

Bishops all the way down: dispersed *episkopē* in the Uniting Church

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A spectre is haunting the Uniting Church in Australia — the spectre of Bishops.

This reflection arises out of the short responses from the recent conference, ‘The Basis at 50,’ to the prompt, “How does the Basis enable and/or limit the UCA’s capacity to develop forms of church, ministry and mission which engage the contemporary context?” It is the contention here that sitting beneath each of these responses is an implicit engagement with the issue of proper oversight within the life of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). Such engagements with the question of oversight within the UCA have often been associated with the question of whether the UCA ought to have Bishops. This piece takes the view: no, the UCA should not have Bishops; and this is because the ministry of oversight, to which the office of Bishop corresponds, is a dispersed ministry throughout the differentiated life of the UCA.

In early discussions of the Joint Commission on Church Union (JCCU) — the commission responsible for writing the *Basis of Union* — it was proposed that a Uniting Church adopt the office of Bishop.¹ This proposal was later dropped, and so the UCA came into existence without the office of Bishop to exercise the ministry of ‘oversight’ (Greek: *episkopē*) within the life of the Church. For some this implies that the UCA does not have sufficient oversight within its life. The implication of this deficiency is that the Church fails to be as responsive as it ought to shifts in the Church’s context, and so fails to enable new life to be birthed in “defunct” congregations and ministry contexts.² Exceptions to this norm, so one account goes, benefit from Presbytery ministers who take a proactive leadership role; this is perhaps suggestive of the need for a clearer episcopal office within the Presbytery.

And yet, while it is common in the UCA to hear people talk of Presbyteries as a kind of communal bishop, this doesn’t fully capture the account of ‘oversight’ offered in the

¹ Incidentally these Bishops would have been consecrated by Bishops from the Church of South India. [cite]

² Cameron piece.

Basis itself. In the *Basis* oversight is named as a responsibility of the Elders' or Leaders' meeting (now Church Council), and of the Synod, as well as a responsibility of Presbyteries (*Basis*, §15, (b), (c) & (d)). This dispersed oversight, entrusted to different bodies in the Church, flows in turn from the fact that, "the Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils." (*Basis*, §15) For this reason each council is responsible to, "wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight." (*ibid.*) This accords with the broader claim of the *Basis* that, "all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ" (*Basis*, §13); that is, all ministries are a sharing in the one ministry of Jesus Christ. So too, therefore, all oversight is a sharing in, and waiting upon the singular oversight of Jesus Christ which is dispersed throughout all parts of Christ's body.

The dispersed nature of Christ's ministry in the Church is picked up in the UCA's response to the World Council of Churches' document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*.³ In particular, the notion of dispersed *episkopē* — inchoate in the *Basis* itself — is pushed further:

"In terms of *BEM*, ordained ministers in the UCA can be understood as both bishop and presbyter within a local eucharistic community. We are prompted again by *BEM* to continue, with even greater care, the work of discovering afresh the ministry of an ordained diaconate. In the *BEM* description of a "deacon," however, we find nothing more than that which might be expected of any baptized lay member of our church."⁴

Part of why it is insufficient to simply think of the Presbytery as the locus of the ministry (and even office) of Bishop is because it presumes that the primary object of this oversight are the various ordained ministers and individual congregations within the bounds of the Presbytery. If we take seriously the last sentence in the quote above, that lay members within the UCA befit the understanding of the diaconate from across the ecumenical landscape, then we are right to ask who is tasked with overseeing the

³ *BEM* explored the ecumenical landscape of theologies of sacraments and ministry, in particular the three-fold order of ministry: Bishop, Deacon, and Presbyter. ['Presbyter' is the ecumenical term for what different traditions name: 'elder,' 'priest,' 'minister,' or 'pastor.']

⁴ UCA, *Churches Respond to BEM. Official Responses to the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry text, Vol. IV*, Max Thurian (ed.), 1987, p. 164. (Note: this document preceded the renewal of the diaconate in the UCA.)

community of ministers which a congregation ought to be? It is for this reason that the UCA's response to BEM suggests the local ordained minister ("Presbyter") be thought of as a kind of Bishop — and notably *not* an officer of the Presbytery.⁵ With clear examples of congregations seeking to be communities of radical discipleship this is not a mere abstract question,⁶ but is reflective of who the UCA seeks to be.

In seeking to be Christ's Church, living and enduring through the changes of history, the UCA confesses that it does so only as a community which responds to the Lord who, "comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of [Christ's] completed work." (*Basis*, §4) The Church's perseverance is both freedom and responsibility. Freedom to constantly review and transform the Church's life, because the Church's endurance in history is not predicated on particular institutional forms, but in trusting response to Christ's continual guidance. And, at the same time, responsibility to ensure that this constant review of the Church's life is such a trusting response which, "may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity..." (*Basis*, §17) This freedom and responsibility can be seen clearly in the growth and transformation of the various agencies and institutions within the broad life of the UCA.⁷ In these agency and institutional contexts too there is a deep need for wise and mature oversight: oversight which rightly ill-fits the norms of a too "Church-minded" approach to *episkopē*.

All this is to say that the question of Bishops, and more broadly the question of the ministry of oversight within the UCA, cannot be answered by an attempt at retrofitting an ecclesial office into the life of the Church. Rather, we must simply confess again what the *Basis* itself confesses, "that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ." (*Basis*, §3) And so it is that all must share in the one life and one ministry of this one Lord: who alone has true oversight of the Church.

In Philippians — the only Epistle addressed to those named as 'overseers' (Greek: *episkopois*)⁸ — we get some insight into what it means to share in the one ministry of

⁵ Though it should be noted that the UCA response does also raise the question of whether a "bishop-in-presbytery" might be, "consonant with our present ordering." (*ibid.*, 163)

⁶ Rhadika's paper.

⁷ Linda Hanson piece.

⁸ Philippians 1:1

Jesus. The famous “Christ hymn” in Philippians 2:5-11 is offered as an account of the reality by which believers should live. This short passage is introduced by a verse which lacks a verb, it literally reads:

This [same]	mind	in you	and	in Christ Jesus
Τοῦτου	φρονεῖτε	ἐν ὑμῖν	ὁ και	ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ

The verb implied here is often supplied as, “to be” or “to have.” The sense, then, is that the Christian community shares in the work of Christ by adopting the same mind as Christ had: “to be in this same mind” or “to have this same mind” that Christ had.⁹ However, there is a baptismal undertone to this whole section which a simple call to imitation obscures. For Paul, to be “in Christ,” reflects the core reality of our participation in the salvific work Christ accomplishes — which we mark in baptism. Insofar as we can have the same mind as Christ, for Paul, this can only be because we are “in Christ,” that is: because we participate in the ongoing salvific work of Christ, and so Christ’s ongoing ministry. To adapt this point to our concern for episcopal ministry: we are called to exercise oversight in the Church *not*, first and foremost, as an imitation of Jesus’ model of oversight, but because we share in the new reality of Christ’s salvation. It is the new reality offered to us by Christ which in turn gives rise to all manner of ministries, including the *episkopē* dispersed within the Church.

With all this in mind, the work of oversight finds its centre in nothing other than the holding forth of the Gospel itself. The task of oversight begins, and finds its end, in seeking more and more to align the diverse ministry of the Church with the vision of a just and reconciled world which Christ proclaims and enacts. So it is that we must at times challenge our siblings in faith for failing in their responsibilities: beckoning them back to the good way of love at the core of our tradition; and so it is that we must at times stoke the embers of creativity and adaption, as a sharing in the work of new creation itself. The work of oversight is the work of recalling us to the joy and justice of God in which we all participate. This is a weighty responsibility, and one which we receive as a gift; and with this gift another:

“ ... [the Church] has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.”
(*Basis*, §3)

⁹ See, Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, 1976, p.91-93.