



B6 CHURCH POLITY REFERENCE COMMITTEE

1. INTRODUCTION

When Danny Denuto pleads Daryl Kerrigan's case before the High Court in *The Castle* – “It's the constitution. It's Mabo. It's justice. It's law. It's the vibe” – he could have been putting in an expression of interest for the Church Polity Reference Committee. I make no comment, of course, about the discernment process of the Assembly Standing Committee in its current or future appointments.

The mission of the CPRC is to offer advice “on the polity of the Uniting Church, in light of the Basis of Union, the Constitution and the Regulations.” Our polity has as its foundation these documents, each with their own legal standing. The documents themselves, however, do not articulate in black and white our polity. Polity goes beyond how any legal documents are expressed, to a combination of values, identity, intent and structure. It is, in some ways, both how we exist and why we are like that.

In its work, potentially because of the nature of polity, the CPRC does not provide determinations. It offers advice to the Assembly, the Standing Committee or the General Secretary or, as requested, other Assembly agencies. The role of discernment of what this means for the Church remains with the Assembly, as the appropriate Council of the Church (or the ASC acting in its place).

Over the past few triennia, it has become almost standard practice in some ways for the CPRC to be used in order to check issues of difficulty or even dispute. The bulk of the CPRC's work has occurred in the first 12 months immediately following the meeting of the Assembly. Even within the first few months. This was again the case during the term of the current CPRC.

2. OUR WORK IN THE LAST TRIENNIUM

All of the work for this term's CPRC occurred between July 2018 and April 2019 and covered:

- the rites, form and ceremony of legal marriage – including the interplay between the Marriage Act, the decisions of the 15th Assembly and the commencement of any new authorized liturgy of the Assembly;
- the place of a Council (other than the Assembly) to express or affirm a specific theological position and the effect of any such affirmation;
- the capacity of a Council to bind its members, committee holders or people within placement within the bounds of that Council to a particular theological position;
- the capacity within the UCA for non-geographic Presbyteries to be established based on theological positions; and
- the status and place of networks within the inter-conciliar life of the UCA.

3. THE FUTURE

Considerations of polity are, however, an ongoing issue for us. The Church is currently discerning a future as a people of God on the way. Act2. We have been impacted in substantial ways by limitations imposed because of the ongoing Covid pandemic. We have developed a particular model for discernment of God's voice in our councils – based on the assumption of a “gathering” in community. All of these ask questions regarding our polity. *What happens when “the vibe” changes?*

These will be matters which are likely to require deliberation in the very near future. Potentially by the members of the incoming CPRC. They are of significance not primarily to a committee advising the General Secretary of the Assembly, but rather to the church as a whole. There must be considerations of how we will exist and why we will be like that. I encourage all members of the Church – and certainly all members of the Assembly – to think about who we are called to be and what that means for the way that we live and work together.

4. APPRECIATION

As this term of the CPRC concludes, I offer my thanks to its members over the past three years – Chris Budden, Michelle Cook, Andrew Dutney, Haloti Kailahi, Ian Price, Kerry Wilson and for the initial part of this term, Jenny Tymms. The wisdom and engagement of each person has been particularly important in our work.

It has been my privilege to be part of this Committee for quite some time, and to be Chair since 2015. It is appropriate that my role with the CPRC ceases at this Assembly. I commend the ongoing work of the Committee to the church and pray for the ongoing guidance of the Spirit as we discern God's way together.

Gordon Ramsay
Chair

