

"BUILDING A FUTURE"

Report for Blackwood Uniting Meeting of the Congregation May 25, 2014

1. THE DILEMMA

Change is the constant today. The Church is gradually realising this. The Uniting Church's Discussion Paper, "*Changing Landscapes*" reported in June 2013 noting the following –

- The number of part-time ministry positions is increasing exponentially.
- The Pastoral Relations/Placements Committee is facing assessments re the financial sustainability for placements more often these days.
 - Many treasurers tell us that they can plot out "*when the money runs out*".
- Many of us feel as if we are doing all we can. We are tired. Those of us who are left wonder how long we can keep the sense of responsibility that has kept "the show on the road" for years.
- Many of our congregations are aging.
 - As the NCLS results would suggest, the average age of the UCA survey respondents was 62 years, with 42% aged 70 years or older.
 - Only 8% of the respondents were aged 15-29 years.

These stats may mean that our numbers become very thin in the next ten years or so. Many of our wider church UC leaders informally predict that we will have 30% fewer churches within the next 5 years.

- For some, the buildings have become both our centre and our challenge. We are becoming focused on our survival rather than the mission of God.

We would say that much of this is a 'fit' for Blackwood Uniting Church. In seeking to engage in this discussion and 'build a future', Church Council has been wrestling with this change and challenge in [long] meetings over recent months.

The Treasurer and Finance Team have recently presented to Church Council a 5 year cash flow projection for Blackwood Uniting. Assuming that most things stayed 'as they are' [programs, staffing, giving, and with only minor capital works and maintenance work would lead to several successive deficits over the period 2014 - 2018, of varying levels dependent upon community program receipts and funding. These deficits would necessarily be met out of existing Bank Balances (including bequest money) until Blackwood Uniting could ultimately run out of cash during 2018.

This has been described as the 'do nothing' approach to ministry and mission. Clearly, the 'do nothing' approach is not an option for Blackwood Uniting. If only from a financial point of view, something must change. We can consider a) cutting costs, which means reduce staffing/ministry, b) find other income streams, c) otherwise re-structure. But we must do this not simply to prolong our existing life and mission, but to shape a future life.

In term of property, like any church with buildings which have not had significant re-development for over 40 years the time for some significant re-assessment of property needs for the future needs to be undertaken in the next 3 – 5 years.

II. THE HOPES

In the meantime at its November meeting, the Congregation accepted a 'Strategic Plan' with key focus areas of: [Whilst maintaining the life of worship and care ...] 1. Families and Children's Ministry, 2. Review of Community Programs and 3. Building the Future Church.

All of this needs to take place according to and directed by our purposes and objectives. What is important to us? What do we see Blackwood Uniting Church as existing for?

This question relates to our current review of the Community Programs. We must be asking 'How does the Community Program 'sit' within the aims and purposes of Blackwood Uniting. What are its objectives? We have, as the Blackwood Uniting community, vague and long-held notions of 'being in the Community', of 'service', but in our time of sophistication and refined purposes, these must be 'tightened'; 'Who are we serving? Why?

An emerging theme for us is this; How do we make available what is important to us in this community to a new generation [and possibly not just as 9:15 or 11:00 a.m. worship].

At the April meeting of Church Council we considered the question: What three (3) things are important to me in Blackwood Uniting Church?

- We will be asking this question of community members at the May 25th meeting, as well as sharing the answers of Council members
- We will also be comparing these results with data from the National Christian Life Survey that gives a picture of us as a community.

There are 'ways' of being church that address our dilemmas and provide pathways for the future. A CASE STUDY: Church Council considered the daily emailed (cartoon) Lent Reflections a highlight and also a good means of reaching 'beyond' our existing worship community.

Other potential activities being discussed include:

- Looking for further once-off and other opportunities in faith formation and the practice of spirituality; for example, Christmas 'take home' resources (beyond the expectation of 'Sunday a.m. worship), as we have made available to the people of our existing families ministries ["Messy Church", Playgroup and "Mainly Music"]
- As a provider of (important)'public space' – development of a function centre to cater for community need
- Greater use of internet means of discussion and connection

III. THE BOTTOM LINE

- 1) Our future life needs to be the subject of a continuing discussion. "What 'shape' can the practice of faith take in years to come?"
- 2) This discussion needs a focus on what's important, on goals and objectives
- 3) We must trust in God that just because things are different, doesn't mean loss of all that matters