



Proposal from members

55 Continuing Witness

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) To again express its gratitude to God for the “continuing witness of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr” (Basis #11);
- (b) To encourage members of the Uniting Church to continue to pray that “it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds” (Basis #11);
- (c) To call upon members of the Uniting Church to listen anew for words of continuing witnesses from recent and contemporary contexts by which our own witness might be challenged, renewed and strengthened; and
- (d) To request the Standing Committee to establish a Task Group to
 - (i) explore the reception and endorsement by the Uniting Church of specific statements and documents of ‘continuing witnesses’ (as understood in the Basis of Union) to which the Uniting Church would turn and listen as it “sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God” (Basis #11); and
 - (ii) bring relevant proposals to the 16th Assembly.

Proposer: Geoff Thompson

Seconder: Rachel Kronberger

Rationale:

Calls are often made to 'update' the *Basis of Union* (“the *Basis*”) or to develop a contemporary statement or confession of faith. The Uniting Church has already developed some contemporary statements of faith including ‘We Are a Pilgrim People’ and the Affirmations developed in response to the Revised Preamble.

In addition to our own ‘fresh words’, the *Basis* commits the Uniting Church – in very particular ways – to use, and learn from, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as well as various documents produced during the Reformation and Evangelical Revival, namely the Scots and Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Savoy Declaration and John Wesley’s *Forty-Four Sermons* (see *Basis* #10). There is much wisdom in the documents specified in *Basis* #9 and #10. They remind us of our heritage; they have proved themselves over time and in many contexts as instruments of guidance and insight.

As the UCA has now passed into both its fifth decade, and into a post-Christendom context, it is arguable that it is an appropriate time to consider how we might listen and learn from other contemporary witnesses from contexts other than our own. Deliberately listening to their wisdom as they seek to confess the faith in their circumstances (which may not necessarily mirror ours) can be salutary and instructive for us in our circumstances.

Noting the practice of other churches in the Reformed tradition formally to recognise the confessions of statements of faith from other churches and movements as points of reference for

their own theological guidance, we propose that the UCA listen to and formally receive the wisdom of churches similarly moving out of Christendom and facing opportunities and challenges which were unknown to our Christendom forbears. The outcome of such a process could be the formal recognition of a collection of 'Continuing Witnesses'.

So to recognise such documents would not constitute a blanket endorsement of all their content. We could adopt towards them the same posture that the *Basis* (Paragraph 10) enjoins us to adopt towards the Reformation Confessions: we would commit ourselves to "continue to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures" that we find in them.

This proposal envisages that over the next triennium, through the work of the appropriate panel, congregations, presbyteries, synods and Agencies of the UCA consider a proposed range of possible documents for consideration in a formal list of statements, confessions, sermons and/or interventions of 'continuing witnesses' which would become named and acknowledged sources which the UCA would consult for their wisdom and guidance as occasions demanded. This would not be a list that would be modified every triennium or by the whim of this or that leader or theologian. Rather it would be a list that represented enduring wisdom that over time and/or across diverse contexts had *already* proved itself in claiming the attention of Christian communities by reminding them of some or another aspect of the 'faith of the church'. The purpose of any such collection would not be to reflect the existing theological parties of the UCA. If anything it would be to disturb those existing theological fault lines by intentionally allowing the voices from other contexts to speak to us and thus variously provoke, encourage, challenge and comfort us. Over time, frequent use of these documents in theological colleges, church discussions, and the development of church polity could generate a level of common theological discourse across the church and help shape the collective theological imagination of the UCA.

The following is a list of 'continuing witness' which could be considered.

- The **Brief Statement of Faith** This was produced as part of the 1983 formation of the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- The **Belhar Confession**. A confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa from the early 1980s.
- **Kupu Whakapono**. The Confession of Faith adopted in 2010 by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Rainbow Spirit Theology**. A seminal collection of reflections from several distinguished Indigenous Christian leaders from the 1990s.
- Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, **Laudato si'**.
- **A Gift of Love**. A collection of 16 sermons of Martin Luther King Jr.