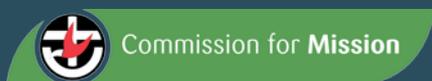


On the Way Together

*The Uniting Church's 40 Years in the
Wilderness*

By John Bottomley



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ON THE WAY TOGETHER: the Uniting Church's 40 years in the wilderness

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John Bottomley asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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John Bottomley
Deputy Director
Creative Ministries Network

May 2014

Foreword

One of the more haunting stories of the Older Testament is the one that provides a context to the ancient but better-known story of Moses and the Hebrew people escaping from Egypt.

This is what the First Testament says: “And Pharaoh gave this command to the over-seers. Until now you have provided these people with straw for brick-making. Do so no longer. Let them go and gather straw for themselves. And what is more, you are to get from them the same number of bricks as before – there will be no reduction in quantity”.

The relationship between people and work, power and oppression is as old as the hills, but it’s one that has been ignored too often and for too long.

This report is good news for the Uniting Church. It speaks into a terminal division in our understanding of who we are as church, a division that is draining the life out of us, crisis by crisis, year by year. This division is the yawning gap between the UCA’s theological formation, and the formation of our lay members in their working lives. Now, with data from the National Church Life Survey, John Bottomley has given the church a missiological perspective on our plight that makes sense of our business failures at a corporate level, and identifies a vital cause of our steadily declining congregational membership at a local level.

The provocative title for this report indicates this terminal division in the life of the Uniting Church has been with us since church union, if not earlier. Simply put, the Australian church has largely ignored the experience of people in paid employment. If many of our lay leaders are first shaped by their experience of the free market, too many of our clergy have been formed by a theological world view and ministry practice arising from their experience of home, family, and neighbourhood. We have divided work from faith, so that our business decisions are only weakly formed by a corporate/’churchly’ sense of our vocational response to God’s mission in the world, while our theological decisions are uncritically detached justifications for ‘our mission’. This has made us a house divided, and the metaphor of ‘wilderness’ is an evocative image of what life in the UCA feels like in the Commission for Mission and the Synod, as well as at Presbytery and the local level of our congregations.

One part of what makes this report good news for the UCA is that it reveals our fundamental captivity to the modern world’s (pretty successful) attempt to marginalise awareness of God’s providence in the world, and evacuate the discourse of faith from public affairs. It is an act of God’s love that reveals our sin and our failures, and which calls us to turn around and pray for the openness to hear again God’s purpose for our lives. This report speaks generously of a remnant of lay people who remain faithful to God’s call on their lives for their discipleship in their workplace. About two-thirds have heard God’s call to vocational obedience at work, and one-

third of those surveyed said their work was a vocation rather than a career or a job. The fundamental importance of this statistic is that it indicates that God remains faithful to us even in our wilderness wandering. God still calls lay people and the church to the joy of service in the whole of life.

As an industrial chaplain for 10 years before my ministry in the Synod, I never tired of the delight I found in being met by workers on the shop floor who wanted to engage me in their concerns and joys, and to reflect on how faith may deepen their understanding of their situation. As this report notes, work may be a source of harm to employed people. And this harm can have terrible consequences for their lives and for their faith. For some, the pastoral support of their minister has been invaluable. But more often it is the support of friends in the congregation that makes a difference. How sad it is to then read that, for some, the failure of the church to be in solidarity with them during an experience of injustice at work has left them unsure of their faith and alone in their congregation.

In the UCA, we are not accustomed to the concept of 'formation' apart from recent developments in theological education. But this report uses the concept of 'formation' to understand how the church has failed too many of our lay people (and their ministers) to integrate their faith with their work. The concept brings into play the spiritual forces Paul identified as the 'principalities and powers', which are the gifts of God in creation that we humans have turned into idols to save us from tough times. Like the world around us, the church has too easily become captive to the world's idolatry of its scientific world view, technology, progress and the free market. In particular, the UCA inaugural Assembly appears to have accepted a benign view of work, and in doing so, from that date on abdicated responsibility for engaging with the lived experience of our members in their struggle with the 'principalities and powers' made manifest in their workplaces.

My own formation for ordained ministry emphasised that the Church's response to God's mission in the world was through worship and ministry. This report emphasises the critical role of worship in the formation of Christian disciples. It is sobering that only one-third of Australian church attenders said their churches' public worship addressed issues that concern them in their paid employment. Perhaps the surprise is that the percentage is that high when only one per cent of clergy said they often preach on employment issues, and only five per cent of leaders/church administrators said their church offered targeted programs on faith and employment. These findings have significant implications for the Commission for Mission. So we look forward to our partnership with the Creative Ministries Network in supporting a network of ministers and their congregations to focus intentionally on developing prayers, liturgies and pastoral responses that attend to God's mission at work.

Those who saw their work as a vocation (calling) were more likely to say their working life has contributed to their growth in faith. This indicates to me that the importance given to their vocation by lay people will be critical to how we develop support for them. For example, those

who saw their work in faith terms as a calling were more likely to say their faith influenced their behaviour on a range of work-related issues, and those UCA attenders who saw their work as a vocation were more likely to have integrated their faith and work. The foundation for our response to the support needs of our members in their working lives is to be found in God's calling them to their work.

This report is at times quite painful to read, because it draws attention to a disjunction between the self-congratulatory language we so easily use in the UCA, and the reality we are living with. From the inaugural Assembly's 'address to the nation', which promised we would address injustice wherever it occurred, to the reality our church worship centres are increasingly bereft of members in paid work, the UCA's journey since union has about it the sense of a church that has lost its way in Australian society. Which brings me back to the disturbing image in the report's title. Perhaps we have been on the way together. But what if the way we are on is not the 'Way' of Christ? What if we have lost our way? If that is true, the Basis of Union promises that we can turn to the Holy Spirit to help us find our way, as the Spirit did for the first slaves who became lost in the wilderness after escaping from captivity in Egypt.

At the Commission for Mission, we welcome this report because it reminds us that our ministry and worship is to serve God's mission in the world. The report reminds us that God continues to call us individually and as church to take up our vocations and serve God's mission, especially today, in the world of work.

Rev David Pargeter
Executive Director
Commission for Mission

June 2014

Introduction

At the 1977 inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), the Assembly made a 'Statement to the Nation' that pledged the UCA 'to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur'. In relation to work, the Assembly affirmed the rights of all people to 'employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available'. Finally the Assembly affirmed 'that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass'.

During almost forty years, many in the UCA have referred back with a deep sense of pride to this statement, which committed the church to correcting injustice, and affirming human rights and Christians' first allegiance to God. Now, data from a recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS) provides an opportunity to examine the church's commitment in the field of work, and specifically, church members' work in paid employment.

The datasets are derived from the multi-denominational NCLS, which is a partnership of three Australian Christian denominations (Anglican, Uniting Church and Catholic) with the Australian Catholic University. The NCLS has collected data from congregations/parishes, churchgoers and local church leaders from approximately 20 Christian denominations (Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) across Australia every five years from 1991. Data for this report was collected in 2011, and has been obtained from three survey formats.

First, church attenders filled out a hard copy "Attender Survey" form. Second, a single leader/administrator in each church completed an "Operations Survey" form about the activities and operations of the church. Third, a "Leader Survey" form was completed by leaders (including clergy and pastors, elders, church councillors and others) in the congregation/parish.¹

About fifteen per cent of attenders received one of 28 small sample survey forms, which were included at random in the bundle of survey forms ordered by a church. One of these small survey forms was concerned with church attenders' paid employment and their faith. This small sample survey was therefore a random sample of the total participants, and was completed by 1395 respondents, of whom 105 were UCA church attenders. Of the 1395 respondents, 140 didn't answer any of the questions in the faith and work section of the survey. People who had never been in paid employment were asked to leave the section blank.

¹ R. Powell, NCLS, email to the author, 2014

About half (53%) of the UCA respondents had professional occupations compared with 43 per cent of respondents from other denominations. There was little difference between the percentages of respondents across all other occupations (employers, skilled and semi-skilled, and farmers) except for the 21 per cent in admin/sales occupations amongst the other denominations, compared with twelve per cent amongst UCA respondents.

In 2011, there were four variants of the Leader Survey, each of which was assigned at random to participating church leaders, and each constituting a quarter of the sample. One of these included questions about faith and work. The random sampling used for these survey forms means the results may be generalized to the population being researched, within accepted statistical conventions.

For perhaps the first time in Australia, the NCLS provides an opportunity to study the extent to which UCA attenders in particular and Australian church attenders in general have been shaped or formed by their church to exercise Christian discipleship in their places of paid employment. For UCA church attenders, the inaugural Assembly declared to the nation that Christian discipleship entailed a commitment to correcting injustice, affirming human rights and affirming that members' first allegiance was to God. This report assumes the Assembly, in referring to God's judgement of all nations, understood that God's judgement of 'policies and actions' refers to every sphere of life, including Australia's world of paid employment.

The results reported from the 2011 NCLS have been weighted to adjust for variations in participation levels across denominations and regions, so that the results are as representative as possible of the Australian churchgoing population.

Formation for the good life in the modern world: *the church's circumscribed role*

Q: Would you be able to introduce yourself to the workshop by answering the following? When did you know that God had called you to be a leader in your UC congregation? Describe the character of the God who has called you, the God you have come to know. What is God calling you to at present?

A: These are very personal (and to some people very private) questions. To be honest, these are questions that I don't ever remember discussing in a UC context, even in small study groups. So to open up about these sort of personal understandings ... may not suit everyone (UC congregation secretary).²

The Assembly's statement implied that the UCA will nurture or shape its members so they are committed to correcting injustice and affirming human rights. The statement also implied that this task of Christian formation is vital for the life and witness of the Church, because there are in national and international life other claims on the allegiance of Christians and the Church. There are competing spiritualities that form human persons and their hearts' desires for their lives in today's world. Human beings are formed by the identity-forming practices of the particular worlds they inhabit. The cultural practices and institutions of each particular world aim to shape the humans living in that world toward their vision of a good life.³

A primary identity-forming practice of the modern world is human work, and specifically, paid work. The world of 'modernity' was shaped by the human work of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment period in 18th century Europe. The present day identity of western people has been formed through the intellectual and moral vision of Enlightenment thinkers, whose vision of a good life was a new society where humans could take their destiny into their own hands, and set human welfare as the ultimate goal of human labours.⁴

² Author's notes, CMN workshop for congregation leaders, 2011.

³ J. K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: worship, worldview and cultural formation*, 2009, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, USA, pp. 37-40.

⁴ T. Todorov, *In defence of the Enlightenment*, 2009, Atlantic Books, GB, p. 2.

'Modernity' is the term that summarises three critical developments of what can be called an Enlightenment project, which finds fulfilment in the belief we are all autonomous human beings.⁵ First, the scientific revolution carried the promise that humankind could learn the secrets of nature, and leave behind superstition and religion. Reason was given priority as an instrument of knowledge over faith. Second, scientific method privileged the knowledge of objective facts over human feelings, and located facts in the rational public world of science, while relegating emotions and beliefs, including what were described as 'religious' beliefs, to the private sphere of home and family. Third, scientific method also asserted that human reason better explained human affairs than "religious cosmologies"⁶, so belief in God was also consigned to the private realm.⁷

The application of these beliefs in Europe of the 18th century led to profound transformations in economic, political and social life, including the development of an Industrial Revolution. A 1932 report for the Catholic Social Guild on the impact of these forces on mid-19th century Germany captures the dimensions of the 'vigorous radicalism' caused by this upheaval. 'The loss of the sense of community, with its uprooting effects above all on the working-classes, went on incessantly. It was not only the ancient community of work that was destroyed: at the same time the community of the family had also been perceptibly shaken. The process went still farther when the Industrial Revolution destroyed home-work by most of its operations and when machine-work attracted women and children into mills and factories.'⁸

Enlightenment beliefs ascribed to human work the purpose of contributing to the means of production to produce economic wealth and a market economy, by which autonomous human beings could inevitably progress towards a unified, peaceful and harmonious world. The ideology forming modern work was a worldview integrating the beliefs, values, ideas and norms of Enlightenment thinkers, which are devoted to the all-encompassing social goal of personal and social progress carried forward by the work of autonomous human beings. The work of autonomous human beings is thus placed at the heart of each development in the belief system of modernity.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, the forces of modernity had reshaped Australian economic and social life along similar lines to the developments in Germany and the U.K. earlier that

⁵ J. Middleton, and B. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1995, pp. 13-27.

⁶ B.A. Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World*. Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999, p. 97.

⁷ op cit, Middleton and Walsh,

⁸ T. Brauer, *The Catholic Social Movement in Germany*, The Catholic Social Guild, Oxford, 1932, p.12.

century. The economy was increasingly based on the notion of a 'free' market, and human participation in the economy was based on the value of both (mostly) men's work to the economy, and their individual effort or paid employment. So the 1880s were marked by the separation of paid work from the home, with the home seen as the soul's defence against the industrial and imagined moral pollution of the city's economic life.

Personal values, emotions, and beliefs such as Christian faith were judged by Enlightenment thinkers to have no place in the competitive work environment, and so were re-assigned by these thinkers to the private sphere of social life to be nurtured in the home⁹. This segregation of work and home into separate worlds, which so well served the needs of industrial expansion in western society, was largely taken for granted by the developing form of a suburban and residentially-based Church. The practical theology and beliefs that developed with this emerging form of church also largely took for granted the belief of the Enlightenment project. By the late 19th century it was widely accepted that the home and family were the Church's primary focus of concern.

Thus by the end of the 19th century, both home and workplace had been substantially formed by the material, embodied practices of modernity. The 'formative rituals' in both spheres acted in concert to shape who or what is the object of Australians' desires. But by the end of the 20th century, there are signs the Australian Church's agreement with its assigned role in modernity had led the Church into a wilderness of declining membership, redundant suburban church buildings, and congregations increasingly bereft of people in paid employment.

This stark reality is a disturbing objective counterpoint to the proud vision for the UCA announced at its inauguration. But what may be said of the interior reality of UCA life and witness? To what extent has the UCA formed its members to seek 'the correction of injustices wherever they occur' in their workplaces? This first of the inaugural Assembly's commitments to the nation will be examined next.

⁹ Davison, G., 1978, The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, p.137

“We are dealing with the restructuring of our work organisation. It is a cost saving exercise that has made positions redundant. I made a stand, and ... I have been isolated and scape-goated by my manager ... people are so fearful about protecting their work, they don't talk to each other”. (UCA member)¹⁰

The UCA 'Statement to the Nation' pledged the church 'to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur'. Abuses of power are one source of injustice in Australian workplaces that may cause harm to employees. Church attenders in the NCLS survey were asked if they had ever experienced harm in a present or previous workplace, that is, harm such as that caused by bullying, discrimination, or an unfair dismissal. Respondents (N=1,073)¹¹ could choose more than one response. Of the valid responses:

- **16.9 per cent said, 'Yes, and I have felt supported by God's presence',**
- **4.6 per cent said, 'Yes, and I have felt supported by the church',**
- **1.9 per cent said, 'Yes, and I have felt cut off from God', and**
- **3.9 per cent said, 'Yes, and I have not felt supported by the church'.**

Due to the small numbers of attenders who felt cut off from God and not supported by the church after experiencing harm at work, NCLS combined the numbers to create one category of 'cut off from God and/or not supported by the church after experiencing harm at work'. This new category was then cross-tabulated with three variables to see if any were correlated with the new category. The three variables were 'attitude to employment' (vocation v career/job), 'occupation' (professional v non-professional), and 'time since last employment' (now employed v previously employed). Only respondents' attitude to their employment had a statistically significant correlation with the new category of cut off from God/not supported by the church. Twenty-two per cent of people who considered their employment as a vocation felt cut off from God/unsupported by the church, compared with five per cent of those who consider their employment as a job/career. While it is important to note the small number of people (N=66) in this cross tabulation, it is also important to note that the attitude of attenders to their employment

¹⁰ J. Bottomley, *The Ministry of Lay People in Paid Employment: a data report*, unpublished report to the Crestonby Fellowship, Australasian Christian Training Centre, Melbourne, 1998, p.2.

¹¹ N = the number of valid responses for this item.

is the only independent variable of the three tested in this study that most often has a statistically significant relationship with a number of dependent variables (see below).

Respondents asked about their attitude to their employment reported on whether they viewed their employment as a vocation, a career or a job. NCLS did not define these variables for respondents, but it is assumed the responses of church attenders reflect common usage. So a vocation may be defined as 'a job or profession you do because you feel it is your purpose in life' or as 'a strong feeling that you should be doing a particular thing with your life, or because you believe that God wants you to do it'. A career is defined as an occupation that is regarded as 'a long-term or life-long activity that offers progress during a person's working life', while a job is 'work you do to earn money'.¹²

The definitions of 'career' and 'job' reflect a utilitarian evaluation of work, that is, the use value of work is evaluated by the contribution human work makes to the beliefs in modernity about attaining the good life. The definition of 'career' reflects a positive evaluation that work is a means to social advancement or personal fulfilment, while the definition of a 'job' carries the negative evaluation that work is a necessity, that is, it is required for a 'greater good'. A vocation may therefore be distinguished from a career or job, as one of its meanings refers to the belief that God has called the respondent to their work, whereas the meaning of a career or job is located in the usefulness of the type of work each represents, either for the individual or for the good of society.

Those who believed their work was a vocation (a calling) were more likely than those who saw their work as a job/career to report that when they experienced harm at work they felt cut off from God and/or not supported by the church. That is, the injustice experienced at work by church attenders with a vocation appears to have a greater impact on their faith in God and their attitude to the church than for those whose work is a job or career.

This finding is congruent with the work of Park and colleagues, who suggest that traumatised people may experience irreconcilable conflict between their global belief structures (how an individual understands the world, including God) and the meaning they attribute to specific events. The resulting distress may lead to a re-evaluation of their global beliefs, such as their trust in God, or a re-evaluation of the specifics of how and why the trauma occurred, such as believing they have been unsupported by their church.¹³

¹² English Assistance Dictionary (U.K): Microsoft Word

¹³ See in K. Drescher, D. Foy, 'When horror and Loss Intersect: Traumatic Experiences and Traumatic Bereavement', in *Pastoral Psychology*, (2010), 59, p.154

Of 1,073 attenders, equal proportions of those harmed by an injustice at work felt both supported (4.6%) and unsupported (5.1%) by their church. While more UCA members who experienced the injustice of harm at work (N=79) felt unsupported by the church (8.2%) than felt supported by the church (4.9%), this difference is not statistically significant when compared with the other churches. The UCA appears to be no better or no worse than other Australian churches at 'correcting injustices' experienced by their own members from harm they have experienced in their everyday working lives.

Perhaps this is not surprising, as the Assembly statement to the nation takes a rather benign view of work. The only work-related injustice the statement acknowledges is the injustice of unemployment, although the focus on 'dignity in unemployment' is on people out of work, rather than what is happening in the economic, social and political organisation of work. Given that human work has been critical to the formation of modernity as well as the faith and life of Australian churches, how benign is work in the everyday working lives of UCA members in particular and Australian Christians in general?

Work: calling (vocation), job or career?

“My vocation is the strength to fight for social justice and a fair go for everybody. (UC member) The older I get, the more I think God has a role for me in my job. God wants his own people all over and especially in the business world. (UC member)”¹⁴

Of Australian church attenders (N= 1,050) 61 per cent strongly agreed/agreed God had called them to their current work. This is virtually identical to the percentage of UCA church attenders (62%) who strongly agreed/agreed in a 1996 survey of three UCA congregations that God had given them a vocation for their paid work.¹⁵ The proportion of UCA church attenders (54%) who had this belief in the NCLS survey was less than the proportion of non-UCA church attenders (61%) holding this belief, but the difference is not statistically significant.

If over half those surveyed believe they were called to their current work by God, it suggests work is a sphere of activity where Christians may seek to embody their faith and discipleship. ‘Secular work is itself a meaningful, satisfying activity and that it is important not simply as a means of feeding one’s family but as a form of ministry and service’.¹⁶

However, the percentage who described their work as a calling fell by more than half when then asked (N=1,050) to choose one of three statements that may best describe their attitude towards their paid employment. Only 23 per cent of survey participants said their paid employment is a calling (vocation). The proportion of Australian church attenders who believed this was the best way to describe their attitude to their employment was lower than each of the two other more benign views about their work. Most (39%) said their paid employment is a job, and a further 28 per cent said their paid employment is a career. Ten per cent were unsure.

While more UCA than non-UCA respondents thought of their work as a calling (34% cf. 22%), more non-UCA than UCA respondents thought of their work as a job (39% cf. 25%), and both groups thought of their work as a career in almost equal proportions (28% cf. 29%). These differences between UCA and non-UCA attenders are statistically significant. The larger

¹⁴ Bottomley, 1998, p.22.

¹⁵ J. Bottomley, *The ministry of lay people in paid employment*, 1999, unpublished Master of Ministry Research Project Report, Melbourne College of Divinity, Melbourne, p.51.

¹⁶ R. Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: spiritual malaise, fiscal woe* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.117.

percentage of UCA respondents viewing their work as a calling may be due to the larger proportion of UCA respondents in professional work, and the tendency for professional positions to be referred to as a vocation.

The author's 1996 survey of UCA members in paid employment found an almost identical percentage to the NCLS survey who thought of their work as a vocation (36%), but the percentages for career and job were reversed. The 1996 research found 42 per cent of UCA members in the three congregations surveyed said their work was a career, and 20 per cent said it was a job.¹⁷

Both surveys confirm the general belief of church attenders that God has called them to their current work, but when this belief is tested against more utilitarian views of their work, the percentage who view their work as a vocation of God drops markedly. It appears that a majority of church attenders discern God's call to their current work, but when they consider their personal sense of vocation or call in relation to other publicly significant meanings of employment (job or career), the importance of their call may mean comparatively less than the meanings assigned by the world of work.

These survey findings point to a hidden paradox that Australian churches may have failed to grasp. On the one hand, the experiences church attenders report are that God continues to call large numbers of people to their daily work. There is overwhelming testimony from church attenders that they discern God's desire for people to be engaged with God's mission in their employment. On the other hand, there appears to be evidence from church attenders of another power or spirit in the sphere of paid employment, one which forms workers to find the meaning of their lives in purposes that minimise giving attention to God's mission in their place of work.

Not only may paid employment be a source of harm that undermines church attenders relationship with both God and their church, work also has a utilitarian public meaning that appears to displace the vocational understanding the majority of church attenders have of their work. The evidence suggests work is contested ground for the formation of human beings, their desires and the source of their life's meaning.

But the sphere of work is not benign or neutral ground for this contest. The spirit of work does do harm that undermines church attenders' relationships with God and church, and does displace the discernment of some church attenders about the meaning of their work. This spirit of work is consistent with the Enlightenment spirit responsible for the formation of social structure and individual identity in modernity. Personal values, emotions and beliefs, such as Christian faith,

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 53.

were judged by Enlightenment thinkers to have no place in the competitive work environment, and so were re-assigned by these thinkers to the private sphere of social life.

So how is the church forming its members to be Christ's faithful disciples in their working lives in the face of the competing spirit of modernity? Or have the Uniting Church in particular and the Australian church in general accommodated themselves to the formation of workers and their families to be 'at home' in the modern world: a world that believes it no longer needs God in the public sphere?

Formation of church attenders

There are certain words of wisdom in sermons or readings with 'speak to me' and can be related to working life situations. (UC member) My minister introduced me to 'lectio divina' meditation, and was continually asking, 'where is God in all this? This was showing us that our relationship with God is total to all part of our life. (UC member)¹⁸

Smith argues that Christian formation is a matter of desiring the kingdom of God, and that we learn to do this by participating in the material, embodied practices of Christian worship. Christian worship aims to provide an alternative 'liturgy' to that of the 'liturgies' of modernity.¹⁹ But what is the evidence that Australian church worship provides an alternative identity-forming culture to the culture of modernity for Australian Christians in the world of their work?

Worship and church life

Only one-third of Australian church attenders (N=1,034) say their churches' public worship often (8%) or sometimes (24%) address issues that concern them in their paid employment. There was little difference between the proportion of UCA (29%) and non-UCA (32%) attenders who said their work concerns were often/sometimes addressed in their church's worship. Eighteen per cent of church attenders said their work concerns were occasionally addressed in their church's worship, and more than one-third (38%) said their work concerns were rarely/never addressed in worship.

If Smith's thesis is correct about the importance of public worship for the formation of Christians for faithful living in the modern world, then only about one-third of Australian church attenders in paid employment are being formed by their churches as Christian disciples for the arena where they work. So how well are the other two-thirds of attenders being formed to counter the pervasive influence of the spirituality of modernity and its formation of alternative desires that embody modernity's vision of the good life?

The leaders' survey of church ministers, pastors, priests (N=493) reinforces the view that perhaps only about one-third of church members are formed as servants of Christ at work by their participation in public worship. Over the course of a year, only one per cent of clergy said they often preach on employment issues, and 24 per cent said they sometimes preach on this topic. One-third (34%) preach on the topic of employment occasionally, and forty per cent rarely

¹⁸ Bottomley, 1998, p.33.

¹⁹ Smith, op cit, pp. 133-134.

or never preach on the topic of employment. Only 20 per cent of UCA church leaders preach often/sometimes on employment compared with 26 per cent of non-UCA church leaders, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Of the same church ministers, pastors, priests (N=527), 86 per cent reported they strongly agree/agree that they support attenders at their congregation(s) to link their faith with issues that concern them in their paid employment. The views of these clergy are thus at odds with the views of their church attenders, where only one-third (34%) of attenders reported their minister/pastor/priest helped them link their faith with issues that concern them in their work. The views of clergy and church attenders about what constitutes an issue of concern in the work sphere may be significantly different. For example, American sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests from his research that U.S. clergy have thought of the church as a haven for their members from the harsh pressures of the marketplace.²⁰ This attitude is congruent with how modernity locates the church's place in the private sphere of home and family away from the material sphere of paid employment. But if this represents the concerns of clergy, it may be quite a different view from lay people's view of their workplace.²¹ It may well explain the lack of support lay people receive from their clergy in linking their faith with issues that concern them in their work.

A slightly higher proportion of UCA clergy (91%) than non-UCA clergy (85%) strongly agree/agree they support attenders at their congregations to link their faith with employment issues. While almost all clergy think they support their church members' to link their faith with their work concerns, only about one-third of both UCA (32%) and non-UCA (34%) respondents think their minister/pastor/priest has helped them link their faith with issues that concern them in their work. This wide discrepancy between perceptions carries over to non-UCA clergy and church attenders.

The operations survey provides evidence that church leaders may believe the main support they offer for linking faith with employment issues occurs through more generic aspects of church life. For example (see table 1 on next page):

- Half (50%) the leaders/church administrators surveyed said their church provides support through Bible studies
- Three-quarters (77%) said they provide support through sermons.

²⁰ Wuthnow, op cit, p. 104

²¹ Note that 52 per cent of NCLS attenders strongly agree/agree that their work contributes to God's work in the world.

Only five per cent of leaders/church administrators said their church offered targeted programs on faith and employment, so this appears to be a minimal intention by their churches to address the formation of members' faith for their work concerns. Of the more generic activities provided, church leaders believe between half (e.g., Bible studies) to three-quarters (e.g., sermons) of these activities support their congregation attenders link their faith with employment issues. The total effect of these activities is that about half Australia's church attenders (53%) strongly agree/agree they feel supported by their local church in being a Christian in their workplace.

Table 1: Church leaders/administrators' views on support their congregation offers for linking the faith of attenders with their employment issues x church

<i>Support for linking faith with employment issues</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>		
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>All</i>
<i>Sermons address faith and employment</i>	81	58	77
<i>Other aspects of the service address faith and employment (e.g. intercessory prayers)</i>	57	58	57
<i>Bible studies/small groups on faith and employment</i>	53	38	50
<i>Targeted programs on faith and employment</i>	6	3	5
<i>Pastoral care focus on faith and employment</i>	63	54	62
<i>Faith and employment is part of informal relationships</i>	67	65	67
<i>Faith and employment addressed by other means</i>	10	6	9

(N=2,521)

The operations survey and the survey of ministers/pastors/priests provide apparently contradictory perspectives on the importance of preaching to the provision of support for attenders to link their faith with work issues. The operations survey reports 77 per cent of respondents (church administrators) say sermons are an important means for their congregation to support attenders linking their faith with work concerns, whereas ministers/pastors/priests

report only 25 per cent of them preach often/sometimes on employment issues. While it is likely that many attenders may hear God's Word address their work concerns through sermons that are not specifically about employment issues per se, it may be that preaching in particular and worship in general are not the main aspects of church life where attenders draw support for linking their faith with employment issues.

The operations survey points to the importance of informal relationships in the congregation (67%) and pastoral care (62%) as activities that link attenders' faith with their employment issues. The importance of informal relationships in linking faith and work is supported by a finding of a 1996 survey of UCA members, which found that 39 per cent of respondents said faith conversations with friends supported them linking their faith with issues in their working life²².

Given that only one-third of attenders believe their minister has helped them link their faith with issues that concern them at work, it is likely that the pastoral support provided for attenders to link their faith with their employment issues is not so much provided by their minister, but is also a function of their relations within the congregation. This interpretation is supported by the finding that less than one-third (32%) of Australian church attenders said their work concerns were often/sometimes addressed in worship.

If Christian formation is foundationally developed by church members' participation in the material, embodied practices of a congregation's Christian worship, then it may be that this process of formation will be strengthened when the informal relationships and pastoral care activities within a congregation are more intentionally integrated into the congregation's worship.

The role of work in faith formation

NCLS asked church attenders four questions about the extent to which their faith influenced various aspects of their work. Church attenders indicated a high level of strong agreement or agreement with the three items in table 2, that is, their faith influences their ethical decision-making, interactions with colleagues and work quality. These high levels of strong agreement are congruent with a 1996 survey of UCA attenders, where 85 per cent said they had a sense all the time/sometimes that God was involved with their working lives in the decisions they made.²³

²² Bottomley, op cit, p.169.

²³ ibid p.170.

When the responses for 'agree' and 'strongly agree' in the NCLS were added, there was no discernible difference between the responses of UCA and non-UCA church members across the three items.

- 90 per cent strongly agreed/agreed their faith influences how they make ethical or moral decisions in their work,
- 88 per cent strongly agreed/agreed their faith influences how they interact with colleagues in the workplace, and
- 86 per cent strongly agreed/agreed their faith influences the quality they strive for in their work.

Table 2: Church attenders' attitudes to the influence of their faith on work-related behaviours x church

<i>Attitudes to the influence of faith on work-related behaviours.</i>	<i>Strongly agree (%)</i>		<i>Agree (%)</i>		<i>Strongly disagree/disagree /unsure (%)</i>	
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>
<i>1. My faith influences how I make ethical or moral decisions in my work</i>	44	47	45	45	11	8
<i>2. My faith influences how I interact with colleagues in the workplace</i>	40	28	47	63	13	9
<i>3. My faith influences the quality that I strive for in my work</i>	39	27	47	64	14	10

(N1=1,033, N2, N3=1,031)

However, there is a large difference between the influence of members' faith on these three areas of work-related behaviour, and the percentage of church attenders who strongly agree/agree on a fourth statement (N=1,025) that their faith has influenced their choice of

occupation or profession (42%). It appears that church attenders' faith has less influence on the decisions they make about the sort of work (occupation) they are able to choose than it has on the decisions they can make (ethics, interactions with colleagues, work quality) once they are in their place of work.

Perhaps church members' faith is most readily exercised when they feel they have some control over the choices they can make at work, such as the personal domain of their ethical or moral decisions, personal interactions, and the quality of work they strive for in their work. This interpretation is suggested by a survey carried out by the U.S. Christian businessman, William Diehl, who interviewed a sample of Christian business executives. Diehl asked the executives to rate ten factors that may be important in shaping their ethical decisions. Six factors in order of importance were a personal code of ethics (70%), the laws of the land (43%), religious training (41%), a professional code of ethics (36%), company policy (30%) and the need to produce results (12%).²⁴ Diehl urges caution in interpreting the degree to which executives' personal code of ethics and their religious training provide a robust formation for Christian behaviour in the often complex and ambiguous issues of industry and commerce, believing that most draw upon the precepts of 'the Ten Commandments and the golden rule' as the basis of their faith discernments at work.²⁵

When the options for faith choices appear to be determined by external forces such as the supply and demand of suitable occupations in the labour market, the proportion who agree their faith has influenced their work decisions is more than halved. This suggests the perceived necessity of work's demands may minimise the importance of their faith for such decision-making for up to half Australian church members.

The three items in table 2 were identified as sharing a common factor through a Principle Components Analysis. This factor provides a single measure of the influence of church attenders' faith on their work-related behaviour. Three independent variables were included in a regression analysis to test the extent to which they contributed to variance in the influence of Uniting Church attenders' faith on their work-related behaviour. The three variables were 'attitude to employment' (vocation v career/job), 'occupation' (professional v non-professional), and 'time since last employment' (now employed v previously employed). Of the three independent variables, only Uniting Church attenders' attitude to their employment - that is seeing their work as a calling rather than a job/career - contributed to a difference in the level of influence of attenders' faith on their work-related behaviour. (see model 1, regression table below) Those who saw their work in faith terms as a calling were more likely to say their faith influences their work-related behaviour. Conversely, those who saw their work in utilitarian terms

²⁴ W. Diehl, *In Search of Faithfulness: lessons from the Christian Community* Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, p.94

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 95

as a career or job were less likely to say their faith influences their work-related behaviour. The meaning of work for UCA members is contested ground between the meaning ascribed by faith and the meaning ascribed by the publicly dominant utilitarian belief about work.

Almost half (48%) of the church attenders strongly agreed/agreed their work contributed to their growth in faith, with a slightly greater percentage of UCA attenders (54%) strongly agreeing/agreeing compared with non-UCA attenders (48%) (table 3).

Table 3: Church attenders attitude to their growth in faith through work x church

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Strongly agree (%)</i>		<i>Agree (%)</i>		<i>Strongly disagree/disagree/unsure (%)</i>	
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>
<i>Grown in faith through work</i>	14	10	34	44	52	46

(N=1,023)

The three independent variables of ‘attitude to employment’ (vocation v career/job), ‘occupation’ (professional v non-professional), and ‘time since last employment’ (now employed v previously employed) were again included in a regression analysis to test the extent to which they contributed to variance in work’s influence on Uniting Church attenders’ faith. Of the three variables, only UCA attenders’ attitude to their employment, that is seeing their work as a calling rather than a job/career, contributed to a difference in the level of influence of their work on attenders’ faith. (see model 2, regression table below) Those who saw their work as a vocation (calling) were more likely to say their working life has contributed to their growth in faith. Conversely, those who saw their work as a career or job were less likely to say their working life has contributed to their growth in faith.

Given that two-thirds (67%) of church members believed their paid employment was a job or career, the utilitarian meaning assigned to work appears to be a significant factor in stifling the Christian formation of UCA attenders’ identity for their working lives. When UCA members accept the meaning of their work is given by the predominant worldview of modernity, it minimises or impedes their growth in faith in God. Conversely, when UCA members accept the meaning of their work is given by God’s calling of them to their work, they appear to be more open to discerning how their work also contributes to the Christian identity and faith.

So it is of immense significance to the mission of the Uniting Church in Australia that about half its members who are or have been in paid employment believe they were called to their work by God, and about one-third believe their work is their vocation. For these church members, work is not the benign reality imagined in the Assembly's Statement to the Nation. Rather, work is an arena for these members to offer Christian service.

The UCA Statement to the Nation at its inauguration appears to have overlooked completely the spiritual power of work to form people's identity and purpose to pursue the counter vision of the good life promised in the beliefs embodied in modernity. Indeed, the NCLS data suggests a majority of both UCA and non-UCA church members give their first allegiance to their job or career for their work identity and life purpose, rather than to God and God's call on their working lives. Such a conclusion exposes the spiritual blindness of the first Assembly's claim that nations' policies and actions must pass under the judgment of God, when the UCA has for all of its almost forty years been blind to its own allegiance to the claims of modern work on its members' identity and purpose. But the UCA is not alone amongst Australian churches in this state of captivity to modern work.

The separation of God and church from the world of work

I come up against lies, evil and corruption – it is hard at the time to sense God is there at that time. (UC member) Most of my decisions relate to equipment etc. I believe God would be more involved in matters related to people. (UC member) I am rarely conscious of God at work. (UC member)²⁶

God's perceived separation from the world of work

While more Australian church attenders strongly agreed/agreed than were strongly disagreed/disagreed/ unsure if their paid employment contributed to God's work in the world, about 42 per cent strongly disagreed/disagreed/unsure that their paid employment contributed to God's work in the world. There was virtually no difference between the percentage of non-UCA members (42%) and UCA members (39%) with this perception.

Even more church attenders strongly disagreed/disagreed/were unsure (58%) that their faith had influenced their choice of occupation or profession. Again, there was no discernible difference in the level of disagreement between UCA (56%) and non-UCA (58%) church attenders. There was some difference between the percentage of UCA (46%) and non-UCA (39%) members who disagreed/were unsure that God had called them to their current work.

²⁶ Bottomley, 1998, pp. 25-26.

Table 4: Church attenders' perceptions of God's presence in respondents' paid employment x church

<i>Perceptions of God's presence and the place of faith in attenders' work</i>	<i>Strongly agree (%)</i>		<i>Agree (%)</i>		<i>Strongly disagree/disagree /unsure (%)</i>	
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>
<i>1. My work contributes to God's work in the world</i>	20	19	38	42	42	39
<i>2. I believe God has called me to my current work</i>	24	23	37	31	39	46
<i>3. My faith has influenced my choice of occupation or profession</i>	15	19	27	25	58	56

(N1=1,041, N2 and N3=1,025)

Each of these three items records a substantial level of disagreement from Australian Christians about their perception there is a relationship between God's presence in the world and their work, and the place of their faith in making choices about their occupation or profession. Further, these perceptions of respondents are highly congruent with the beliefs of Enlightenment thinkers about the necessary absence of God's providence and faith from the modern industrial world. This evidence suggests the formation of perhaps little more than half the members of Australian churches in paid employment has equipped them to discern God's presence in their paid employment.

The three items in table 4 were then aggregated to form a measure of integration of church attenders faith and work. Three independent variables were included in a regression analysis to test the extent to which they contributed to variance in the measure of integration for Uniting Church attenders. Of the three independent variables ('last in paid employment', 'current occupation', and 'attitude to employment'), only UCA attenders' attitude to their employment - that is seeing their work as a calling rather than a job/career - contributed to a difference in attenders' response. (see model 3, regression table below) Those UCA attenders who saw their work as a vocation were more likely to have integrated their faith and work, or conversely, those

who saw their work as a career of job were more likely to have a faith that was less integrated into their work concerns and work identity.

Table: Results of regression analyses²⁷

	<i>Model 1</i> <i>Faith influences work behaviour</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>Work's influence on faith</i>	<i>Model 3</i> <i>Integration of faith and work</i>
<i>Attitude to employment</i>	.39*	.4*	.46*
<i>Occupation</i>	.03	-.09	-.13
<i>Time since last employed</i>	-.03	-.22	-.14
<i>R2</i>	.15	.2	.26

Note: standardized regression coefficients reported.

* $p < .05$

The church's separation from contemporary work

It is perhaps not surprising that substantial numbers of Australian Christians strongly disagreed/disagreed or were unsure if their paid employment contributed to God's work in the world, or that God had called them to their current work, when we consider respondents' church experience of their formation for Christian discipleship in their working lives.

²⁷ The figures reported (Betas) for each of the three independent variables are standardised coefficients. The bigger the Beta (range from +/- 0 to 1) the stronger the impact of that variable on the dependent variable, and the sign (- or +) indicates the direction of the association. R^2 ranges 0 to 1, and indicates the proportion of variance explained collectively by all the predictors in a model. When $p < .05$, the correlation is statistically significant.

For example:

- Only half (52%) strongly agreed/agreed they felt supported by their local church to be a Christian in their workplace.
- Less than half (46%) said they felt supported by the wider church or other Christian organisation in being a Christian in their workplace.
- Only one-third (34%) said their minister helped them link their faith with issues that concerned them in their work.

Table 5: Church attenders' attitude to church support for being a Christian at work x church

<i>Attitude to church support for being a Christian at work</i>	<i>Strongly agree (%)</i>		<i>Agree (%)</i>		<i>Strongly disagree/disagree /unsure (%)</i>	
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>
<i>1. I feel supported by my local church in being a Christian in my workplace</i>	17	8	36	44	48	48
<i>2. I feel supported by the wider church or other Christian organisations in being a Christian in my workplace</i>	14	2	32	45	54	53
<i>3. My minster/pastor or priest has helped me link my faith with issues that concern me in my work</i>	9	4	25	28	66	68

(N1=1,016, N2=1,011, N3=1,022)

While there is no discernible difference between UCA and non-UCA church members on their level of disagreement/being unsure on each of the items in table 5, UCA members' levels of strong agreement are appreciably lower than non-UCA church attenders on each of the items.

That is, fewer UCA than non-UCA attenders strongly agreed they were supported in being a Christian at work by their local congregation, their minister and their wider church.

While about half of Australia's church attenders who were/had been in paid employment believe that their formation for Christian discipleship in their workplaces has been supported by their churches at the level of their congregation, minister, and denomination or other Christian organisations, the other half believe they have not been supported to be a Christian in their workplace at the local and denominational levels. These divergent experiences of church attenders reflect what appears to be a deep ambivalence in the church to forming its members to live out a Christian witness in their working lives.

The separation of faith from work

One quarter (25%) of attenders strongly agreed/agreed their paid employment takes time away from their devotional life. The difference between the percentage of non-UCA attenders (26%) strongly agreeing/agreeing compared with UCA attenders (19%) is not statistically significant. This may mean for the other three-quarters of respondents that their work commitments make no demands on their devotional time, that they have little or no devotional time for their paid work to interrupt, or that their working life is integrated with their devotional life and they disagree with the premise of the question. The 1996 survey of UCA members in paid work suggests this third option may apply to a proportion of the NCLS respondents; that is, 83 per cent strongly agreed/agreed prayer is very important to their identity.²⁸ This further suggests the practice of personal devotion or prayer is also contested ground for Christians living out their faith at work. If some Australian Christians find their prayer is meaningfully integrated with their life at work, for others, work demands or pressures take time away from their devotional life, while for others work and prayer have little or no connection.

²⁸ op cit, Bottomley, p. 130.

Table 6: Church attenders' attitude to employment and devotion x church

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Strongly agree (%)</i>		<i>Agree (%)</i>		<i>Strongly disagree/disagree/unsure (%)</i>	
	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>	<i>Non-UCA</i>	<i>UCA</i>
<i>Employment takes time away from devotion</i>	6	1	20	18	74	81

(N=1,007)

Finally, the separation of Australian church members' faith from the world of paid work appears to be an increasingly physical reality, reflected in the number of church attenders now retired from paid employment. Data from the 2011 Australian population census and the NCLS 2011 survey reported Australian churches have an older age profile than the Australian community, with the proportion of church attenders over 60 years of age significantly higher than the proportion of that age group in the general population.²⁹

Table 7: Time in years since attenders were in paid employment x church

<i>Last in paid employment</i>	<i>Non-UCA (%)</i>	<i>UCA (%)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
<i>I am in paid employment now</i>	57	34	55
<i>Less than 5 years ago</i>	13	7	12
<i>6-10 years ago</i>	8	12	8
<i>More than 10 years ago</i>	23	47	25

(N=1,188)

²⁹ NCLS *Comparing church and community: A demographic profile*, NCLS Occasional Paper 19, <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=7161> (accessed, 11/04/2014)

The separation of church members from the world of paid employment is dramatic in the UCA, with 59 per cent of UCA members retired from work for more than six years, and only 34 per cent currently in paid employment. When the Enlightenment project to elevate science as the source of truth succeeded in relocating God from the public world to the private sphere, Enlightenment thinkers also set the church on a trajectory out of the public world of paid employment to the margin of society. This trajectory has continued to gather force, for today the UCA in particular is increasingly bereft of members in paid work. The UCA's journey to the margin of Australian society has about it the sense of a church that has lost its way.

"I didn't make a conscious decision about how what was happening at work, such as staff cutbacks, conflicted with my faith. These are out of my control, so one tends to compromise, as one does with many issues today, or else one cannot survive in today's world. (UC member) There is little room available (at work) for discussion of the conflict between my work and faith. (UC member) The conflict at work brought my faith to the surface at the time. (UC member) From day to day, you can be down the path a way before you think this may be something God doesn't approve. (UC member)³⁰

In claiming the high moral ground as a champion of justice at its inauguration, the UCA failed to recognise the forces that were already hollowing out its membership. The forces that formed human beings for work in our industrial age were never benign. The forces of modernity that found expression in human work acted to break down the dignity and wholeness of the human person; valuing objective reality over subjective sensing of the world, giving rationality and thinking priority over intuition and feeling, and creating the individual as an autonomous being free from normative tradition. The forces of modernity set themselves in opposition to God's intention for human wellbeing. In a theologically disturbing sense, the Uniting Church in Australia appears complicit in an act of injustice against God.

Human work became contested ground between the forces of modernity and the providence of God. At its inauguration the UCA spoke as if it trusted in God, but it acted as if its life depended on its accommodation with modernity and its view of paid work and the home. Nearly 40 years on, the UCA's increasing abandonment of the public world of work for the sanctity of the family and home is reflected in the steadily increasing abandonment of the UCA by people in paid employment, and the increasingly unchecked demands of the free market on both human 'being' and our environment.

Not only is the UCA's increasing separation from the world of work a failure to be true to the promise to resist injustice wherever it occurred, it is a breach of the Assembly's promise to the nation that the UCA would give its first allegiance to God, under whose judgement all policies and actions must pass. So what we may see more clearly today is that the pilgrim people of the Uniting Church are mired in modernity's idolatry of work, have lost their way in its wilderness, and have closed their hearts to God's judgement.

³⁰ Bottomley, 1998, pp. 26-27.

Ironically perhaps, the UCA's Basis of Union has some words that point to how the Church may respond to God's Word of judgement. The Basis of Union states that, 'On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.' (par. 3) In nearly forty years, the UCA has rarely acknowledged it has lost its way, and so the gift of God's Spirit seems to be increasingly taken for granted as God's blessing on whatever human work the various church councils deem to be the church's mission. When the human work of the church is persistently self-justifying, the result is profound spiritual blindness to the captivity of the church and its members. How then may the UCA confess it has lost its way?

The substance of a confession may need to acknowledge the UCA in particular and Australian churches in general have formed little more than half their members in paid employment to discern God's presence in their paid employment. Australian Christians' perceptions of God's presence in their world of work seem to be almost equally formed by Enlightenment beliefs about God's being absent from the public world of their work, as they are by faith formation in their churches. These opposite experiences of church attenders reflect the competing spiritualities in the church and world to the formation of church members for being Christian witnesses in their working lives. So when Mark's gospel declares that 'if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand' (Mk 3:25), it speaks into the extremely vulnerable situation of Australian churches today.

Next, it may be time to confess that the Assembly's benign view of work has left a number of UCA members who have been harmed by work feeling cut off from God and/or not supported by their church. When work is known to be a vocation called forth by Christ, the harm caused by unjust work is more likely to leave these Christians feeling cut off from God and/or not supported by their church. Herein may be an opportunity for church leaders and attenders to begin a conversation about devising appropriate pastoral and liturgical responses to this situation.

There is also a need to confess that for those with a sense of work as their vocation, the church and its clergy have not adequately understood these church attenders' work as contested ground between the meaning ascribed by their faith and the meaning ascribed by the publicly dominant utilitarian belief about work. Work is a site of spiritual struggle about personal identity and the meaning of the good life, in which the Spirit is active. A challenge for church leaders is to discern the way in which the Spirit continues to call a healthy remnant of people to God's mission at work. There is an opportunity to discern the way the Spirit is also present in the world of paid work to strengthen and enrich faith, and the way the Spirit is working to fulfil God's mission for the church and the world through the informal support and pastoral care of church members for each other. Deep listening by church leaders to the experiences of their members in paid employment may guide the development of new forms of ministry that support the work of the Spirit's redemptive and transforming purpose for the world.

Finally, the UCA needs to confess the inaugural Assembly journeyed into self-righteousness in its proud boast that the correction of injustices ‘wherever they occur’ would be a distinctive ‘mark’ of the Church. Its pride blinded the UCA to injustice’s being suffered by its own members in relation to their abandonment to the spiritual struggles at their work in general, and the actual harm some members experienced at work in particular. In this, the UCA appears no better or no worse than other Australia’s churches. But today the UCA is increasingly bereft of members in paid work, because in spite of the Spirit’s urging, too much of the Church’s life has been captive to the spirit of modernity and the idols that sustain modernity’s beliefs, values and structures.

The Assembly’s self-confident statement about its commitment to justice, work, and Christians’ first allegiance to God may be traced to an inadequate theology of the Spirit in the Church’s Basis of Union. The gift of the Spirit is not limited to ensuring ‘the pilgrim people’ ‘may not lose the way’, as the Basis of Union proposes. God also uses the wilderness and people’s experience of the wilderness to fulfil God’s purposes. So in Numbers 32:13, ‘the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord had disappeared.’ This Biblical image of the ‘pilgrim people’ remains hidden from the consciousness of the UCA. Further, Christ also was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1, Luke 4:1). It is evident that God may use the experience of being lost in the wilderness for a transformative purpose, as well as the experience of being led into the wilderness for the testing and identity formation purposes necessary to understand the world and live in freedom from its false claims. Yet against these Scriptural teachings the UCA’s Basis of Union appears to offer the false promise that the Church could never lose its way because it has the gift of the Spirit to ensure the purpose and direction of its pilgrim journey.

But if the wilderness is a space that embodies God’s anger against human evil, the deconstruction of the self-righteous identities God’s people construct for themselves, the testing of our discernment between good and evil, or other painful and humbling experiences, it also holds the promise of God’s renewing mercy and gracious blessing. There would be no pilgrim journey for Israel towards the Promised Land without the forty years in the wilderness. There would not have been the clarity of purpose in Jesus’ ministry without the encounter with the devil in the wilderness. Time spent in the wilderness for both Israel and Christ deepened their trust in the Spirit of God.

It may be the same for the UCA and other Australian churches that have spent much of these past almost forty years of wilderness wandering around the limited horizon of the private sphere assigned to Christian faith and its churches by the idolatries of modernity. Perhaps it is time for the UCA in particular to confess our experience of exile from the public world of work. This may reconstitute the Church in solidarity with all those who have been lost in the wilderness of modern work, and open our hearts to their desire for a fuller life. We may know ours and their need for forgiveness for putting our trust in idols. For when the UCA truly knows from God’s judgement it has lost ‘the way’, it will receive with breath-taking clarity a grace-filled insight into

the lost souls and broken hearts, minds and bodies of those oppressed by the world of work formed by the spirit of modernity.

We may then hear again God's Word of healing, justice and reconciliation that accepts us as we are in our brokenness and vulnerability. And we may learn to wait upon God, so that we may be formed anew as God's people for God's mission to those whose pain and struggle we now know intimately. For their wilderness has been our wilderness. And the God who meets the lost pilgrim people of God in the wilderness of modern human work is the God whose desire is to love and restore all people in justice.

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