

CONTINUING WITNESS TASK GROUP REPORT TO THE 17TH ASSEMBLY

Introduction

The 16th Assembly (Reconvened) passed the following Resolution (22.05):

- 22.05.01. *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.*
- 22.05.02. *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.*
- 22.05.03. *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'.*
- 22.05.04. *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.*

The Continuing Witness Task Group (the Task Group) was appointed following the decision of the 15th Assembly (Minute 18.31) to explore the possibility of adopting various statements or confessions of faith from other churches in different contexts as part of the Uniting Church's own acknowledgement of "continuing witness[es]" (Basis of Union, #11).

This was an opportunity to act on the commitments in #11 of the Basis of Union, for the Uniting Church to "sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God." Tasked with bringing recommendations about any such statements or documents to the 16th Assembly, the Task Group established relevant criteria, and identified the following three documents for the Assembly's consideration.

1. The Belhar Confession
2. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification
3. Laudato si'

Background

In the course of its work leading up to the 16th Assembly (Reconvened) and noting how other churches around the world had engaged and received these and other documents, the Task Group was especially struck by the practice of discernment that accompanied the adoption of Belhar by the Presbyterian Church (USA). Their decision to adopt it as one of that church's own confessional statements followed several years of church-wide engagement with the document through a range of local and regional discussions.

Following this example and convinced of the ecclesial and theological significance of adopting these documents, the Task Group proposed that a similar process of intentional and widespread engagement should precede any decision of the Assembly to formally adopt any or all of them. Therefore, as well as identifying and presenting these three documents to the 16th Assembly, the Task Group proposed that a final decision on the documents should wait

until the 17th Assembly.

Equipped with resources and a process designed by the Task Group, presbyteries were invited to provide feedback through the Assembly office that would inform the Task Group in the preparation of its final recommendations to the 17th Assembly.

These proposals were adopted by the Assembly (22.05.03) (Attachment A).

Consultation Process since 16th Assembly (Reconvened)

Following the meeting of the reconvened Assembly, a Continuing Witness page was added to the Assembly website. It contains a video introduction to the work, the decisions of the Assembly, access to the three documents, liturgical resources prepared for use by presbyteries (based on each of the documents) and the electronic feedback form.

The 16th Assembly (Reconvened) passed a further proposal, commissioning the Task Group to explore other forms of witness, especially from Asia and the Pacific which might at some future stage be adopted as forms of “Continuing Witness.”(Minute 22.05.04)

There was very limited engagement with the process planned and described in Minute 22.05.03. We believe there are several reasons for this, including the priority given to Act2 in the time and energy available at Presbytery level for Assembly matters; and the transitions in the ARU since 2022 and thus its decreased capacity to promote and monitor the process.

Nevertheless, this matter has been discussed and its direction affirmed at two consecutive Assembly meetings, passed by consensus on each occasion, and the Task Group has received almost entirely positive feedback during the course of its work.

Rationale and Status for Continuing Witnesses

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 on 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 particular times and in particular places (often in the midst of 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 or 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. These documents are not position statements which the church would treat as policy directly determining UCA practice. 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. If #10 of the Basis is an historically oriented exhortation, these documents would be those from which we “begin to learn” in the present. Documents considered as ‘Continuing Witnesses’ do not detail positions to be adopted by the UCA. Rather they are identified and trusted as privileged, but not definitive or exhaustive, sources of wisdom upon which the UCA would call from time to time and when relevant to issues are at hand.

Vision for the Use of these Documents

To use these documents as examples of continuing witness and to be willing to “learn from” them is a reminder that not all our theological discernment is provoked by internal theological controversies or the need to make doctrinal decisions. Instead, the adoption and use of such documents 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.

Used in all manner of ways, these documents can resource the teaching, worshipping and liturgical life of the Church. Of course, not every member of the Uniting Church will engage them, let alone read them. It was never the expectation of the Task Group that they would. Each of three is quite technical in its own way, and one of them is unusually long. This should not disqualify them. None of the Basis of Union, the Confessional documents listed in Basis #10, or the various post-union authoritative and identity-giving statements and documents are read or engaged by every member of the Church. But those various documents nevertheless perform the roles that they do in the church’s life because at certain times, particular people in bearing concrete responsibilities in specific times and places do engage them.

As per the vision offered to the 15th Assembly, this intentional 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 introducing the category of Continuing Witness and the adoption of particular documents within that category 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 divided church.

With the Confession of Belhar we see the deep pain – the cry of the heart at the origin of this work. Reading the letter that accompanies it makes this pain very clear. In considering this confession we need to honour its story and hold its history respectfully. And while there are most certainly prophetic summonses within it which call us to walk together in our time and place, it does come from a different time and a different place. The distance between its world and ours is close enough to challenge and delight us, and far enough to illuminate those parts of the life of our church in need of reconciliation. This document has been adopted in other Christian contexts not directly affected by the particularities of South African apartheid, perhaps because it so clearly begins with an exposition of the gospel.

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.

The Uniting 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'

Laudato si' is Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical on "care for our common home." It is a wide-ranging and challenging document which offers a theological understanding of the ecological crisis the world faces and provides a theological framework for our responses to this crisis.

An encyclical is one of the most authoritative documents a Pope can produce. Usually, they are directed to Catholic clergy and laity as statements of the church's teaching. This encyclical, however, broke new ground in that Pope Francis addressed this encyclical to "every person living on this planet" (#3). Its call has been heard: it has been praised by people of other denominations, other faiths and atheists.

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. Taking his cue from St Francis, Pope Francis encourages us to look to creation as our sister, through and with whom we offer our praise to God. Pope Francis reverses the human tendency to place ourselves at the centre of creation with this key claim: "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 illumines all things” (# 83)

The document reflects conversations with biblical, economic, political and technological perspectives. It accepts the scientific evidence for human-generated climate change. It notes the disproportionate effects of climate change on the world’s poor, and in seeking deeper knowledge of creation there is a special summons to dialogue with Indigenous peoples (#146). It is very pointed in its critique of consumerism and its “throw away culture” (#22). It is expansive in the vision it offers “to help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (#163). The encyclical adopts a posture that is repentant, prophetic and hopeful.

The Encyclical has received various levels of endorsement 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. None of those organisations would agree with all the theological claims in the document. Neither is the Uniting Church being asked to do so. Rather, we are being asked to make it a recognised source of wisdom from which we would learn and by which we would be provoked to act.

In many ways, *Laudato si’* is fine example of what Paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union summons the Uniting Church to do: to join with the “world-wide fellowship of Churches” to “stand in relation to contemporary societies in ways which help it understand its own nature and mission.”

For the Uniting Church to adopt this document would also be a remarkable development. Our 16th century Reformation forebears were quick to denounce the Pope and the papacy. For us to commit to learning from the wisdom of Pope Francis would be a form of healing itself.

C Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) is a significant ecumenical achievement and the culmination of a thirty-year dialogue between the Catholic Church’s Pontifical Council (now Dicastery) for Promoting Christian and the Lutheran World Federation. It was later co-signed by the World Methodist Council (in 2006) and The World Communion of Reformed Churches (in 2017). The doctrine of justification (how and on what basis we are reconciled to God) was at the heart of the dispute that led to the sixteenth-century division of the Western Church into Catholic and Protestant branches. To have arrived at such a broad consensus on the doctrine is therefore a matter of very great significance for the healing of the Church’s divisions. Ecumenical dialogues typically look to the Joint Declaration as a model of what can be achieved and as the high watermark of formal ecumenical agreements between churches.

Not all Catholics and Lutherans accept the Joint Declaration, and this is recognised by the authoring bodies and subsequent co-signers. The Declaration itself conceded that amid consensus there are also ongoing areas of difference and disagreement. It may be felt by some in the Uniting Church that the debate over justification with its detailed and legal 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 reconciling work of God in the person of Christ the justifier, the foundation for all other acts of reconciliation and of our Christian unity and identity.

Paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union reminds us of the need for ‘the congregation of Christ’s people ... again and again [to] be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith [and] of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier.’ The Joint Declaration is a sign of our common faith and a reminder of what can be achieved when our hearts are open to

one another in a spirit of unity and understanding. Paul urged the Roman Christians of the first century, 'Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.' (Rom 5:1) Such grace, peace, and hope are the glorious privilege, not of any one denomination or faith community but of all God's people.

The Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission (MERCIC) launched its new five year-round in Rome in October 2022 and gave some consideration to the ways in which the insights of the Joint Declaration could be shared more widely with congregations. Pope Francis met with members of the Commission and reminded them that the dialogue was not about Methodists returning to the Catholic fold. Invoking the story of the Prodigal Son, Pope Francis insisted that Methodists and Catholics alike had strayed from the Father's house, and all stood in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. In recognising the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification as a document of Continuing Witness, the Uniting Church in Australia would be committing to a deepening of its own understanding of God's reconciling love as a gift to the world.

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.

Next Steps of Continuing Witness Work

The Task Group proposes that the three documents be put to the 17th Assembly for endorsement as forms of Continuing Witness assuming the same rationale which was presented in the report to the 16th Assembly (Reconvened). The Rationale (above) has been expanded in this report to include material that addresses two concerns (the technical nature of the documents, and the use and status of the documents) that were identified in the limited feedback the Task Group received.

In view of the limitations mentioned above, the Task Group was not able to attend to Assembly Minute 22.05.04 (seeking Continuing Witnesses from Asia and the Pacific). We believe that this requires further attention and that the proposals before the 17th Assembly will establish a clearer vision with which to engage with such documents.

Further, if the 17th Assembly adopts these initial three documents, any future acknowledgement of Continuing Witnesses should be informed by what the Uniting Church learns from the experience of using and learning from these documents. To that end the Task Group proposes that the Assembly Standing Committee appoint a new Continuing Witness Task Group to address these matters.

An Ongoing Process

The Task Group was not able to attend to the work referred to in 22.05.04. In any decision to proceed with this matter, the Task Group reminds the Assembly of these remarks in our report to the 16th Assembly (reconvened).

[In the course of its discernment] 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 that 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 then 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. This led to reasoning behind Minute 22.05.04. This work should continue but requires a different approach than the one that has led us to this Assembly.

Proposals:

That the Assembly resolve:

1. to approve the Confession of Belhar as a Continuing Witness
2. to approve *Laudato si'* as a Continuing Witness
3. to approve the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification as a Continuing Witness
4. to ask the Assembly Standing Committee appoint a Task Group to explore the possibilities of adopting other Continuing Witness documents/and or other forms of witness, and in doing so in ways that learn from the church's experience of adopting and using these three documents.