

# The Voice

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## Being church: a new possibility

The CMN Board has taken the first steps towards our faith community being recognised as a congregation of the UCA. The Board is seeking expressions of interest from a minimum of eight people who may be interested in founding a CMN congregation. This group will be invited to an information and discussion evening to discuss their interest, and to learn about the steps that need to be put in place.

The initiative follows the Board's study of a national UCA Assembly report, *"Being Church Differently"*, which has developed a series of steps to encourage UCA agencies and schools to establish congregations or faith communities. In a report to the Board, Director John Bottomley noted that the development of a CMN congregation may strengthen the Network's identity as church.

"As we seek to be the church, the UCA's view of the congregation is a much fuller expression of what it means to be church. In particular, the congregation is created a fellowship by the Spirit of Christ, while a faith community is created by the needs of the individuals to 'explore', 'serve' or even 'worship together'. The former is more congruent with both CMN's story as told at the Network's anniversary services, and with our Directions Vision as a response to God's governance," he said.

The UCA requires a group of eight people to apply to a presbytery for recognition as a congregation. The group needs to demonstrate 'that their life and mission is consistent with the definition of a Congregation'. Participants may hold membership of the UCA in another congregation; they may be interested to be recognised as a member; or they may belong to another denomination and join the CMN congregation as a member in association (akin to dual citizenship).

If you are interested to find out more about being part of a CMN congregation, please contact the Director, John Bottomley (9827 8322), [john.bottomley@cmn.unitingcare.org.au](mailto:john.bottomley@cmn.unitingcare.org.au)

### THE VOICE

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### CONTENTS

Being Church: a new possibility	1	A flashback	2
Transformative ministry in the world of work	3	What does resurrection mean for my friend?	8

## A flash back

*Thaya Thiagarajah*

Incomprehensible is the flashbacks albeit,  
Just one experience of many I write  
For those who say, " It is all right,  
After all for a just cause that we fight".

The silence of the long dark night  
Which followed the 'sulfur rain' of the daylight,  
Was broken by the 'thunder' and the Para  
light,  
Emitted by the canons so might,  
Melted my organs within me in fright  
And changed my countenance into ghostly  
white.  
My fondest hopes were in blight  
As I thought of my desperate plight.

At daybreak my child wanted to be fed  
I had stale, 'sand' sandwiched bread  
Still cramped in the bunker my three year old  
said,  
"Mum, let us sing grace and thank God  
without fail".

Oh yes! But what do we thank God for?  
For my kindred who fight the bloody 'holy  
war'?  
For sparing us, when others are blown into  
pieces?  
For those whose slogan is 'war for peace'?  
For those who still debate, the 'peace  
package',  
While part of the nation goes into wreckage?  
For those who strategize the war for fame?  
Or who play it, just to win the game?

The episode continues, with more  
sophisticated weapons,  
But my heart bleeds, for the helpless ones.  
If only we try the humane, just but once,  
The vicious cycle of violence will cease at  
once.

*Based on Thaya's experience with her  
daughter when they found refuge in a bunker to  
escape from the bombing and shelling during  
Sri Lanka's civil war.*

## How may the Uniting Church engage a more transformative ministry in the world of work?

*Creative Ministries Network (CMN) is developing  
a proposal in response to an invitation from the  
Board of Mission and Resourcing (BOMAR) for  
CMN to explain how an investigation into the  
'world of work' would provide a 'genuinely  
transformative' opportunity for the church.  
The invitation from BOMAR arose from CMN's  
report on a three-year (2002 -2009) BOMAR  
funded project. We are publishing this article  
as a work in progress, and invite responses from  
those interested in contributing to this  
question.*

*John Bottomley*

### Background

BOMAR funded the CMN from 2007-2009 to  
develop three initiatives:

- Two art-based programs for Indigenous people.
- The script development and public performance  
of a play integrating stories of CMN clients  
bereaved by a work-related death with the  
poetic voice of the prophet Isaiah.
- An integrative theological reflection on the  
church's vocation to bring healing, justice  
and reconciliation to an Australian society  
broken and suffering from the violence and  
injustice caused by the structures and  
beliefs of modern work.

In this work-in-progress paper, the CMN is  
drawing upon the insights from the BOMAR  
funded project, our experience in workplace  
ministry, and our partnerships with several  
congregations in specific projects to:

Affirm the goodness of God in creation by  
recalling the church to God's governance to  
understand what is happening in the world,  
and shed light on our calling to be God's  
people in the world.

Through the prophetic word of judgment,  
identify critical dimensions of idolatry, sin  
and evil in both the world of work and also  
the life of the church that God is dismantling  
and/or purifying.

Identify how a prophetic ministry voices the  
people's lament at their/our suffering in re-  
engaging with God in a desire for God's  
justice and mercy.

Affirm the transforming movement of God in

bringing healing, justice and reconciliation to the brokenness in the world of work and church.

### How the sovereignty of God's governance is displaced and marginalised in modernity

Since the scientific revolution of the eighteenth century, the sovereignty of God in creation has been gradually replaced by belief in scientific and rational thought as the source of truth for explaining events. The rise of rational scientific thought carried the promise that humankind could learn the secrets of nature, and leave behind superstition and religion. Scientific method located 'facts' in the rational public world of science, and relegated emotions such as grief, and beliefs like belief in God, to the private realm.

This was the beginning of 'modernity', a worldview that relegated religious piety to the private sphere of life while placing at the centre of public life belief in autonomous human beings who no longer needed God. (Middleton, J.R. & Walsh, B.J., 1995, *Truth is stranger than it used to be: Biblical faith in a postmodern age*. Illinois. InterVarsity Press)

The autonomy of human beings was placed at the heart of the belief system of modernity, and their 'paid work' is the primary expression of modernity's belief in the power of humans to control their world.

Two other beliefs were important for the emergence of modernity. During the Enlightenment, scientific thinkers believed they could apply scientific rationality to control nature for human benefit. Modernity is characterised in part by Enlightenment thinkers' belief that the "messiness" of the human world, including death, can be put right by the exercise of reason. (Harvey, B., 1990, *Another city: An ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world*. USA: Trinity Press.).

These thinkers believed they could construct a boundary between life and death (Howarth, G., 2000, 'Dismantling the boundaries between life and death', *Mortality*, 5(2), 127-138.), quarantining the reality of death from the public world to achieve the illusion that death

could be mastered. Judeo-Christian belief that God has governance of life and death is marginalised by modernity's belief that death could be mastered by rational science.

Enlightenment thinkers also believed their science and technology would produce economic wealth and a market economy by which human work inevitably progressed towards a better world. God's governance of a material world where God's spirit is incarnate was replaced by a dualistic belief that separated the material and spiritual. The purpose of human work is to ensure material progress, which can be measured by rational, objective means, while spiritual reality is largely ignored because it is invisible and not subject to scientific verification.

***Scientific method located 'facts' in the rational public world of science, and relegated emotions such as grief, and beliefs like belief in God, to the private realm.***

This paper reflects on the sovereignty of God's governance in creation to highlight these three fundamentally idolatrous beliefs in the creation myth of modernity. The paper suggests how the church has accommodated these beliefs in its relative neglect of the world of work, and witnesses to the conviction that in turning away from God's governance in creation, the structures shaped by these beliefs today stand under God's judgment.

### How God's judgment on the world of work and the life of the church reveals the critical failings that need to be transformed

Prophetic perspective exposes God's judgment on three deep divisions in our modern world.

#### 2.1 Life divided: God's 'no' to the separation of 'public' and 'private'

The division of human life into 'public' and 'private' spheres created by Enlightenment thinkers is today under God's judgment. In particular, we are witnessing the collapse of rational knowledge and 'facts' as sources of absolute truth with the dehumanising of work (e.g., work-related deaths, bullying, increasing gap between rich and poor within and between nations), while the private realm of the individual and home is emotionally overburdened and unable to cope with the strain (e.g., increasing mental illness, social isolation, spiraling levels of drug, gambling and alcohol addictions).

God's judgment also falls on the church to the extent that the UCA's congregational, presbytery, synod and assembly structures are primarily enmeshed in and focused upon the private sphere of residential/home life. UCA membership today reflects the church's long-standing neglect of people in their paid working life.

This is not a generational issue. The decline in worship attendances of working people is a consequence of a far deeper blindness in Australian (and western) society. The sickness the church is experiencing in its captivity to the private world of residence/home life is mirrored in the sickness being experienced in the world of work. One cannot be transformed without the other. This is a message of hope for the church as we hear God's 'no' to the separation of 'public' and 'private'.

## 2.2 Time divided: God's 'no' to the separation of 'death' from 'life'

There is a judgment on the separation of 'death' from 'life' and the consequent fear of the reality of death and grief in the public world of work. The lack of respect for death as part of life ensures the causes of death due to injustice and oppression in the public world are inadequately understood (e.g., work-related death, road/car deaths, stress-related death) and therefore the foundation of injustice continues to hold firm.

God's judgment also falls on the church to the extent that the UCA is in denial about the decline and death of its prevailing model of residentially-focused ministry, and is complicit with the prevailing culture in failing to embrace its dying and death as part of God's gift of life.

From the 1950's, declining congregations have been encouraged to amalgamate to survive. Recently, the same strategy has been applied to presbyteries. Throughout this period, the church has invested more and more heavily in establishing congregations on the traditional congregational model in so-called 'new' suburbs, when these urban fringe suburbs bring even greater separation of home from work than the 'old' suburbs did 130 years earlier.

A church that cannot live with the truth of its own decline and the dying of its much-loved model of ministry is not well-equipped to minister to a culture that is also in decline and dying. The dying of an institutional form of church may be teaching and transforming the church for the urgent ministry our society needs. This is a message of hope for the church as we hear God's 'no' to the separation of 'death' from 'life'.

## Reality divided: God's 'no' to the separation of the 'material' and 'spiritual'

There is a judgment on the exclusion of 'spirit' from the 'material', and in particular the destruction of the essential links between human life and our stewardship of creation. The blindness to God's spirit at 'work' in the created order ensures our economy continues to plunder the environment's 'resources', while the prevailing spiritualities of our age baptise the pursuit of material progress. Work for many is soul-destroying because God's spirit of justice and mercy is resisted by the prevailing economic free-market spirits of efficiency and competition.

God's judgment also falls on the church to the extent that the UCA has organised its life around this spiritual blindness, maintaining the separation of the material (property, finance, work)

from the spiritual (mission, worship, home). Lay people receive little or no encouragement from the church to integrate their faith and work. Rather, they are encouraged to see faith as service to the institutional church, and their work as a lesser service, if indeed it is seen as a service to Christ at all.

It is no surprise that the world of work formed in the worldview of modernity has erected so many barriers to exclude God's spirit of justice and mercy from being the animating spirit in people's working lives. This is a message of hope for the church as we are called to the profoundly urgent matter of spiritual discernment so we may hear God's 'no' to the separation of the 'material' from the 'spiritual'.

The particular Australian reference for these

***..the UCA's congregational, presbytery, synod and assembly structures are primarily enmeshed in and focused upon the private sphere of residential/home life..***

three fractures in western societies dates back to the belief structure that underpinned the British colonial expansion to our shores in 1788 - a belief structure that has endured to this day. As the recent Assembly's adoption of a new preamble to the UCA constitution acknowledges, the UCA needs to acknowledge this historical truth as the critical horizon for Christ's transforming of Australian society's divided and fragmented life.

Because the CMN as church has also been captive to these structures and beliefs, our calling to share with Christ in his mission to transform the world of work has of necessity also meant our transformation as church.

Prophetic ministry imagines God's purifying judgment on the people of God as necessary preparation for their ministry to be a transforming light to the nations. These acts of God's judgment and renewal occur in human history, so CMN offers its own history as a model for understanding God's mission to transform work and church.

**Lament: who will voice grief for a culture in denial of death and dying?**

#### A Personal Narrative

*My parish ministry began in Melbourne's suburbs. A church member said one Sunday, "My father-in-law is dying. I wondered if you could visit him". I promised to visit, but as the days passed, I did not make the visit. I was always too busy. There was always something more important.*

*The week ticked by to Saturday; the last day I could put off the visit before I would see the woman again at Church services the next day. I steeled myself to make this visit, which, by now, I dreaded. I felt ill-equipped to visit a dying person. On Saturday morning, I knocked on my member's front door. She answered. "Oh! Come in. Dad died during the night!"*

My professional role gave me tools to conduct funerals, but failed to equip me to understand my emotions. I could not escape my irrational fear of death, which exposed the illusion that my role gave me control over death. I believed my fear was a personal weakness until I learned I was formed by traditional masculinity to be

rational, autonomous and secular.

I believed my fear was the enemy of my reason, and needed to be banished from my work. This belief crumbled when it failed to equip me for my ministry, beginning my renewed exploration of Christian narrative. I discovered a counter voice that didn't pathologise powerless feelings, but saw in personal weaknesses a point of openness to Christ's love and forgiveness.

***Work for many is soul-destroying because God's spirit of justice and mercy is resisted by the prevailing economic free-market spirits of efficiency and competition.***

This discovery entered my working life, and became connected to a personal Christian narrative that holds a vision of justice. In this vision, grief is not only an emotional expression of loss. Here, grief is also a lament that names what is unjust in the structure and beliefs of the modern world.

This grief is a protest against the dehumanising ideology of work, beginning with its challenge to the assumptions in my own working life and workplace. Grief lamented in a prophetic voice is intensely personal and political. It identifies the fractures in workplace beliefs and structures that are the critical openings for God's spirit to begin its transforming mission.

CMN's faithfulness to its founding vocation to ministry in the world of work also embraced periods of significant unfaithfulness, lostness and confusion, both personal and organisational. CMN's story illuminates the possibility and the costs of ministering within the fragmented structures and beliefs of modernity.

The Network's conviction is that Christ called into being our expression of church for the sake of the world. Our service for the world is constituted through Christ's body, the church, and it is this inter-relationship with other parts of the church that engages CMN in being a part of the transformation of the church.

God desires our world of work to be transformed to God's peaceable kingdom of justice and mercy from work's captivity in modernity to sin and evil. As church it is CMN's calling to witness to Christ's transforming mission.

## The transforming movement of God

This proposal suggests four areas of mission and worship where the UCA may take up its call to minister reconciliation in the world, and specifically the world of work. The four areas need to be viewed as a whole, in that they offer distinctive starting points related to the current context of a fragmented reality in both the world of work and church. CMN sees the importance of establishing diverse starting points to connect with the struggles and the possibilities in each of the specific contexts identified.

Each of these four areas is grounded in the Network's experience as church in the world of work, and is able to be resourced from the solid ground of prayerful reflection on our work and ministry.

### Supporting church people at their work as the church's front line of mission

The vocation of lay people in paid employment is the hidden treasure of the church's mission in the world of work. Sadly, for too long the church has looked at lay people as resources for the mission of residential congregations, or Presbytery and Synod committees, rather than empowering its lay people for the mission they can and do exercise in their working lives.

CMN's investigation of ministry in this sphere of work points to the need for a church that is able to:

Develop liturgies and prayers to support key events in members' work life.

Equip ministers to listen to members concerns about their work, and develop their capacity for preaching on such concerns.

Build upon the experience of ministers in secular employment.

Develop opportunities for faith reflection on work through study and prayer.

Locate the experience of individuals in the wider context of either occupational concerns or industry sectors.

***The vocation of lay people in paid employment is the hidden treasure of the church's mission in the world of work.***

Integrate the experience of mature-aged theological students' work histories into their vocational identity.

### Addressing work and faith in UCA workplaces as a learning environment for ministry in like industry sectors and work organisations

In its Synod structure, schools and agencies, the UCA has many workplaces where it can address the integration of faith's wisdom and professional knowledge. CMN's experience is that the church addresses itself almost always merely as an organisation relying on professional expertise, rather than through its calling to be the church.

The challenge is to integrate faith's wisdom with professional knowledge in an environment defined by secular notions of 'risk' that narrowly proscribes the organisational benchmarks for healthy and effective work organisations.

CMN's investigation of ministry in this sphere of work points to the need for a church that is able to:

Develop governance models and training for Synod, schools and agencies that affirm the governance of God as the basis for integrating faith's wisdom with professional knowledge in service provision, employee relations and workplace based faith communities/congregations.

Develop management models and training for CEO's and senior managers in Synod, schools and agencies that uphold the governance of God as the basis for competent and faithful leadership of UCA work organisations.

Develop staff education and training for lay staff in Synod, schools and agencies that equips Christians and non-Christians to work together in work environments that encourage all staff to live out their vocation.

The experience gained from developing these models may then be built upon to support individual Christians working in secular organisations in similar sectors. This would be a new education and training task for the CTM,

and could be funded by fee-for-service students and workplace education contracts.

### Responding to the harmful impact of work on individuals and society

The ideology of work as the primary or sole means for individual and social progress has many harmful effects, including:

The dispossession of Australia's First Peoples through colonial economic expansion.

The compartmentalizing of emotions (grief) and belief (faith, values) in the private sphere, and their separation from objective and rational facts in the public sphere.

Work-related deaths and injury.

The impact of competitive and violent relationships (discrimination, prejudice) on mental illness.

Destruction and degradation of the environment (salinity, pollution, exposure to toxic substances).

Diminishment of the value of unpaid work and of people who are outside the paid workforce.

CMN's investigation of ministry in this sphere of work points to the need for a church that is able to:

Move to a position of solidarity alongside those who are suffering. This requires a

renewal of our understanding of grief and lament as the means by which the church calls on God to act against injustice.

Listen to God's word of judgment on any church structures and beliefs that impede our solidarity with broken and suffering people; acknowledge our failures; and open our hearts to God's transforming grace so we can be renewed in our vision and mission.

Proclaim a renewed vision of work as part of a new community advocating for just and peaceable work.

### Renewing the humanity of people at work

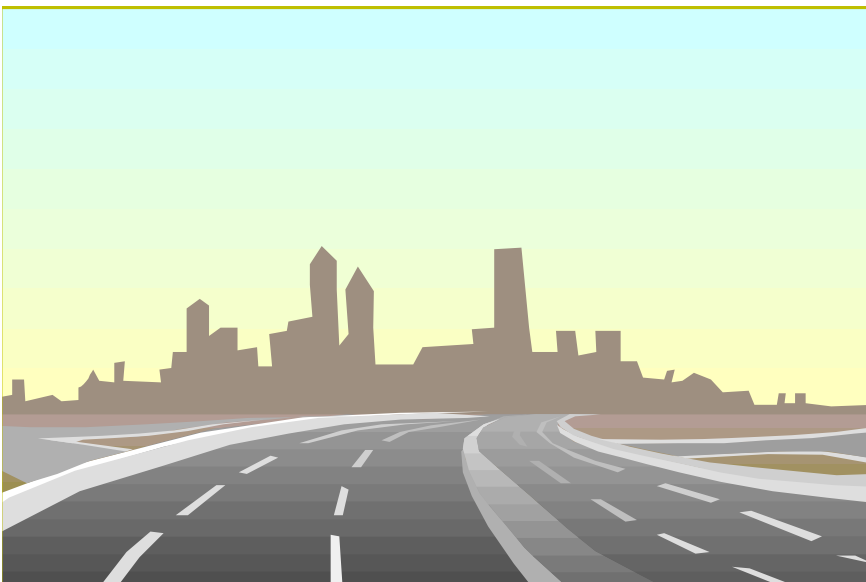
Work is a primary source of meaning and identity for many people, but there is continuing evidence that many others are alienated from the type of work that could provide them with lasting meaning or satisfying identity.

There is a burgeoning consultants' market for organisations packaging solutions to address alienating work and alienated workers. But the secular insights that they market fail to grasp the dimensions of sin and evil that undermines the goodness of work given in creation.

CMN's investigation of ministry in this sphere of work points to the need for a church that is able to:

Translate its experience with pastoral care, ritual, ethical reflection, social justice and faith education to develop new humanizing responses to these critical work issues. The church needs to then develop a language and concepts of mission and ministry that speaks intelligibly to the world in which its transforming ministry takes place.

Form specific work-orientated agencies for mission and worship to address urban and rural industry specializations, with industry consultancy services for the critical humanizing issues facing modern workplaces.



## What does resurrection mean for my friend?

Thaya Thiagarajah

### The first day .....

Behind the steel gate of the 'lunatic rehabilitation centre'  
Staggered she with the bare minimum patched attire  
Bent down head, exposed breasts, rotten odorous hair  
Her mouth gaped wide with unceasingly dripping saliva  
Shoved, into the 'den' to 'keep her safe and out of danger'

### The second day...

The 'helpers' and nurses fully involved labouring with her  
In the open space, under the hot sun, stark naked she laid  
Silent and shameless like a sheep that was before its shearers,  
Gave her to be shaved all over 'to keep her clean it seems!'  
The straight long hair of her head and the hair on the pubic sphere!

### The third day...

The yelling, fighting, shouting, of the lunatics subdued  
At the entrance of the dining hall it was kept, motionless and silent!  
The clean white shroud covered it from the top to the bottom  
'She forgot to swallow the food and thus got choked to death'  
The schizophrenics were carefully brainwashed with this funny tale!

### Just a few minutes later...

My dear friend dragged me into the dining area  
'Feed me now lest I may starve to death' she cried!  
At the foot of the corpse I opened the box with lunch  
The food was really good she said, the rice and the dead chicken  
'If not for the smell of the corpse, and the taste of my salty tear drops'.

*This poem is based on an experience of one of Thaya's clients at the mental hospital, who became a mental patient because of the Sri Lankan civil war. CMN is a partner in the Sri Lanka Partnership Project, and is raising funds to support the ministry of Jaffna Diocese, Church of South India with a population traumatised by war. Donations or pledges of support may be sent to the 'Sri Lanka Partnership Project, P. O. Box, 362, St. Kilda 3182.*

## Fifth Monday Faithful Conversation: 31 May 2010

'Fifth Monday Faithful Conversations' continues to develop a conversation for those interested in exploring more intentionally the faith foundation and questions that sustain and energise the Network's ministry.

The focus of the conversations is the life questions, faith and doubts of the participants. The next conversation will explore this focus in the context of a conversation on 'Being the church for transforming the world?'

The evening begins at 6.30 p.m. with a take-in meal from one of our local take-aways, and the conversation will begin around 7.00 p.m. for about an hour and a half. The cost of the meal will be split between participants, so please RSVP your attendance by noon on the day.

Future 5<sup>th</sup> Mondays for 2010 are 30 August, and 29 November