

The Role of Members in the Uniting Church

At the recent Leaders' Retreat that was held here at the Gladstone Uniting Church, those gathered spent some time discussing the roles and responsibilities of various councils of the church such as Church Council and Elders and looked at the recent change that has occurred in the most recent edition of the Rules and Regulations of the Uniting Church. One council of the Uniting Church that is often left out of these discussions is the congregation, which is also regarded as a council of the church.

The following story, taken from the book, *A guide for Elders*, edited by Colin Ray, was used at the Retreat to help us understand that not only does the Church Council and the Elders have responsibilities within the congregation, so do the members of the congregation.

Flight 401 was bound for Miami from New York with a heavy load of holiday passengers. As the aircraft approached Miami Airport for its landing, a light that indicates proper deployment of the landing gear failed to come on. The plane flew in a large, looping circle over the swamps of the Everglades while the cockpit crew checked out the light failure. Their question was this: 'Has the landing gear actually not deployed, or is it just the light bulb that is defective?'

To begin with, the flight engineer fiddled with the bulb. He tried to remove it but it wouldn't budge. Another member of the crew became curious and tried to help him out... and then another. By and by, if you can believe it, all eyes were on the little light bulb that refused to be dislodged from its socket. No one noticed that the plane was losing altitude. Finally it flew right into the swamp. While an experienced crew of high-priced and seasoned pilots messed around with a 75-cent light bulb, an entire plane and many of its passengers were lost. The crew momentarily forgot the most basic of all rules in the air... 'Don't forget to fly the airplane'.

The same thing can happen in a local congregation. The minister or the Council of Elders can be so busy fighting petty fires and focusing so much of their attention on the insignificant issues that they lose sight of what the congregation is all about. They forget the primary objectives of the congregation.

Whose job is this?

1. bear witness to that unity that is both Christ's gift and his will;
2. build up the members and adherents in faith and love;
3. sustain the members and adherents in hope;
4. nurture the members and adherents in their growth in grace;
5. instruct the members and adherents for outreach in mission;
6. lead and equip the members and adherents for service and a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.
7. discipline its members in love;
8. maintain pastoral oversight;
9. encourage each member and adherent to participate in the total life of the Congregation and endeavour to provide opportunity for that participation;
10. provide the means whereby the members and adherents may be sustained in fellowship, in prayer and in confession, in baptism and in the Lord's Supper, in mutual reception of and mutual exertion in the gospel proclamation and service.

When asked this question, many people, including elders, quickly answer 'Oh that's the task of the elders'... *but no, it's the task of the whole congregation!* Paragraph 3.1.1(a) of the Uniting Church *Regulations* describes the congregation as 'the embodiment in one place of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' and goes on in Paragraph 3. 1. 1 (b) to say how it fulfills its purpose. Then follow points (1) to (10) as above.

As members and adherents of a congregation it is very easy for a person to come on Sunday morning and not think that they have any responsibility apart from being there, and that the primary responsibility for leadership, encouragement and pastoral care for the congregation falls on the Church Council, Elders and minister. Nothing is further from the truth. Everyone who calls a particular congregation "home" has the responsibility to engage in ministry, mission and leadership within that congregation—to provide an atmosphere where people can be nurtured in their faith—to provide the nurturing and encouragement that all of us need—where the old in the faith can teach the young in the faith—and where all of us grow together in faith and love to serve the Lord.

Grace and peace,

Allan