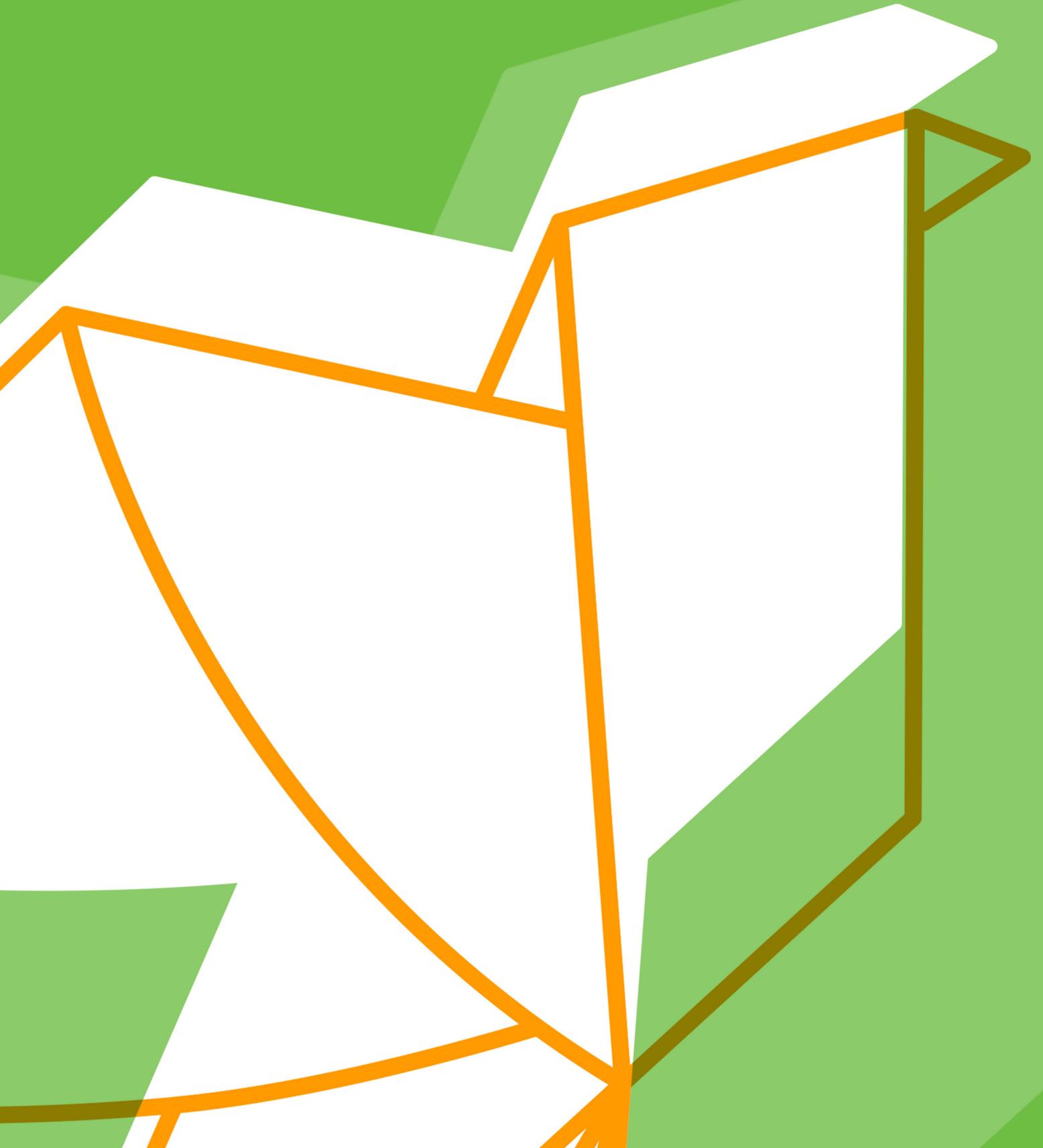


# ACT2

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER:

REFLECTIONS ON THE BASIS OF UNION



# Introduction

Welcome to these studies *Our Life Together: Reflections on the Basis of Union*. We are glad you are making time to study the *Basis of Union*.

These studies were commissioned by the Act2 Task Group. Act2 is a project of the Assembly that was initiated by the Assembly Standing Committee. The task of Act2 is to identify and implement sustainable structures, practices, and ways of working which:

1. Create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation,
2. Foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church, and
3. Fulfil the Church's legal, ethical and social obligations.

You can read more about Act2 on the Assembly website <https://uniting.church/act2>.

One of the directions suggested by the most recent paper, *Act2: Considering Afresh Our Life Together*, is that we should "Reconnect with our core identity and clearly articulate and communicate the common theological and other frameworks shaping the life of the UCA." The *Basis of Union* is a key guiding document allowing us to reconnect with our core theological identity as we continue to chart our life together.

We asked Rev Dr Geoff Thompson to write these studies. Geoff is a Uniting Church theologian and a member of the Assembly Standing Committee, who has published books on the *Basis of Union* and Uniting Church theology.

You can use these studies in small groups, your Church Council, Presbytery, school, or your community service agency. You can use them to deepen your understanding of the *Basis of Union* or to help you think about Act2 in light of the *Basis of Union*.

Each study has two to three pages of comments on one or two paragraphs of the *Basis of Union*, followed by a Bible passage and some questions for reflection and discussion. At the end of the studies, we have included some specific Act2 questions which you can use to provide feedback on the Act2 project if you wish. You are not required to use these studies to give feedback.

It is our prayer that these studies will deepen your love of God, encourage you in your service in the world and strengthen your commitment to God's church.



Sharon Hollis  
President Uniting Church in Australia

## Preparation:

To engage these reflections, it will be important to be familiar with the whole of the Basis of Union. It would be worth reading through the whole document before commencing the reflections. Nevertheless, Paragraphs 3, 4, 7, 13 and 15 do have a special focus - and it would be worth reading them especially closely. The text of the Basis (the 1992 edition) is available on the Assembly website: <https://uniting.church/basisofunion/>

# Reflection 1:

*Christ alone is supreme and constitutes, rules and renews his church*

Christianity is nothing without Jesus Christ. This is hardly a controversial claim, at least about the origins of the church. After all, if Jesus had not lived, and if certain things had not been believed about him after his death, there simply never would have been a church, let alone, two millennia later, the Uniting Church in Australia.

Yet, the claim, 'Christianity is nothing without Jesus Christ,' is also a claim about the present and ongoing existence of the church. If Jesus Christ is not living and active now, then the church has no reason to exist (and, indeed, many reasons not to exist). Each of the claims about Jesus in the heading of this first reflection assumes this claim about Jesus' present existence. He *is* supreme in the church. He *constitutes, rules* and *renews* the church.

Each of these terms, all taken from the *Basis*, is important for the present Act2 project. The affirmation that "Christ alone is supreme in his Church" (Para 15) reminds us that in all our planning and discernment, neither any council nor any person has absolute authority. That does not mean that we do not invest relative authority in particular councils or leaders for particular purposes. We do. And we do so because God gives people and councils the gifts to use that authority. But we do so also aware that all of us are accountable to Christ. The claim that Christ "constitutes, rules and renews [his disciples] as his Church" (Para 4) enables us to see another dimension of the same point, a point that runs through the *Basis*.

That point is that the *Basis of Union* simply does not let us think about the church without thinking about Jesus Christ. Nor does it let us think about ourselves as Christians without thinking about the wider community of disciples. Even if you have already done so, it might be worth pausing and reading through Paragraphs 3 and 4 of the *Basis* where this connection is so strong. The following two claims are worth reflection.

*The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. (Para 4)*

*God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. 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)*

The first of these two quotes speaks of Christ continually coming to the church: we have no life without his ever-renewed presence. The quote reminds us that the church exists for Christ to work and bear witness to himself. The second quote also points to the cosmic scope of Christ's work. The church is not the centre of this work, but the 'instrument' set apart for a commissioned role to play in God's renewal and reconciliation of the whole creation.

A few sentences later in Paragraph 3, we read that it is Christ who will bring about this "final consummation" of all things for which the church hopes. In other words, the church looks back to Jesus Christ as its historical source, as the source of its current life, and towards his future renewal of the whole creation. Notice how, in these paragraphs, the stories of Christ, the church, and the cosmos are all woven together. There is no story of the church, no definition of the church, no mission of the church which can be separated from the story of Jesus and his cosmic work. In this strikingly woven cord, three threads — Christ, church and cosmos — are carefully held together. That cord weaves its way through the whole of the *Basis*.

This big picture of the church and its relationship to Christ may seem some distance from Act2's immediate presenting issue of identifying and implementing sustainable structures and practices in the Uniting Church, but it is the big picture which constitutes the necessary background for this strategic and structural work.

Over the course of its history, the church has found all sorts of ways to disentangle this threefold cord and to isolate the church from the other two threads. Or if not to isolate it, at least make the church the most conspicuous of the threads. That has always been a mistake when it has happened. We don't want to repeat it.

Yet, to be alert to the dangers of exaggerating the importance of the church should not translate into a coyness about the church. The church does have a significance in the ways of God. It is not as if Christian salvation would be experienced more 'purely' without the complication of the church. God calls the church into being, calls each of us into its life as part of the experience of salvation, and knits us together to be the instrument Christ uses to 'work and bear witness to himself.'

So, a little ironically, precisely the reason for not inflating the significance of the church is very close to the reason for taking it very seriously and making careful, wise and responsible decisions about its structures and practices. By God's grace, these – the church's structures and practices – are among gifts which enable the church to witness to Christ.

## Engaging the Bible:

*Consider this reflection in the light of Colossians 1:15–20*

### Discussion questions:

- How is the threefold cord of Christ, Church and cosmos held together in your local community of faith?
- How do you think your local community hears the witness to Christ through your community of faith?
- How easy is it for you to place the life and witness of your community of faith in the context of the whole creation and the 'coming reconciliation and renewal of all things'?
- How might the Uniting Church provide your community of faith support and encouragement to your local life and witness?
- How might the councils of the Uniting Church<sup>1</sup> help you keep Christ, Church and cosmos together?

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<sup>1</sup> The Councils of the Uniting Church are the Congregation (and its council), Presbytery, Synod and Assembly

## Reflection 2:

### *Responsibility, governing, gifts*

In the first reflection, we explored the inter-woven nature of Christ, church and cosmos. It was argued that the *Basis* reminds us that we can't really think about the church's practices and structures – those of any church, not just the Uniting Church – without paying attention to, and being grounded in, this framework. It might be thought, then, that we are now ready to move on to the nitty gritty of the sections of the *Basis* devoted to structures and decision making. But we can't rush there just yet.

Just as we observed in the first reflection that Christianity is nothing without Jesus Christ, so it is that the church is nothing without the people whom God has called into it. Although Paragraphs 3's language of the church being an 'instrument' may sound somewhat impersonal, other images and metaphors in the same paragraph remind us that when God calls the church into being, it is as a community: the church is also described as a "fellowship of the Holy Spirit"; a "fellowship of reconciliation" and a "pilgrim people". The Act2 project invites us to think about some of the ways we are structured as that community. And so does the *Basis*. But what we read about structures in later paragraphs only makes sense against the background of what is said about membership and ministry in Paragraphs 7 and 13.

Paragraph 7 reminds us of the formal beginning of our membership of the church: baptism. Deep theological claims are made about this sacrament in this paragraph. If, however, we read that paragraph only to find answers to the historically controversial questions of infant baptism or of how baptism does its work, we will miss what is perhaps its most important sentence:

Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.

Notice here how the emphasis shifts from the act of baptism to the character and purpose of the Christian community into which we are baptised. The community is called to have a particular character: a fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy. The community which is called to have this character is also called to a particular purpose: to share in Christ's life and mission in the world.

In turning to Paragraph 13, we see that this link between membership and mission is amplified. This is the paragraph that is the hub of what is often referred to as 'every-member ministry.' The first part of the paragraph is worth quoting:

The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.

The connection between every-member ministry, the Spirit, gifts, and service is a reminder that this ministry is not primarily about *our* commitments or *our* goals or about the contributions we want to make to the church's mission. Rather, every-member ministry is about using gifts given to us by God for God's purposes. We receive these gifts not for our own indulgence or enjoyment. As the quotation reminds us, gifts are given for service in the ministry of Christ.

The threads between these paragraphs are very important. In Paragraph 7, baptism and membership are related to Christ's life and mission in the world. In Paragraph 13, the gifts given by Spirit in the context of every-member ministry are given for the members' participation in the ministry of Christ. But these threads also need to connect to the theme of Paragraph 3: Christ, church and world. The horizon for the use of our gifts is as broad as Christ's mission to the whole world. As we will go on to see in the remaining studies, some of the gifts are for the government and building up of the church itself. Giftedness for these tasks is essential. It is right and proper that we invest in them and pay them serious attention. But they have this wider horizon which can't be ignored.

Taken as a whole, the theme of giftedness and ministry in the *Basis* is oriented to the church's witness to the world. Most Christians will exercise their ministry in the world rather than in the structures of the church. If this is not the case, then we have a problem: there is then an acute danger that a focus on church's structures will leave Christians ill-equipped for their ministries in the world. None of this is reason to avoid paying attention to the gifts and ministries needed for building up the church. Whilst we shouldn't trade the intra-church ministry off against the outward-oriented ministries in terms of their mutual source in the Spirit, it is the former that serve the latter not vice versa. In fact, it is because of this direction of their relationship that the attention to the intra-church ministries is focused and properly oriented.

Recalling the opening point of this reflection, i.e., that the church is nothing without its members, we are also challenged to remember that in talking about gifts, ministry and structures, we are talking about people. None of this is abstract. We Christians are called to exercise our gifts in the mix of our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. We exercise our gifts in what Paragraph 7 calls "one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy."

## Engaging the Bible:

*Consider this reflection in the light of Romans 12: 3–8*

### Discussion questions:

- Which of the metaphors for the church in Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union most claim your attention and why?
- What role does belonging to the church play in your experience of Christ?
- In your experience does the Uniting Church have the balance between intra-church ministry and outward-oriented ministries correct? What would enable members of your faith community to be best released and equipped for ministry in the world?
- When you think about belonging to the church how important is it for you to belong to a church that has a national identity as well as local and regional identities? In what ways does it help you experience Christ?

## Reflection 3:

### *Inter-related councils and mutual submission*

At the beginning of the previous reflection reference was made to not moving on too quickly to the 'nitty gritty' of the sections of the *Basis* dealing with the church's structures. The reason for going slowly was to make sure we engaged the foundations as well as we could. We now come to the paragraph of the *Basis*, Paragraph 15, which focuses on the church's structures. Yet, it was a little unfair to anticipate it with the term 'nitty gritty'. That's a term which suggests a certain amount of mundane detail and potentially dry regulations.

Actually, whilst Paragraph 15 has a different tone to it than the earlier paragraphs, it is much more than dry detail. Some important dimensions of the character and purpose of the church are not relegated to the background of this paragraph; they are right there in its midst. This point is worth expanding a little because there is much about this paragraph that makes it liable to misunderstanding.

One potential misunderstanding lies in the paragraph's length. Making up almost one-fifth of the total word count of the *Basis*, it is tempting to think it must be among the most important. The authors of the *Basis*, however, did not think so. Among them there was a consensus that it is Paragraph 3 which has that status.

Another potential misunderstanding lies in the possible impression that the paragraph involves a cobbling together of bits and pieces of the previous denominations, just enough of each to keep everyone happy. In which case, union could be passed off as more or less clunky denominational merger. But union was always presented as something much more than that.

One of the claims made to reinforce the resistance to the idea of merger was that union was not "an exercise in ecclesiastical carpentry"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, it did not consist of taking a bit of Presbyterianism and connecting it to a segment of Methodism before joining them to an element of Congregationalism. In fact, in his comments on this paragraph, the Uniting Church's first President, Davis McCaughey, pointed out how it embodies deliberate resistance to some the characteristic features of the three antecedent churches. Far from ecclesiastical carpentry, something new was being envisaged. For instance, he drew attention to the deliberate displacement of the Presbyterian idea of 'courts' of the church (with all its judicial allusions) and its replacement with the more ancient and more ecumenical notion of *councils* of the church. That the councils were to be 'inter-related' was a deliberate rejection of any top-down conciliar structure which,

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2 For the original use of this phrase, see Davis McCaughey, "The Formation of the *Basis of Union*," in *Fresh Words and Deeds: The McCaughey Papers*, ed. Peter Matheson and Christiaan Mostert (Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing, 2004), 12.

McCaughey suggested, had been a feature of Methodism<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, however, the commitment to inter-related councils was not an endorsement of a bottom-up conciliar structure. The commitment to inter-related councils is stated in this short sentence from Paragraph 15:

The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation to both the Church and the world.

In fact, the idea of inter-related councils doesn't fit any particular box. You're unlikely to find reference to it in textbooks on governance or management. It's not just a pragmatic structure, it is a way of building relationships into our decision-making processes. This in itself is a reminder that councils are not abstract entities; they are made up of living, breathing human beings. This is an echo of the point made in the second reflection: the church is a community of people. What is true of the church generally is also true of its councils. Government by inter-related councils is not a case of disembodied councils relating to each other; it is communities of people who make up those councils relating to each other. With this in mind, it is worth reflecting on some further words of Paragraph 15:

The Uniting Church recognises that responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them. 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.

And so, as the paragraph goes on to outline, the Uniting Church is organised around congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the Assembly. These are bodies made up of "men and women, bearing the gifts and graces" which God has given them "for the building up of Church."

But we should note that just a little later in the paragraph, a further claim is made about how the councils should relate to each other.

Each council will recognise the limits of its own authority and 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.

'Giving heed' to other councils is not just a matter of observing boundaries established by regulation. It is a relationship. In fact, it is an instance in the domain of the church's councils of what, in the concluding words of the previous quote, the whole church is called to: mutual submission in the service of the Gospel.

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3 See J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 87f.

The language of 'mutual submission in the service of the Gospel' is risky language. Feminists and post-colonial theologians have reminded us – and have to keep reminding us – of the way the use of the Christian language of submission has often had tragic and violent consequences. This language needs to be used carefully. Clearly, it is an echo of Ephesians 5:21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." And we know that it's the verses that follow that text that have played such a role in the misuse of this concept. But understood in the light of the gospel, this language of 'mutual submission in the service of the Gospel' constitutes a calling which God has laid upon us.

When couched in these terms, it is helpful to think of government by inter-related councils as a spiritual discipline. At first glance this might seem slightly jarring. But if councils are made up of people, and if they are called to give heed to each other in the name of the gospel, then the councils are structured contexts where we are called to allow the gospel to shape our speech, attitudes, actions and hopes. Government by inter-related councils is not a theologically-neutral or spiritually benign structural add-on; it is about the very character and purpose of the church.

## **Engaging the Bible:**

*Consider this reflection in the light of Philippians 2:1–11*

### **Discussion questions:**

- Do you find it helpful or unhelpful to think of participating in the councils of the church being a spiritual discipline, and why?
- Have you experienced or been involved in the government of another Christian church? If so, what have you found distinctive about the Uniting Church's structures?

Do you think our current structures are effectively acting for "the building up of the Church"? If not, what might need to change?

How might the spiritual discipline of mutual submission contained within the idea of councils of the church 'giving heed' to other councils, be better reflected in our processes?

## Reflection 4:

### *Waiting upon God's Word*

We continue the focus on Paragraph 15. As pointed out in the previous study, whilst this paragraph points to the specific demands and responsibilities of the various councils, it remains concerned with larger questions of the nature and purpose of the church. Further evidence of this is found in the following sentence:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight.

The *Basis* is clear about how some of the 'matters' are allocated to each of the various councils. You might find it helpful to go through the sections of this paragraph to identify which responsibilities of each council are described. But as new situations arise and new contexts are engaged, the Uniting Church will continue to discern which tasks belong to which councils. But the point to note here is the reference to 'waiting' upon God's Word. Once again, we see how the *Basis*, through its reference to 'waiting,' directs us to something more like a spiritual posture than a clearly defined technique.

It marks out the specifically Christian nature of the task before each council. This is highlighted by D'Arcy Wood, the Uniting Church's sixth President, in his own comments on government by inter-related councils. He draws a contrast between, on the one hand, this 'waiting' upon God's Word and 'obeying' God and, on the other hand, how we commonly define democracy.

The Uniting Church is not a democracy, because a democracy is a form in which the people as a 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.<sup>4</sup>

This observation opens up several possibilities for contemporary reflection.

Firstly, the fact that our decision-making processes can be distinguished from, and is not determined by, the West's dominant political process suggests the possibility for making us open to what we might learn from the decision-making processes of discernment practised in First Nations, Asian and Pasifika cultures. Even the language of 'waiting' certainly resists the modern Western impatience to get quick results. First Nations, Asian and Pasifika cultures have each inherited and developed ways of discernment that are often more patient, more relational, and

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<sup>4</sup> D'Arcy Wood, *Building On A Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986), 52f.

more consultative than the characteristic of the West. By integrating the idea of 'waiting' into our decision-making, the *Basis* has actually opened up – albeit inadvertently – the theological and cultural space for the Uniting Church to learn from its indigenous and CALD members different ways of 'waiting' than those it has inherited from its European roots.

The second aspect of D'Arcy Wood's comment that is worth exploring is related to his reference to 'consulting together.' This carries the risk of conveying a somewhat neutral image of what is involved. Genuine consultation, however, is hard work. It involves listening, interpreting, conceding, entertaining new perspectives and, potentially, changing one's mind. In the cut and thrust of the church's disagreements and diversity it also involves the necessity of politics. And by 'politics' nothing more or less is intended than those processes by which a group of people bound together by some basic shared commitments seek to find ways of living and working together, seeking some common good, but doing so in the midst of diversity and disagreement.

That the church has often messy and complex politics is not a denial of the church. To use the lofty language of 'waiting' upon God's Word or of 'consulting together' is not a strategy for bypassing the church's politics. It is part of the diversity of the community that God has thrown together in the church that our seeking the will of God takes place in the midst of disagreement, mixed levels of trust and distrust, and the existence of differentials of power. Our seeking of God's will does not require us to bemoan or demonise those realities as intrinsically unchristian. Rather, being honest about them, and treating our processes of discernment as a spiritual discipline of mutual submission in the service of the gospel, we are called to attend to our politics in particular ways.

Once again, we are drawn back to the character and purpose of the church. This is reinforced by the way this section of Paragraph 15 invites us to reflect on what we are waiting for: God's Word. The *Basis of Union* is very particular in understanding God's Word to be Jesus Christ. It also is clear that this "living Word" (Para 11) is "to be heard and known from Scripture, appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church" (Para 5). We need to listen to scripture in whatever process of 'waiting' we adopt in our decision making. We need to interpret it and reflect upon it.

We also need to be mindful of the grand story it contains and to ask not how our decisions match this or that part of Scripture, but how our decisions take us more deeply into the grand story to which it bears witness. To echo earlier themes of this and the previous studies, this is not about having the correct technique, but a more a posture of openness to the consoling, surprising, disturbing, challenging and enlivening living Word.

## Engaging the Bible:

*Consider this reflection in the light of Luke 24:25–27*

### Discussion questions:

- What experiences of 'waiting on God's Word' have you known and found helpful?
- What are your responses to the claim that church's discernment processes are something more than simply discerning the will of the church's members?
- What can the Uniting Church do to ensure that it is regularly discerning God's will in the decisions it makes in the councils of the Church?

## Reflection 5:

### *Church and world*

Earlier in these reflections, a distinction was drawn between the intra-church ministries and outward-oriented ministries. It was a helpful distinction to draw in order to anticipate the orientation of these reflections to the church's internal structures and processes of discernment and decision making. The distinction was drawn, however, alongside the conviction that all ministries, whatever their orientation, are grounded in the one ministry of Christ and are enabled by the one Spirit.

Nevertheless, it is time to pull back from drawing that distinction too sharply. To do so, we turn our attention to the last sentence of the first sub-paragraph of Paragraph 15, already quoted in Reflection 3:

The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation to both the Church and the world.

The last three words of that sentence are the very words that collapse the distinction between intra-church and outward-oriented ministries, and expose that distinction as ultimately artificial. Although the councils have a particular role in the structures of the church, they are oriented to both the Church *and* the world. As we've seen several times so far in these reflections, it is impossible to think about the structures of the church without thinking about the church's character and purpose. This orientation of the councils to the world is another expression of the calling of the church to be an 'instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself'.

This orientation of the various councils will take a different form in each of the councils. It may range from issuing statements which speak truth to power about social, economic and ethical issues, through making decisions to invest money ethically, all the way through to establishing support services which can be deployed in times of national emergencies or natural disasters.

This dual orientation of the councils also allows us to reflect on the contrast that is frequently drawn between being an institution and a movement. This language is often invoked in relation to Christianity in general. But it has a particular currency in the Uniting Church where, for many, being a movement is something to embrace whereas being an institution is something to be resisted.

This contrast can sometimes be a reflection of a grudging posture towards councils and organisations which has a long history in our protestant traditions. Protestants have a fine-tuned sensitivity to the ways institutions become inward looking, self-serving, insensitive to the individuals within the *institutions*, and resistant to scrutiny – tendencies

in which being an institution gives way to being *institutional*. Hopefully, we will never let go of that sensitivity. Yet, we should perhaps pause before too easily and energetically trading off movements against institutions, and then using that rhetoric as a tool to critique our councils and other organised structures.

In his book *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, American sociologist, Richard Sennett, explores the social and cultural impact of global capitalism on the realities of workplaces. He begins the book by referring to the quest of 1960s radicals to dismantle the institutions of big government and big corporations which held individuals in their grip. Many institutions were dismantled, but with ambiguous results: "The fragmenting of big institutions has left many people's lives in a fragmented state: the places they work more resembling trains stations than villages.... Taking institutions apart has not produced more community<sup>5</sup>." Sennett goes on to write, "Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions<sup>6</sup>."

This is a reminder that we should not be shy about developing strong structures and practices of discernment and community life in the church. Recalling the metaphor of the church being a 'pilgrim people,' it might be said by analogy that pilgrims can flourish and keep on track only if they are provided with relatively stable and relatively coherent paths. Without those paths, pilgrims may lose sight of their destination. After all, a pilgrimage is not an aimless wandering.

Yet we need to not lose sight of, or too quickly dismiss, the protestant anxiety about institutionalism. The fact that the *Basis* orients the councils of the Church to both the Church and the world is an important tool within the Uniting Church's founding document to keep us alert to this danger.

We have now come full circle in these reflections. At the end of the first reflection the following point was made:

...precisely the reason for not inflating the significance of the church is very close to the reason for taking it very seriously and making careful, wise and responsible decisions about its structures and practices. By God's grace, these – the church's structure and practices – are among gifts which enable the church to witness to Christ.

Alongside the commitment to government via inter-related councils being a spiritual discipline we have seen that that structures and practices of the church can be received as a gift. But it not a gift to attract our uncritical gaze. Paragraph 15 concludes, asking the various agencies of the church at the time of union to:

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5 Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 2.

6 Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 3.

enter a period of self-examination in which members are asked to consider afresh their common commitment to the Church's mission and their demonstration of its unity. The Uniting Church prays that God will enable them to order their lives for these purposes.

Nearly half a century later, the Act2 project is an opportunity to maintain that self-examination, renew that prayer, and to order our common life for the purposes God has for the Church. There is much in the *Basis of Union* to help us in that process and to open us to new possibilities in our common life that could never have been imagined at the time of its writing. It can do this because it keeps us oriented to the *living* Jesus Christ.

## **Engaging the Bible:**

*Consider this reflection in the light of Mark 16: 14–15*

### **Discussion questions:**

- In what ways have you encountered the 'movement' versus 'institution' rhetoric? Does it help to draw a distinction between 'institution' and 'institutionalism'?
- How easily does your community of faith embrace the idea of self-examination?
- How might the whole Uniting Church embrace the idea of self-examination?

# ACT2 feedback

As you have worked through these studies, you may have also been reflecting on the future of the UCA and the work of the Act2 Project. It would be good to receive your feedback.

The best ways to give feedback is to use the [feedback form](#) at the end of the Act2 Considering Afresh Our Life Together report. We hope you will also take time to read this report if you haven't done so already.

Find the report and information about the report on the Assembly website: [Considering Afresh - Uniting Church Australia](#).

