

# THE POLITY OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

By Rev. Dr. Hedley Fihaki

## 1. Jesus Christ is the head of the Uniting Church.

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church because He is the Lord of all things.

*Col 1:15 Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things. 16 For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. 17 Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place. 18 He is the head of his body, the church; he is the source of the body's life. He is the first-born Son, who was raised from death, in order that he alone might have the first place in all things<sup>1</sup>.*

Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union puts it in this way:

The Uniting Church *acknowledges*<sup>2</sup> that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father.... To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.... 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..... The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself (para. 3.)<sup>3</sup>.

“What is involved [here] is living truth<sup>4</sup>,” not mere propositional truth. Jesus is the head and the source of the church's life because he is *the* life; life in all its fullness; abundant life. The Church only has life when it remains within Christ Jesus who is the *source* of the body's life. It is why Jesus clearly says, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches”(NIV John 15: 4-5a).

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<sup>1</sup> “When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church” (BoU para. 5).

<sup>2</sup> Italic added

<sup>3</sup> McCaughey, D. (1980: 19) “Commentary on the Basis of Union” says, “This is the most fundamental Paragraph [para. 3] in the whole Basis. Wood, D. (1986:15) similarly concurs, “Paragraph 3 is the most fundamental statement of doctrine in the Basis of Union. It is, if you will, ‘the basis of the Basis’, for it states how and why the church exists at all”.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, K. (1959) Dogmatics in outline. Harper & Row Publishers, Yew York. USA. p.25.

That is, the faith of the church is not simply a description of God and the church as if it were mere static knowledge, knowledge in itself; “it is practical knowledge [living knowledge for a living community whose source of life is the living Christ], embracing the entire existence of man”<sup>5</sup>. It is “what in the Old Testament is called wisdom, what the Greeks called *sophia* and the Latin’s *sapientia*”<sup>6</sup>. As Barth maintains:

Wisdom is the knowledge by which we may actually and practically live; it is empiricism and it is the theory which is powerful in being directly practical, in being the knowledge which dominates our life, which is really a light upon our path. Not a light to wonder at and to observe, not a light to kindle all manner of fireworks at – not even the profoundest philosophical speculations – but the light on our road which may stand above our action and above our talk, the light on our healthy and on our sick days, in our poverty and in our wealth, the light which does not only lighten when we suppose ourselves to have moments of insight, but which accompanies us even into our folly, which is not quenched when all is quenched, when the goal of our life becomes visible in death. To live by this light, by this truth, is the meaning of Christian knowledge. Christian knowledge means living in the truth of Jesus Christ. In this light we live and move and have our being (Acts 17: 28) in order that we may be of Him, and through Him and unto Him, as it says in Romans 11: 36 (p.25).<sup>7</sup>

It was why the Rev. Dr. Davis McCaughey points out that, “the *faith*<sup>8</sup> of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is not a series of human aspirations: it is built upon Jesus Christ [who is the source of the body’s life]. The unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church depends not upon the will of men but upon the will of God made effective through Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> And, “it is as the Church does [these] two things that it becomes apparent [visible] that her faith and unity are built upon Jesus Christ: as she preaches the message of Christ crucified; as she acclaims him in worship as Lord”<sup>10</sup>.

Rev. Dr. D’Arcy Wood importantly points out that paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union is Trinitarian in form. “The church’s life is life in and from the Trinitarian life of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God reaches out to us in grace. On that grace we depend utterly.”<sup>11</sup>

It is essential, therefore, that our understanding of the Triune God (“as the Bible and the Greeks would have us start from as the one unoriginated God who is already Father, Jesus’ Father, who sends the Son and gives Himself to us in the Spirit”, as opposed to an Augustinian-Western conception that “begins with the one God, the one divine essence as a

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, K. (1959) Dogmatics in outline. Harper & Row Publishers, New York. USA. p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5 p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5. p.25.

<sup>8</sup> Italic added

<sup>9</sup> McCaughey, D. (1980) ‘Commentary on the Basis of Union’ Uniting Church Press, Melbourne Vic. p.19

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4 p. 19

<sup>11</sup> Wood, D. (1986) Building on A Solid Basis: a guide to the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia. Uniting Church Press, Melbourne. p. 15.

whole, and only afterwards does it see God as three persons")<sup>12</sup> so that, as Dr. Gordon Watson argues, the faith of the church is expressed in ways that are actually related "to the ground of its life *in Christ*;"<sup>13</sup> that is, in life giving ways; ways that reveal that the Church's faith, life and mission are truly *built* upon the one Lord Jesus Christ and not simply upon the will of 'men'. When the faith and life of the Church is not grounded or built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ, then, as Rahner maintains (cited in Watson), the Western doctrine of the Trinity has become superfluous for the practical life of the church's faith. That is,

*despite the orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost 'mere' monotheists. We must be willing to admit that should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of the Christian experience and literature could well remain virtually unchanged*<sup>14</sup>.

In the light of the faith of the Church built and grounded upon the one Lord Jesus Christ, it is now possible to speak of the 'order' of the Church for "The order of the Uniting Church grows out of and is controlled by its faith [in Jesus Christ]." <sup>15</sup> That is, as McCaughey argues, "In approaching the doctrine of the ministry and the ordering or government of the life of the Church we are conscious of the need to remember that questions of faith precede those of order. Put it another way. The Gospel does not depend upon ministers, ministers are dependent upon, derive their authority from the Gospel. Moreover the doctrine of the Church precedes logically and theologically the doctrine of ministry."<sup>16</sup>

"That must always be so, for the church is the creation of the gospel, called into being by the gospel and given shape by the gospel. If order is divorced from faith, what then determines the order of the church? Expediency? The structures of big business? What its members think would be most efficient?"<sup>17</sup>

Rev. Dr. Andrew Dutney makes it clear that, "The Uniting Church is convinced that Christ alone is the head of his church. It is organised to reflect that conviction and to keep itself continually open to Christ's leadership. This means that the Uniting Church is a Christocracy and not a democracy."<sup>18</sup>

Discussions regarding the polity of the Church, therefore, cannot be separated from the faith of the Church. "Paragraph 14-18 of the Basis of Union, which deal with the ordering of the Church, grow out of and are dependent upon paragraphs 1-13."<sup>19</sup> Discussions around

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Rahner in his book 'The Trinity' p.1-21 cited in Dr. Gordon Watson's lecture on 'Church and Ministry' (1999) Trinity Theological College, Brisbane. Lecture 14 p.148.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, G. (1999) Church and Ministry. Trinity Theological College, Brisbane. Lecture 14 p.148.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "The status, authority and role of the Basis of Union within the Uniting Church in Australia". A discussion paper by the Assembly for comment by 31 October 1996. p.14

<sup>16</sup> McCaughey, D. "Forward Together: On What Basis?" in Essays on the Basis of Union in the Uniting Church. Edited by Rev. Dr. Max Champion (1994) Forum Booklets No. 6. p.17. Published by The Forum on Faith and Society.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>18</sup> Dutney, A. (2008) Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia. Uniting Church Press, Sydney Australia. p.24

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12

discipline, like faith and order, must also “arise out of the gospel [as it too] is accountable to the gospel”.<sup>20</sup> In fact, everything that the church says and does must be understood in the light of the ‘faith’ of the church, as understood in Basis of Union. That is, everything must be about “God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; about God’s grace and truth; about God’s thoughts and works; about God’s promises, ordinances and commandments; about God’s kingdom, and about the state and life of man in the sphere of His lordship. But always and in all circumstances about God Himself, who is the presupposition, meaning and power of everything that is to be said and heard in the Church, the Subject who absolutely, originally and finally moves, produces, establishes and realises in this matter”.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. It’s All about Mission

Dutney, ‘Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia’, rightly stresses that the Uniting Church is “All about mission,”<sup>22</sup> God’s mission, the *missio dei*,<sup>23</sup> the mission of our Father, Jesus’ Father, who sends the Son and gives Himself to us in the Spirit.

This is because “The core business of the Christian movement has always been” and continues to be to “share that message of reconciliation in words and actions.” That is, reconciliation is the core business of the Uniting Church because it is at the very heart of gospel and not just in its margins. As St. Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5: 19 “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself....[therefore God has entrusted and committed] the message of reconciliation to us”<sup>24</sup>.

As Barth maintains regarding the doctrine of reconciliation:

“The subject-matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of the faithfulness of God in which He takes the lost cause of man, who has denied Him as Creator and in so doing ruined himself as creature, and makes it His own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and in that way maintaining and manifesting His own glory in the world.”<sup>25</sup>

For the Joint Commission on Church Union, “*mission*<sup>26</sup> was the organising principle of the Commission’s ecclesiology”. That is, as the commission was describing the Apostolic *faith and life* of the church, it was doing it through the lens of the Church as a ‘missionary

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>21</sup> Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics, Volume II The doctrine of God, Part 1* (3). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

<sup>22</sup> Dutney, A. (2008) *Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia*. Uniting Church Press, Sydney Australia. p.15

<sup>23</sup> According to David J. Bosch, "mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God." Jurgen Moltmann says, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church." There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. The Church must not think its role is identical to the *missio Dei*; the Church is participating in the mission of God. The church's mission is a subset of a larger whole mission. That is, it is part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world. Wikipedia.

<sup>24</sup> Dutney, A. (2008) *Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia*. Uniting Church Press, Sydney Australia. p.15

<sup>25</sup> Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics, Volume IV: The doctrine of God, Part 1* (3). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

<sup>26</sup> Italic added

Church’;<sup>27</sup> a living and active community, participating in the mission of God to the world, not as servants as such according to the first Adam<sup>28</sup>, but as children of God, born of God after Jesus Christ who was and is the first born of a new humanity, a new race, a new creation, of which the church is a sign and foretaste “of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation” (BoU para. 3).

As Dutney well puts it:

It is entirely characteristic of the Basis that, not satisfied with a simple ‘I believe in the Church’, nor with an amplification of this article in traditionally philosophical terms, it called the church to an awareness of itself in relation to the message of Christ. The Basis did not seek to define what the church *is*, but to describe the Church in terms of what it *does* in response to the message of Christ. The church works for reconciliation and, pooling the gifts of its members, it offers itself as an instrument in the hands of Christ, so that it can continue its missionary pilgrimage from the event which it proclaims to the fulfilment of that event’s promise: the ‘reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation’. And this missionary journey is itself a work of God’s grace: the church grows nether faint or lost, being fed by Christ and led by the Spirit.

The Uniting Church was called to put aside any assumption of institutional potency. It must recognise that not by means of dogmatic, constitutional or structural mechanism, but only because Christ ‘is present when he is preached’, does the church manage to meet and survive the vicissitudes of history. Such an affirmation calls for optimism. The confidence of the church is not based on its own strength, but on the grace by which it is created, sustained and equipped for its missionary journey in a changing world:

*Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command men’s attention and awaken their faith; he calls them into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way he constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church (BoU para.4).*

The Basis gave first priority to the message of Christ. In its third and fourth paragraphs, it called the Uniting Church to hear the message through which Christ renews God’s pilgrim people in faith and mission.<sup>29</sup>

“The Church exists for the sake of that mission, as a sign and instrument of what God in Christ has done and is doing”.<sup>30</sup> Sadly, as Dutney importantly points out, “a lot of what we do, enjoy and are comforted by as a church is not about that mission at all. A lot of it is just

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<sup>27</sup> Dutney, A. (1986) Manifesto for Renewal. The Shaping of a New Church. Footnote 4 on p.52.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 45. So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

<sup>29</sup> Dutney, A. (1986) Manifesto for Renewal. The Shaping of a New Church. p.101-102.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19 p.16

habit, nostalgia, vested interest, or merely a lack of imagination".<sup>31</sup> It is why Dutney also importantly points out, why the Basis of Union was written in a way to ensure that the Church will always be open to "ongoing correction"<sup>32</sup> and reform in the light of the call to mission. If it has to go, it has to go. It's all about mission", says Dutney.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The Uniting Church is governed by inter-related councils.

To help foster the Mission of the Church, the *missio dei*, "The Uniting Church therefore so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world" (para. 15 BoU).

St. Paul put it in this way, "Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts..... If the foot were to say, "Because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body," that would not keep it from being a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I don't belong to the body," that would not keep it from being a part of the body. If the whole body were just an eye, how could it hear? And if it were only an ear, how could it smell? As it is, however, God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be. 19 There would not be a body if it were all only one part! As it is, there are many parts but one body". (1 Corinthians 12:12-20).

Rev. Dr. D'Arcy Wood stresses that "The structure of the Uniting Church's government is not hierarchical. The Assembly is not 'the top' and the congregation 'the bottom'. Each council or category of council has a particular sphere of responsibility, and none is the most important. The key phrase used in Paragraph Fifteen is 'inter-related councils' ".<sup>34</sup>

"The concept of conciliarity", says McCaughey "is deeply embedded in the Church's historic understanding of the way in which decisions should be made about her faith and life".<sup>35</sup> That is, as Dutney puts it, "Decisions are made by councils, not individuals. In the reformed

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 19 p.16-17

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4. 17 Dutney also says: "In the first paragraph of the Basis of Union was a commitment to "look for continuing renewal" and to "remain open to constant reform". In matters of doctrine the Basis of Union expressed an expectation of ongoing learning and interpretation, praying that the Uniting Church "may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds" (paragraph 11). In paragraph 13 the Uniting Church was committed to "order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into its mission" . So too in paragraph 17 the Uniting Church undertook "to keep its law under constant review" to ensure that it facilitates and does not impede mission . Indeed, the final sentence of the Basis of Union includes the Uniting Church's prayer that "God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life" (paragraph 18).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19 p.17

<sup>34</sup> Wood, D. (1986) Building on A Solid Basis: a guide to the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia. Uniting Church Press, Melbourne. p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19 p. 87

tradition of church organisation it has always been recognised that decision-making in the church should be corporate and not individual".<sup>36</sup>

Dutney continues to say that, "Beyond the clergy, churches like ours have always looked among the laity for the same gifts and graces 'fitting them for rule and oversight' (Basis of Union, paragraph 14 (b) ). The councils rely on their lay members, whose contributions carry the same weight as that of ministers in a council's deliberations".<sup>37</sup>

Dutney in his book 'Where did the Joy come from?' argues that the concept of conciliarity guards against the dangers of clericalism and hierarchical ordering; Episcopal centralism; and congregational independence.<sup>38</sup> "To put it positively" says Dutney, "It is a vision of a church being organised nationally as an egalitarian network of mutually accountable missionary communities".<sup>39</sup> The words 'egalitarian', 'mutually' and 'accountable' are vital words for understanding *how* councils are to relate to each other as 'missionary communities'. That is, as Dutney argues, "We consult, we confer, we take counsel. It's what we do and is indeed a mark of who we are: part of the church of God".<sup>40</sup>

If the various councils are not "bound ineluctably to one another in chains of love and mutuality"<sup>41</sup>, that is, "If councils ignore each other, misunderstanding and confusion follow".<sup>42</sup> It is why the Basis of Union encourages each council to "give heed to other councils of the Church, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel (paragraph 15 BoU). But there is a deeper reason for 'giving heed'" says Wood "and this reason is that Christ 'may speak to her (the church) through any of her councils'. In other words, all councils wait upon the Word of God and respond as they are inspired by the Spirit. As they speak to each other, the councils at various levels seek to interpret the Word of God for the particular situation. So, in 'giving heed', each council is listening for God's Word mediated through another part of the church".<sup>43</sup>

What is currently lacking at present in the Uniting Church are clear processes and procedures for dealing with conciliar disagreements, situations that arise from time to time where different councils of the Church genuinely, in good faith, disagree on what is God's will for the church. In situations such as these, it is important, I believe, that clear judiciary processes are put in place.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15 p.25

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 15 p.26

<sup>38</sup> Dutney, A. (2001) *Where did the Joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union*. Uniting Church Press, Melbourne. p.29

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.29

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, A. (1994). *Between Cross and Resurrection - A Theology of Holy Saturday*. Cambridge, UK, Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8 p.53

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8 p.53

Regarding the 'Congregation', Dutney<sup>44</sup> says:

The Congregation is 'the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" (BoU, paragraph 15 (a) ), This is not said of any other council because it is not true of any other council". As Davis McCaughey (the President of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church explained:

*Of the other councils it might be said that they exist to serve the ends of the Church which may be seen through two focal points: the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as God's people existing from Pentecost to the congregation where God in Christ draws men and women to himself by Word and Sacrament in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit<sup>45</sup>.*

And when he explained the organisation of the Uniting Church in the years following union, Davis McCaughey insisted that:

*The councils of the church exist primarily to serve that basic unit, the congregation: to make sure that Word and Sacrament are available for Christ's people, so that they can worship, witness and serve. Presbytery, Synod and Assembly are constituted for that purpose. Of course they may have other things to do as well, but they ought to remember that the further they get away from the task of simply serving Christ's people gathered around Word and Sacrament the further they move from their own sphere of competence.<sup>46</sup>*

Wood further points out that "It is significant that this appears first. It is in the congregation that, week by week, the Word is heard and the sacraments are celebrated and the pastoral work of the church is organised.... The congregation is a gathering which hears the Word and seeks to respond. It does so not only by each individual seeking to act in a Christian way in daily life; it does so also as an inter-dependent group, interpreting the will of God for the local community. As a group it seeks the mind of Christ and the councils such as the elders' council and the presbytery should give heed to this congregational response to the Word. It is in the congregation that the whole church is embodied, for here we find all the features which makes us to be 'church'. It is no accident that Paul usually saluted his readers as 'the church of God which is at Corinth' (1 Corinthians 1: 2; 2 Corinthians 1: 1 or 'the churches of Galatia' (Galatians 1: 2)."<sup>47</sup>

Barth put it in this way, with reference to the centrality of 'worship' as that particular or distinct activity that the Church does that makes it stand out clearly from the world:

"In divine service there takes place that which does not take place anywhere else in the community. In divine service the sabbath intervenes between six working days on the one side and six more on the other. In it it exchanges its working clothes for its festal attire. It is

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 15. p.27-28

<sup>45</sup> Davis McCaughey, Commentary on the Basis of Union (Melbourne Uniting Church Press, 1980). p.89

<sup>46</sup> J. Davis McCaughey 'Retiring Presidents Address', Minutes and Reports of the Second Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia 1979, 1979 (Sydney: The National Office of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1979) pp.46-49, at p.46

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 8 p.54

now an event as community. Unpretentiously but distinctly it stands out from the secularity of its environment in which it is for the most part submerged. It now casts off the anonymity of that which is distinctive and common to it; the occasional and haphazard and private character elsewhere assumed by its manifestation. It now exists and acts in concrete actuality and visibility as the congregation to which many individuals—each from his own human and Christian place in dispersion—come together to one place at one time in order that together, occupying the same space and time, they may realise the *communio sanctorum*<sup>48</sup> in a definite form.”<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Ordination and the role of the Minister of the Word in the Mission of the Church.

Ordination is understood, as Watson maintains:

as the means whereby the church confesses the truth of its life to be grounded in the faithfulness of the Lord of the Church to sustain its life by coming to it through the preaching of the word of the apostolic testimony and the dominical sacraments. The truth of the church’s life as enunciated in Para. 4. of The Uniting Church’s Basis of Union:- “through human witness in word and action” Christ is present with His people in the world: and as such He “he constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church”, for the fulfilment of the purpose of their life and calling as His church. The church’s action in ordaining Ministers of the Word and Deacons is therefore a confession by the church of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the action of ordination it confesses that the truth of its life is mediated to it by another. The church by its action in ordination, the setting apart of people for the specific ministries of Word and Deacon, as distinct from the common calling and gifts of the people of God, indicates that it “acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because her Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. Therefore the act of ordination has nothing to do with acquiring status in the church. It is the ordering of the life of the church in a particular way because the church acknowledges that its life comes to it from Another; the Lord of the church who in the mystery of His grace chooses to mediate His being and life with His people in this way and no other.”<sup>50</sup>

The questions in the Uniting Church’s ordination service point to this reality:

Do you confess anew Jesus Christ as Lord?

*I do.*

Do you believe that you are truly called by God and the Church to the office and work of a minister of the Word?

*I do.*

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<sup>48</sup> communion of saints

<sup>49</sup> Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics, Volume IV : The doctrine of reconciliation, Part 2* (697–698). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, G. (1999) Church and Ministry. lecture 14 p.147. Trinity Theological College, Brisbane. Rev. Dr. Gordon Watson was the Head of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College.

Do you embrace the faith and unity of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as set forth in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and described in the Basis of Union?

*I do.*

In your life and work within the Uniting Church will you be guided by its Basis of Union, and will you submit yourself to the Church's discipline?<sup>51</sup>

*With God's help, I will.*

May the One who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace to perform them; that the work which God has begun in you may be brought to fulfilment.

Regarding the role of the minister or the 'set apart ministry' in relation to mission, Dutney<sup>52</sup> says:

The set apart ministry is to be organised according to the needs of the missionary church. It is less an essential *institution* than an *instrument* essential for the life of the church. It is not simply its existence, but its effectiveness which is crucial. As the commission said,

*Succession in ministerial order is good; succession in apostolic faith and life is essential*<sup>53</sup>.

The church is served, but not constituted, by the set apart ministry within it. It is not the perpetuation of a particular form of ministry which ensures that the church is maintained in apostolic succession, though it is the function of the set apart ministry to facilitate the continuing participation of the church in the 'apostolic faith and life'.

The reciprocity between the set apart ministry and the missionary church was emerging as the central truth for the Commission. The relationship of mutuality, by which the needs of the people of God exercising their missionary ministries in the world condition the form in which the set apart ministry exercises its function among the people of God, must be determinative of the ordering of church and ministry.

There is no formal mechanism by which apostolicity might be maintained, only the relationship between the set apart ministry and the missionary church through which the whole people of God seeks to respond to the call of Christ in their time and place.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Regulation 7.1.2 "Discipline in the Church is the exercise of spiritual authority with a view to honouring Christ the Head of the Church and ensuring the spiritual well-being of its members".

<sup>52</sup> Dutney, A. (1986) *Manifesto for Renewal. The Shaping of a new Church*. Uniting Church Press, Melbourne. p.38-39.

<sup>53</sup> *The Church – Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, The Second Report of the Joint Commission on Church Union (1963), Melbourne, 1984, p.40).

<sup>54</sup> Dutney, A. (1986) *Manifesto for Renewal. The Shaping of a new Church*. Uniting Church Press, Melbourne. p.38-39.

Paragraph 14 of the Basis of Union says that the role of a minister, is “to *care*<sup>55</sup> for the flock, to *share*<sup>56</sup> [*mutually accountable*] in government and to *serve*<sup>57</sup> those in need in the world [*as missionary communities/mission of the Church*]”. That is, the role of the minister is to help foster the mission of the Church (*the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed*) summarised here in three basic ways: pastoral care, government and through mission & outreach.

Noting again that regarding government or the way the Church orders itself in order to facilitate the mission of the Church, the Basis of Union (para. 15) makes it very clear, that the Uniting Church is governed by *council’s* (inter-related) not individuals. As Dutney pointed out, “decisions are made by councils not individuals. The ‘responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the *people of God*<sup>58</sup> by virtue of the gifts and task which God has laid upon them’ (para. 15 BoU). The Councils rely on their lay members, whose contributions carry the *same weight*<sup>59</sup> as that of ministers in a council’s deliberations”.<sup>60</sup>

To make this point stronger theologically Wood argues, “Every baptised person is a minister of Christ (meaning ‘servant’). All are, in a sense, ordained by their baptism *to serve Christ, to serve the body of Christ and to serve the world for which Christ died*”.<sup>61</sup> This does not mean of course that everybody can do anything they like. The concept of ‘representatives’ is therefore vital. As Wood articulates:

In paragraph Fifteen those who are called to this are given the general name ‘representatives’. These people represent in a double sense. First, they represent the gospel to the church, as they are given by the Holy Spirit the faith and the ability to put the church’s response into visible organisational form. Second, they are representative of the church, *for they are not self-appointed: they are chosen by the church to be representatives*<sup>62</sup> in a particular sphere of service. The Uniting Church is not a democracy, because a democracy is a form in which the people as whole rule. The Uniting Church does not aim to represent the will of the people on any given issue, but to seek the will of God by prayer and by consulting together in the light of the Word of God. The representatives, then, *are not separate from the people*, nor are they chosen simply to represent the majority view on each issue. They are to be Gods’ stewards.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Italic added

<sup>56</sup> Italic added

<sup>57</sup> Italic added

<sup>58</sup> Italic added

<sup>59</sup> Italic added

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 15 p.26

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 8 p.24 Italic also added.

<sup>62</sup> Italic added

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 8 p.52

Paragraph 15 (b) of the Basis regarding 'The Elders or Leaders meeting (Church Council)' says:

(b) The Elders' or Leaders' Meeting (the council within a congregation or group of congregations) consists of the minister and those who are *called to share*<sup>64</sup> with the minister in oversight. *It is*<sup>65</sup> responsible for building up the congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.

Noting that '*It is*' is referring to the Elders/Church Council. That is, 'it is' the elders/church council that is 'responsible' for building up the congregation and fostering participation in Christ's mission in the world. Responsibility for this task must never be left to one person, not even the minister regardless of how gifted he or she thinks they are. The Basis of Union makes it clear that the minister is called to *share* together mutually with the Elders/Church Council in the mission of the local congregation as "the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church"(BoU, paragraph 15 (a). That is, as regulation 2.4.3 puts it, "Every Minister shall participate fully and regularly in the public worship of God and the mission and fellowship of the *Congregation*<sup>66</sup> with which the *Minister is enrolled*<sup>67</sup> (Regulations 2.4.12-14)."

The UCA's induction service acknowledges that a minister is "called to be a servant and a shepherd in this *congregation*".... A minister is "inducted into the *congregation* of ....." Emphasis is on the 'congregation' and the integral relationship that a minister has with the congregation that he or she is inducted into to be its 'servant and shepherd'.

Code of Ethics 1.4 reminds ministers that "They exercise considerable influence and power. It is essential that each individual Minister recognises the power they have and understands the boundaries that the church requires to be observed within their ministry".

For this reason, "Ministers and Lay Pastors will be *responsible*<sup>68</sup> to a Presbytery and Synod in matters of faith<sup>69</sup> and discipline<sup>70</sup> and to the Presbytery or other appointing body for the exercise of their ministry"(Constitution paragraph 15). Further, as Regulation 2.4.4 puts it,

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<sup>64</sup> Italic added

<sup>65</sup> Italic added

<sup>66</sup> Italic added

<sup>67</sup> Italic added

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6 p. 26 Dutney (2008) says: "Oversight is exercised by councils. The different councils have different areas of oversight. Oversight (episcopate, in Greek, the language of the NT) is very important in the organisation of the Christian movement. In Christian history episcopate, or oversight, came to carry a sense of supervision from a position of superiority. But the term is better understood as conveying a sense of focussed, directed, sustained attention coupled with responsibility of care; the kind of attention that a shepherd gives to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4) . It doesn't imply status so much as focus. This oversight has both personal and corporate dimensions, but in the government of the church episcopate is always corporate.

<sup>69</sup> As mentioned earlier, "Discussions around discipline, like faith and order, must also "arise out of the gospel [as it too] is accountable to the gospel".

<sup>70</sup> Regulation 7.1.2 "Discipline in the Church is the exercise of spiritual authority with a view to honouring Christ the Head of the Church and ensuring the spiritual well-being of its members".

“Every Minister shall report annually to the Presbytery with which the Minister is enrolled on the ways in which the duties of a Minister as prescribed in Regulations 2.4.2 and 2.4.3”.

During an induction service ministers affirm this truth by answering in the affirmative to these questions:

“Do you accept the oversight of the presbytery?”

*I will*

Will you take part in the work of this presbytery and other councils of the Uniting Church, and will you share in the life and witness of the wider Church?

*I will*

Noting, that regarding the exercise of power, we must also be aware of the dangers of “bureaucratic power (invoking rules, regulations and structures to disempower others and to control process and outcomes),<sup>71</sup> paternalistic power (we know what is best), patriarchal power (Lording it over others, oppressing those considered less or lower on the hierarchy of status and importance), combative power (being aggressive in words, perhaps even in deeds, bullying and even violent towards others, taking a war-like stance in oppressing and attempting to control others, in order to win at all costs), all seen to exist in the UCA decision-making councils, says Dr. Harisun.”<sup>72</sup>

For this reason, Dr. Harisu points out that: “Any exercise of power [therefore] needs to bear witness to triune divine power. God has given each of us power through the Spirit’s power as capability and capacity to act, choose, decide, achieve, towards our own personal goals and co-actively towards those of our Christian community, God’s church. Power therefore must be multi-faceted, communal and relational, in imitation of God’s power. Power is not a commodity to be hoarded and jealously guarded lest someone else take power and thus reduce our power but to be given away and shared in mutuality.”<sup>73</sup>

## **5. Conscience and Ecclesial Authority within the Uniting Church.**

Before looking at conscience, it is important to understand the framework through which we are to understand ecclesial authority within the UCA. Noting again, as Wood has pointed out, “The structure of the Uniting Church’s government is not hierarchical. The Assembly is not ‘the top’ and the congregation ‘the bottom’. Each council or category of council has a particular sphere of responsibility, and none is the most important. The key phrase used in Paragraph Fifteen is ‘inter-related councils’ ”.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> National Assembly/Coolamon College (2008) The Uniting Church in Australia. Orientation to The Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice in the Uniting Church in Australia. A Resource for Pastors and Other Ministers. Uniting Church Press, Adelaide. p.31

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.31

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 8 p.53

“The Church: Its nature, function and ordering”<sup>75</sup> says:

**The government of the Church** (p. 145).

The aims and manner of her government will be controlled by her understanding of her worship, mission and service. She will derive her methods of government not from secular patterns but from her self-awareness as a ‘brotherly Christocracy’, that is to say, a brotherhood in which Christ reigns supreme. She will seek to make her laws *conform to the law of Christ*<sup>76</sup> so that her law may be a perpetual reminder to her members of him who called them and whom they are called to serve.

Government is given to her in order that she may maintain her life, and that of her members, in a sinful world.... Since *law is the servant of the mission of the Church*<sup>77</sup>, where it serves that mission it is a good law; where it becomes rigid or chaotic and stands in the way of that mission it is no longer good law.

Barth maintains: “In the light of its basic law, the law to be sought and established and executed in the Christian community must always have the character and intention of a law of service. It must always be law within an order of ministry. The community of Jesus Christ, as the body of which He is the Head, exists as it serves Him. And its members, Christians, as members of this His body, exist as—united by the service which they render to their Lord—they serve one another. This first and decisive determination of all Church law has its basis in the fact that the Lord Himself, who rules the community as the Head of His body, ‘came not to be ministered unto, but to minister’ “ (Mk. 10:45).<sup>78</sup>

**Authority in the Church**<sup>79</sup> (p. 147).

We have maintained consistently that the ultimate authority in the life of the Church belongs to God and has been committed to the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 28: 18)<sup>80</sup>. Ultimately authority belongs to Christ as he rules in his Church; but he mediates his authority through persons and corporate bodies. Christ is the Head of the Church, and no Christian man or group must claim to be able to speak in Christ’s name without being checked and corrected by others.

The Christian way of discerning the will of God – not with absolute certainty, but with the assurance given to faith that it is God’s desire to grant us knowledge of his will – is by *Christian counsel*.<sup>81</sup> (Matt. 18: 20<sup>82</sup>, and see the whole discourse on the

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<sup>75</sup> in Boss and Thompson (2008) *Theology for Pilgrims. Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*. Uniting Church Press, Sydney.

<sup>76</sup> Italic added

<sup>77</sup> Italic added

<sup>78</sup> Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics, Volume IV : The doctrine of reconciliation, Part 2* (690). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

<sup>79</sup> in Boss and Thompson (2008) *Theology for Pilgrims. Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*. Uniting Church Press, Sydney.

<sup>80</sup> Mat 28:18 Jesus drew near and said to them, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

<sup>81</sup> Italic added

<sup>82</sup> Mat 18:20 For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

*ordering of the life of Christian community in Matt. 18)*<sup>83</sup>. The Spirit does not replace the old laws of Judaism with new and better laws; he dwells in the Christian community. The government of the Church is therefore by the Spirit in the community or in the interrelation of communities. Laws are needed for maintaining the orderly life of communities, but law must be understood by Christians not as abstract rules governing the community, but as living law subject to the will of the community as it is guided by the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. For this reason we see the essential order of Church life in interrelated councils in which believers counsel together concerning the will of God, with necessary judicial procedures designed to help the councils perform their function.<sup>84</sup>

Barth maintains: “ Church law is living law. This, too, derives directly from the basic law of the community by which it is the body whose Head, or the fellowship whose law, is the living Jesus Christ. Who He is emerges from the sketch of His person or history attested and made known in Holy Scripture. But His person as attested in Holy Scripture lives to-day and to-morrow in all its historical singularity. And as this living person He rules and upholds and orders His community; He Himself at every moment in the quickening power of the Holy Spirit.... As the living Lord Jesus is the law to which it is obedient in the discovery and administration of the law appropriate to it, its own law, Church law, necessarily acquires the character of a law which is living and dynamic”.<sup>85</sup>

Paragraph 4 of the Constitution of the Uniting Church regarding ‘Purpose’ summaries well these points regarding the framework for understanding law and order in the Church:

“The purposes of the Church are to provide for the worship of God, to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, to promote Christian fellowship, to nurture believers in the Christian faith, to engage in mission, to assist in human development and toward the improvement of human relationships, to meet human need through charitable and other services and to do such other things as may be required in obedience to the Holy Spirit”.

## **Conscience**

Just as our constitution, rules and regulations are there to help the church to be obedient to the Holy Spirit, our conscience similarly is there to help us to conform to the will of God in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>83</sup> Mat 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, asking, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" 2 So Jesus called a child to come and stand in front of them, 3 and said, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. 4 The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. 5 And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this, welcomes me. Etc..

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>85</sup> Barth, K., Bromiley, G. W., & Torrance, T. F. (2004). *Church dogmatics, Volume IV : The doctrine of reconciliation, Part 2* (690). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

Conscience<sup>86</sup> is “the faculty by which [we] apprehend the moral demands of God, and which causes [us] pain when [we] fall short of those demands.”<sup>87</sup> That is, as in the New Testament, Conscience is characterized as a ‘witness’ either for or against us. Like a ‘witness’<sup>88</sup> in a court of law called to give evidence, our consciences similarly is called to bear witness or testimony either for us or against us. It is not there to make a judgment on us as such. It simply bears witness either ‘for us’ when we speak/act according to the truth, or ‘against us’, when we speak/act against the truth.<sup>89</sup>

It is important to note that from a Christian perspective, our conscience does not have a life of its own. It is not the final judge regarding matters of right and wrong, holy and unholy. It must live off or be guided by the ‘mind’ or the conscience of Christ.

The conscience, as Sproul rightly stresses because of sin “is [always] capable of distortion and misguidance. The conscience can be seared and eroded, being desensitized by repeated sin.”<sup>90</sup> As Wood & Marshall<sup>91</sup> also points out “it is possible for man’s conscience to be inadequately disciplined (1 Cor. 8:7), to become weakened (v. 12) and even defiled (v.7; Tit. 1:15), and to grow seared and ultimately insensible (1 Tim. 4:2)”.

“We [therefore, says Sproul, need to] diligently strive to bring our consciences into harmony with the mind of Christ lest a carnal conscience lead us into disobedience. We require a redeemed conscience, a conscience of the spirit rather than the flesh.”<sup>92</sup> That is, our “conscience must be continually enlightened and developed by an exposure to God’s Word if it is to serve as a reliable guide for our lives. A conscience that is allowed to become hardened and insensitive to sin will ultimately lead to spiritual and moral disaster. We must allow God to develop our consciences and then our consciences are able to develop us.”<sup>93</sup>

In other words, “it is essential for the conscience to be properly educated, and indeed *informed*, by the Holy Spirit. That is why ‘conscience’ and ‘faith’ cannot be separated. By repentance and faith man is delivered from conscience as ‘pain’; but faith is also the means

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<sup>86</sup> A word to me from Pastor Bill Hollingsworth (Chairman of Elders UAICC): Ezekiel 44:23 “The priests are to teach my people the difference between what is holy and what is not, and between what is ritually clean and what is not. 24 When a legal dispute arises, the priests are to decide the case according to my laws”. (During my period of suspension I have sought counsel and advice from the ‘wisdom’ of Pastor Bill Hollingsworth. Further reading required into the Book of Hebrews, with particularly reference to Christ’s eternal priesthood in the Order of Melchisedek).

<sup>87</sup> Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (221–222). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>88</sup> Rev. Ivan Kirk’s response to ‘Sexuality and Leadership proposal #8’ (David Pitman and Jenny Timms) is very good regarding the use of “conscience”. Qld Synod papers.

<sup>89</sup> Heb 10:22 Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Heb 13:18 Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.

<sup>90</sup> Sproul, R. (1996). *Following Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>91</sup> Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (221–222). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 p.47

<sup>93</sup> Osbeck, K. W. (1990). *Amazing grace : 366 inspiring hymn stories for daily devotions* (238). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications.

whereby his conscience is quickened and instructed. To walk in 'newness of life' (Rom. 6:4) implies a living, growing faith, through which the Christian is open to the influence of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14); and this in turn is the guarantee of a 'good', 'or, clear, conscience (1 Pet. 3:16; Acts 23:1)".<sup>94</sup>

It is important to note, as Dr. Michael Owen points out, that "Freedom of conscience" is categorically different from the "difference of opinion in matters that do not enter into the substance of the faith" allowed for by adherence to the Basis of Union. "Freedom of conscience" implies difference, not only in opinion, (i.e. in judgement or belief, in personal views or estimation), but in action and behaviour. Freedom of conscience [for example] on the equality of men and women in ministry means that, if my conscience will not let me treat them as equal, then I have a right to treat them as unequal."<sup>95</sup>

Dr. Watson says that conscience, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is "The bond between the principles of natural law known to reason and the act in which these principles find concrete expression is the 'conscience'; as the word means literally in English 'a knowing together'. Conscience is the bond between Law and responsibility."<sup>96</sup> That is, our conscience seeks to bring together our knowing and our doing; there is a correspondence between what we know regarding what is right and wrong and our responsibility and actions towards that knowledge or law.

In the language of "The Church: Its nature, function and ordering", our conscience should be 'controlled by [our] understanding of worship, mission and service', should 'conform to the law of Christ', 'should be a servant of the mission of the Church', should be 'checked and corrected by others', should be 'guided by the Word of God through the Holy Spirit' and that we, as believers, should 'counsel together' within the 'council's' of the church in order to discern the will of God and particularly so that we might obey the Holy Spirit.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I make the following salient points regarding the Polity of the UCA:

### **1. Jesus Christ is the head of the Uniting Church.**

The UCA organises herself in such a way, as Dutney pointed out 'to reflect that conviction and to keep itself continually open to Christ's leadership. This means that the Uniting Church is a Christocracy and not a democracy.' Our understanding of God as Triune, that is, as 'the one unoriginated God who is already Father, Jesus' Father, who sends the Son and gives Himself to us in the Spirit' is vital for ensuring the faith, order and mission of the church etc., are truly grounded and built upon the One Lord Jesus Christ. Discussions regarding the polity of the Church, therefore, cannot be separated from the faith of the Church. That is, as McCaughey pointed out, 'In approaching the doctrine of the ministry and

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>95</sup> Dr. Michael Owen (1996) "Back to Basics. Studies on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia. Uniting Church Press. Melbourne. p.206.

<sup>96</sup> Dr. Gordon Watson lectures on Ethics (1999) Trinity Theological College. p.10

the ordering or government of the life of the Church we are conscious of the need to remember that questions of faith precede those of order.

## **2. The Uniting Church is all about mission, participating in the *mission dei*.**

2 Corinthians 5: 19 “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself....[therefore God has entrusted and committed] the message of reconciliation to us”. As Dutney pointed out, for the Joint Commission on Church Union, ‘mission was the organising principle of the Commission’s ecclesiology’. As a result, the Basis of Union has come to express the Church’s understanding of itself not in terms of traditional philosophical terms, but in terms of the message of Christ and how it ‘responds’ to the message of Christ. The church therefore exists for the sake of that mission, as a sign and instrument of what God in Christ has done and is doing.

Sadly, as Dutney pointed out, “a lot of what we do, enjoy and are comforted by as a church is not about that mission at all. A lot of it is just habit, nostalgia, vested interest, or merely a lack of imagination”. It is why the Basis of Union was also written in a way to ensure that the Church will always be open to “ongoing correction and reform in the light of the call to mission.

## **3. The Uniting Church is governed by interrelated councils.**

To help foster the Mission of the Church, the *missio dei*, “The Uniting Church therefore so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world” (para. 15 BoU). That is, the Uniting Church is not a hierarchical church. If the various councils are not “bound ineluctably to one another in chains of love and mutuality” , that is, “If councils ignore each other, misunderstanding and confusion follow”.

Regarding the particular place of the ‘Congregation’ as ‘the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (BoU, paragraph 15 (a), it is important to note, as McCaughey pointed out, that the ‘councils of the church exist primarily to serve that basic unit, the congregation, and that the ‘further they get away from the task of simply serving Christ’s people gathered around Word and Sacrament the further they move from their own sphere of competence’.

## **4. Ordination and the role of the Minister of the Word in the Mission of the Church.**

Ordination points to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord of the Church and that the church so orders its life in a way that points to this reality. The church by its action in ordination, the setting apart of people for the specific ministries of Word and Deacon, as distinct from the common calling and gifts of the people of God, indicates that it ‘acknowledges that the

Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because her Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work'. It is why ministers in their ordination service are asked to 'Confess anew Jesus Christ as Lord'.

Paragraph 14 of the Basis of Union says that the role of a minister, is to 'care' for the flock, to 'share' in government and to 'serve' those in need in the world. That is, the role of the minister as also pointed out in the induction service is "to be a servant and a shepherd" in a particular 'congregation', to help foster the mission of the local congregation. There must be a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between a minister and a congregation in order to better serve the mission of the Church.

To ensure ministers fulfil their duties as prescribed in Regulations 2.4.2 and 2.4.3<sup>97</sup>, "Ministers and Lay Pastors will be responsible to a Presbytery and Synod in matters of faith and discipline and to the Presbytery or other appointing body for the exercise of their ministry"(Constitution paragraph 15). In the induction service ministers commit themselves to the 'oversight of the presbytery'. Noting, as Dutney (2008: 26) points out that "Oversight is exercised by councils. In Christian history episcopate, or oversight, came to carry a sense of supervision from a position of superiority. But the term is better understood as conveying a sense of focussed, directed, sustained attention coupled with responsibility of care; the kind of attention that a shepherd gives to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4) . It doesn't imply status so much as focus. This oversight has both personal and corporate dimensions, but in the government of the church episcopate is always corporate".

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<sup>97</sup> REGULATIONS - DUTIES OF A MINISTER

2.4.2 Within the ministry of the whole Church, Jesus Christ calls men and women to proclamation of the gospel in word and deed through the ministry of the Word and the ministry of Deacon. This calling is exercised by:

- (a) preaching of the Word;
- (b) presiding at the celebration of the sacraments;
- (c) providing for other persons to preside at worship and/or preach within the pastoral charge in which the Minister is in placement;
- (d) witnessing in the community to the gospel of Jesus Christ;
- (e) guiding and instructing the members of the Church and equipping them for their ministry in the community;
- (f) nurturing candidates for baptism and confirmation;
- (g) pastoral oversight and counsel wherever needed;
- (h) serving in the community, especially among those who are hurt, dis-advantaged, oppressed or marginalized;
- (i) careful attention to administrative responsibilities;
- (j) due observance of the discipline of the Church;
- (k) the enhancement of the Minister's own gifts for the work of ministry;
- (l) pioneering new expressions of the gospel and encouraging effective ways of fulfilling the mission of the Church.

2.4.3 Every Minister shall participate fully and regularly in the public worship of God and the mission and fellowship of the Congregation with which the Minister is enrolled (Regulations 2.4.12-14).

## **5. Conscience and Ecclesial Authority within the Uniting Church.**

### **Ecclesial Authority**

Ultimate authority in the life of the Church belongs to God and has been committed to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The church will therefore derive her methods of government not from secular patterns but from her self-awareness as a brotherly Christocracy in which Christ reigns supreme. The government of the Church, in other words, is by the Spirit in the community or in the interrelation of communities.

Laws of course are needed for maintaining the orderly life of communities, but law must be understood by Christians not as abstract rules governing the community, but as living law subject to the will of the community as it is guided by the Word of God through the Holy Spirit.

### **Conscience**

Paragraph 4 of the Constitution of the Uniting Church reminds us that the purpose of the church is to be 'obedient' to the Holy Spirit so that it truly participates in the *mission dei* and not simply follow the will of 'men'.

In a similar way, our conscience is there to help us in our 'obedience to the Holy Spirit'. It does not have a life of its own and should not be regarded as the final judge regarding what is right and wrong. Because our conscience is always capable of distortion and misguidance, it is vital that we diligently strive to bring our consciences into harmony with the mind of Christ lest a carnal conscience lead us into disobedience to the Holy Spirit who is the Lord of the Church.