



muylathina takila-ti Le:wun tunk-ungai tuldangk tunk-ungai
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CONTINUING WITNESS TASK GROUP REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The 15th Assembly passed the following Resolution (18.31):

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 “sharpens its understanding of the will and purpose of God” (Basis #11) being cognisant of our diversity within our unity; and (ii) bring relevant proposals to the 16th Assembly after consultation with Presbyteries.*

In response, the ASC as requested established a Task Group comprising of Rev Rachel Kronberger (Chairperson), Rev Dr Geoff Thompson, Rev Dr Glen O'Brien, Rev Salesi Faupula, Matthew Julius, Rev Dev Anandarajan, Emily Evans and Rev Lindsay Cullen (Assembly Staff person). During the life of the Task Group, both Rev Salesi Faupula and Matthew Julius indicated a desire to resign from the group and they were each thanked for their contributions and released.

Responding to the ASC's Terms of Reference, the Task Group began by looking at questions of process and timeline and determined that a more suitable timeline for the overall task would involve bringing to the 16th Assembly a rationale and vision, a small group of nominated documents, and resources suitable for use in discussions and consideration of these documents in Presbyteries. However, in the view of the Task Group, such consideration might more productively take place following the 16th Assembly, with Presbytery comment and feedback being brought together and reported to the 17th Assembly for a final decision regarding endorsement of the nominated documents.

Part of the Task Group's vision for the usefulness of this process of receiving 'continuing witnesses' is the theological and spiritual benefits of a consultation process within (especially) Presbyteries. The Task Group envisages that this process considering continuing witnesses from the wider Christian tradition might become a regular part of the ongoing life of our Church. Thus one of the proposals following this report is that during the Triennium following the 16th Assembly (Reconvened), a further small group of documents could be researched and brought forward for discussion in Presbyteries following the 17th Assembly, thus beginning an ongoing practice of consideration and evaluation of the continuing witnesses brought to the attention of the Church throughout its ongoing life. This change to the initially envisaged timetable was received and approved by the ASC.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

After some consideration, including a discussion of some candidate documents, the Task Group came to the position that a consideration of specifically Christian documents would best reflect both the original rationale and the discussion on the floor of the 15th Assembly. In choosing to focus the task this way, the Task Group does not wish to dismiss the importance of hearing from and learning from other faith and secular traditions and sources, but is simply reflecting their understanding of the specific task given to them from the Assembly via the ASC.

While the Task Group considered the possibility of sources of Continuing Witness other than written documents, it was felt most practical now to limit our research to documents which could be distributed and considered in written form. Of course, this could include written transcripts of speeches originally delivered verbally.

Given that the Basis of Union names some of the historic witnesses received from our traditions there was a sense that it would be helpful to have a particular focus on contemporary witnesses which may have come into being since the time of the writing and editing of the Basis of Union.

As part of its regular process of reporting to the ASC, the Task Group received feedback encouraging the exploration of forms of witness from Asia and the Pacific region. The Task Group had reported on its engagement with theological work from these regions and some of the issues it encountered in doing so. It had been a struggle to identify written documents that reflected the original mandate of the 2018 Assembly. The Task Group acknowledged that engagement with the forms of witness emerging from these regions was a learning experience for us. In our reading, and the conversations with Asian and Pasifika Christians in which some of us participated, we learnt that powerful modes of witness are emerging which are quite different from the kind of confessions or statements that have emerged in other times and places. We also came to a new appreciation of the particularities of these witnesses. People are witnessing to the gospel in the context of, for example, the immediate impacts of climate change, the West's apparent disregard for the people of the Pacific, and the daily challenges and opportunities of being religious minorities in Asia. We came to the view that the Uniting Church ought indeed to fully receive and engage these witnesses. It would, however, require orienting to a wider concept of witness than had been assumed at the 2018 Assembly. We also note that the three documents proposed as 'Continuing Witness' within this report are each in their own way global documents which direct the attention of the UCA to our relationships with our Asian and Pacific neighbours and to the task of reconciliation between Australia's First Nations and later settlers.

RATIONALE AND STATUS

In confessing and teaching the Christian faith, the Uniting Church does not start from scratch. In the first instance, we have the presence of Jesus Christ, the gospel about him passed on over the centuries, and heard and encountered in the witness of the Bible. The Basis of Union acknowledges that along with the whole church it "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" (Basis #4). The church is called to listen for this news in its reading of Scripture: "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" (Basis #5). The Basis also commits the Uniting Church 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 #9 and #10).

Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union cites confessional documents from each of the three pre-Union churches and this present endeavour is likewise located in all three traditions. Churches in the Reformed tradition have often favoured formal confessions of faith, while Methodists have stressed the value of sermons, hymns, and the Christian experience of grace in the process of theological formation. Such sources are not in competition but complement and reinforce each other. In addition to the 'witnesses' of scripture, creed, confession, and the experience of believers

through the centuries, the Basis also points the Uniting Church to the “continuing witness” of fellow Christians of the present. This refers to those, who through informed engagement with scripture, contemporary thought and society can “sharpen [the Church’s] understanding of the will and purpose of God;” “help it understand its own nature and mission” (Basis #11) and make visible God’s activity in the world through their words and deeds. In the Basis, ‘witness’ typically sits within the triplet of worship, witness, and service. As such, witness weaves together the worship of the gathered community, and its service to the world.

Such continuing witness can take the written forms of ‘confessions,’ ‘declarations’ or ‘witnesses’ of faith produced by communities of faith at different times and places (often amid crisis or controversy). But as with historical confessions, they draw attention to some aspect of the Gospel in a way that transcends their original contexts. Accordingly, the 15th Assembly decided it may be an appropriate time to consider how we might deliberately and formally listen and learn from this form of contemporary witness developed in contexts other than our own.

The practice of formally recognising the confessions and statements of faith from other churches and movements as points of reference is quite common in both the Reformed and Methodist traditions. For example, the Presbyterian Church of the USA has a Book of Confessions and the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has a designated collection of ‘Statements of Faith’ that serve to guide their theological work. Both the World Methodist Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches have formally adopted The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) originally a document between Catholic and Lutheran bodies.

To recognise such a collection of documents would not constitute a blanket endorsement of all their content. Such a collection would not replace the Basis of Union or modify the status or function it has in the UCA. We would adopt towards the collection the same posture that the Basis (#10) enjoins us to adopt towards the Reformation Confessions and the Standard Sermons of John Wesley: we would commit ourselves to listen to them, study them, and “continue to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures” that we find in them.

VISION AND USE OF THESE DOCUMENTS

In learning about the process by which other churches in the Reformed and Evangelical traditions formally recognise confessions or statements of faith from the wider church, the Task Group is convinced this offers the church an opportunity for deep church-wide theological reflection. In doing so, it offers the Uniting Church the opportunity to be intentional about listening to contemporary witness and opening itself to fresh words and deeds as envisioned in the Basis of Union.

The Task Group envisions a process which provides an opportunity for members of the Church to move beyond agreeing or disagreeing with a document. Indeed, it is essential to stress that this proposal is not asking the Uniting Church to endorse the proposed documents as definitive statements of our own theology. Rather it hopes that people will enter a process of wrestling with a document’s claims and witness to the gospel. We could ask questions such as ‘do we recognise the Gospel of Jesus Christ in these words?’; ‘what, for us, is missing from these words?’ and ‘Do we recognise the call of God to the Uniting Church in this confession?’. In such questions the people of God may be guided to engage with matters of theological substance.

This mode of theological wrestling is not provoked by internal theological controversies or the need to make doctrinal decisions. Instead, it aims to deepen the Uniting Church’s engagement with the gospel by deliberately listening to the words of other Christians and asking them what they have heard and experienced of the gospel that we might not have heard.

These documents can resource the teaching, worshipping and liturgical life of the Church both in the process of discerning to adopt the documents and once they have been adopted.

As per the vision offered to the 15th Assembly, this engagement with voices from beyond our context seeks to enrich, illuminate, challenge, and even disturb the theological categories and groupings that have emerged in the Uniting Church. The Task Group hopes that this participation will variously provoke, encourage, challenge and comfort us as a church. Over time, frequent use of these documents in theological colleges, church discussions, the development of liturgies, and the development of church polity could generate a level of common theological discourse across the church and help shape the collective theological conversation of the UCA.

PROPOSED 'CONTINUING WITNESSES'

A) The Belhar Confession

The Belhar Confession was written in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1982 and formally adopted in 1986. During the Apartheid era, its call to unity spoke to the segregations in South Africa. After 1994 it provided the demanding terms by which the DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa would form a Uniting Reformed Church. Strikingly – and relevant to our purposes – although speaking into that situation, the confession never describes the political situation of South Africa directly. Indeed, not even the word apartheid itself is used. Instead, the confession steps fully into the reconciling nature of the gospel and uses its light to expose and critique a racially divided church. The document begins with an exposition of the gospel which may be one reason the document has been adopted in other Christian contexts not directly affected by the particularities of South African apartheid.

The language with which the Belhar Confession articulates the Gospel of Jesus Christ is fresh and accessible for our twenty-first Century Uniting Church. Its account of reconciliation at the heart of the gospel is familiar from the Basis of Union and its central claim of the equality of all human beings before God resonates with core UCA theological values. However, this Confession also takes us into new and demanding territory, asking the reader to explicitly reject values which are contrary to such reconciliation and equality. Our Church's history lies in a culturally dominant group within Australian society, and it is a beneficiary of its participation in cultural dominance. This Confession offers us an opportunity to explore our aspirations to be a reconciled and diverse community of Christ.

B) Laudato si'

Issued in 2015, *Laudato si'* is Pope Francis's second Encyclical. This places it in the category of the most authoritative documents a Pope can produce. The title, *Laudato si'* (Praise be to you) is taken from the *Canticle of the Creatures* written by St. Francis of Assisi, and on which the English hymn, *All Creatures of our God and King* is based. The Encyclical has received various levels of endorsement and/or welcome from the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Movement, the Christian Reformed Church of North America, and various secular leaders and institutions, including the Ecological Society of America. In the words of its subtitle, *Laudato si'* addresses the challenge to "care for our common home" from theological, economic, political and technological perspectives. It accepts the scientific evidence for human-generated climate change and deems our current circumstance to be one of crisis. It draws attention to the distortions of Christian faith and theology that have contributed to the current situation. There is a consistent emphasis on the disproportionate effects of climate change on the world's poor, and in relation to cultural ecology there is a special summons to dialogue with indigenous peoples (#146). It is broad ranging in its sources, pointed in its critique of consumerism, and expansive in the vision it offers "to help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us" (#163). It makes political, theological and educational proposals to implement such a vision. A key theological claim undergirding the document is stated in Chapter 2: "The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumine all things" (# 83). The penultimate section of the final chapter makes passing references to Mary and Joseph. This, together with respective discussions of the sanctity of life (#120) and gender (#155) will receive resistance in the UCA. But to receive the document for our proposed purposes is no reason to silence that resistance or to play down our differences

from the Roman Catholic tradition on these matters whilst learning from its wisdom on other matters.

Its method of drawing on a wide range of scientific, theological, and economic arguments is consistent with the appeal to “literary, historical and scientific enquiry” in Paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union. It reflects another church doing what the UCA is summoned to do in that same paragraph, i.e., to “stand in relation to contemporary societies” as part of understanding the church’s “own nature and mission”. In addressing, describing and highlighting the actual conditions of the world and their claim upon the church, this encyclical adopts a posture that is repentant, prophetic and hopeful.

C) Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The Joint Declaration is a 1999 document produced by a 30 year-long dialogue between the Catholic Church and World Lutheran Federation which seeks to resolve a 500-year-old doctrinal conflict and ensuing fractures in the Body of Christ.

Not all Catholics and Lutherans accept the JDDJ and this is recognised by the authoring bodies and subsequent co-signers. It may be felt by some in the Uniting Church that the debate over justification with its forensic and juridical language is an outmoded form of discourse or that it is an historic debate that need not be revisited. Yet nothing can be more foundational to our understanding of the Gospel than the way in which God and the world are reconciled. Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union calls on the Church to study the Reformation Witnesses ‘so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith [and] of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier.’ The reconciling work of God in the person of Christ the justifier is the foundation for all other acts of reconciliation and the foundation of our Christian unity and identity.

In the Uniting Church we have learned to live with diverse and at times divergent views on a variety of theological and social issues. Part of the gift of being a uniting church is that we are familiar with difference and with the richness that brings to the cohort of our fellow travellers. Indeed, we have become so familiar with these divergent positions, and the friendships and fellowship which span across our divides, that we sometimes forget to hear one another’s arguments with truly open minds and hearts. The Joint Declaration is a challenge to retain our openness to the transformation that comes when we do.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DOCUMENTS

The Task Group proposes that this engagement be focussed on Presbyteries and made available in formats that can easily be extended to congregations and other groups in the Church. Thus the proposed process for engagement with the documents is that:

- The presbytery resource for each Confession would include the document itself; a commentary from the Task Group (identifying the status of the document and its original context, plus some of our thoughts about why it might spark excitement, stretch our theology and enable us to hear a voice of continuing witness); and a video resource including diverse perspectives on the material.
- Each Presbytery would be asked to commit one hour to each document over two years. This would include a guided small group discussion, with a feedback form for Presbyteries, and Task Group members could be available to attend via videoconferencing.
- Each Presbytery would provide feedback to the Task Group.
- In the final year the Task Group would provide collated feedback and reflections in its report to the 17th Assembly, noting especially some of the reasons why the Church has found each document to be lifegiving.

- Accompanying that report to the 17th Assembly would come proposals to officially receive the documents as 'Continuing Witnesses'.

AN ONGOING PROCESS

As mentioned above, the Task Group envisages that this process of consideration of continuing witnesses from the wider Christian tradition might become a regular part of the ongoing life of our Church. As a result, one of our proposals concerns the continuation of this work of discernment of 'Continuing Witnesses' in parallel with the Church's consideration of the three documents listed above.

As also already mentioned above, the Task Group's attention was drawn to the Basis of Union's own reference to our relationships with churches in Asia and the Pacific. We began to engage documents and leaders of some of those churches. And we began to discover that 'witness' was a richer concept than that we had begun with, and which was well established in our historical traditions. Similarly, our knowledge of the witness of First Nations people reminded us that witness was a broader category than the category of written confessions to which the Assembly decision was oriented. We recognised the Revised Preamble to the UCA Constitution was its own quite particular form of witness, without that category usually being attributed to it. We learnt that in the immediacy of poverty, climate change, religious pluralism and dispossession, the witness of prophets and martyrs was more often found in potent speech and action than in carefully crafted confessions. It was also pointed out to us that churches living as minority communities and without well-established financial and institutional resources may not prioritise written confessions of faith.

We came to the view that to truly and fully engage these different forms of witness required a slightly different task than the one initially set for this Task Group. Thus we propose that the 16th Assembly mandates the continuation of this work in ways which will engage such forms of witness from these churches allowing that witness to be communicated and received with their own dignity as part of the Uniting Church listening to continuing witnesses.

PROPOSALS AND RATIONALE

That the Assembly resolve:

1. To approve the following documents for consideration by the Uniting Church between the 16th and 17th Assemblies, for reception as continuing witnesses:
 - (a) The Confession of Belhar,
 - (b) Laudato si', and
 - (c) The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification;
2. That the process of consideration should involve an invitation for all Presbyteries within the Church, and such other Councils of the Church as desire to participate, to commit to discussing each document for a period of at least one hour, using resource materials provided by the Continuing Witness Task Group, and reporting the results of this discussion to the Task Group;
3. To request the Assembly Standing Committee to oversee the Task Group in the work of providing ongoing support and resourcing of these conversations, and gathering responses from Presbyteries; and bring a report to the 17th Assembly along with proposals for the official adoption of documents as 'Continuing Witnesses';
4. That the Assembly Standing Committee request the Task Group continue its work of identifying further continuing witnesses, with a special focus on the variety of forms of witness from Asia and the Pacific and report to the 17th Assembly.

Rationale:

The 'Continuing Witness' Report and proposals are brought to this Assembly in response to the resolution (18.31) of the 15th Assembly. This resolution called upon the 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." The resolution also directed the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) to establish a Task Group to do the work required to bring relevant proposals to the 16th Assembly.

The ASC now brings the report of the Task Group to this Assembly along with the proposals above. The Task Group commends to the 16th Assembly the three documents for engagement and reflection and looks forward to bringing the Church's feedback to the 17th Assembly.

The Task Group believes that each of the selected documents is worthy of consideration as a 'Continuing Witness'. It also believes that regardless of the outcome, the process of wrestling with a document's claims and witness to the gospel will be a life-giving and energising experience for Presbyteries and members of the Church. The focus of such engagement is not to endorse the selected documents as definitive statements of our own theology. Rather, by becoming permanent points of reference for the Uniting Church, they provide recognised resources from which we can learn and thereby deepen the Uniting Church's engagement with the gospel. By deliberately listening to the words of other Christians, and asking them what they have heard and experienced of the gospel that we might not have heard, our own response to the gospel can be strengthened.

As the Report details, the documents chosen by the Task Group for this engagement and potential adoption as 'Continuing Witnesses' include both rigorous engagement with biblical material and the tradition of the church universal, as well as prophetic calls to action addressed to the church or even to "every person living on this planet" (Laudato si', paragraph 3). It is the belief of the Task Group that engagement with these voices from beyond our context will enrich, illuminate, challenge, and even disturb the theological categories and groupings that have emerged in the Uniting Church and may provoke, encourage, challenge and comfort us as a church.

The proposals above will enable this engagement to occur in a structured way, as well as prepare the Church for the possibility of further engagement with even more diverse voices in the future.