



Understanding Commonwealth Within the UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Commonwealth - a definition

Commonwealth - a term used by the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, (of the Uniting Church in Australia) to denote 'collective ownership' in the shared interests of the Church;

'shared interests' are established by the Uniting Church in Australia Act, the Uniting Church's *Constitution, Basis of Union* and *Regulations*, and sundry by-laws of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

Judaeo – Christian tradition

Covenant

Understanding the Uniting Church in Australia's commitment to the practice of a common wealth begins with an exploration of the concept of Covenant. For the Uniting Church, the whole Christ event is in itself an act of God's grace. God first approached us and made God's-self known to us through Jesus Christ.

"... In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV) *In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin*" (The *Basis of Union*, para 3)

God's act of grace in Christ is often depicted in biblical imagery as the *New Covenant* between God and people. The concept of Covenant provides a theological foundation for our current understanding of and commitment to commonwealth across the various Councils and communities of the UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

Covenant in Israelite tradition

Israelite identity, spirituality, and consequent tradition are articulated in covenants between God and people. Various covenants between God and people are laid out in the first five books of the Bible. Of these, the focus on the Mosaic covenant God made with the Israelites at Mt Sinai offers a definitive understanding of covenant. Having delivered the Hebrews from slavery in an epoch-making act of grace, God made a Covenant with them. (See Exodus 20:1-22.) Thus, the Mosaic covenant was founded in God's grace, which in turn directed Israelite identity as well as the conduct of the relationship between God and the people bestowed through the Covenant. In fact, the Mosaic covenant continues to define the Israelite nation to this day.

The Mosaic Covenant also provided various mechanisms, practices for observing the 'terms and conditions' of the covenant in the daily, seasonal, yearly and generational life of the community. These provisions guided the conduct of relations between God and the people, between persons, persons and groups, relatives and strangers, tribes and other nations. Among these provisions are the practices of Sabbath and Jubilee. Jubilee was a social and communal practice designed to ensure that the Israelites experienced the reality of the Covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites. According to the book of Leviticus, Jubilee was to be proclaimed on a regular and cyclical basis.

"The images of Sabbath and Jubilee ... offer a counter to a society, whose





economic and social systems were based on values antithetical to those of the reign of God. They speak powerfully of the need for rest, for humans and the land, and of the importance of equity in society. The Law in ancient Israel, which included prescriptions for caring for widows and orphans (the most vulnerable in terms of isolation from the care of community), for regularly writing off the personal debt of the poor, and resting the land so it might recover from continued use and restoring it to its original caretakers, provided some redress for the excesses which affected people's wellbeing and the sustainability of the earth.

Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah, responding to the political and economic hardships of their time in ancient Israel, called the people to account before God, for failing to remember their history as the people of God, worshipping idols, and allowing injustice and oppression to affect the most vulnerable in their society.”¹

The scriptures reflect various understandings of the occurrences and practices of Jubilee. There is some evidence that Jubilee presented practical problems for a largely agrarian society. In particular, cities provided a significant challenge to the original practices of Jubilee. Some provisions about redeeming land and property in cities were substantially modified to suit the realities of urban life. Some scholars suggest that Jubilee ceased to be a common practice after the 8th Century of the Hebrew era.

However difficult Jubilee proved to be in practice, Jubilee continued to be associated with economic traditions - similar to elements of a 'commonwealth' today. *For example:* with respect to community and the land, Jubilee:

focused on justice for families and communities - through restoring ownership of land and property to original owners or their heirs, including those held by bond in service

restored persons to the community - through manumitting bonds of service

guaranteed provision - to cover the Sabbath

enabled restoration of the earth - through provision for fallow land.

The New Covenant and commonwealth in Christian tradition

“The Christian story is the story of God in Jesus Christ: Jesus, the incarnation of the God whose very nature is love, who came to announce good news for the poor in the tradition of the ancient Hebrew prophets and in fulfilment of the Jubilee.”²

Christians understand that the whole Christ event is in itself an act of God's grace. God first approached us and made God's-self known to us through Jesus Christ. Thus, “*We love, because God first loved us...*” (1 John 4:19)

For the Uniting Church in Australia:

“... *In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin*”
(The *Basis of Union*, para 3)

Luke / Acts uses the imagery of the New Covenant and Jubilee as one of several lenses through which to see the good news of Jesus' Way (*For example*, see Luke 4:18-19; Acts 4:32-37). Hebrews also adopts the imagery of New Covenant. These writings of the early church depict the whole Christ event as a *New Covenant* between God and humanity, impacting all creation. (See: Hebrews 8:8-12, *cf* Jeremiah 31:31-34; also Luke 22:20; 1

¹ *An Economy of Life: Reimagining Human Progress For A Flourishing World*, Twelfth Assembly, The Uniting Church in Australia; Resolution 09.21

² *Ibid.*



Corinthians 11:25!; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 9:15; Hebrews 12:24.)

The early churches, it seems, were aware of the Jubilee concept, because they appear to have continued a Jewish practice of sharing assets to the benefit of the community. For example: Acts 4:32-37 suggests that property was held in common, or at least for the common good.

However, there is one significant difference between the way the Israelites and the Christians considered the respective covenants with respect to a Promised Land. In the Mosaic Covenant, the land was given to the Hebrew people as a whole. Each tribe and family had a portion in it. This portion was seen as a gift from God, to be restored every fifty years at the year of Jubilee to each family that had lost the land through circumstance. Participation in the commonwealth of the Promised Land was not contingent on a land ownership which could be lost or gained, but upon belonging to God's people. God's people were obliged to provide out of the goodness of the Promised Land for any covenant member who was in trouble such as the widow and the orphan. To fail to do so was a serious breach of the covenant. God's love and gracious promise belonged to all his people in a spiritual and an economic way.

For Christians, the New Covenant through Jesus was seen as continuing the promises of the Old Covenant, but in modified form. There was no longer a promise of a *particular* land or *place*. The New Covenant established a more universal relationship of grace between God and all God's people. (See Galatians 3:26-29.) The people of this new community belonged to each other. They instantly recognized whatever property they owned as being like 'the Promised Land'- a gracious provision from God. Therefore, all members of God's family had a share in it, just as all members of God's family had a share (future inheritance) in everything God 'owned'. (See 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, and Matthew 5:5.) This commonwealth, established through a shared participation in the body of Christ, is an insight that underpins this often overlooked element of Jesus' teaching. (See Mk 10:28-3)

It is not surprising then, that the early church immediately and intuitively shared what might previously have been deemed 'private property' with others who shared in this New Covenant with God. If you belonged to God's people, then they belonged to you; everyone and everything owned belonged to God. The earliest language of the Eucharist would have reinforced this belonging together in God's promised commonwealth. (See 1 Cor. 10:25.)

Luke suggests that property was held in common or at least for the common good. (See Acts 4:32-37) The early church also encouraged a 'common fund' for taking care of orphans, widows and others unable to care for themselves. Paul encouraged generosity, collecting funds from newly established churches to be shared with the Christians in Jerusalem and perhaps in other places, too.

The Uniting Church in Australia and commonwealth

The Uniting Church in Australia is composed of inter-related Councils. Under the *Constitution* and the *Basis of Union*, each Council participates in the shared interests of the Church. These include people, ministries and capital assets. By so doing, the Church continues to acknowledge God's grace with respect to its understanding of the many gifts it has received. The *Constitution* provides for the practice of a commonwealth through the interconnectedness of the various Councils of the Uniting Church in Australia.

The Church is at the same time both universal and local. Establishing a commonwealth within the Church ensures that all councils may participate in discerning and allocating the shared interests of the Church. Through this commonwealth the various councils of the Church serve the ministry and mission functions of the Church in local, regional, national and international contexts.



Thus, there is a strong sense in which the practice of a commonwealth by the Uniting Church gives practical expression to the theological concept of a New Covenant with respect to possessions of the Church.

The UCA holds its key 'assets' in a 'commonwealth' for the benefit of the vocation of the Church, the *whole people* of God called and sent into God mission, including:

- *The members of the church* - every member of the church is 'endowed with a diversity of gifts ... there is no gift without its corresponding service' (BoU para 13) This leads to a 'stewardship of faith' in which every baptised person participates. Baptism is the sacrament by which belonging to the Body of Christ is initiated. In baptism each person receives both the gifts of the Spirit and the commission to Christ's mission in the world. All baptised persons are ministers of the gospel. In baptism each received a commission to Christ's mission in the world. Ministry is held in commonwealth, the *whole* people of God. While an individual's membership may be associated with a particular congregation, one is baptised into the Church as a *whole* people of God.
- *Ministers of the Word and Deacons* – ordained members of the Church, called by God and set apart by the Church to various ministries; available to be placed wherever the Church may require such ministry as agreed by the various Councils of the Church, ('to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world' BoU para 14.)
- *funds* – are held in Trust and operated by the various Councils of the Church through interconciliar agreement and procedures, such as *The Regulations* and *Synod By-Laws*.
- *properties* – are held in Trust and operated by the various Councils of the Church through interconciliar agreement or arrangements, such *The Regulations* and *Synod By-Laws*.

Economic structures

The Church as the body of Christ expresses the economic dimension of its life by the ways in which it defines, allocates and uses available resources. At all times and in all cases, the gospel (See the *Basis of Union*, Para 3) is the means by which the church evaluates the integrity of its economic structures. Current provisions for the economic structures of the Church include the following.

1. The UCA holds its property assets *in Trust*. The Uniting Church in Australia Act of Parliament (Victoria), (Clause 13), established *The Trust* as a way of holding, managing and administering all properties that we hold in common.

The *Constitution* of the Uniting Church in Australia, Division 5 (Funds and Property), and esp. para 51 and 52 notes the following with respect to the Church's Property and Funds

- a. *Beneficial ownership* – use provisions Div 5 para 50 – where 'beneficial ownership' has been understood as 'beneficial use' for clarity throughout the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
- b. that *the Synod regulates the prescribed provisions* for lease and creation of property, after the manner prescribed by the Assembly (para 54)
- c. *beneficial use confers a type of 'custodianship'* - in the sense that the council or agency to whom *beneficial use* has been allocated may make *use* of the property for ministry or mission purposes but does not 'own' the property in the secular legal sense. Therefore, all property '*used*' by the *beneficial user* must be maintained in such a way that it may be passed by allocation to another beneficial user in due course or as circumstances require from time to time.



2. The Synod 's functions with respect to property of the Church are laid out in *Regulation 4.2.1*. These functions include:
 - a. *creating policies to guide* the creation, development and use of properties
 - b. *allocating beneficial use*
 - c. *implementing policies* for the purchase, sale, lease, and development of Church properties.

Congregations' functions with respect to property are laid out in *Regulation 4.4.1*.

3. The Board of Mission and Resourcing (BOMAR) administrates the practical application of a commonwealth approach to property
 - a. in cases of purchase, sale, lease, and development of Church properties
 - b. allocation of funds and resources to enable any of the above.

BOMAR initiates policies and procedures to ensure that the Church's income from funds generated by sale of properties are distributed to the benefit of the Church's witness and service in the Synod, presbytery and locally.

The benefits of a commonwealth

The notion of a commonwealth is for many people and organizations a counter cultural way to understanding property, rights and economics. Although as Australian's we are familiar with the concept of a 'commonwealth' through political structures, sometimes such a concept is lost in the nitty gritty of political power plays and seeking advantage over another State, Territory, institution or group. Sometimes issues arise that challenge the notion of a 'commonwealth'. Water rights and the proper allocation of water to the various industries and environment of the Murray Darling Basin is a current example of a severe challenge to Australian's commitment to the commonwealth. Likewise, the Church often experiences issues that challenge members' commitments to a commonwealth. Dispersing funds from the sale of property is one issue with potential to raise a case for exemptions when it comes to the actual allocation.

For the Uniting Church, there are many benefits associated with the practice a commonwealth such as the following.

1. *The Church as Communion and community*. The Church is a community, formed to a particular purpose by virtue of its nature:
"to serve God's healing purposes for all the world as God's witnessing people to all of the world"
 Darrel Guder, *Walking Worthily*, PTS Bulletin, Vol 28 2007.
 Central to the life and witness of the Uniting Church is the Lord's Supper – a sacrament that gives expression to a commonwealth. All are welcome at this table of the Lord, not by reason of social status, ethnicity, age, or gender - but on the basis of the invitation issued by the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Around this table, each is recognized and known by her or his belonging in Christ.

A commonwealth approach assists the Church to practice gospel values and beliefs that are at the heart of its nature and critical to its purpose, such as:

- *extravagant compassion*
- *liberating love*
- *reconciliation and justice*



- *priority concern for the least, the last and the lost*
- *grace in all relationships*

When all elements of the Church express these values in practical actions associated with its capacities, gifts and assets the Church demonstrates a different way to that of the dominant culture. This is the Way of Jesus.

The Church also enters into covenants or agreements whereby injustice through inequitable allocations of assets can be addressed. Thus, the promise of a way of being consistent with gospel becomes real, observable and open to exploration.

2. *The Church as promise and movement.* The Church is called to be a movement rather than an institution - a movement of people, listening to discern God's calling and Christ's sending into the world in the presence and power of the Spirit. The Church has a missionary purpose. The church is not an end in itself. In this sense the Church is at once and always a '*pilgrim people, on the way to the promised end*'. The practice of a commonwealth is significant. A commonwealth
 - a. *enables the missionary purposes of the Church.* Any property the Church holds is for the sake of the missionary purposes of the Church. Property is one asset the Church brings to its being called and sent into God's mission. Property is one of the tools that the Church has at its disposal in '*servicing God's healing purposes for all the world as God's witnessing people to all the world*'.
 - b. *encourages flexibility and adaptability.* As needs change over time, reallocation of beneficial use can be negotiated, ensuring that any particular property can be disposed of or retained, purchased, reconfigured or redeveloped for the best possible use according to the vocation of the particular Church bodies in their context.
 - c. *ensures practicality.* Properties can be imagined, designed and developed to suit a wide range of applications rather than a single use; or alternatively properties can be altered to suit uses different from those for which they might first have been created.
 - d. *requires commitment to asset sharing.* A commonwealth approach ensures that assets which might have reached a 'use-by-date' with respect to one expression of the Church's vocation can be transferred to another beneficial user and reconfigured to suit a refreshed vocation.
 - e. *engages collaborative power sharing.* There is a place at the table for all expressions of the Church, irrespective of the status, wealth or capacity of each, to share in the distribution of the assets of the Church according to what has been discerned as a priority mission-focused use of the property. Responsibility and accountability occur within a collaborative rather than hierarchical social structure. (This is what is meant by interconciliar structures. Each council participates in discerning and deciding the allocation of 'beneficial use'.)
 - f. *positions property as a resource to enhance the gifts of the Spirit.* The Spirit of God gives diverse gifts to the church, enabling the Church to be faithful in heeding its call to God's mission. The Church also acknowledges the Spirit's generosity in its approach to its assets and looks to see how the allocation and use of the property is consistent with faithfully witnessing to Christ. Thus, the Spirit's gifts for ministry and the Church's property are brought together to serve the vocation of the Church. The way in which Church property is held, allocated and used is one element of the Church being perceived as a 'sign', or 'foretaste' of the reign of God. Through the character of its operation of The Church's commonwealth the Church bears witness to Christ, showing another way to those of the surrounding institutions and cultures.





- g. *makes the resources of the Church available for allocation according to the Holy Spirit's direction.* A missional Church understands that all structures and assets are provisional upon the Spirit's calling to God's mission. The Church is therefore not so much a settled people, with its members bound closely to particular land and buildings, but a people on the move. Sometimes this will mean properties are sold and new ones built or purchased. At other times being on move may suggest leased properties rather than owned properties. Always, the operation of the commonwealth depends on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all matters of discerning God's mission. Various Councils of the Church are encouraged to regularly engage in faithful discernment of their calling, asking '*what does God want to do?*' They work to discern what they will do to faithfully exercise being sent into God's mission in their locality or region. That the properties of the Church are held in a commonwealth is an advantage to the consequent reallocation of property because it is possible to connect a particular expression of the Church with specific property.

What does a commonwealth require of Church members?

Living and operating in a society that holds very different values and beliefs to those of the Church about property means giving attention to several matters,

1. *Disposition* – It is the way of the world to 'build and settle'. Pilgrimage is acceptable if it is temporary. However, the Church is called to the disposition of its Lord: to be a sign, an instrument of God's reign wherever its members find themselves. The Church is not to a settled people, but a people faithful to the Spirit's calling to God's mission in the world. The Church's disposition is to "*an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.*" (*Basis of Union*, para 3)
2. *Discipleship* – Christians are people, too. And just like all people, Christians can find it easy to become acquisitive of property, which often leads to resentment and jealousy. Attention to personal Christian disciplines and collective Christian practices that sustain the mind of Christ within and amongst us all is essential. This is the way to be liberated from the dominant worldviews that may clamour for attention and demand satisfaction. Even so, there may well be times when people involved struggle to move beyond past understandings and practices.

For example: For the 'builder generation' transforming one form of an asset into another – physical effort and skills - into a building. Selling a building or land that was once gained at considerable expense and personal effort can seem wasteful, or at least neglectful or disrespectful of other people's history. However, if the building is considered as one 'form' of an asset, and the funds generated by its sale are considered as another 'form' of the same asset to be utilised in another way, then perhaps the notion of 'asset transformation' can help us to see that the sale is not wasteful. In fact, the asset remains, only its 'form' has changed. [NOTE: This concept is a significant to social enterprise and community development, where what has value is considered in more than economic or structural terms.]

3. *Discernment* – The various Councils of the Church can discern separately and together what a faithful response to God's calling requires of the Church with respect to the capacities, gifts, funds and properties of the Church. Shared discernment can provide a common ground for trust and a willingness to be permission giving rather than permission withholding. Various resources provide practical guidance for corporate discernment, which can be easily accessed from the Synod office or UniChurch Books.





4. *Determination* – Faithfulness to God and the gospel is the prerequisite for a Christ-like determination. Upholding in practice the meaning of the phrase, “Whose we are” is more important than “who we are”, means commitment to self awareness, learning, forgiveness and reconciliation. The *Manual for Meetings* provides practical guidance for the conduct of Church meetings for Councils and Boards and committees, settings in which much of the business around the Church’s commonwealth occur.

Through the practice of a commonwealth, the Uniting Church continues the theological heritage of the Covenant - accepting and celebrating God’s grace amongst us – and benefits all of its members, Councils, agencies, Boards and institutions that together seek to discern God callings and to be faithfully sent into God’s mission in the world.

There are many stories that can be told of how the Church’s practice of a commonwealth has enabled faithful Christians to follow Jesus Way and benefited communities. Through continuing commitment to the practice of a commonwealth, the Uniting Church expresses the counter cultural way - typical of God’s New Covenant - to that of secular society with respect to its available resources.

John A Emmett
Mission Catalyst
Research and Development
The Commission for Mission
February 2011.

