

Church Union in Australia: Those who stayed out; a Continuing Congregationalist Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The 22nd of June 1977 marked a significant change in Australian church history with the formation of the Uniting Church of Australia. This amalgamation of Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches gave birth to Australia's 'first indigenous church', which is now its 'third largest Christian denomination'.¹ This magnificent achievement of union, or 'reunion'² as some have seen it, may have made good sense to the 'average Australian'³ and those who united, however, a minority of churches chose to 'stay out'.

Amongst this group were a comparatively small number of churches that continued to 'fly the congregational banner'.⁴ Of these churches a number stayed independent, others joined the 'Congregational Federation' and around twenty-seven churches in NSW, who somewhat

¹ 'About The Uniting Church', *Uniting Church Australia*, Online: <http://www.uca.org.au/about.htm>.

² J Davis McCaughey, 'Church Union in Australia', *Ecum. Rev.* 17/1 (January 1, 1965), 39.

³ This statement is from Geoffrey Barnes, 'A United Church Is Born in Australia'. *Mid-Stream* 16/4 (October 1, 1977), 417; However, this is backed by a study carried out by the Australian National University which found that 64% of their sample study was in favor of union, cited in Hans Mol, 'The Merger Attempts of the Australian Churches', *Ecum. Rev.* 21/1 (January 1, 1969), 25.

⁴ Bruce Upham, 'Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977', in *Congregationalism in Australia* ed by. Bruce Upham (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), 346.

regard themselves as the ‘remnant of the congregational church’⁵ in Australia, formed the Fellowship of Congregational Churches (FCC).⁶

Much has been written about the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia from a proponent’s perspective, some of which has touched on the reasons why certain churches chose not to unite.⁷ The Presbyterians have produced various publications from their perspective.⁸ However, virtually nothing⁹ has been written from a Continuing Congregational perspective, particularly of those churches that joined the FCC.

This paper will therefore be a start in filling that void. Over the course of this paper, under four basic headings – background, the road to union, the Continuing Congregationalist perspective and the Fellowship of Congregational Churches – I will present their perspective on church union, seeking to identify their reasons for staying out, the potential factors that contributed and the path they walked in aiming to preserve not only their congregational heritage, but also, in their eyes, an evangelical response to the *Basis of Union* and the formation of the Uniting Church.

⁵ ‘Our History’, *Fellowship of Congregational Churches*, Cited 25 Apr. 2014, Online: <http://www.fcc-cong.org/history.asp>.

⁶ Hereby referred to as the FCC.

⁷ For example Barnes in ‘A United Church in Australia Is Born in Australia’ highlights scripture as a reason for the Congregationalists staying out.

⁸ Uidam is one example of many. Cornelis Uidam, *Union and Renewal: A Historical and Ecumenical Survey of Three Churches in Australia and Their Union Negotiations* (F.D.C. Group, 1970).

⁹ Most of the works are small and unpublished. Upham’s is the exception. Upham, ‘Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977’.

BACKGROUND

Congregational churches have by no means been uniform throughout the ages; however, a brief understanding of their origins identifies some of the core tenets that are significant in understanding the ‘Continuing Congregational’ churches’ perspective on Church Union.

Many Congregational churches want to firmly establish their roots in the New Testament,¹⁰ however it was not until the 16th Century in England that they came to be known as “Congregationalists”.¹¹ Separatist Puritans began meeting together because they would not adhere to the implications of the Act of Uniformity in the Elizabethan settlement. They were strongly influenced by the continental reformation and Calvinistic theology, and believed that the Elizabethan Clergy were not holding fast to the Word of God.¹² They had a high view of the Authority of the word,¹³ aptly illustrated in the Savoy Declaration of 1658 which proclaims that the Bible is the ‘inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life’¹⁴ and that its authority ‘dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church; but wholly upon God...the Author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God’.¹⁵ This shaped their ecclesiology and in particular church governance, as they believed that the church should be separate from the state and autonomously governed under the headship of Christ by God-appointed officers and the priesthood of all believers. R. W. Dale picks up this core tenet in his fourth principle of Congregationalism, which states, ‘By the Will of

¹⁰ Gordon T Booth, *Evangelical and Congregational* 2nd ed. (Shropshire, UK: Quinta Press, 2003), 21.

¹¹ G. Lindsay Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia* ed by. Bruce Upham (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001), 11.

¹² Geoffrey Barnes, ‘English Origins of Congregationalism and Its Beginnings in Australia’, *Reform. Theol. Rev.* 37/2 (May 1, 1978), 45.

¹³ Barnes, *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ ‘The Savoy Declaration of Faith And Order 1658’, in *Evangelical and Congregational* 2nd ed. (Shropshire, UK: Quinta Press, 2003), chap. 1.2.

¹⁵ ‘The Savoy Declaration of Faith And Order 1658’, chap. 1.4.

Christ all the Members of a Christian Church are directly responsible to Him for maintaining His Authority in the Church'.¹⁶

When Congregationalism landed in Australia as an 'unplanned by-product of the London Missionary Society's early outreach to the South Pacific'¹⁷ it was largely dependent upon its heritage from its homeland. In its early years, Lockely maintains that its core characteristics, although 'coloured' by various influences, 'had not been added to' and that they maintained their 'theologically Calvinist' roots.¹⁸ They were relatively small in number, though active in membership and said to be 'among the most enterprising of nineteenth century evangelicals'.¹⁹

THE ROAD TO UNION

This foundation was influenced and shaped by various factors on 'the road to union' in 1977, which are important in identifying both some of the reasons that people chose to unite and influential factors for the Continuing Congregationalists staying out. The first attempt at Union is undoubtedly one such influence.

In 1901 the Australian Presbyterian General Assembly proposed a 'United Evangelical Christian Church', which resulted in forward moving conversations with the Methodists and

¹⁶ Robert William Dale, *A Manual of Congregational Principles* (Quinta Press, 1996), 59.

¹⁷ Graeme F Smith, *The Congregationalist and His Origins* (Sydney, NSW: Fellowship of Congregational Churches NSW, Unknown), 72.

¹⁸ Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia*, 12.

¹⁹ Stuart Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World : Evangelical Christianity in Australia* (Brunswick East, Vic.: Acorn Press, 2012), 80.

Congregational churches²⁰ and a *Basis of Union* being drawn up. When the *Basis* was submitted for voting in 1920 it showed a 'clear majority in favor'.²¹ However, there were issues regarding the Presbyterian vote, which was only 60% in favor, resulting in dissolution of the Church Union Committee and further discussions between the denominations, and, although some discussions continued between the Methodists and Congregationalists, nothing prevailed. Uidam, a Presbyterian, highlights that the issues for the Presbyterians were doctrine, polity and property, yet he suggests that there was no attempt to prove any heresy. Interestingly he states that, at 'worst it could be said that the doctrine in the basis was insufficiently expressed'.²² This 'attempt' at union may have been enough for some to proceed with caution in the future.

The doctrinal objections were most likely a result of the reactions to theological liberalism that, according to Piggin,²³ was forcing evangelicals to choose between fundamentalism, or an abandonment of evangelicalism, which held inerrancy as an essential component.

According to Thompson, theological liberalism was 'the most corrosive agent in the erosion of Christian belief' in Australia.²⁴ Evangelical Christianity 'was under scrutiny'²⁵ and there was a general movement 'to defend Protestantism against biblical criticism, theological liberalism, the theory of evolution, and the social gospel'.²⁶ The influence of theological liberalism permeated all the denominations involved in union, though its influence within the

²⁰ There were also conversations with Anglican churches that did not prevail.

²¹ Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 21.

²² Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 22.

²³ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 79.

²⁴ Roger C. Thompson, *Religion in Australia : A History (Australian retrospectives)* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 111.

²⁵ Ian Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 93.

²⁶ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 79.

Congregational Church was very strong. This strong influence may have been precipitated by Congregational polity, particularly that of independence, which according to Lockely presented greater ‘room for theological liberty’ and lent itself to ministers from other denominations who wanted more theological freedom.²⁷ This may have been exacerbated further by the member-led nature of their polity, as the reach of liberalism seemed to extend to the laity.²⁸

A further significant factor in this was the training institutions. It has been argued that the United College, which trained ministers for Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational clergy, was largely influenced by liberal theology.²⁹ Piggin gives an example of a significant figure, Samuel Angus, a New Testament lecturer from 1914 to 1943. His teaching was quite radical and said to have diverged from the Westminster Confession on a number of points.³⁰ He questioned things like the historicity of the virgin birth and traditional interpretations of the atonement,³¹ and according to Piggin his influence resulted in a ‘weakening of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches’.³² This issue of theological liberalism in the colleges would become a significant concern for the future of the Continuing Congregational churches that saw themselves as conservatively evangelical, as they sought to train their future pastors.

²⁷ Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia*, 12–15.

²⁸ Patricia Jalland, *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History, 1840-1918* (South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press, 2002), 159.

²⁹ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 93.

³⁰ Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches*, 129.

³¹ Alan Dougan, ‘Angus, Samuel (1881–1943)’, in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University).

³² Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 94.

Congregationalism was only ever a minority movement in Australia,³³ although another challenge at this time was numerical decline. Between 1901 and 1976 the Congregational Church decreased from 1.95% to 0.39% of the population,³⁴ a decline that was also seen in other denominations.³⁵ On the website for the FCC, this decline is attributed to a ‘turning away’ from Congregational heritage and the influence of liberalism. They suggest that this led to a loss of ‘spiritual fervor’ and ‘missionary zeal’, subsequently making church union a necessity.³⁶ While this may well be the case, there were also other factors that contributed to this decline and push towards union. Two world wars, the Great Depression, a decrease in migration from people from the United Kingdom³⁷ and Federalism³⁸ all played a part. A booklet “The Compulsion to Unity”, published in May 1969, highlights the need to adapt to an ever-changing society and declining finances as positive reasons for uniting. One line suffices to capture the sentiment: ‘In order to meet the rapid growth of cities across the country we must discover new patterns of church life that will match our dwindling resources’.³⁹

Thus far some factors have been identified that both bear on Church Union and lay some foundations that will help explain the reasons for union and why the Continuing Congregationalists stayed out. Now we must turn to what actually happened. Firstly, by identifying what happened, and then retracing our steps to tell the story of the continuing Congregationalists’ perspective.

³³ Lockley, *Congregationalism in Australia*, 265.

³⁴ Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia : A Cultural History of Religions (Australian experience)* (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 197.

³⁵ *Presbyterians declined from 11.72% in 1921 to 9.29% in 1961. ABS 1976 Census.*

³⁶ ‘Our History’. FCC Website

³⁷ Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 14.

³⁸ Barnes, ‘A United Church Is Born In Australia’, 413.

³⁹ ‘The Compulsion To Unity’, May 1969, Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

After the first attempt at union, negotiations were revived following the Second World War between the Congregationalists and the Methodists. In 1954 the Presbyterian General Assembly voted on whether or not they would recommence discussions regarding union. The vote was overwhelmingly affirmative with more than 70% of votes in favor.⁴⁰ Following the referendum representatives from each church began negotiations. Uidam argues that there were only three people involved in the negotiations and this led to a lack of communication and few people being empowered to think through the issues involved.⁴¹

Following this it was proposed that a 'joint commission' be formed to consider various aspects of union. J. Davis McCaughey (1914-2005) of Ormond College at the University of Melbourne was to play a notable part in its direction and is said to have been against 'ecclesiastical carpentry' and that the central concern ought to be a 'radical concern to hear God's word and do his will'.⁴² The commission produced two documents that resulted in the final edition of the *Basis of Union* in 1971.

The first document, *The Faith Of The Church* produced in 1959, was a 'first attempt at a statement about Scriptural Authority and the status of the classical creeds'.⁴³ The document essentially surveyed the relevant historical perspectives of the churches involved and proposed a basis of union. In regards to the respective declarations of faith it stated that they 'should be studied critically, but with humility and respect' and that they cherished a

⁴⁰ Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 45.

⁴¹ Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 45.

⁴² Lecture Notes From Barnes.

⁴³ McCaughey, 38.

‘constant appeal to scripture’, systematic exposition and the position of the church as a ‘power of teaching and setting forth the faith’.⁴⁴ In regards to scripture it stated that ‘The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the unique written vehicle of God’s gracious dealings with man’. This document would form the future Basis of Union in 1971.

Where *The Faith of the Church* in 1959 was said to have ‘mostly failed to excite the interest of the laity’,⁴⁵ the next document was ‘controversial right from the start’.⁴⁶ In 1963 the Joint Commission produced a document titled, *The Church, Its Nature, Function and Ordering*. The main development was the introduction of Bishops and a recommendation that the united church should ‘have bishops linked with the Church of South India’.⁴⁷ Mol is right in suggesting that this move may have been to keep potential negotiations open with the Anglicans. The Rev John Bennett, a member of the Joint Commission, affirms this thought in a document produced by the Congregational Union of Australia in favor of the 1963 basis stating: ‘I believe that we should find the quickest route to full communion with the Anglican church in Australia, as well as with other “non-conformist” denominations’.⁴⁸ The concept of bishops would lead to problems for the Congregational churches that stayed out.

The link with the Church of South India, that had already successfully united, was proposed as a better expression of Australia’s geography and a way for the ‘Uniting Church to give a

⁴⁴ Joint Commission on Church Union (Australia), *The Faith of the Church : Report of a Joint Commission on Church Union Set up by the Congregational Union of Australia and New Zealand, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia* (Melbourne: Published on behalf of the Commission by the Joint Board of Graded Lessons of Australia and New Zealand, 1959), 36.

⁴⁵ Barnes, ‘A United Church Is Born In Australia’, 414.

⁴⁶ Mol, 23.

⁴⁷ Joint Commission on Church Union, *The Church : Its Nature, Function and Ordering. Being the Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union Together with the Proposed Basis of Union* (Aldersgate Press).

⁴⁸ John Bennett, *Committee Report for Church Union* (Congregational Union Of Australia, December 10, 1963), Uniting Church Archives.

prophetic lead to the church catholic and all nations'.⁴⁹ Geoffrey L. Barnes, another influential person in church union negotiations, emphasizes that this was also to be 'an expression of the power of the Gospel to break down racial, cultural and national barriers'.⁵⁰ In many ways there is much to commend the motives behind these moves. However, *The Christian Century* magazine in 1963 suggested that 'The report and proposed plan are certain to provoke much unofficial discussion and, late, official debate'.⁵¹ This was indeed the case and after various amendments, suggested from all three churches, it became obvious that there was no support for bishops or the concordat with India. As a result the final Basis of Union in 1971 did not contain any such proposals.

In comparison to the previous documents, the *Basis of Union* of 1971, which was to be voted on by the respective churches, was a considerable revision. Described as a 'charter for mission',⁵² the *Basis* was said to have appeared 'without any fan fare or roll of drums'.⁵³ McCaughey describes the document as one that had 'wider room theologically'.⁵⁴ It stressed that the Christian faith is to be found in the 'scriptures, the creeds, the Sacraments, the Reformed confessions, and the life of believers in the fellowship'.⁵⁵ Of particular note however is paragraph 15 'Government in the Church', which places considerable authority within the Australian Assembly and a series of 'inter-related councils' through which Christ may speak. Other areas of the *Basis* that would become important was its addition of paragraph 11 on scholarly interpreters and its statement concerning the Bible which

⁴⁹ Bennett, *Committee Report for Church Union*.

⁵⁰ Barnes, 'A United Church Is Born In Australia', 415.

⁵¹ Rex Mathias, '[Australia, Work of the Joint Commission on Church Union, Statements]', *Christ. Century* 80/15 (April 10, 1963), 476–77.

⁵² Geoffrey Barnes, 'The Basis Of Union: What It Is and What It Says.', Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁵³ Rex Mathias, 'Australia : Church Union Vote Approaches', *Christ. Century* 89/21 (May 24, 1972), 616–17.

⁵⁴ McCaughey, 39.

⁵⁵ 'Basis Of Union' (Uniting Church Australia, 1971).

proclaims that; 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished, and regulated'.⁵⁶

In 1972 the first vote was taken. The voting procedure was different for each church involved and depended largely on their existing structures. The procedure for the Congregational Church was recommended in a document by the Congregational Union entitled 'Procedures for final vote'.⁵⁷ It suggested that each local church was to hold a special meeting six months after the revised *Basis* was published for vote. The churches were required to have a 'majority of at least two-thirds of eligible voters' before it was deemed as a yes vote and these were then to be sent to the state union. This was similar for both the state and the national Congregational Unions, who were to 'vote in its own right having due regard to the voting of its member churches'.⁵⁸ Some churches suggested that this time frame was 'unrealistic',⁵⁹ and others that it should be a 'simple majority',⁶⁰ however both the procedure and the timing seemed to suffice for most.

Most states voted with an overwhelming majority⁶¹ and the Congregational Union of Australia voted 97.6% in favor.⁶² However, in NSW, twenty-seven churches voted against it, more than in any other state. Upham suggests that this pointed to a 'strong presence of

⁵⁶ 'Basis Of Union', . para. 5.

⁵⁷ 'Procedures For Final Vote - Church Union Proposals' (Congregational Union Of Australia), Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁵⁸ 'Procedures For Final Vote - Church Union Proposals'.

⁵⁹ Dickinson was responding to Punchbowl regarding the insufficient timeframe laid out by the voting proposal document. J.F Dickinson, 'Letter: To Punchbowl Congregational Church', July 20, 1967, Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁶⁰ J.B Sharpe, 'Letter to J.F Dickinson Congregational Union of NSW General Secretary', August 29, 1967.

⁶¹ *Qld* 87.5%, *SA* 95.45%, *Tas* 81.82%, *WA* 68.18% 'Majority in Favor' Results of Voting on Basis of Union', Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁶² Upham, 'Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977', 345.

conservative evangelicals',⁶³ which is congruent with Piggin's assessment of evangelicals in NSW as more conservative.⁶⁴ This matches an assessment made also by Barnes about the churches that stayed out: 'The continuing Congregationalists are almost entirely conservative theologically'.⁶⁵ Between this vote and the inauguration of the Uniting Church Upham records that some churches declined numerically, amalgamated or closed, and twenty churches voted again with a vote in the affirmative. Thirty-seven Churches left, twenty-seven churches in NSW formed the FCC and a small number joined the 'Congregational Federation of Australia'.⁶⁶

The Methodists voted 84.97% in favor and following a hiatus with a confused Presbyterian vote, the 1974 General Assembly of Australia voted 230 to 143 in favor of union, a majority of 63.96%. Again the majority of those who voted no in the Presbyterian Church were in NSW. Following the initial vote, various logistical considerations took place regarding buildings, finances, communication with the churches who stayed out, and legal proceedings to name but a few. Finally on 22nd June 1977 at Sydney Town Hall the inaugural Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia declared that 'A new church has been born'.⁶⁷

THE CONTINUING CONGREGATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Now we will retrace our steps somewhat, highlighting the core objections of the Continuing Congregationalists. As indicated earlier, a split was happening in Australian Christianity. As

⁶³ Upham, 'Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977', 333.

⁶⁴ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 50.

⁶⁵ Barnes, 'A United Church Is Born In Australia', 417.

⁶⁶ Upham, 'Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977', 333–335.

⁶⁷ 'Statement to the Nation: Inaugural Assembly, June 1977 - Uniting Church in Australia Assembly', Cited 28 May 2014, Online: <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/134-statement-to-the-nation-inaugural-assembly-june-1977>.

a result of liberal theology people were forced either to abandon evangelical essentials or become more conservative and somewhat fundamental in their beliefs. This division was perceivable within the Congregational Churches. In an interview with Rev. Colin Jones, a retired congregational pastor and an active member of the FCC in its early years, he said that the ‘leaders of the Congregational Union tended to be more liberal in theology’ and that around 40% of the churches were evangelical and the other 60% varied. This minority tended not to be involved in the Congregational Union; rather, they were involved in the ‘Congregational Board Of Evangelism’,⁶⁸ which Upham suggests was ‘distinctly evangelical’.⁶⁹

In the early days up to the formation of what was to become the Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregationalists (EFCC) in August 1970, and later the FCC, the issues raised were seen in embryonic form. In a letter from Manly Congregational Church in July 1967 the issue of bishops was raised (which was ultimately voted against) along with problems with the authority of the local church – the letter stating that the 1967 *Basis* was a ‘blatant denial of the rights of the local church’.⁷⁰ This was a sentiment that was also expressed by North Ryde Congregational Church, who stated that they held to the ‘priesthood of all believers’.⁷¹ These objections could be interpreted as an unwillingness to abandon tradition. However from 1970 it would become clearer that independency was not the main concern.

On the 22nd of August 1970 ‘a small group of Congregationalists gathered together at Revesby Congregational Church...for the purposes of discussions relating to the theme of

⁶⁸ Colin Jones, ‘Interview: Congregational Perspectives On Church Union In Australia’, April 23, 2014.

⁶⁹ Upham, ‘Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977’, 332.

⁷⁰ P.J Doyle, ‘Letter: To: J. Dickenson. Secretary of the Congregational Union of NSW.’, July 4, 1967.

⁷¹ H.W Bate, ‘Letter: To The Joint Commission for Church Union’, August 10, 1967.

“Continuing Congregational Christian Fellowship”.⁷² The document suggested that their primary concern ought to be ‘Basic Christian Doctrines’. Colin Jones suggested that they were not against union per se, but in their eyes, ‘this one was wrong’.⁷³ The two central concerns that were raised were that of ‘Biblical Authority’ and ‘Autonomy of the Local church’. They proposed a committee to look at a statement of faith and at the second meeting on 28th November 1970 they suggested that they would mail other Congregational Churches informing them of their ‘fellowship and its purposes’.⁷⁴

Leslie Van Vorst, a prominent Continuing Congregationalist figure, also circulated to the churches a document entitled *Declaration for Concern*,⁷⁵ outlining various reasons that the *Basis of Union* was unacceptable. It highlighted concerns with the authority of scripture, its silence on major doctrines, the clear change in church polity and other claims relating to the open ended nature of the union which could end up with ‘Union with Rome’, as well as a misplaced emphasis on ‘service to the world’ as opposed to God, and various other ecumenical concerns.⁷⁶ Where aspects of Van Vorst’s claims were accused of being inaccurate and somewhat of a ‘stretch’,⁷⁷ there were three areas that became core reasons for choosing against Union.

⁷² Leslie Van Vorst, ‘Conference Report of the First Meeting of Congregational Churches Which Would Become the EFCC’, August 22, 1970, EFCC Conference Minutes, Fellowship of Congregational Church.

⁷³ Jones, ‘Interview: Congregational Perspectives On Church Union In Australia’.

⁷⁴ Leslie Van Vorst, ‘Second Conference Report of “Continuing Congregationalists” November 28th 1970’, November 28, 1970, EFCC Conference Minutes, Fellowship of Congregational Church.

⁷⁵ Leslie Van Vorst, ‘Declaration Of Concern: An Assessment of the Basis of Union Revised 1971’ (Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregational Churches), Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁷⁶ Primarily connected with the World Wide Council of Churches.

⁷⁷ This was the accusation from Barnes in a response that was also circulated to the churches of the union. Geoffrey Barnes, ‘Comments on the “Declaration of Concern” By the Congregational Union of Australia’ (Congregational Union of Australia, May 1972), Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

The first reason was that 'The statement represents a definite movement away from the clear Biblical Authority of truly orthodox Christianity'. The main concern was that paragraph 5 of the Basis does not state that the 'Bible IS the word of God' and that it does not represent it as 'final authority'.⁷⁸ In separate correspondence, Barnes, in reply to a letter from J. G. Stewart on behalf of the Congregational Union of Australia Church Union and Ecumenical Affairs Committee, indicates that 'the *Basis of Union* affirms the authority and inspiration of the scriptures...is implicit throughout'.⁷⁹ Stewart's reply was that an explicit statement would resolve the issue.⁸⁰ His recommendation was ultimately not taken on board. Upham, and indeed Barnes himself, suggest that the doctrine of scripture was the main reason that the Congregational churches stayed out.⁸¹

It may have been that the Continuing Congregationalists were being overly cautious due to notable liberalism in the Joint Commission.⁸² Certainly paragraph 11 of the *Basis*, which seems to promote higher criticism, would have played a part in their objections. Maybe both groups were simply failing to properly engage with one another, or it was simply just too late in the proceedings.⁸³ The *Basis* may not have been clear enough for some, however, whatever the reason, this was the central concern and their stance was clearly represented in the newly drawn up statement of faith which stated that:

⁷⁸ Van Vorst, 'Declaration Of Concern: An Assessment of the Basis of Union Revised 1971'.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Barnes, 'Letter: Reply to Mr Stewarts Concerns about Basis of Union', September 17, 1971, Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁸⁰ J.G. Stewart, 'Reply to the Letter from Barnes Regarding His Concerns about Union. Addressed to the Church Union and Ecumenical Affairs Committee.', September 5, 1971, Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

⁸¹ Upham, 'Additional Chapter: 1965 to 1977', 346; Barnes, 417.

⁸² Peter Barnes, 'Schemes For Church Union In Twentieth Century Australia', argues that McCaughey in an address at Princeton Theological Seminary on 6th June 1967 suggested that the church 'must be prepared to live without guarantees, without the guarantee of an infallible book'.

⁸³ An accusation made in the following letter, which suggested they should have made their accusations earlier. John Bryant, 'Letter: To Leslie Van Vorst in Response to a Circular by Him on 27th January 1970. On Behalf of the Church Union and Ecumenical Affairs Committee.', January 30, 1970, Box. 50260, Uniting Church Archives.

We therefore accept all that is written in the Bible as not merely containing, but being, the Divinely inspired and infallible word of God and the final and sufficient authority on all matters of Christian faith and life.⁸⁴

The second reason was the silence on major doctrines. The Continuing Congregationalists were concerned that the *Basis for Union* did not outline core doctrines that they saw as central to evangelicalism. However, Barnes in the document *The Basis of Union – What it is and what it says*, indicates that this was never the intention of the *Basis*, stating that it ‘does not spell out in detail the beliefs of the church, its function is to point us to those places’.⁸⁵ This is of course the purpose of the articles on creeds and reformation witnesses.⁸⁶ Uidam sees this emphasis on the creeds as a natural implication of the ‘weakening of the authority of scripture’,⁸⁷ which may have been the sentiment behind the requested amendments by Mosman Congregational Church who said that they felt the ‘*Basis* gives too much authority to the historic creeds’.⁸⁸ Barnes simply referred to the *Basis* as a ‘charter for mission’,⁸⁹ however it was obvious that this made the Continuing Congregationalists nervous.

The final core objection was definitely a result of wanting to hold to the core tenet of Congregationalism, which highlights autonomy of the local church. However, that said, in the Continuing Congregationalist eyes this was not just mere traditionalism, but also a matter of doctrine. As highlighted earlier, the Congregationalist view of scripture and ecclesiology

⁸⁴ Walter (Chairman) Collier, ‘An Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregationalists: Constitution and By-Laws.’ (Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregational Churches), EFCC Conference Minutes, Fellowship of Congregational Church.

⁸⁵ Barnes, *The Basis Of Union: What It Is and What It Says*.

⁸⁶ Barnes, *Basis Of Union*, chap. 9, 10.

⁸⁷ Uidam, *Union and Renewal*, 49.

⁸⁸ ‘A Detailed List Of Amendments from Congregational Churches by the Congregational Union of Australia’.

⁸⁹ Barnes, *Basis Of Union*.

was such that they both went hand in hand. Polity is not just a structural add on, but for them biblically based. Attached to this was the concern of property, which would take up considerable time and resources for all churches involved in the coming years.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregationalists continued lobbying churches and sent out deputationists seeking to empower local churches about the issues of concern and to give them an alternative option. Various churches that considered themselves conservatively evangelical still decided to unite. Colin Jones suggested that around half of the churches involved in the Congregational Board of Evangelism decided to unite. He stated that: ‘some thought that they would join to try and influence and then if it did not work they could leave’.⁹⁰ However the nature of union and centralization of property made this difficult. It was possible to leave later but this would invariably mean that the church would leave behind any right to property or assets. Various communications regarding these central issues and legal concerns would follow along with necessary discussions that would lead to the formation of the FCC.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES

After the vote, much time was spent on legal proceedings, the division of assets and concerns about how the continuing churches would either continue or set up a new body. Ultimately they decided that the Congregational Union would be disbanded and that a new body would be inaugurated, the Fellowship of Congregational Churches. Doctrine, however, still remained a central concern in the lead up to the formation of this body. In an executive meeting of the EFCC on 28th July 1972 the committee planned a conference titled ‘The

⁹⁰ Jones, ‘Interview: Congregational Perspectives On Church Union In Australia’.

relevance of Church Union issues to evangelicals',⁹¹ which had a definite emphasis on the central concern of scripture. Those who continued as Congregational churches clearly saw themselves as preserving evangelical orthodoxy. In 1974, in a meeting at Sylvania Congregational Church of those churches which did not unite, Leslie Van Vorst addressed the churches, urging them of the importance to stand for 'truth' which was so necessary in these days.⁹² In the FCC address on the 25th of June 1977, Ray Best, who chaired that meeting in 1974 and would go on to be the first president of the FCC, addressed the churches with these words:

We believe we are in conscience bound to remain Congregational churches...The reasons for this as I see them are primarily theological, that is to say they concern matters of doctrine or belief...we are concerned to uphold and re-affirm in our day the great evangelical doctrines of the Christian faith.⁹³

In this address, Best went on to single out the issue of scripture, stating 'One important area which I would mention in which we believe we are called to bear testimony...[that is] to the full and complete inspiration of the Scriptures as they were originally given and have been divinely preserved'.⁹⁴ Best also included aspects of historical Congregationalism and autonomy of the local church, though the doctrine of scripture continued to be the main concern for the Continuing Congregational churches.

⁹¹ Leslie Van Vorst, 'EFCC Executive Meeting and Conference Planning' (Evangelical Fellowship of Continuing Congregational Churches, July 28, 1972), Fellowship of Congregational Church.

⁹² Leslie Van Vorst, 'Address from L. Van Vorst at the Meeting of Members of Non-Uniting Churches at Sylvania Congregational Church', September 20, 1974, Minutes of Meetings 21/3/75 to 19/10/78, Fellowship of Congregational Church.

⁹³ Ray Best, 'Address given at the Inauguration of the Fellowship of Congregational Churches', June 25, 1977, Minutes of Meetings 21/3/75 to 19/10/78, Fellowship Of Congregational Church.

⁹⁴ Best, 'Address given at the Inauguration of the Fellowship of Congregational Churches'.

One way that they sought to address what they saw as a logical result of theological liberalism was to make alternative plans to train their clergy. Breward states that this was one of the ways that evangelicals rallied against liberal theology.⁹⁵ Colin Jones became part of a task force to think this through. He suggested that there was an arrangement made by the United College for the Presbyterians and Congregational churches who stayed out, although both groups said ‘no’. Instead, they ‘came in on the coat tails of the Presbyterians in an arrangement with Moore Theological College’,⁹⁶ which Breward identified clearly as evangelical.⁹⁷

The Continuing Congregational churches that became the FCC now consist of thirty-one churches and only around 1200 members, that is 0.005% of the Australian population. This may have been a result of the many challenges over the last 100 years, however Piggin, when commenting on union in general states that ‘union further fragmented the denominational scene’.⁹⁸ It would be naïve to suggest that this was the sole reason for such small numbers today, although it was a factor.

CONCLUSION

There are obviously multifaceted reasons that the Continuing Congregational churches stayed out. It would be simplistic to suggest otherwise. We have identified a number of these in this essay. The first attempt at union may have flavored future perceptions. Theological liberalism and the evangelical reaction in general would have put the Continuing

⁹⁵ Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches*, 121.

⁹⁶ Jones, ‘Interview: Congregational Perspectives On Church Union In Australia’.

⁹⁷ Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches*, 121.

⁹⁸ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 173.

Congregational churches in defense mode. The suggestion of bishops and the concordat with South Indian churches would have definitely been an ecclesiological step too far for most Congregational churches, as it proved to be for the others too.

This paper has not attempted to assess what lay behind the multitude of conversations regarding property and assets. Was it traditionalism, a matter of pragmatics, or was it driven by concern for the ministry of the word? Nor has the paper explored the attitude of the laity and what influenced their voting, both of which would be worthwhile discussions. There is room for more in-depth analysis on the central claims of the Continuing Congregationalists against the *Basis of Union*, and it would be helpful to weigh this up with both the Presbyterian and Methodist views, particularly that of the Presbyterians that the Continuing Congregationalists closely related to post union. That said there are some things that can be ascertained from the analysis above.

The Congregationalists clearly have a strong heritage, which, in particular, emphasizes the authority of the word, the autonomy of the local church and their Calvinistic heritage. These three aspects of their identity have played an obvious role in their reasons for staying out.

For some, the issue of autonomy may have been a guise, a mere battle cry for Congregational traditionalism. It is difficult to tell. However, it seemed clear, at least from the clergy involved in the EFCC and FCC, that they saw this as a matter of doctrine and not traditionalism primarily. Colin Jones suggested that the issue was not union per se. The general consensus seemed to be that Union was a good thing, just not on this basis. The Continuing Congregationalists clearly saw the autonomy of the local church as something to

be upheld, and as such would have been naturally opposed to the polity of the Uniting Church.

The reactions to theological liberalism that permeated the Australian colleges and the Congregational Church resulted in natural battle lines being drawn and no doubt resulted in misunderstandings from both camps. This could have led to a misunderstanding of the Basis, though some helpful questions were raised that would require further work. Were the core evangelical doctrines implicit in the *Basis*? Did it need to be more explicit? The Continuing Congregationalists certainly thought so and made it clear in various addresses that they wanted to stand for truth and traditional evangelical orthodoxy.

The central reason for them, which ultimately they saw all others resting upon, was one that would bring them right back to their roots – that of the authority of scripture. Theological liberalism obviously contributed to their reaction, as would the Presbyterian doctrinal objections during the first union attempt (even if their claims were not proven, this would have affected perceptions). Even though the motive behind the *Basis* was that they ‘sought to hear God’s words and do his will’,⁹⁹ the Continuing Congregationalists believed that the *Basis* was not specific enough on a doctrine that they believed was central to evangelicalism. It may be that these claims from the Continuing Congregational camp were communicated too late. It is hard to tell for sure. Also the charge that the document Declaration of Concern was fraught with inaccuracies could have resulted in a failure to deal with the real issues. All of these things are possible. However, one thing is clear, the central reason for the Continuing Congregationalists staying out was an inadequate doctrine of scripture proposed by the *Basis of Union*.

⁹⁹ Barnes, ‘The Basis Of Union’.

So, where there are a myriad of complex issues that need to be assessed in order to give a fuller picture of the Continuing Congregational churches staying out, we must say, that in their eyes the main concern was theological, concerning ‘matters of doctrine or belief’,¹⁰⁰ of which the authority of the word and the autonomy of the local church were central.

¹⁰⁰ Best, ‘Address given at the Inauguration of the Fellowship of Congregational Churches’.

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