of restructuring and budgetary pressure. The shift in direction was understandable, but whether it was true to a discourse on the common good was debatable.

There is a risk of 'parochial' introversion here which needs to be countered. The intellectual basis for a Christian concern for the public good lies within the emerging discipline of a public theology. Its standard practice is to make the case for what is known as a bilingual address. The intention is to move in and between the ideational and symbolic world of faith and the capacity for accessible reason in the public forum or marketplace of ideas. The underlying assumption is that a public theology must be inter-disciplinary; its exponents should be well grounded in the theological life of the religious tradition and yet also able to translate and interpret what requires critical attention back into the life of faith itself. It is double process. The Moderator rightly assessed the importance of focussing on the common good 'now'. It was an 'ancient idea whose time has now urgently come'. Theologians like Will Storrar have declared the present to be a kairos moment for a public theology and an ecumenical commitment to the common good. Given the nature of his audience, the Moderator's approach was to name some practical issues demanding attention in a time of 'the great crisis among us'. For this purpose the Moderator identified three examples of the contemporary imperative: the hardship inflicted on asylum-seekers by Australia's policy of mandatory detention and other punitive measures; the large and growing gap between the rich and poor, here and worldwide; and global warming due to burning of fossil fuels. Each of these in its own way is an effect of what Barack Obama, cited here by Brown, described as a part of the 'imperative of economic growth'. These issues are likely to loom large for some time to come. Theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars like Michael Northcott, Joerg Rieger and Richard Horsley refer to this combination of politics, economics and power as a new 'empire'.

The hermeneutical task then becomes one of relating the present vocation of the Christian faith to this imperial system in a way which is analogous to the life of the early church and its witness to the kingdom of God over and against the Roman Empire.

The naming of particular issues requiring address is consistent with an emerging public theology. Its disciplinary practice is to discern the signs of the times. The common good is not an abstraction or a disembodied theory. It is made up of an ever changing raft of presenting issues and power plays which need to be identified and negotiated. That practice becomes more obvious in the work of the Assembly


agency, Uniting Justice, at the onset of various election campaigns. Its document on *A Just Society* for the federal election of 2013 makes an explicit link back to a *Statement to the Nation*; it makes the case for what it means to be a Christian citizen in a current democracy and the importance of exercising the right to vote; and then it identifies a range of broad themes to do with what it means to be just, as well as naming some ‘hot issues’ in associated pamphlets. On this occasion constitutional recognition of first peoples, income support, early childhood education and care, climate change, energy affordability, disability, multiculturalism, gambling, people trafficking, asylum seekers and offshore processing, children in immigration detention, and alcohol misuse are on the agenda.

In the Moderator’s address, the global intersected with the local in a most helpful way: ‘the little community at Bulga’ was cited as an example of those who drew the line and ‘just sat down in front of the Rio Tinto juggernaut’. In a single sentence he noted the ‘seriousness of the water issue’ and related it in an iconic way to rural churches and communities in the Murray Darling Basin. But the case with which Brown was able to make these local connections should not be simply assumed. There are two risks within the practice of an ecclesial public witness to the common good. The first is the failure to connect the big issue of the day and the right of the church to speak on that matter on behalf of the local congregation and secure ownership for the pronouncement. Writing in *The Good Society* Robert Bellah and others[21] have fastened upon how easy it was for a gulf to emerge been social activists working on behalf of denominational agencies and their own grassroots membership. There were multiple reasons for such a gulf, not the least of which was the relative lack of attention given to explaining how the issue at stake related to received biblical and theological understandings within congregations. The second problem is what Robert Jay Lifton[22] described as psychic numbing. Here the gravity of an issue—like climate change—is well known but the society concern looks away and does not engage with the impending fear or trauma. The problem is too big; it is overwhelming; it is global and there is doubt about the capacity of an individual or local group to do anything remedial. The way in which this response of psychic numbing plays itself out in public issues has become the subject of a sociology of emotions. The recent writing of Kari Marie Norgaard[23] on climate denial in a well informed Norwegian town demonstrates the power of such a gulf when a communal way of life and sense of identity are under threat. The Moderator’s references to local protests and community action furnished examples as to what is possible. They created a way of hearing.

There is nevertheless a rather distinctive problem which faces the Uniting Church when it seeks to have a voice in the public sphere. Writing in *The Age*, Dick Gross[24] observed that the Uniting Church’s practice of ‘rotation of leaders means that it sacrifices any chance of prominence in public debate’. It becomes a church which slips under the radar. The headlines and prominent characters belong to other denominations. It was the Anglican archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, who was invited to deliver the

prestigious Boyer Lectures for 2005 on radio national. It was Cardinal Pell who was invited to write the recent article on ‘Religion, Christianity and Social Capital’ in a prestigious anthology on *Future Proofing Australia* which featured leading politicians and academics. Gross is essentially sympathetic to the Uniting Church: he finds it difficult to hate because it seems relatively progressive and has a flexibility of mind. The problem is a lack of visibility in Habermas’ fourth estate—the media and the sensory.

Now and then there are exceptions to this rule of course. In his capacity as President, Dean Drayton was dubbed by *The Weekend Australian* as ‘this meddlesome priest’. His responses to the Howard Government’s policy on asylum seekers, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and industrial relations were woven into garbled warnings against ‘church heads’ engaging in ‘police-bothering’. His willingness to lodge the complaint that in the current context ‘only the field of economics seems above suspicion’ generated rhetoric to do with his ignorance of modern economics and his apparent moral arrogance. Drayton would later reach in the area of a public theology; what he was doing while President was putting into practice the art of a public theology for the sake of the common good—and it attracted fierce critique, which should not be unexpected. Drayton instinctively recognized that there is a prophetic dimension to the common good. This might be not only profoundly counter-cultural; it might also be counter to the dominant mood in the church itself.

There are individuals here and there who are able to attract a sound-byte or lobby a cause. The interconciliar polity of the church and the way it devolves responsibilities to agencies can lead to briefing documents for the church and submissions to government. What is not forthcoming is the equivalent of a sustained narrative on what a future Australia or good society interpreted through the lens of a Christian faith might look like. Pell was able to make a case for how the Christian faith might contribute to the common good through its being a ‘mediating structure’ in contemporary expressions of secular democracies. Pell made use of Robert Putnam’s distinctions between a bonding and bridging social capital and a Catholic reading of ‘natural moral virtues’ enhanced by ‘the gift of grace or spiritual energy’. In a rather pertinent manner he established a link between religious profession and the level of volunteering. Pell has ready access to the media, and his opinion is actively sought. Where is the equivalent to this kind of role from within the Uniting Church?

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27 Pell, ‘Religion, Christianity and Social Capital’.

28 This absence is not due to a lack of capacity. The institutional initiative for the development of a self-conscious public theology in this country has its origins in United Theological College. Through its membership in Charles Sturt University’s research centre for Public and Contextual Theology, it participates in the Global Network of Public Theology. There have been significant conferences on violence and religion, climate change, urban life as well as the nature of public theology. There has been much creative and innovative writing done here as well by academics who have strong Uniting Church associations—for instance Marion Maddox, Dean Drayton, Julia Pittman, Chris Budden and Clive Pearson, all of whom have published recent work in the *International Journal of Public Theology*. These voices seldom make their way into the official statements of the church and there is a general lack of media and ecclesial awareness of what has actually been produced. The infrastructure of theological knowledge already exists.
The architecture of knowledge

The architecture of an effective public theology for the flourishing of all is established upon three foundations. Brown presupposed the first, which is the capacity to secure the right to speak into the public forum. He has been more explicit with the second, which is the naming of occasional issues to be addressed. The third he touches upon in a section of his address headed "What does the Bible say?" The pressing hermeneutical feature here is to draw out the public relevance, consequence or signature of core Christian beliefs. The very validity of the Christian confession is on notice here.

The point was well made by Alasdair McFadyen\(^29\) in the test case he mounted on the language of sin. If the gospel is bound somehow to the forgiveness of sins, what happens if the word sin is not used other than in prayers of confession and is excluded from public life? Is the church then unable to make claims on behalf of its basic beliefs which cannot transcend their use within the church. What then is the point of believing and following if this public reference is denied? Does the church itself then run the risk of allowing another language—for instance, management theory—to shape its life and, in the process, succumb to what McFadyen has identified as a form of 'pragmatic atheism'?

The Moderator's focus fell upon what the Bible says. The necessity for a public hermeneutic of Scripture and the role it might play in the church's witness to the common good has been a long time coming. Practical and systematic theologians and ethicists were wrestling in a self-conscious manner with a public theology before their biblical counterparts. Here in Australia the initiative has only recently been taken by the Canberra-based New Testament scholar, David Neville,\(^30\) who stepped into this territory with reflections on the public use of scripture. In the immediate future the Uniting Church will need to have recourse to a cross-cultural and a public hermeneutic of Scripture.

The Moderator's question, 'what does the Bible say?', was therefore timely. Through a selection of texts, primarily taken from the Pentateuch, prophetic literature and the gospels, the common good is seen to be a 'basic fundamental ethic'. His recognition of the public dimension to Scripture has its place: the congregational examples of serving the common good he cites in South Sydney, Mudgee, Moree, Hillston, Narrumine, and Perthville can only benefit from having their actions tied to a biblical imperative which illustrates a radical discipleship. But more is required. There is a pressing need for a sophisticated hermeneutic which goes beyond a relatively simple and potentially misleading level of correspondence between biblical stories and a current engagement of faith-based communities in the public sphere.\(^31\)

There is also an urgent need for deepening levels of exegetical interpretation which can address the basic

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\(^{31}\) The analogy can be made with the work identified by Susanna Snyder on the importance of 'foregrounding hermeneutical assumptions' in relating Biblical studies to asylum-seeking and migration. See her *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and the Church*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 29–31.
structures and expectations of presbyteries, synods and assemblies. There is lying beneath and behind all of this activity an urgent imperative to ensure that the public witness of the church is addressing accurately a cultural context which is diverse, secular, multifaith and suspicious of Christian institutions. The public theology and biblical hermeneutic which underpin the service of the common good must be able to read the signs of the times as they affect the very nature of the gospel and the being of the church.

Through the work of Elenie Poulos, Uniting Justice has produced an increasing range of statements on public issues within the context of a significant theological rationale. These statements are of course occasional in their nature and do not constitute a thorough public hermeneutic of the theological doctrines concerned. In some instances these pamphlets are responses to Assembly resolutions: the 2006 statement on human rights led to the publication of Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person; the 2006 resolution on climate change led to For the Sake of the Planet and all its People. The most significant of these publications arose out of the 2009 Assembly. Poulos oversaw the writing of An Economy of Life: Re-imagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World. This document could be likened to a prototype. It is the most comprehensive illustration of what a Uniting Church perspective on the common good might look like. It names problems; it conjures up a vision of 'love and wholeness', of life lived abundantly. The overriding metaphor of economy binds the primary dominant discourse at work in the contemporary world while opening up the prospect of an overt theological response. Poulos refers to the divine 'economy' and how this ancient Christian idea presupposed the management of God's household of creation. The temptation in much talk about the common good is to focus on hope and idealism. The Moderator countered that a little in his address through his counsel of how hard it is 'let go of our comforts', 'relinquish our prejudices and narrow loyalties' and 'our power and wealth'. Poulos speaks of sin—and rightly so. There is a theological rigour here that captures the role of Scripture and exemplary stories but thickens the content with overt theological reference. The Christian is called to be a disciple who is a citizen and willing to live 'a different story'. For a more complete rendering of a public theology in the Uniting Church this particular pamphlet could be aligned with Moe-Lobeda's text for the Evangelical Lutheran Church on what it means to be a public church. The seeds are there.

Speaking together

Such an approach could also be undergirded by the methodological work of Ann Wansbrough. Her doctoral thesis is an ecumenical reading of how the Australian churches have striven to 'speak together' on matters of public policy.32 Wansbrough is alive to the church's call to fulfill a prophetic calling. The National Council of Churches came into being in 1994 with the intention of proclaiming a 'prophetic word' to both the church and the nation. It saw itself as more than a lobby group serving a fashionable cause; its purpose was not simply to condemn unjust practices but also where appropriate to affirm.33 The overarching vision was one of justice, peace and integrity of creation.

33 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', p. 15
The presenting issues in the public domain that Wansbrough addresses have to do with indigenous matters, unemployment, industrial relations, families, environment and housing. All of these issues are informed and affected by the most basic problem area, which is economic. But these debates are, in a sense, incidental. Wansbrough's primary aim is to concentrate on the methodology of the ecumenical partners individually and collectively. She was particularly sensitive to this need because the early statements made on behalf of the National Council of Churches tended to outline 'general directions' rather than being constructed along the lines of an overt methodology. Wansbrough was prepared to concede that such directions appeared to be middle axioms but the statements themselves left the method implied. Her critical inquiry was determined, though, by the need to address a handful of strategic questions: what does it mean to speak 'on behalf of' or 'act in solidarity' with? Does the methodology adequately reflect the member church's traditions? Will it enable the churches to recognize what oppressed people need them to say and do? Will it enable the churches to speak responsibly and credibly in the Australian policy context?

Wansbrough's most distinctive ecumenical contribution lies in her close analysis of the policy-making context. She discerns how the prospective role a church may play needs to negotiate the complexities of power surrounding who determines policy and sets the agenda, and what makes policy effective. Wansbrough is an activist and researcher; her practical experience is evident in her discussion of the structure of policy formation. There is frank recognition of how policy 'is not merely the expression of values as if it were an abstract philosophical task'. It leads to 'control over the life of others'. The perceived need to influence this expression of power requires then awareness as to how policy directions are formed. Who has the decision-making power? How is covert and latent power to be discerned? Wansbrough's thesis is at its most astute at this point. She surveys the roles of parliamentary speeches, the work of the cabinet committee, the Senate, question time, reports, the professional bureaucrats, the treasury and the legal system.

Moreover, Wansbrough argues that the Basis of Union lays a foundation for the Uniting Church not to be 'afraid to confront the world with rigorous thought and spiritual commitment'. The confession of its being a pilgrim church assumes an openness to change; its theology, and especially its ecclesiology, embraces a 'sense of self-suspicion'; the transcendent is retained but not without due awareness of the need to take seriously empirical realities in the light of critical theory. Wansbrough draws upon paragraph 3 to claim that 'the work of Christ not just about the justification of individuals but is about the renewal of the whole of humankind and creation'. The church is called to be a 'community of reconciliation' within its own being as well as within society at large. It is a vantage point which Wansbrough argues

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34 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', pp. 32–36.
35 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', p. 16.
37 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', p. 43.
38 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', p. 185.
39 Wansbrough, 'Speaking Together', pp. 188–89.
is in keeping with the World Council of Churches’ emerging understanding of how the kingdom of God is related to the struggles of history. From a theological perspective the church is called to engage with what the 1980 ecumenical document, ‘Your Kingdom Come’ termed ‘our penultimate struggles’. Wansbrough has a fine sensitivity not so much to doctrines of the two kingdoms, which can at times dominate public theology; her focus is rather on the intersection of eschatology and the temporal. Being a Lutheran, Moe-Lobeda is interested in the two kingdoms; Wansbrough anticipates Pickard’s ‘seeking church’ and helps to align the commitment of the Uniting Church to be a public church along a travelling and pilgrim axis.

The importance of being bilingual

This particular focus on method is as timely as was the Moderator’s address. For the sake of a flourishing public faith there will also need to be a greater degree of insight into various models of the way the church functions, how language can differ depending upon which model is operating, and which sphere of the public forum is being addressed.

In terms of the politics of the church, there is a bilingual and bivocational task. The language we use can often become a symbol of identity, belonging and ownership. The point of potential tension is most evident in the work of ecclesial agencies and church schools. For the Uniting Church the most vulnerable area here has been the place of Uniting Care. The merits of its activities can hardly be denied: the various expressions of Uniting Care have demonstrated a concern for advocacy, the aged, mental health, children at risk, and those suffering from addiction. The agency represents an unprecedented level of public service. The dilemma that can surface, however, is one of competing commitments and compliance. This manifests itself in membership of boards, organisational structure, the competencies that are prioritised, and the imperative to meet external standards. The agency can begin to look like a parallel organisation, unconnected to its ecclesial host. It is at this point that language matters. The common practice has been to identify a set of ‘core values’ that serves a vision dedicated to a ‘just, fair and compassionate society’. These values represent the way in which the agency is ‘expressing our Christian faith’. The particular values selected have to do with social justice, respect, integrity, care, and responsiveness. A sense of well-being, optimism and hope surrounds this terminology. It is not difficult to establish a connection between the various words used and a raft of biblical and theological ideas. The awkwardness that sometimes arises though is that these links are not explicit. The agency can become, as it were, an expression of a ‘religionless’ Christianity. Such a case study is interesting in terms of how a denomination engages with the common good. The issues at stake are not merely to do with the wording of particular values and what that might signify. There is work for the institutional the church and its membership to do. The critical issue is whether agencies like Uniting Care and Uniting Justice might build upon the diaconal model elaborated by Avery Dulles,64 and let an interpretation of its strengths and weaknesses be informed by the discourse surrounding what it means to be a public church. The

denomination itself might then need to realize that its life and witness operate under an intersection of Dulles' other models—institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald and servant, as well as the diaconal. The difference between the agency and the institution is one of emphasis: the public nature of the diaconal model is more strongly accentuated for those agencies which engage with the public sphere in a different manner than does a synod, presbytery, or congregation.

Back to the beginning

The Moderator's theme of 'uniting for the common good' is rich and full of promise. The address itself was of the moment. The challenge it presents is how to weave these diverse threads together into a more comprehensive understanding of what it means for disciples to be citizens and neighbours, ready to serve the flourishing of all—for Christ's sake. A critical dimension to the Moderator's 'now' is the necessity of a public theology which embraces a resilient and flexible ecclesiology and which has the capacity to ask searching questions about the too-easy use of the language of 'mission'.