

Section 3: Theological Reflection

The Uniting Church will...order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission..
Paragraph 13, Basis of Union

As we move to think about the future shape of the Church it is important to ground our thinking. This project is grounded in prayer and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We are guided by the faith and unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as described in the Basis of Union. We are also shaped by our core identity markers as the Uniting Church, expressed in the Basis of Union and in the foundational commitments that have defined and shaped our life together over many decades.

As a Uniting Church, we do not claim to be the whole church, simply one part of the church, in one part of the world. This is most clear within the Basis of Union through our commitment to the World Council of Churches, to a special relationship with Asia and Pacific (Paragraph 2, Basis of Union). We know we are incomplete, and we celebrate that. Our baptism is into the church of God not the Uniting Church.

As the Uniting Church, we have struggled with what holds us together. Is it simply an accident of history and our interconnected legal arrangements or is it something more? Through history, the Protestant tradition of which we are a part, has divided over differences of belief and practice. The unifying force for most has been common beliefs and practices. Yet we sit within a uniting church which has sought to overcome differences in beliefs and practices to bear visible witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So, what is it that holds us together? Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One who we confess as Lord. This is not an easy unity, our differences of belief, practice, culture, history have all challenged that unity. Therefore, it is only through Christ we can and will find the source of our unity.

We are, however, also located within a particular time and place. We acknowledge that history brings change (Paragraph 4, Basis of Union) and in fact we look forward to our end! We have continued to grapple with our own time and place through responding to the invitation to enter a Covenant relationship with the First Peoples in this land⁹. We recognised that we could not truly be a Church in these lands we now call Australia without acknowledging the reality of the history of a relationship to First Peoples.

We have continued to build on this, changing the Preamble to our Constitution, writing into our law the history of our country, our Church and the relationship of First Peoples and Second Peoples from many lands¹⁰. We acknowledged Second Peoples did not have a monopoly on truth, rather we could learn from the wisdom of First Peoples. We have acknowledged First Peoples as sovereign.

We have also recognised that we are a multicultural Church. This has led us to recognise that our commitment to transcending cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries (Basis of Union, Paragraph 2) does not mean the elimination of difference. The diversity of cultural and linguistic communities reflected in the Church is a gift of God enriching us all. We have continued to grapple with what it means to be a truly inter-cultural community. We have grown to recognise the colonial roots of our missionary activity not only in Australia but across the world, including with our partners in Asia Pacific¹¹.

As we shape our life, we are deeply informed by the principles outlined within paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union. We make decisions in community, not just on our own. We make decisions through listening to God and one another.

We recognise we may not possess all the wisdom and that others in other councils may have wisdom for us¹². This has shaped us in our embrace of consensus decision-making; a means by which we may more deeply listen for God's call to us in the voice of one another, as we build community together, be shaped by prayer and the Word and listen, learn and discern together. It is almost as if God's gift of consensus decision-making was essential for an inter-conciliar Church in this land.

The Basis of Union offers us rich images of the Church. Three are of greatest relevance to the Act2 Project.

A pilgrim people

[T]he Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come.

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

No image has been invoked by more songs, meeting themes or strategic planning documents than this. Yet it appears our life has become far too weighed down by baggage for us to be truly pilgrims. Travelling communities around the world travel light. If we want to live out this image, we will need to find ways of living as a community which equip us to be people of the journey. Courageously leaving behind that which burdens us so that we might travel more lightly.¹³

Most obviously this relates to our physical property. In our search for a space and place in which we can grow and sustain communities of disciples, we have allowed property to become a burden. As we discuss the implications of releasing ourselves from that burden, we squabble over the economic spoils. We continue to grapple with the colonial history of the land on which our buildings now sit.

How might we be shaped by the wisdom of the First Peoples about land as the ground of our being and source of life? How might we learn from the experience of so many of our CALD communities that have migrated to this land from homelands and found a new place in which to shape life together?

It may also be our law which has become a burden and the custom and practice we elevate to law. We are now burdened by the customs and practices which arose from the wisdom of our predecessors to order a Church we no longer are. As we seek to fulfill the law, might we need to find less legislative language and more stories of wisdom? Can we lean into our practices of making decisions together, informed by our faith and identity, rather than trying to legislate and regulate?

Travelling communities also find themselves often on the margins of the society. Despite our founding as a Church in 1977, post the peak of Christendom in Australia, we have adapted slowly to the post-Christendom age and the implications for our role within the broader Australian society. We have struggled with our marginalisation which we often confuse for persecution. Rather than embrace this location as closer to Jesus' location in society, we have too often clung to the last relics of our Christendom influence.

As we lament the loss of our voice at the centre of our society, could we instead embrace our presence on the margins as a more significant source of legitimacy in our voice in our national life?

The Holy Spirit

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

In this image we recall the very earliest community in the church. This community formed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that gathered, broke bread, prayed, held everything in common and gave to those in need. This early community need not be viewed as a utopian ideal. The Epistles make it very clear that the early life of the church was not easy. The Council of Jerusalem demonstrates deep divisions in the community.

However, we are probably spending more time in rooms with our doors closed, than around the table breaking bread together. We have allowed the parochial culture of our wider society, entrenched in stereotypes and fueled by politics, to define how we relate across the geography of this vast continent. It takes courage to step over the boundaries of safety and familiarity we have created for ourselves.

We have certainly struggled with the vision of a 'common wealth'. The contests we have over access to property and financial resources suggests we have not fully grappled with the implications of the sources of our wealth or the radical call of Jesus in relation to earthly possessions. Yet the gift of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of our consensus decision-making which provides a process by which we seek to collectively discern the Spirit's leading.

How do we unlock the doors on our lives and our treasure to better participate in our collective ministry and mission together?

The Body of Christ

[A] body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole...

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

Recalling again images from the New Testament, particularly 1 Corinthians 12, we are given a rich image which speaks to our respective gifts and role within our life together. However, in contrast to the image in 1 Corinthians, we seem to spend time seeking the place of honour - defining our role as the most important within the body.

Some of us think we are part of the 'beating heart' of the Church or the 'hands and feet'. Too often in our life we have felt the fragility of our part of the Church. Much like the skin we have felt wounds resulting from pain, sometimes healing, many times scarring.

Rather than embrace this fragility we have tended to assert our own significance, often at the expense of other parts of the body. We also seem all too eager to amputate other parts of the body we do not value as highly as ourselves. We seem reluctant to enter into the sufferings of others. It takes courage to enter into the sufferings of others within the community of the Church.

When one part of the body hurts, do we all hurt? The image of the body is fragile, inter-connected, and inter-dependent. As we think about the shape of our life together, how do we embrace our inter-connected fragility?

We look forward with hope to what God may be doing in our midst, and we enter into a period of collective discernment about our life together. As we consider the directions and options laid before us:

- How do we find ways to lay down burdens we have been carrying for too long?
- How do we find ways of more deeply entering into fellowship with one another?
- How do we find ways to be a more inter-connected and inter-dependent body?

As we embrace the reality of our fragility and marginality within the life of the Australian society, we can imagine our life differently. So many within our Church feel a deep sense of grief for a Church that no longer exists. However we have always anticipated our end as a Church, knowing that we did not have a continuing city.

As people of the way of Jesus, disciples of the risen crucified One we need not change simply to avoid death. Were the Uniting Church to die as an institution, God would do a new thing. Our calling and opportunity is to do a new thing now which lies before us; to enter more fully into the vision to which God has called us as a Uniting Church in Australia.