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Nominalism in the Uniting Church: A Role for Deacons.

THEO 3309: Church and Ministry

For the Rev. Dr Andrew
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Summary

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Due on the fifth hour past noon, on the fifteenth day of June,
of the year Nineteen hundred and ninety five.

Written in some three thousand, three hundred and thirty
words

and with apologies to the trees.

Abstract

Most members of the Uniting Church rarely, if ever, attend Sunday Worship. Most used to be frequent attenders, but either drifted away for various reasons, or were pushed out by the other members.

Deacons have a role in affirming the validity of nominal Christianity, whilst working to overcome some of its inherent dangers. They may also be involved in overcoming the dangers inherent in the ghettoising tendency of those who remain in the institution, and bringing recognition, or even reconciliation, between the two groups.

Introduction

A mere fifth of the Uniting Church's members attend Sunday worship at least monthly. Sixty percent attend less frequently, and a further seventeen percent come only for weddings and funerals¹. Regular churchgoers generally look down on the others, often rejecting their claim to be Christian.

The purpose of this essay is to consider how we should view, and respond to, the dramatic increase in the number of nominal Christians since WWII, particularly now that the diaconate has been established in the UC. Deacons may have a special role to play because they are primarily called to be in ministry with people outside, or on the margins of the institutional church, whereas presbyters are primarily called to be in ministry with the regulars².

¹ See appendix one.

² Presbyters are more typically called ministers of the Word (and Sacrament). However, this tends to identify the Word exclusively with preaching, and sacraments exclusively with those performed in Sunday worship. Deacons are also ministers of the Word (Christ), and presently ministers of the sacraments. The doctrine commission follow this nomenclature in *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church* (May 1994).

For the purpose of this essay, UC members will be divided into three groups. Regulars attend Sunday worship at least monthly (most do so weekly). Attenders come to worship less than monthly, but usually more than annually. Nominals do not attend worship services, coming to church only for weddings, funerals, and perhaps infant baptisms. Although attenders comprise 60% of the UC they are rarely mentioned in this paper, but can be understood as falling between the two other extremes..

The first task is to decide whether nominals and attenders should be considered true members of the UC. How do, and how should, we view people who rarely, if ever, participate in the institutional life of the church? Are nominals Christians 'in name only'³, or are they people who 'nominate' themselves as Christians but rarely if ever participate in the institution?

Are Nominals Really Christians?

Christians who say, 'no.'

The New Testament was primarily a time of gathering, so there is little said about nominalism. What we do find is very negative. The author of Hebrews warns that apostasy is unforgivable (6:4-7), and encourages his readers to continue to meet together for encouragement and motivation (10:23-25). John particularly emphasises that the world is an evil place, and that those who go out from the community are not a part of it, and indeed never were. They are without the Spirit (1Jn2:15-20). Therefore by this logic it is impossible to be Christian if not part of a worshipping community, and more specifically the *right* worshipping community, that believes the right things.

³ *The Macquarie Dictionary*, s.v. "Nominal" cites this as the primary meaning.

This view continued through to the reformation, and finds strong affirmation in Calvin's Institutes⁴. It is still a common one today, particularly amongst more biblicist Christians. Nominals are often not considered to be Christian at all. Nominals, most attenders and even a few regulars are declared to be backsliders, apostates, worldly.

Christians who say, 'yes.'

Hughes⁵, believes that nominals are different, not apostates. Their theological leaning, and strength of conviction may be different, but most nominals profess a Christian faith.

Survey statistics also reject the claim that people who stop attending Sunday worship are apostates. The NCLS found that only 14% of people who subsequently returned to church after a period of absence left because of a loss of faith⁶. More important were theological conflicts or changing needs. Almost as important were conflicts with the leader or unhappiness with institutional worship.

Blombery & Hughes⁷ divide nominals into three categories. *Intellectual dissenters* left the church over theological issues, see the church as irrelevant to their weekly life, or do not find their spiritual needs being met there. *Institutional*

⁴ Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.I.4, "away from (the visible church's) bosom, one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation...God's fatherly favour... [is] limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church."

⁵ Hughes, P., "Mission and Nominalism in Australian Society", *St Mark's Review*, no. 146, Winter 1991, pp. 2-6. Hughes, P., "Nominalism", *Trinity Occasional Papers*, vol 11, no. 2, 1993, pp. 63-75.

⁶ The "National Christian Life Survey", discussed in P. Kaldor, *et al*, *Winds of Change: The Experience of Church in a Changing Australia*, p. 203.

⁷ Blombery, T., & Hughes, P., *Faith Alive: An Australian Picture* (Christian Research Association 1993).

dissenters dislike the boredom, hypocrisy, bickering, or the difficulty in complaining against certain ministers. For these people, church is a boring waste of time and the clergy are ignorant of the issues of society. *Personal dissenters* are those who stopped attending once their family stopped forcing them to, particularly when they moved out of home. They are not necessarily anti church, but do not see it as relating to their lifestyle. For some, their activities, particularly parties, drinking and smoking, did not match what they were told was the Christian lifestyle, so they felt uncomfortable coming along.

The most common criticisms that regulars hear about the church from nominals are that regulars don't practise what they preach, that the problem of suffering isn't adequately addressed, the objection to an insistence on biblical inerrancy, and that church is irrelevant. Some think that church is for non-copers, or good, but not for them. Seven percent of Christians have heard that others don't feel good enough to attend church⁸.

Far from being unbelievers, almost 90% of nominals and attenders believe in God, mostly a personal God who is primarily an awesomely powerful creator, ^{not a} ~~the~~ friend. Most believe in eternal life, heaven and hell, although they are less confident than regulars⁹. Hughes concluded that there is a considerable portion of the UC who don't attend, or attend rarely, not because they have rejected the Christian faith, but because they see the institution as irrelevant and not necessary for them to maintain their faith. Why has this happened?

He offers three answers. There are now more women at work, and therefore less women with the time or energy to attend church. Free entertainment was at one stage focussed around the church, but is now readily

⁸ Kaldor, P., Bellamy, J., & Moore, S., *Mission Under the Microscope* (Open Book 1995) p. 80.

⁹ Hughes, *Nominalism*, pp. 66-68.

accessible at home through television. The communication and transport boom means that people often have friends far from where they live, so the local church is not a primary social gathering place¹⁰.

Although most nominals believe in a personal God, their emphasis on God as a somewhat detached creator and lawgiver gives them less reason to feel the need for church. God as creator has ordained a certain way of living in the world, and once people have attended church long enough to work out what that is, church is less important. Hughes argues that for such people, once church was no longer the sole supplier of entertainment and social connections, it was no longer necessary to attend. They may do so on occasion, but believe that they know the faith enough not to need to. For them, the faith consists primarily of living the good life, especially in keeping the ten commandments and 'doing unto others...'

The regulars, then, are either people who see Sunday worship as essential to nurture their relationship with God, or for whom it provides significantly for their need for entertainment and social contact¹¹. This may explain why the church is over represented by older people; they formed strong social circles while the local congregation was still central to community life, and haven't moved out of the area since.

Hughes basically argues that many nominals are Christians who were *pulled* out of institutional church by external sociological factors. While his argument is logical, and may account for much nominalism, the data is also compatible with the hypothesis that a significant number of nominals were

¹⁰ Hughes, *Nominalism*, pp. 70-72.

¹¹ Kaldor, P., & Powell, R., *Views From the Pews: Australian Church Attenders Speak Out*, p. 84, reports that about half of respondents see Sunday worship as a significant source of spiritual growth, and about half see friendships and groups as significant. Unfortunately the question, "Why do you come to church?" was not asked directly.

actually *pushed* out of the Institution by the other regulars.

It may be that regulars are those who relate well to the dominant social groups in the church. Regulars are Christians who like to dress and present themselves well, who drink little if anything, don't smoke and dislike swearing. They were lucky enough to grow up in, or slot into, the in-crowd. Other Christians either never fitted in, or found as they matured that they liked to drink and smoke, or they couldn't find work, or became divorced or *de facto*. They just didn't fit in anymore and, faced with the pressure to conform or get out, they chose to leave, much to the subconscious relief of the rest¹². Those who worked long hours, or had Sunday commitments, are in a similar position: very few churches offer worship on other days. The introduction of Sunday trading must be responded to quickly if further marginalisation is to be avoided.

Bosch's investigations into the failure of the early church's mission comes to conclusions that support the above claims. He found that the church rapidly became an insular clique, focussing on difference rather than similarity. Although Jesus started a movement, Christians rapidly institutionalised themselves, gaining a conservative and anxious outlook. Finally, they failed to make those with a different understanding of the faith feel at home¹³. Bosch points out that there was little else that the church could do if it was to survive, especially during the times of persecution. Maintaining this siege mentality in Australia is indefensible.

¹² Kaldor, P., *First Look in the Mirror*, p. 92, shows that institutional church is under represented by working men, the under 40's, blue collar workers, public housing tenants, and those from non English speaking backgrounds. Kaldor & Powell, *Views from the pews*, p. 5, report that only 4% of UC members surveyed drink regularly, and these may all have been attenders. Forty percent believe that most poor are entirely, or mostly to blame for their poverty (p. 10). Sixty eight percent reject *de facto* relationships (p. 15), and only half believe that divorcees should always be allowed to remarry (p. 17).

¹³ Bosch, D. J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, p. 50.

Hughes thought that those with a more distant view of God had less reason to come to church after WWII. Perhaps, instead, their faith may have closely resembled that of the other regulars when they left, but over time the intimate relationship dimension faded. God, sacramentalised by the church as they experienced it, became a somewhat removed, but generally benign source of moral laws and expectations. Their different faith was caused by, not the cause of, their nominalisation.

Yet another group is those who not only didn't fit in, but were directly abused either by other regulars, or leaders. Their belief in God, if they managed to retain it, would most likely be an even more remote version of the attenders': God created the world, but is powerless or unwilling to intervene in it (else why didn't God stop the abuse?). No wonder that their view of God is thought to be less personal and less unshakable than that of the regulars¹⁴.

Theological Issues

Nominals as marginalised Christians.

Whether through direct abuse, or more subtle peer pressure, many nominals and attenders have been pushed to, or beyond, the margins of the Uniting Church. These people resemble the 'sinners' of Jesus' ministry, not sinful in their actions, but defined as such because of their exclusion from the institution. The New Testament shows us that Jesus had a special concern for such people, and berated the religiously self-assured who pushed them out. For all who have been pushed out of the church, we can affirm that Jesus is with

¹⁴ Hughes, *Nominalism*, p. 66.

them, and against us¹⁵ .

Others left because the institutional forms of devotion and worship did not help them relate to God¹⁶ . Again, the New Testament reminds us that Jesus did not seek to form a new institutional religion. His legacy was the Supper, with which we were to remember him¹⁷ , and the Spirit, through whom he would continue to communicate with us, and through whom we would worship God in truth. It is not for those of us who appreciate the traditional, institutional worship patterns to insist that others should also.

The above section affirms the place of nominals as true members of the church, and the UC in particular. Regulars have no right to excommunicate attenders, or even nominals¹⁸, either intentionally or by neglect. This is not to say that nominalism is without problems:

Dangers of Nominal Christianity

Jesus left his followers the Supper to remember him, and the Spirit through whom to relate to him. Unfortunately, the Supper is presently unavailable to most non regulars in the UC. The Spirit is, of course, available to all, but as humans we need tangible ways of deepening our experience of the Spirit. There are many options apart from Sunday worship, so nobody need

¹⁵ Tillich is one of many who report that Christ is not just *for* those excluded by the church, but *in and with* them, sometimes to the point where they better reflect the true church than organised congregations do. (Tillich, P., *On the Boundary*, p. 67).

¹⁶ Even half of the NCLS respondents (who were mostly regulars) did not put worship as the primary or secondary source of spiritual growth (Kaldor & Powell *Views from the Pews*, p. 84).

¹⁷ Hughes *Nominalism* p. 72.

¹⁸ It is central to Protestantism that no one group has the right to put itself between God and others. The cliques in the church that attempt this must be confronted (Tillich, P., *Systematic Theology*, volume 3, pp. 177-179).

miss out¹⁹. It is likely, however, that many nominals are unaware of the options available to them. The first problem of nominalism, then, is that most of them are deprived of the Supper, and helpful ways to develop their relationship with God.

Many nominals have no significant, intentional discussion with Christians about Christian issues. Therefore their faith is free to develop without the critique of others. It is very individualistic, and may become self serving. Unless they read widely, their interpretation of the bible and Christian life may rely largely on their own reworking of their Sunday School lessons. Theology is best done in community, where there are many voices²⁰.

On the other hand, they also lack explicit *encouragement* from other Christians. Their faith may be constantly criticised by non Christians, without the affirmation of other believers. This may be why people's strength of conviction tends to weaken when they become nominals.

Similarly, the lifestyle of nominal Christians lacks critique from other Christians, but also affirmation. It may be easy to become complacent about love and justice not only for self serving reasons, but because of the hostility such a lifestyle can incur from those with different values²¹.

¹⁹ Hughes, *Nominalism*, pp. 74-5, suggests regional gatherings, home groups, external education, spiritual retreats, spiritual directors and perhaps even the mass media.

²⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 201,208, argues that the symbols and language of religion rely on community for interpretation. There is no such thing as a totally private religion. As contact with the Gospel through the 'realised Spiritual Community' diminishes, so does the resistance to profanisation and demonisation of the faith (though churches themselves are not free from either of these problems). Particularly he seems to suggest that non church groups are ill equipped to stand against social injustice such as that perpetrated by the Nazis.

²¹ Hauerwas, S. & Willimon, W. H., *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, pp. 73-80, argue that it is impossible, or at least extremely difficult, to follow the Christian ethical life without the support of other Christians. Jesus did not call heroes, but communities to follow his teachings.

Dangers of 'regular' Christianity

Excluding those who don't fit the mould, and rejecting those who don't feel the need for Sunday worship, is not only unjust and unChristian²². It also disadvantages those who remain. Now that the institution doesn't meet the entertainment and social needs of the majority, it is increasingly becoming a ghetto for its remaining patrons. The NCLS suggests that few regulars have significant contact with individual nominals or non Christians²³.

Regulars, and many ministers, rarely have the chance to have their ghettoised faith confronted by Christians actively engaged in the wider society, or by society itself. The occasional statement against poker machines, prostitution, and euthanasia hardly constitutes a socially aware church. Worse, these announcements come from paid specialists, and are rarely understood or supported by the congregation.

By excluding those who are different, regulars miss out on having *their* lifestyle challenged. This refers both to their participation in injustice²⁴, and issues of 'personal morality', such as whether it is truly unchristian to drink, smoke, swear, or live in *de facto* relationships. Or whether it is appropriate to continually present two parent families and full, paid employment as the norm. The constant referral to *de facto* relationships as 'sex before marriage', or 'try before you buy' illustrates the ease with which ghetto ignorance allows stereotypes to become fact, which is then used inappropriately to affirm the marginalised's 'apostasy.'

²² Russell, L. M., *Church in the Round*, p. 133, is one of several recent writers who criticise the injustice of enforcing church unity through exclusion of those who don't fit the desired image.

²³ Kaldor, P., *First Look in the Mirror*, pp. 54-60. Though the commentary is optimistic, the statistics suggest that few regulars are involved in community groups unless professionally paid, or elderly volunteers working in care and welfare agencies.

²⁴ Only 6% of NCLS respondents were involved in community social justice groups, and these were mostly paid professionals. Kaldor, *First Look*, p. 55.

Practical Responses...

How are regular attenders to deal with the marginalisation of other Christians, and the disadvantages it brings to both parties? One response is the renewal of the diaconate, to provide a group of ministers ordained to work with those on the margins.

Deacons are ordained, among other things, to be a sign to both regulars and nominals that Jesus requires the institution to look beyond its own doors in a non patronising way. Deacons could support laity already involved with the those on the edge of the church. Others may pioneer new forms of reconciliation, and nurture of non institutional Christianity.

... to the Marginalisation of Nominal Christians

We must reject any hint of a superior, or patronising attitude. Nominals have either been forced out by regulars in the first place, or feel quite able to relate to Jesus without us. We are not on a mercy mission or evangelistic crusade. We are hoping to restore our relationships with marginalised Christians to our mutual benefit. A restored relationship does not mean that they will all become like us. To those unable to return to the institution, or re-link with it, deacons affirm that God need not be worshipped at the temple, but in Spirit and truth.

Deacons have a role in attacking the tendency of some regulars to push others into nominalism. They may join those who ^{are} already [^]advocate^s for those forced out of a church which refused to hear their cries against leaders and clergy. They can encourage others to ensure that the new process for

investigating abuse in the UC is properly implemented, so that more victims don't become nominals.

Deacons can also stand against the tendency to exclude others more subtly, knowing that Jesus is against such a thing. Deacons must challenge regulars to be more accepting of others. The powerful cliques must be confronted with their oppressive attitudes, just as the Pharisees were in Jesus' day. With Paul, the church must emphasise grace, not the marks of Law as indicative of true faith. We have replaced circumcision and holy days with tee totalism, clean clothes, church weddings, and particular theological viewpoints, whether fundamentalist or [?]a-biblical.

Deacons can bring to those excluded by this distortion of the gospel our confession and plea for forgiveness. They can encourage regulars to create spaces for Christians of all persuasions to worship God together, in places and styles that they find helpful.

... to the Dangers of Nominal Christianity

Deacons should endeavour to bring the Supper to nominals, for the remembrance of Christ. They will do this aware that nominals are quite capable of having communion without our blessing, and that it is the deacon and the institution they represent that is privileged in such an encounter. Shared Communion between a nominal and a deacon, is a sacrament of unity and reconciliation between the nominal and the institution. The UC already provides communion to those physically unable to attend on Sunday. We must also take it to those not emotionally able to attend, especially since it may be us who wounded them.

In presiding at infant baptisms for nominals who are not totally severed from the institution, deacons reinforce the relationship between nominal and institution, not only on the day, but whenever they meet again

Deacons will of course meet many nominals through their work in various communities, and the relationship developed may be a source of both confrontation and affirmation, of faith and lifestyle²⁵. Similarly, they can take the nominal's critiques and affirmations back to the regulars. Nominals they meet can be encouraged to participate in other forms of spiritual development.

There is a place for deacons in mass communication. Christian education should not be for the regulars only. Whether through print, film or radio there is a continued need for relevant Christian material, easily accessible to non regulars in its language, format and focus. This material must be both challenging and affirming, and present a wide range of Christian approaches to issues, not just the presenters' particular bias. With their exposure to issues on the fringes of both church and society, deacons are well placed to make a contribution in this area.

...to the Dangers of Regular Christianity

Many deacons will be in an excellent position to bridge the church ghetto. Deacons must be given opportunities to preach, not to reiterating existing beliefs for the umpteenth time, but to challenge people to justify these beliefs in light of what is happening around them. Some presbyters are excellent at this. Many of the laity could do this brilliantly. Deacons should encourage all sorts of voices and community experiences to address the gospel in the pulpit.

²⁵ As Hughes point out, relationship building as a means of communicating grace is by far the best way to help nominals develop their faith (*Nominalism*, p. 75).

Deacons should be involved in the sacramental life of the institution for the regular's sake, not just the nominals. By presiding at the Supper they remind the congregation that Jesus is not concerned to feed them only, but his concern is for the world. We receive that we might give. As one Eucharistic service puts it, "We cannot take bread, and forget those who are hungry...We cannot take wine, and forget those who are thirsty."²⁶

Summary

The eighty percent of UC members who attend rarely, if ever, are not faithless, but have either been excluded through abuse or peer pressure, or find institutional worship unhelpful in their relationship with God, and unnecessary for their social needs.

Regular attenders must acknowledge their guilt towards some people, and accept that what they find socially and devotionally helpful is not an essential ingredient of Christian living. Space needs to be created for Christians of different lifestyles, personalities, theologies and worship styles to find a place in the institution. Having thus stopped pushing people into nominalism, we may even find that others may be encouraged back, not as returning prodigal children, but as equals graciously giving the regulars another chance.

Until then, deacons have a role in affirming the validity of nominal Christianity. They may help overcome some of nominalism's limitations, particularly the lack of access to the Supper, and the lack of Christian confrontation and affirmation. At the same time, deacons can challenge and

²⁶ Source not acknowledged. G. Sinden's article, *The Deacon's Ministry*, argues that Anglican deacons must be allowed to assist priests at communion for this very reason. In the Uniting Church there is no reason why the deacon couldn't preside alone, though dual presidency may be even more appropriate provided that one is not always seen as the assistant of the other.

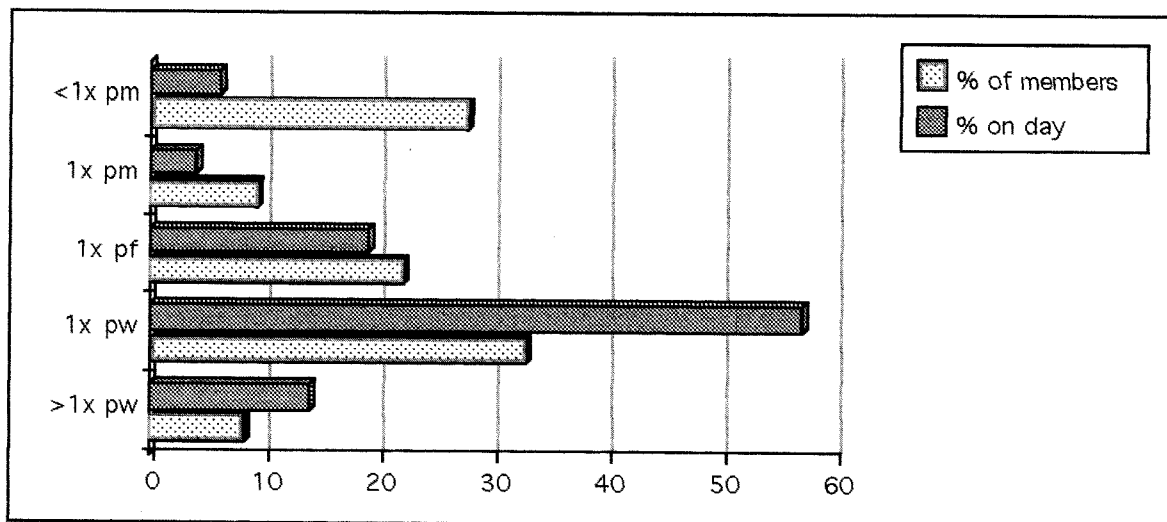
encourage the regulars to escape their ghetto mentality and participate more fully in the wider community.

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Appendix 1

Comparison of frequency of attendance of (1) all UC members, versus (2) those present on the day of the NCLS.



(Adapted from Kaldor, *First Look in the Mirror* (Lancer 1992) p. 73.)

While on any given Sunday most people present are regulars, overall most members of the UCA attend less than fort nightly, and over a quarter attend less than monthly. Therefore the survey of attitudes and patterns undertaken in the NCLS under represents the majority of members of the UCA. Any discussion on what the church thinks about certain issues should take this into account. If the church is presented as believing what regulars believe, there may be even less encouragement for nominals to return, and greater pressure for some regulars to leave.