

The good news of parochialism

By Peter MacKenzie UCANZ executive officer

There is an inherent tension in churches between the competing attitudes of parochialism and denominationalism – whether the church is a cooperative venture or not. Being parochial is aligned with having a local identity derived from a geographic location, while being denominational reflects the identity that is derived from our church practice and theology.

As churches come under tension from changes in demographics and financial challenges, there is often a need to consider some form of coming together to create a more economic unit. This is nothing new. In the beginning of the 20th Century many denominational churches clustered together in circuits or parishes to provide ministry to widespread congregations. At this time denominationalism was ascendant and ministers often faced longer travel distances.

The ecumenical debates of the mid-century allowed parochialism to gain more ground. Churches in a community were able to put aside denomination in favour of a local solution. In many communities there was a simple choice – unite locally (which is parochial) or unite within the church to make a much bigger parish area. It may have been a simple choice, but it was never easy.

Many union and cooperating churches were formed with a background of parochialism – they wanted to be a local church and that was more important than denominational differences. In many of our rural areas the only reason the church has survived is attributable to people setting aside their denominationalism in favour of a parochial solution.

Times have changed – but many things stay the same! We, as churches, still face the same tensions between being local and being denominational. Smaller churches are still struggling with the tension of being a local church and the need to create a bigger unit. In some areas we are seeing denominational mergers as neighbouring churches amalgamate – but that is not an option for everyone. Distance and distinctiveness often block the possibility of denominational churches merging.

So what of the option of staying parochial (local) and breaking down the denominationalism? Our UCANZ parishes bear witness to the fact that it can be done. Churches have successfully worked together in communities for over 50 years and in doing so they have affirmed that God's Spirit moves in ways that challenge human attitudes. The Spirit unsettles, making us un-peg the tent and move on.

In the ecumenical spirit of those that envisioned church union, UCANZ believes that there are opportunities for the local church to strengthen their calling in their community. This affirms a oneness of Christ's body and communion of the church. While the Procedures for Cooperative Ventures is approved by the five partner churches, it provides a framework for other form of cooperation beyond our usual partnerships.

Parochialism gets plenty of bad press – but maybe it is part of a creative tension that invites churches to look at new wineskins to hold the precious vintage of our faith. For together we affirm, "He is risen! And he is Lord."

