

Project Reconnect – A visitor's view

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Submitted: 15th November, 2005

(This is a fictionalized account of a visit made to a Project Reconnect congregation)

First Impressions

I arrived at Billings Gap at 9.20am Early enough to have a quick drive around this neat little country town (pop. 200) to have a peek at its attractions. Railway siding, grain silo's, war memorial, pub. All signs to its age and current activity. No one out and about yet on this mild and sunny morning. I found the UCA building quite easily opposite the Primary School (30 students). 3 cars out front already but plenty of shade left. The building and property looked clean and well cared for. Fresh paint and mown grass pointed to people wanting to make a good impression.

Welcome and Worship

As I left my car I had a friendly welcome from Karen, whom I had met at the workshop the day before. She invited me in and introduced me to Malcolm, the elder, Vi the organist and Mary, her mother in law. Polite welcomes all round. A flat floor, subdued lighting, carpeting, comfortable pews all left me with the impression of a worship space that they were very familiar with. A television to one side of the sanctuary with a DVD menu displaying was the only sign of anything different. Sitting on top of the TV was a mixture of objects, shoes... toys... boxes... I'm sure things would be explained in good time. Karen suggested that I pop out the back and say hello to the others. I did this and found a small group of 3 others putting up some newspaper clippings on a pinup board and arranging things for morning tea and lunch. After some brief introductions to Bet, Bob and Elaine we all moved back to the main room and seated ourselves. A few others also arrived. I sat in the second row, Malcolm came and sat next to me. Vi announced that we would sing some choruses and I was given a copy of "Songs of Praise" I was taken back briefly to the seventies as we sang some old and familiar tunes. Everyone had a go. As I went to sit back down Karen encouraged Malcolm and I to come and sit in the front row so it would be easier to participate in the discussions. We did so.

How Church is done!

Karen led us in an opening prayer. After this Bob started up the first segment on the DVD... the "youth message". All members paid close attention to the TV as Tom, and a guinea pig (I presumed it was a living one) listened to a brief talk about the easy life of captive rodents. The youngest person present, Elaine's son Ben, was at least 14 so the intent and language of the message was pitched well below everyone's comprehension level. But the congregation appeared to be engaged in what was being offered.

A hymn was sung, an offering taken, notices were given and general conversation about who was doing what, where and when in the life of this church was engaged. The bible readings for the day were read by Bet and the questions to be answered in response to the message were displayed, one at a time, by Bob on the TV. Another hymn and we were ready to listen to the message.

The Message Bit

Bob started up the segment on the DVD and we were presented with the face of a rather severe looking man in his 60's who was obviously a bit nervous talking to a camera instead of people he could see. He started well enough with a simple picture of Eden but he soon entered into a very prescriptive monologue blaming all the hardships and difficulties of human existence on the consequences of Adam and Eve's fall from grace. I felt a bit taken aback at his simplistic pronouncements and the axe he appeared to grind about those who would disagree with his understanding of the biblical message. I consoled myself with the knowledge that the message would only go for a maximum of 10 minutes. It felt a lot longer.

Now for some discussion

As soon as the segment finished the congregation launched into a discuss of who the preacher was. They then proceeded to answer the questions that accompanied the message. Simple questions about life in eden and life in heaven. The discussion, which included comments and contributions from everyone gathered except for young Ben was good humoured, insightful and quite well balanced (in my opinion). In fact... the message may have lasted for 10 minutes but the discussion lasted for about half an hour. The message may have been simplistic but the discussion was rich, wide ranging and designed to encourage and reassure. No one participant dominated and all were given space to offer their own mind on the subject. Bet drove the questions along once discussion on each was coming to a close.

The minister arrives near the end for Holy Communion

Another hymn was sung. I was invited to lead in prayers of intercession. A prayer was provided on a sheet to be read. The prayer was difficult to read as the formatting on the sheet didn't separate rubrics from content but I struggled through. At the end of my prayer John arrived from Forbes ready to lead us with communion for the day. After being welcomed and few matters of housekeeping he led us in a simple sharing of the Lord's Supper where we shared the elements together. Worship then concluded with a hymn.

And the experience was like?

Nothing fancy. Nothing awkward. Just a comfortable worship service in a little country time similar to what I had experienced many times before.

Yet different.

The level of ownership by these people was much higher than I would have expected from congregations many times their size. No one seemed reluctant or shy to share, even with a "minister" or two in their midst. They were well practiced in their procedures. There was none of the "what do we do next?" flustering that is common to congregations left to their own devices. There was no domination by one "leader" of the proceedings.

Not just morning tea!

After the worship we all proceeded out the back for morning tea and more discussion. The congregation had been asked to fill in an evaluation form of the preaching and took to that task with some interest. They rated the preacher of the message that day much more highly than I would have. But they had felt energized by the service and their discussion. They also had the task of responding to questions raised by a recent presbytery review of Parkes and MLMA. They were very keen to have their say. And they were very sure to give all the opportunity to have a say. The food and these discussions occupied about 2.5 hours. During this time I directed a few questions to them about their involvement with Project Reconnect. I had asked Karen the day before. "If you could have a minister of your own for your church would you stop using PR?" She answered then, without hesitation. "NO!" I reminded her and those gather there of this response and they all agreed with her. Then I asked (over a period of about 40 mins)

Some questions I asked of them.

1. If PR were to cease to exist what would you do as a congregation?

They put some thought into this. They looked a bit shocked at the possibility. "We could do this!" "We can find other resources on the internet." "We know how to arrange our worship." "We feel a strong need to keep worshipping together and to be a witness in our community." "We would like to have visits from a minister though!"

Reflection

These answers demonstrate that this congregation has, in 3 years, taken responsibility for its own life and future. It has worked hard to learn how to resource its own worshipping and witnessing life. They truly value each other and have a great love of their life together.

2. What do you need a minister for?

One man looked around at everyone and said, "We need a minister to stop us turning into a little cult!" Their

elder said, "We need someone who continues to connect us to the rest of the church!"

Reflection

What great responses! These people who would be considered to be on the "edge" of the UCA have a clear and deep understanding of the nature of ministry within the UCA. They like ministers... and know what they are good for... and what they are not good for.

3. What are you giving back to PR?

"We run a Fun Day a couple of times a year. Last time we took it out of town to other people in the area. It was easier for us to go to them than for them to go to us. We thought it was a way to give something back"

Reflection

They see that they have a mission. I suggested to them that they might be too "full on" for people with little experience of church to join in with their close community. They thought this a bit strange but gave it consideration and tried to view themselves from an outsiders view point. They started listing names of people who they know that in the area who had contact with them outside of the worship context and thought about how they would "fit" with what they currently do.

4. What is the danger that this could become TV church?

Instant reply... "None!" The DVD is there to help us but its only a small part of what we do. They thought the whole idea as a bit silly.

Reflection

These people see the PR materials for what they are. Useful tools to help them. Starting points and guides to get them going and keep them on track.

As I indicated that I was about to leave Karen jumped up to say that she had questions of her own for me.

1. Are we typical of what PR can do in a congregation?

I offered that they were a group of people that were keen to make good use of any opportunities given to them. PR was excellent material for them to use but they had the willingness to learn and grow and use it to their advantage. They are a good example

2. How do you rate us as a church?

I said that they were as good as any congregation of any size I have ever met with. They were friendly, confident and assured about their "place" as a real congregation of the UCA. I gave them 8 ½ out of 10. I re-iterated their need to build bridges to help them connect more closely with their community. And reminded them that they were the ones who needed to cross the bridges.

So Summing Up!

The UCA needs Project Reconnect. If it can do for other small congregations what it has done for Billings Gap and its sister congregations then it will be more effective than any other programme for resourcing local churches that I have encountered.

Here are the characteristics of this congregation that highlight the effectiveness of Project Reconnect.

- ***High level of personal and corporate ownership***
- ***Clearly articulate role of ministry, members and ministers***
- ***Strong sense of mission to connect to God, church and community.***
- ***Readiness to listen to new ideas and give something a go.***
- ***Inclusion of all participants in discussion.***
- ***Pragmatic approach to making plans and ensuring that all have a part to play.***