

THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA (MEMBERSHIP OF TRUST) AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Debate resumed.

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:17): I rise to speak to The Uniting Church in Australia (Membership of Trust) Amendment Bill 2015 and note that we on the Liberal side of the house support the full intent of the bill. It is essentially to do with taking away the age limit of 70 years with regard to being a member of the trust.

My family has had a long history in the Uniting Church. I do not have the opportunity to go as many times as some members of my family have in the past. My family do have a long link with the church since coming out from England in 1840. In fact, my earliest forebears are buried at the old Gawler River Methodist church, alongside some of John Dawkins' ancestors. My father, who is nearing his 95th birthday in a couple of months—

Mr Treloar: Hear, hear!

Mr PEDERICK: Hear, hear, absolutely. He was a lay preacher for around 60 years and I remember him getting an award—I think it was during the eighties—at Coomandook for his 50 years of service. The Uniting Church in Australia Act came about in 1977 when we had the necessary alterations to state law when the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches amalgamated.

Going further back before that happened, just a little bit of history of the Presbyterian church in Australia is the belief that when James Cook landed in 1776 he was sure to have had some Presbyterians in his crew. John Hunter, the captain of HMS *Sirius*, was a former Church of Scotland minister. Later, Presbyterian Christianity came to Australia with the arrival of members from a number of Presbyterian denominations in Great Britain at the end of the 18th century. The Presbyterian missionaries played an important role in spreading the faith in Australia and they grew to become the fourth largest Christian faith in the country.

The Presbyterian Church of Australia was formed when Presbyterian churches from various Australian states federated in 1901. These state churches were and are incorporated by separate acts of parliament. The member for Bragg, the deputy leader, talked about the church union before, but in 1977 two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, together with nearly all the membership of the Congregational Union of Australia (or the Congregational Church) and the Methodist Church of Australasia, joined to form the Uniting Church in Australia. There is quite a history in regard to the Presbyterian Church.

In regard to the history of the Congregational Church in Australia, there was a Thomas Quinton Stow (1801-1862) who was a Congregational minister born at Hadleigh in Suffolk, England. He was a descendant of an old Suffolk farming family at Stowmarket. He began preaching at 17 and later studied at the Missionary College, Gosport, under Dr David Bogue, a theologian of great repute and a founder of the London Missionary Society. Stow was a minister at Framlingham, Suffolk, between 1822 and 1825, at Buntingford, Hertfordshire, and at the Old Independent Church, Halstead, Essex, between 1832 and 1837.

On 12 October 1836, Stow was accepted for service in South Australia by the newly formed Colonial Missionary Society and, in an announcement to his people published at Halstead in 1836, he proved that his decision was not hasty:

Six years ago I wrote a piece in the Congregational Magazine, recommending the formation of this very society which now commissions me with its affairs in Australia.

With his wife and his four young sons, he sailed from Gravesend on the *Hartley* and arrived in South Australia in October 1837. Stow pitched his marquee and preached his first sermon in November and the next month with 10 others he formed the first Congregational Church in South Australia and was elected pastor. Early in 1838, on North Terrace he helped to build a temporary place of worship with gum wood posts, pine rafters and reed thatch.

At the request of some leading colonists, he opened a daily classical academy, thus beginning higher education in the colony. He was very much a forward thinker. In December 1839, the foundation stone of a new Congregational chapel was laid in Freeman Street. Opened in November 1840, it had a heavy debt which caused Stow much embarrassment during the Depression years, and he supplemented his income by farming a property on the River Torrens which happened to be named Felixstow.

Stow was responsible for forming many new churches, recruiting and training several ministers. He was the first chairman of the Congregational Union of South Australia in 1850, and he did much to foster friendly relations between all denominations. He was appointed to the first board of education in 1846 and served on many other public committees, always ready to promote moral, social and intellectual progress.

As the outstanding preacher in early Adelaide, his firm stand against state aid to religion had a powerful influence from 1846 until the grants were abandoned in 1851. He had many sermons published. He had a heavy workload and his health suffered. After being in the ministry in Adelaide

for 19 years, he resigned his pastorate in September 1856. In 1862, he went to Pitt Street Congregational Church on a temporary engagement. That is some of the history of the Congregational Church and its start in the world and arrival in South Australia.

Methodism, as many people would know, was begun by John Wesley within the Church of England and became its own denomination by 1796. By the time of European settlement in South Australia, it had divided into several streams. The Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians and Methodist New Connexionists all came to the colony, and this was how the Methodist Church was split until 1900, when they all amalgamated over 100 years ago.

The first Methodist church service was held at Glenelg—in the seat of Bright, I would suggest—on 2 January 1837. In that year, a Wesleyan Methodist Society was formed, and in 1838 the first Methodist church was built in Adelaide and opened in Hindley Street. In August, the first minister, William Longbottom, arrived in Adelaide. He had been shipwrecked while sailing from Hobart to Perth. The first Primitive Methodists service was held in 1840 and the Bible Christians followed in 1849. Over time, all these churches expanded.

Methodism had a presence in pretty well every community in South Australia, and during the 1850s the Wesleyans built substantial churches throughout the city. They were certainly involved in Prince Alfred College, Way College and Methodist Ladies College (which was Annesley College from 1977), and Westminster School was established by the Methodist Church. The Wesley theological college dates from the 1920s, and from the 1930s the church has developed numerous aged-care facilities, with many generous benefactors.

As I indicated before, my father was a lay preacher for around 60 years. In many rural districts, church communities were begun by lay preachers in their own homes, developed into churches, and an ordained minister was responsible for the circuit. By 1901, Methodists comprised one-quarter of South Australia's population, the highest proportion of any Australian state. By the end of the 19th century, Methodism had become a comprehensive community, embracing wealthy city businessmen, pastoralists, settlers on the land, Cornish miners and professional people. As I said, the branches of Methodism were all amalgamated on 1 January 1900, mainly on Wesleyan terms.

It is interesting that in the history of the church there are obviously amalgamations over time, with people with very similar beliefs getting together for the betterment of the group. I note that the Uniting Church formed on 22 June 1977. In either 1970 or 1972 (I would have to check), we had the new Coomandook United Church, so I would like to think that Coomandook was leading the charge almost, but it was only because the

Coomandook United Church was the combination of a church at Ki Ki (just a few kilometres down the road) that went out of service and Coomandook Church, which came on board when they built a new building.

The old church, Parkin Hall, was built on the aptly-named Parkin Hall Road which runs behind our property. I actually attended that church in my early days and went to Sunday school there, although the church has long since been demolished because everyone was afraid it would be vandalised, but I still think that was probably a bad move; nearly all the stone ended up in a heap on our property, so we have remnants of the building there. However, I am proud to say that my and my wife, Sally's, wedding was the last to be held on the site and that we took our vows facing the farm—it was quite a moment for me personally.

In regard to the amalgamation, The Uniting Church in Australia Act 1977 came about because of the amalgamation of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. It was necessary to make sure that the churches had the statutory authority to unite and also to establish the appropriate property trust to hold all the property of the then new Uniting Church. The trust activities would remain entirely under the control of the synod.

It is interesting that, at the time, there were strict laws about age limits for members of a trust. At that time, it was a 70-year age limit. I would like to think that probably 90 is the new 70. I would like to think 50 is the new 35.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: It is.

Mr PEDERICK: It is.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: My rule!

Mr PEDERICK: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I guess we would all like to think we are a bit younger. I just see that this is very sensible legislation. This age restriction involved here is outdated. It no longer reflects the values of the church or the general community's expectations.

I know that a letter from Mr Peter Battersby on behalf of the church went to the Attorney-General seeking the age restriction to be deleted. The church had conducted a review of the trust generally and, as a result, identified the need for reform. I note that the deputy leader has consulted with Dr Deidre Palmer, who is the moderator of the Uniting Church, and Mr Peter Battersby, and they have indicated their full support for the bill.

This is a hybrid bill, so it will have to go through the committee process with the member for Hartley and me from this side going on that committee, and there will be members from the other place as well. It

certainly shows that, over time, needs have changed and communities have changed.

As I explained in my earlier comments, there have been amalgamations over time between various churches, and I suppose the biggest one was in 1977. You did not just have Methodists combining when the four lines of the Methodist Church amalgamated a lot earlier: you had the Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church getting together. It is to be noted that, as the deputy leader said in her contribution, some churches were not happy about the amalgamation and some communities have stayed out of it ever since.

It is a little bit sad. It is a bit of a sign of the times in rural communities especially that there is change and, certainly, things have changed in my little community and my home town of Coomandook. Last year, the church became a gym, so I guess you can pray while you are exercising—pray you lose some weight! It is great to see how the community, knowing that they had a declining church population, utilise the actual building. It is still made available for church services, especially at Christmas time and Easter and things like that if people so require.

With those few words, I certainly support the bill. It is interesting to watch the history of religion over time. I think this is just a sensible piece of legislation to take the age limit away and bring this legislation into the modern century.