



Uniting Church in Australia

The Congregation of Mark the Evangelist

Incorporating UnitingCare Hotham Mission

Elm Street Hall, near Curzon Street, North Melbourne

12 June 2015

TO: The MSR Team and the VicTas Synod Standing Committee

RE: the MSR Community Services Summary Report

This paper is a response from the Board of UnitingCare Hotham Mission to the “MSR Community Services Summary Report [Condensed Version]” (“the Report”). It is largely a theological response – ecclesiological, in particular. We are mindful of the 5-Agencies document “A Response”,¹ with which we are largely in agreement, but here we are focussing less on the in/adequacies of the process or proposals of the Report and more on its undeclared ecclesiological and missiological assumptions.

In sum, our main point is this:

there is no theological justification given in the Report for the Church to be involved in the shape of service delivery which currently predominates in UCVT, and is proposed will continue. In the absence of any clearly articulated theological rationale, it is not clear how the Church – Standing Committee, Synod – can make an informed decision about the future shape of the UCVT network.

This paper is offered in the hope that it might assist the Church towards a greater clarity and fidelity in its thinking and final decision-making about its community services network.

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Scarcely any attention is given in the Report to the theological bases for the Church being involved in community services. The Report states, “Previous sections of this report explored the theological and missional basis for the community services work of the Synod, as well as the external and internal environments of the 26 UnitingCare agencies” (page 18). In fact, there is no such exploration in the Report. Granted, we have received a “Condensed Version” of a “Summary Report” and the theological bases might have been omitted for brevity’s sake, but when the Report then goes on to declare, “The theological reflective work supports a range of options for community outreach by congregations, presbyteries and the Synod,” we are left wondering, “How does this theology support this range of options, and what other options might it support?” Further, how is the Church then able to make a fully faith-informed decision about the future of its agencies?

¹ A response by UnitingCare Kildonan, ReGen, South Port, Ballarat, and Werribee Support and Housing, June 2 2015.

In the absence of a clear statement of these theological principles it becomes necessary to infer them from the content of the Report itself, analysing the language and emphases to identify the ecclesiology and missiology operating in the Review and its proposals.

Such an analysis yields at least the following observations:

1. The “mission” here is the operation of the agencies – the services they provide. Yet how this work differs from the work of other community service providers is not stated. Clear decision-making about UCVT’s continuing involvement in government-funded community service delivery requires clarity about what difference it makes that *we* do this work, as distinct from other NFP or for-profit providers. This question is fudged in the language of the Report. Thus, for example, the word “mission” appears 88 times but the word “ministry” only once (in “Centre for Theology and Ministry”!). Non-church community service providers will typically also speak of having a “mission”, but none would speak of having a “ministry”. Within the churches² these two words are largely interchangeable; if they are not interchangeable in our speech to ourselves (or others) about the work of the UCVT agencies, then we risk self-delusion and infidelity to ourselves and others. In the language of the Report, the term “mission” serves as a justification for the predominant agency form in which the Church currently works in the community.
2. We note (suspect) that the thrust of the Report on the community services network was not originally determined by the MSR itself but has behind it the inter-agency strategic review which began independently of the MSR and was then subsequently subsumed into the MSR. The original conception of that prior internal review has been carried too uncritically into the present Report. Lead among the concerns of the prior internal review was adjusting to the changing funding environment in order to remain “competitive” in the community services environment. That approach to that review reflected a strong concern to “survive” in the new environment. This concern is entirely understandable at an institutional level, but is not at all a clear “mission” principle – properly conceived. Yet it overshadows other important ecclesiological considerations which might have been noted in the Report and broadened the range of options for community service delivery in the future. The Report notes several times the impact of client-centric funding on NFP agencies in NZ and the UK, apparently as a warning as to what could happen here. What is not acknowledged in the Report is that the services no longer provided by such NFP agencies in those places *are still being provided*. What has changed is the service provider, not the provision of the service. A critical question here begs an answer in relation to the MSR recommendations for the future of our community service delivery: does it matter if *we* are no longer the service providers in any particular, or most, instances? We recognise that many people’s jobs may be at risk here – at least as employees of one of *our* agencies rather than of some other – but if this is our

² We attempt in this document to distinguish between “the Church” (uppercase) as the Uniting Church and “the church” (lower case) as the church more generally; in some cases the distinction is difficult to draw.

main concern it needs to be reconsidered in view of a clearer understanding of the vocation of the church, which does not include “employer”. The Report confuses service delivery *per se* with service delivery *by us*. As such, a different way of dealing with the importance risk and governance issues identified in the Report is not considered: that we might have the option of reducing risk by being less involved in delivering services which do not have to be delivered *by us*. *The root cause of this confusion is that the “mission” of the agencies precedes a statement about the nature of the church and its particular responsibilities.*

3. There is a tension between the stated concerns of the Report and the Synod-determined concerns (“themes”) of the MSR. In particular, the MSR is to be concerned with “the changing nature of the church”, while the Report is almost wholly concerned with the changing nature of the operational environment of UCVT. The only way in which the “changing nature of the church” seems to impinge upon UCVT’s environment is in the Church’s diminishing competence, making the Church another *environmental* rather than *constitutional* factor of UCVT. Clearly such diminished competence needs to be a crucial element of a review of the agencies, yet but it is not the nature of the church (the UCA, or more generally) which directs the Report’s findings but the agencies’ changing context. It is difficult to see how staying “competitive” in a changed funding environment – competing with, among others, other churches – is something which falls naturally out of a sound ecclesiology. This suggests, again, that the nature of the church *per se* is not central to the analysis or proposals of the Report. There is nothing in the Report which communicates how the agencies of UCVT would be different if the Church ceased any relationship to them; indeed, the Report could be read to be skirting around the fact that some of our agencies would do better without the encumbrance of church oversight. As such, it is not clear why the current agency model should be retained. If an argument – properly built upon a theology of the church and its mission – were mounted, then the Standing Committee and Synod would be much better placed to make informed decisions about the future shape of its community services network. An argument for retention of the current model may perhaps be mounted, but it has not yet been.

4. Among the issues the Report raises are concerns about the resourcing at UCVT and CFM Board level to provide adequate oversight of the complex of agencies and their programs. As noted above, this is one point at which the MSR’s theme “the changing nature of the church” impacts directly on the changes to the wider UCVT environment. The proposed solutions to this inadequacy, however, implies that we should continue to do everything we currently do, if more efficiently, effectively and safely. Again, the ecclesiology here is very weak. Because the question which has been asked is not primarily about the nature of the church but about the needs of the agencies, it is the strongly implied conviction of the Report that we are under an imperative to maintain the current predominant government-funded agency model

of UCVT and that it necessarily be delivered on the same (or even larger) scale. Again, the Report does not draw the Church deeply enough into the fundamental questions about mission to enable a full understanding of what we are committing to, *and why*.

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In summary, the principle problem with the language of the Report – and so with its implied theology – is that the word “mission” operates without any reference to an understanding of church, apart from the Church being the umbrella organisation for UCVT. Put differently, *the needs of the agencies are considered independently of the nature of the church*. The ultimate effect of this is the impression that the Church needs the agencies more than the agencies need the Church even if, for reasons not made clear, the wider community needs *our* agencies more than others’ agencies.

It is doubtless possible to make our agencies more efficient, effective and safer by adopting strategies along the lines of the preferred options in the Report. It is not at all clear, however, how this assists the Church to *be* church, or will resolve the long- and deeply-felt concerns about the relationship between the Church and its agencies, which surely must also be part of the work of such a wide-sweeping study as the MSR.

Had the Report begun with a reflection on the nature of the church *per se* and not with the organisational needs of the agencies, the range of options for responding to the current situation of the Church and its agencies would have been much broader. We recognise that this paper makes no particular contribution to a theology which might inform decision-making about the current (and proposed future) shape of UCVT community service delivery. Our purpose here is simply to observe that, in the absence of any theological grounding for continuing with the current shape of UCVT service delivery, we do not believe it is possible for the Standing Committee and Synod to make an informed decision about the future of UCVT.

Signed

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