

“In His Own Strange Way”

A Post-Christendom
Sort-of Commentary
on the
Basis of Union

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INTRODUCTION

I have written this commentary for people who are committed to the Uniting Church and who want to deepen that commitment. It is for those who want to explore the specifics of the Uniting Church's founding theological vision for its own value and merit. It is written for those who believe or sense that the vision of faith sketched in the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* might have something particular, unique, encouraging – and even constructively unsettling – to say to the contemporary Church. It is also written in an effort to persuade those who doubt that it can do these things that it can.

This book will offer little if you come to it primarily wondering if the *Basis* ticks the various boxes required by the 'evangelical' or 'liberal' or 'progressive' camps etc. Rather than employ that approach, I'd invite you to engage the *Basis* on its own terms. You may not agree with everything it says, but try to be open to the possibility that contained in this document is a vision of faith which creatively cuts across the theological fault lines of contemporary Christianity. You may well want to agree or disagree with that vision, but it might turn out that you need a different set of boxes than those which exist on the prevailing check lists.

My intentional engagement with the *Basis* during the last ten years has convinced me over and over again that whilst it was obviously a document of and for a particular time and place, it has an uncanny capacity to speak into other times and places – including the quite particular dynamics of the post-Christendom context of the twenty-first century Australian church. It offers particular ways of understanding Christ, salvation, the Scriptures, Baptism, Eucharist, the Church, and mission. It does so in ways that can actually take a reader by surprise. It can even knock you slightly off your theological balance. As I noted above, it cuts across the theological fault lines which our various theological tribes have so carefully and painstakingly drawn. You don't have to scratch too far beneath

its surface to realise this, but the *Basis* doesn't always say what you might expect it to say. That's why reading it can be such a rewarding and stimulating experience.

What is the Basis of Union?

The *Basis of Union* is what its title says, even if that needs just a little expanding. It's the theological basis of the union of the three Churches which produced the Uniting Church in Australia. Its function as a *basis* is twofold. First, it is the document on which the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches voted in the early 1970s in order to agree to unite and form the Uniting Church in Australia. If there had been no *Basis* or if any one of the churches had rejected it, there would be no Uniting Church.

Secondly, it remains the ongoing theological basis of the Uniting Church. The question of its post-union status was addressed very explicitly in the mid-1990s. There was a debate about whether the *Basis* had done its work simply by bringing union about. Some argued that it had. Their claim was that it was a basis *for* union, not the theological basis *of* the Uniting Church. After a widespread discussion across the church, the 1997 Assembly affirmed that it was in fact, and had always been intended to be, the ongoing theological foundation of the Uniting Church. This decision led to changes in both the Constitution and the liturgies of the Uniting Church, changes which reflected this status and function.¹

There are two important points to make about this understanding of the *Basis*. On the one hand (as the *Basis* itself confesses), Jesus Christ is the actual living foundation of the church. Obviously, the *Basis* cannot usurp this role. On the other hand, that the *Basis* has this ongoing function does not mean that it is the Uniting Church's last theological word. It is, instead, the theological *basis* for our ongoing theological, moral, and spiritual discernment. It is less a map (with clearly defined routes), and more like a compass (which gives us direction in unfamiliar and changing territory).

It is also important to note that in 1992 an inclusive language version of the *Basis* was approved by the Uniting Church's Assembly Standing Committee. This is now the most widely-consulted version of the *Basis* and it is the one used in this book.

What is 'post-Christendom'?

As with many of the summary descriptions of ours or any culture, 'post-Christendom' is used in many ways and with varying degrees of precision. Post-Christendom has proved to be especially flexible, if not slippery. If Christendom was, in its broadest sense, the millennium-long cultural marriage between Christianity and Europe, then post-Christendom is the culture of Europe (and its outposts) that has separated itself from the texts, institutions and practices of Christianity.

There is also a narrower meaning of Christendom used in this book, and it is specific to Australia. It was that arrangement of church and society which had its heyday in the post-World War II period when Australia's mainline churches were at their peak in terms of numbers, cultural presence and social impact. It included deference to church leaders, the frequent inclusion of Christian spokespersons in public debate, and the widespread use of the churches for the rites of passage. For those who were members of them, the large, culturally-robust, suburban and regional congregations were the hubs of social activity and community service. This defined Christianity and provided an integrated framework in which to be both a disciple and citizen. This was Australia's own particular Christendom.

Being *post* this particular Australian Christendom is not simply a social condition defined by decline in church attendance. It is a cultural circumstance in which those previous cultural symbols which helped sustain the church in its own imaginative world have largely disappeared. What characterises being post-*this sort of* Christendom is the near total disappearance of those earlier alliances and the cultural supports they provided for Christian

self-understanding. Living in *this* post-Christendom means that contemporary Churches now have sole responsibility for sustaining Christian identity and vocation.

Let me highlight: the term covers various, albeit overlapping, meanings and a range of that variety is used throughout this book. It all depends on the issues being discussed at any given moment.

What is a 'sort of Commentary'?

A commentary is a book which, literally, 'comments' on some or another text of note. Commentaries can take many different forms. Some can be highly technical and have something to say on every word in the text at hand. Some are more informal and function to open up conversations with the broad sweep of the text. This present work is of the latter type. I am not pretending to give a balanced treatment of each paragraph of the *Basis*. Some shorter paragraphs get less attention than some of the longer paragraphs. Sometimes, I give more information on the background to the paragraphs than their content.

Moreover, what is driving this 'sort of commentary' is a desire to bring the document and its vision of faith into conversation with some of the realities of the contemporary Uniting Church. I have tried to bring a post-Christendom perspective to my reading of the document. This perspective has shaped the themes I emphasise and the questions I ask, although quite clearly different parts of the *Basis* invite the post-Christendom perspective more than others.

This orientation shapes the structure of each reflection. An extract from the *Basis* begins each section. Usually, this is one entire paragraph. Sometimes one or more paragraphs are grouped together. In the case of Paragraph 3, because of its significance, it is broken into three sections, each with its own reflection.

There have, of course, been earlier and more conventional commentaries on the *Basis*. Two of them were written by Davis

McCaughey, the first President of the Uniting Church and one of the key influences on the final form of the *Basis*. One of his commentaries was written before Union in 1971. Significantly, it was republished in 2016.² The other followed union, in 1980.³ Another was written by D'Arcy Wood, himself a subsequent President of the UCA. It was published in 1986.⁴ Another engagement with the *Basis* which has some elements of a commentary is Andrew Dutney's *Where did the joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union*⁵. All of these are valuable resources for the Uniting Church and continue to be well worth the time taken to read them. This applies also to Dutney's *Manifesto for Renewal: The Shaping of a New Church*⁶ and Michael Owen's *Back to Basics: Studies in The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church*.⁷ For any full study of the *Basis* all of these works – and more – would need to be consulted.

And why 'his own strange way'?

The phrase comes from the fourth paragraph of the *Basis*. The concern of this particular paragraph is to address the issue of how the living Jesus Christ currently engages the church. We will, of course, come to a full engagement with that paragraph in its proper place in this commentary. For now, however, I simply invite you to think about the idea of Jesus and his way being strange. One of the perennial problems for Christianity is that Jesus becomes all too familiar to us – or at least we allow him to. He becomes too well known. We think we understand him. But why should this be so? After all, the Gospels almost go out of their way to point out that even those closest to him in during his life failed to understand him and never really got to know him. This lack of familiarity is reinforced, indeed sharpened, with the encounters with the risen Jesus. He is elusive, cryptic, and unpredictable. This aspect of Jesus was frequently lost to the churches of Christendom. We had Jesus wrapped up in our styles of worship and theology, in our agencies and institutions, and in our evangelism and our activism. The advent of post-Christendom can be an opportunity for us to re-

engage this strange Jesus, the one who always pushes against the boundaries we build around him and our churches. Certainly this theme is stronger in some parts of the *Basis* than others and it won't always be immediately evident. But it's a useful unifying theme – one to keep us on our toes as we read the *Basis of Union* and look for the ways it nudges us towards Jesus and his strange ways.

Headings

When the *Basis* was first published in 1971 it did not contain any paragraph headings. It was presented simply as a sequence of numbered paragraphs. The headings that now accompany the official version of the *Basis* were added later simply as tools to assist the reading and discussion of the document. I have not used those headings in this book. Instead each section of the book is given a heading which is related to the issues I raise about the respective paragraph. I also highlight that a couple of the headings which have become part of the official version of the *Basis* are unhelpful and a little misleading.

The format of this book

The book consists of 16 reflections. Each begins with an extract from the *Basis*. As indicated above, this is either a section of one of the *Basis*' 18 paragraphs, a full paragraph, or a cluster of closely-related paragraphs. Following the extract, there are four resources for either personal reflection or group discussion. So, the structure of each reflection is as follows:

- » The selected **Text** from the *Basis*
- » A **Commentary** on the text
- » A brief statement of the **post-Christendom Reality and Opportunity** suggested by the particular section of the *Basis*.
- » Two standard **Getting Started** questions
- » Two or three questions for **Going Deeper** into the particular section of the *Basis*

- » A biblical reference for **Engaging the Bible** either by bringing the biblical passage into dialogue with the *Basis* and/or using it as a stimulus to prayer or meditation. Note that the selected bible passages are not offered as proof texts of the *Basis*. Sometimes the connections between the bible passages and the *Basis* are clear. Other times they are merely suggestive.

Acknowledgements

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Geoff Thompson
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PARAGRAPH 1

Union: acknowledging one another

Text: Paragraph 1

The Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic, and seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church, hereby enter into union under the name of the Uniting Church in Australia. They pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They give praise for God's gifts of grace to each of them in years past; they acknowledge that none of them has responded to God's love with a full obedience; they look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people. To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this union these Churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will. In entering into this union the Churches concerned are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died, and that it awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever.

Commentary

The formation of the Uniting Church on June 22nd 1977 was big news. It was headlined on the front pages of many of the daily newspapers. The inaugural service held in the Sydney Town Hall was replayed on ABC TV that same evening. Indeed, it even claimed international attention. Firebrand preacher, Ian Paisley, not satisfied with the bigotry he was fomenting in his native Northern Ireland, travelled to Sydney to *protest* about this new ‘ecumenical’ church. More happily, Synod-based services marking the UCA’s advent were held in Australia’s capital cities on the following Sunday. They were packed.

Have we lived up to the expectation? And how would we answer that question in any case? If we used this opening paragraph of the *Basis* as a criterion, we might ask whether, when we gather in our various communities of faith week by week, we do so acknowledging “one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ” and in order to “hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will”? Or to lower the register of the language, we might simply ask: Is Jesus Christ and his mission central to our life as Christian communities? This is a much more serious test of the state of the Uniting Church than any narrative about numbers or any data about demographics.

The union of churches that produced the Uniting Church in Australia was not a denominational merger. Its purpose wasn’t to consolidate resources. It wasn’t a strategy of expansion. It wasn’t driven by a vague sense that it was a good idea. No, at least according to this paragraph, union was embedded in some deep theological convictions: it was intended for the glory of God; it was a call to “sole loyalty to Christ”; its horizon was nothing less than the kingdom of God which Jesus had proclaimed and for which Christians hope.

Right at the outset of the document, union is set within a context of the triune God, the centrality of Jesus Christ, the call to mission,

and the hope of the coming kingdom. The UCA was not intended as a 'new Church' or a new 'denomination' - even if that is the language that might come most easily to us to describe what happened. Indeed, it was probably inevitable that this is how the event of union would be described and understood – both within and outside the church. To counter that inevitability, one way of summarising the spirit of this paragraph might go like this: the formation of UCA was simply a new episode in the history of the 'Church of God'.

The logic at work in this paragraph is precisely the logic that challenges 'denominationalism', the phenomenon of Christendom by which the divided Churches defined themselves over and against each other. "We are this kind of church." "We do communion this way, not your way." "We appoint our ministers this way, differently from you." "We have this form of government, unlike yours." Of course, Christianity has never been homogeneous: it has always displayed variety and diversity. But denominationalism turns that variety and diversity into division. It makes primary things which should be secondary: forms of government and leadership; modes of worship; theologies of ordination, or beliefs about the sacraments. For instance, consider the names of the three Churches which entered union: each one of them was known by a title which referred in one way or another to the form of government adopted, or the way it structured Christian experience: Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational. In other words, Christians from these churches identified themselves to each other by the way they organised themselves.

One of the most striking post-Christendom notes in this paragraph is precisely the move away from these denominational labels as markers of identity. They are challenged and subverted by the seemingly innocuous but deeply challenging summons: "In this union, these churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ." As noted above, this union was not simply an organisational merger.

It was an event that called forth a deeply personal response from the individual members of each of the denominations. No longer would Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists identify themselves or one another in those terms. Nor was the challenge from now on simply to recognise one another as fellow members of the Uniting Church. That would simply replace one form of denominationalism with another. No, something even more fundamental was being called for: an acknowledgement of each other as “believers in our Lord Jesus Christ”. We might balk at the language of ‘believers in’ rather than, say, ‘followers of’ Jesus Christ, but the basic point of Christian identity is stated. Christians are Christians through their relationship to Jesus Christ.

Of course, at one level acknowledging fellow Christians as Christians can be a fairly formal or superficial process. Beneath (and not always beneath!) the acknowledgement can be mutual suspicion, hostility or indifference. Here, however, the *Basis* invites those entering union to set those aside and to accompany the mutual acknowledgement with a key Christian virtue and an equally key Christian disposition: love and joy. This are not about whether we like our fellow Christians or whether we can put up with them. It’s about the hard work of acknowledging that in Christ I am connected and responsible to any other person whom Christ calls into the church and that together we are equally called by Christ into his mission.

The post-Christendom reality

Post-Christendom has exposed the denominationalism that lay behind the denominational differences of the Christian Churches.

The post-Christendom opportunity

Sit lightly to the Uniting Church ‘brand’ without ignoring the particular vocations to which the theology, ethos and identity of the UCA calls us.

Starter Questions

- » Which words or concepts in this paragraph most claim your attention or excite you? Do any worry you? If so, why?
- » What issues have not been raised here that you think should be? How would you articulate them to your own community of faith?

Going deeper

- » Can the members of the UCA learn not to first say we are members of the Uniting Church, but to find our identity as fellow disciples? If not, what is stopping us from doing so?
- » Can we extend the recognition, in love and joy, to other denominations? If not, what is stopping us from doing so?
- » Is being a ‘believer in’ or ‘follower of’ Jesus Christ central to your participation in your local congregation or community of faith? How might we strengthen one another in making that even more central?

Engaging the Bible

Read this text and bring the *Basis* and the above commentary into dialogue with it and/or use it as a basis for further discussion, prayer or meditation.

Ephesians 4:1-6

PARAGRAPH 2

Unity in an age of difference

Text: Paragraph 2

The Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church recognises that it is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission. Recalling the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries, the Uniting Church looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church's unity expressed, in similar Councils. It thankfully acknowledges that the uniting Churches were members of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies, and will seek to maintain such membership. It remembers the special relationship which obtained between the several uniting Churches and other Churches of similar traditions, and will continue to learn from their witness and be strengthened by their fellowship. It is encouraged by the existence of United Churches in which these and other traditions have been incorporated, and wishes to learn from their experience. It believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end the Uniting Church commits itself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific. The Uniting Church declares its desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches.

Commentary

In the late 1990s I read an article by an academic theologian in which the author made the suggestion that as her neighbours drove to their golf clubs, coffee shops and restaurants on a Sunday morning, most

of them couldn't care less about the diversity of churches they drove past. They would be more scandalised by what was missing from the menus at their chosen dining venues than by the spectre of a divided church.

This anecdote at least invites us to ask whether we exaggerate the significance of the divisions between the Churches. It depends. Perhaps some of our neighbours are put off Christianity by its denominational divisions. Clearly, for others it is a matter of indifference, if indeed they even notice. But is that the decisive issue? Surely the scandal of division should first exercise the hearts, souls and minds of Christians. After all, the notion of 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph4:4-6) was a significant element of early Christian proclamation, For the community of Christians to fail on this score would seem to be a pretty significant failure.

It is true, however, that the modern ecumenical movement was deeply shaped by the assumed connection between church disunity and unbelief. The words included in Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 was one of the most invoked biblical warrants in the twentieth century. It was a sort of ecumenical proof text: "I ask...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

It is also true, as this paragraph of the *Basis* indicates, that that same modern ecumenical movement (focused in the World Council of Churches, formed in 1948) was a large part of the background to the formation of the Uniting Church. Its activities and theological discussions provided much of the stimulus for, and helped to resource, those who working on union here in Australia. The goal of organic or institutional unity was very much part of that particular ecumenical background. That background can also be seen in this paragraph's declaration that the UCA will "seek union with other Churches".

The reality in the twenty-first century, however, is that the quest for organic unity amongst divided churches appears to have stalled. If anything, denominational diversity has increased since the formation of the World Council of Churches. This should not be seen as a failure. It is undeniable that even without organic unity the ecumenical movement fostered other forms of unity which have enriched the churches and their mission. It is, however, a chance to reflect on the fact that the twentieth-century ecumenical movement was just that – a movement of the twentieth century, generated largely by the churches of a divided Christendom (which had exported their divisions from Europe to their ‘mission churches’ in other continents). It was also, as some critics have pointed out, ultimately inseparable from some of the forces of colonialism and some problematic ideas of unity which often came with that.

We might need to consider the possibility that the question of church division and unity looks different in the circumstances of post-Christendom. The divisions generated by the churches of Europe are giving way to new multi-dimensional relationships between the churches of Christianity’s new centres of gravity – Africa and Asia – and those of Europe (and its outposts). We should not assume that the Christians of Africa and Asia automatically think about unity and diversity in the same way that Christians of European legacy do.

This need to consider new ways of looking at church divisions and unity might also coincide, at least in the West, with living in a post-modern context where ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ are seen, not as problems to be overcome, but as positives to be embraced. To recognise and celebrate them is a way of resisting false unities and various ideologies of conformity. The commitment made in this paragraph to forming relationships with the “Churches in Asia and in the Pacific” has been an important stimulus for the Uniting Church to learn ways of understanding ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’. The same can be said of the commitments, developed later in the life of the Church, to relationships with Australia’s First Peoples

(regrettably ignored in the *Basis*) and to honouring and embracing the *cultural* diversity which quite quickly came to characterise the Uniting Church (more on these issues later in this book).

Yet perhaps the most important part of this paragraph is that it points to the fact that any institutional unity is in the service of a deeper unity that should always characterise the relationships between Christians: “a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, racial and national boundaries”. This can be a mandate for this or that church union; but more deeply it belongs to the very character of the Christian calling. And because it is that, it is also an abiding challenge to all church division and a summons continually to seek diverse forms of unity.

The post-Christendom reality

The once-dominant mainline protestant denominations are now mostly minor players in the Australian and global Christian scenes.

The post-Christendom opportunity

Rather than despair at or lament this situation, take it as a chance to develop an understanding of being an ecclesial minority and appreciate how that situation brings its own insights into the Gospel which can then be shared with the more dominant Churches.

Starter Questions

- » Which words or concepts in this paragraph most claim your attention or excite you? Do any worry you? If so, why?
- » What issues have not been raised here that you think should be? How would you articulate them to your own community of faith?

Going deeper

- » What do think your friends and neighbours make of the fact that there are so many different churches? How do you respond to their comments and attitudes?
- » In your experience, are cultural differences any easier or more difficult to negotiate within or outside the church?
- » Discuss the ways your particular community of faith embraces or resists relationships with Christians from diverse cultures here in Australia.

Engaging the Bible

Read this text and bring the *Basis* and the commentary into dialogue with it and/or use it as a basis for further discussion, prayer or meditation.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9