THE BASIS OF UNION

A Series of Lectures
given to the Uniting Church
Presbytery of Port Phillip West
in 2011
by
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Lecture 1\(^1\)

Outline
- What is the Basis of Union?
- The “success” of the Basis.
- Can the Basis be changed?
- Paragraphs 1 and 2.

What is the Basis of Union?

It is NOT

(a) a full confession of faith
(b) a Constitution
(c) a strait-jacket.

Why?

(a) the Basis itself calls for “fresh words and deeds” (paragraph 11), and
(b) theological language has changed since 1971!

It IS

(a) a theological foundation for a reunited church:

• The Constitution must be consistent with the Basis.
• Further doctrinal statements will be made from time to time (there have been plenty!).
• It is an orthodox Trinitarian statement, i.e. it is not sectarian and does not set the UCA over against other churches.
• It is a pointer to “where faith can be found” (McCaughey), therefore it is Christ-centred, Scripture-based and recalls the Reformed and evangelical confessions.

It IS

\(^1\) Lecture 1 was given at North Essendon on the 19\(^{th}\) of February.
(b) a foundation for mission, ministry and government:

- The Church as part of the mission of God breathes throughout the document (and we shall look at paragraphs 1 and 2 today).
- Paragraphs 14 and 15 give the basis for ministry and government of the church.

It IS

(c) a launching-pad into the future.

- It is forward-looking in mission
- It has flexibility, e.g. paragraph 17
- It envisages union with other denominations (paragraphs 1, 2, 18)

The “success” of the Basis

- The UCA in the 1970s had confidence, enthusiasm and a spirit of co-operation.
- It is still quoted— and frequently— 40 years after its publication.
- It has “worn well“ as a guide to the life and mission of the UCA, therefore we should give thanks to God for the work of the writers.

Can the Basis be changed?

- No, but modifications to government and ministry (as well as mission policy, obviously) can be made: the Basis itself says this, e.g. the Synods of Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania are now one presbytery (each).²

² See my commentary of 1986. It’s not like a rocket-launch when the pad becomes important!
• At ordinations, the question is asked, “Do you adhere to the Basis of Union?” so this is a life-long commitment.
• If the UCA were to unite with another church, THEN a new Basis would be needed.

PARAGRAPh ONE

1. THE WAY INTO UNION³

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

³ All quotations from the Basis of Union are from the 1992 edition.
All paragraphs EXCEPT this one begin “The Uniting Church” (does or says), but this one begins with the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches “hereby enter into union”, i.e. this is the agreement or covenant between three churches to come together.

It also says WHY the union is to happen: it is

(a) to give glory to God:
(b) to advance the mission of the Church “that the world may believe”
(c) to follow the will of the Lord of the Church for unity (John 17).

The little phrase “in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic” can easily be missed.

it is important, as the UCA sees itself as part of a wider movement for the reunion of Christians. It is not a sect, and it does not enter into union to seek its own glory or its own power. All churches live only by the grace of God. As part of the Reformed family, the UCA recognises the constant need of repentance and reform.

PARAGRAPH TWO:

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

This paragraph is about CONTEXT, i.e. ecumenical, regional, confessional, and mission contexts.

ECUMENICAL: World Council of Churches, Australian Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches in Australia), Christian Conference of Asia and kindred bodies.

Will there one day be an ecumenical council like the first five centuries? In the meantime we have fellowship with OTHER united churches around the world.

REGIONAL AND MISSION: Our particular context is Asia and the Pacific. Our partnerships with churches in these regions are strong. This doesn’t mean we ignore, e.g., Africa and Latin America, but our special emphasis is Asia and the Pacific.

Our unity in Christ, however, knows NO boundaries. (In discussion, presbytery members commented that, in an age

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4 All churches exist in a time and place!
of instant communication, geographical distance is less and less important.)

CONFESSIONAL: All churches have a history, and ours is in the Reformed and Evangelical streams of the universal Church. We continue these links (although they are not mentioned by name in paragraph 2) with the World Methodist Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (which includes both Presbyterian and Congregational churches).

Interestingly, the latter has itself united in the past year with another Reformed body to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Is there a gap in all this? YES, as there is no mention of indigenous people in Australia. There is a reference to “racial boundaries” but that is all.

This deficiency has of course been rectified in the 2010 Preamble to the Constitution of the UCA. (It is hard to alter the Constitution, which is appropriate, but it was achieved.)

Back in the 1980s the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress was formed, which is an illustration of the fact that the Basis of Union is not the last word on the shape of the Church and its mission.

**Lecture 2**

First, a brief recapitulation on some of the points in Session One.

- The Basis of Union is a foundational document, theological and missional. It also gives the basis for ministry and government in a reunited church.

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5 Delivered 28th April at Western Heights Uniting Church
• But it is not a constitution, and nor is it the last word in theological reflection: the Basis itself calls for continued reflection on the Word.
• The Basis cannot be changed, but forms of ministry and government can be modified (and have been).

PARAGRAPH 3

3. BUILT UPON THE ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST
The Uniting Church acknowledges that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin.

Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love. Jesus himself, in his life and death, made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain. In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. 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. The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.

This vital paragraph lays a theological foundation for the following 15 paragraphs.

The church is not a human creation but is established and sustained by Christ himself. It is the Body of Christ and (different image) he is the corner-stone. A church which stems from the Reformation can be expected to be strongly Christological, but this paragraph also draws on the biblical theology movement of the mid-20th century and if there is one theologian who had more influence than any other it would be Karl Barth.

There are also five references to the Holy Spirit here. The Church lives from the gift of the Spirit and is the fellowship (koinonia) of the Spirit. It could be argued that theological language has moved on from the 1960s/70s, but the themes of reconciliation and new creation are as relevant today as at any time (e.g. wars, racism, the ecological crisis).

In the 1971 edition of the Basis a sentence was added to underline that we live by grace (“The whole of our salvation. . ..”), that is, the Church does not live by its own cleverness or purity or success, but by grace. We are not saved, either, by having a particular sort of “Christian experience”, but by receiving a gift.

The Church, while a divine institution, is also part of human history. It is a “pilgrim people”, which means
(a) we are “on the way”;  
(b) we make mistakes;  
(c) we are looking to a “final goal”; and  
(d) we have provisions for the journey.

PARAGRAPH 4

4. CHRIST RULES AND RENEWS THE CHURCH
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. Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist. Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.

This paragraph is about the Word (the heading in the 1992 edition is somewhat misleading - these headings are later interpolations).

Christ is present today in the Word, through the Spirit. Human witness to this Word, even though imperfect, is necessary, and God uses our efforts.

It is worth remembering that, in Reformed theology, the Word comes to us in 3 ways (and the sequence is important):

1. the Word made flesh;  
2. the Word proclaimed; and  
3. the written Word.
Christ rules in a “strange” way, i.e. not by force but by the way of suffering love. This is a unique “rule”. It can be rejected not only by this world but in the Church as well.

PARAGRAPH 5

5. THE BIBLICAL WITNESSES
The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. 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. The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures.

This paragraph has no full theology of Scriptural authority (see the 1971 Preface) but Scripture is affirmed here as essential, authoritative and irreplaceable. More important than having a theory of biblical authority is to actually read and preach the Word!

What about recent atheist attacks? We defend Scripture as a whole, not every part having equal weight, and not every verse infallible in the ordinary sense of that word. But Scripture is vital: the Church's faith and obedience are “nourished and regulated” by it.

PARAGRAPH 6

6. SACRAMENTS
The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ himself acts in and through everything that
the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

Both Word and sacrament are gifts to the Church. Both are essential for the Church to be the Church. They are given to the whole Church, therefore, e.g. when we baptise we do so “into Christ” and not just into the UCA. We are not free to make of the sacraments something other than what they are, that is, gifts to the church. They are not the Church's possession.

Similarly, the UCA logo on the Holy Table is inappropriate, as the eucharist is not a sacramental action of the UCA but of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The Word is not just “words” but action. St Augustine called the sacraments “visible words” of the Gospel. The Word is active and life-giving, which means the Spirit is at work.

PARAGRAPH 7

7. BAPTISM
The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. 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. The Uniting Church will baptize those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility.
Baptism is in the name of Christ and of the whole Church. Ecumenical issues therefore cannot be avoided. (Australia is ahead of most of the world in the mutual recognition of baptism by 10 denominations.)

Baptism means incorporation into Christ and into the Body of Christ. It is also initiation into the mission (sending) of Christ and his Body into the world.

Appendix One adds some detail on the administration of baptism, e.g. reading the Scriptures on baptism, the use of water and the Triune name.

The fierce controversy over re-baptism in the 1980s was not envisaged when the Basis was written, but the theology in the Basis precludes re-baptism.

The 2011 discussions on membership are based on a strong theology of baptism, but renewal of membership should not be allowed to compromise the “once-for-all” nature of baptism.

The final sentence in paragraph 7 allows flexibility as to who should be baptised. Various ministers and various church councils take somewhat different views on that question, and probably that difference will persist for a long time to come.

PARAGRAPH 8

8. HOLY COMMUNION

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the continuing presence of Christ with his people is signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord's Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptized people on their way to the final
inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.

Our discipleship and our life in Christ are strengthened by the repeated observance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is a duty. Since the 1970s the frequency of observance has increased markedly. A society was even formed, in the UCA, to encourage weekly observance.

Paragraph 1 says “in fellowship with the whole Church catholic”, and this principle should be applied to the whole Basis. Therefore ecumenical developments are always significant for the UCA. In the case of the eucharist, a key document is the World Council of Churches' Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982). The Basis pre-dates this, of course, but is consistent with its theology.

The eucharist looks to

(d) the past, saving acts of God;
(e) the present nourishment of believers;
(f) the coming Kingdom.

This paragraph resorts to a little “list” of aspects of the eucharist, each one deserving of a chapter!

Appendix One, which I shall refer to in Session Five, sets out some detail on practical aspects of eucharistic celebration, and this appendix was affirmed by the first Assembly in 1977. The two editions of Uniting in Worship (1988 and 2005) are built on the Basis and Appendix One.

Interestingly, the Commission on Doctrine (now the Doctrine Working Group) has published a lot on baptism but not much on the eucharist, probably because baptism
causes more controversy in the Church - and not just in the Uniting Church.

Lecture 3

Introduction:

The Basis is tightly written, so it cannot be read quickly! My role in these sessions is to draw attention to what is already there!

For today it is paragraphs 9 to 13, but recalling paragraphs 3 to 5 is essential to today. The ecumenical approaches to baptism and eucharist which we looked at in Session Two reappear today in paragraphs 9 to 13.

PARAGRAPHS 9

9. CREEDS

The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith. The Uniting Church commits its ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age. It commends to ministers and congregations their use for instruction in the faith, and their use in worship as acts of allegiance to the Holy Trinity.

The two creeds are described as “authoritative”, but this is qualified in two ways:

- They are “framed in the language of their day”, and
- We need to “interpret their teaching in a later age”.

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6 Delivered on the 24th June at North Essendon.
By using these creeds we align ourselves with mainline churches around the world, with the exception that the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox do not use the Apostles’ Creed (a western development).

Both creeds have the prefix “known as” because the Apostles’ Creed was not written by the apostles (although it reflects the apostolic teaching) and the Nicene Creed of 325 was completed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and reaffirmed at Chalcedon in 451.

What is their use today, seeing that they address issues of their own time?

INSTRUCTION: the Apostles’ Creed is still useful for confirmation classes and study groups, while the Nicene is probably more for people in various ministries and for theological students. The Apostles’ Creed is a short summary of New Testament teaching.

WORSHIP: The Apostles’ is used at baptisms, and I don’t believe that ministers should lightly cast it aside: it is one of the unifying factors in services of baptism. Other “statements of faith”, some quite modern ones, as in “Uniting in Worship”, can certainly be used in other services, and in fact their use underlines the fact that “confessing” statements are still being written as the Church faces new issues. But baptism is a somewhat different issue, and I would urge the use of the Apostles' Creed.

The two creeds should not be seen as a sort of “checklist” of orthodox belief. Not everyone in the Church accepts, or even understands, every line in the creeds. That is not the point. The point is, as paragraph 9 puts it, that they function as “allegiance”, i.e. identifying our Church with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
They are not museum pieces, either, as they are part of the Christian witness that we inherit. We stand on the shoulders of millions Christians who have lived in 20 centuries and handed on (traditioned) the faith to us!

One footnote: the UCA does not use the word *filioque* (“and the Son”) in the Nicene Creed, and thereby adheres to the original wording. We align ourselves, in this, with the Orthodox rather than with other Western Churches.

**PARAGRAPH 10**

10. *REFORMATION WITNESSES*

The Uniting Church continues to learn of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and in the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, from the witness of the Reformers as expressed in various ways in the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and the Savoy Declaration (1658). In like manner the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793). It will commit its ministers and instructors to study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture.

The listed confessions are part of our heritage too, but more specifically of the Reformed and Evangelical parts of the Church. Their function is spelled out as:

- To point us to the biblical witnesses.
- To link us with the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival.
- To protect us, as they were intended, from distortions of the faith. An example is “justification by works” which was a key issue in the 16th century and is still a problem today.
Not every sentence is every confession or sermon will probably be affirmed today, e.g. predestination, but we “study”, “learn from” and “listen to” these confessions and sermons.

Michael Owen’s book, *Witness of Faith*, sets out these confessions and some of the Wesley sermons, and this book is of great value to teachers and students in the Church. At ordinations, ministers are asked to continue to study these documents.

**PARAGRAPH 11**

11. SCHOLARLY INTERPRETERS

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God’s living Word. In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God’s ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission. The Uniting Church thanks God for the continuing witness and service of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr. It prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds.

I am told that no basis of union, or similar document around the world, has a paragraph like this one which affirms modern scholarship. It is important as a complement to paragraph 5 on Scripture, paragraph 9 on the creeds and paragraph 10 on confessions. Theology did not stop in the 16th or 18th century! The 19th century saw the emergence
of biblical criticism and the 20th century new discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The word "criticism" is of course not negative in this context (as in the phrase "to be critical of"): it is a matter of "faithful and scholarly interpretation". This task is not only for scholars in the professional sense but for all preachers, teachers and office-bearers in the Church.

This paragraph also affirms that knowledge and guidance for Christians come from outside the Church as well. All truth is from God, after all, and we welcome it as part of our understanding and of our approach to the mission of the Church in the contemporary world. Science, for example, is not a competitor with theology. Science and theology deal with different aspects of truth.

At the end of the paragraph we salute “evangelist, scholar, prophet and martyr”. There were more martyrs in the 20th century, I am told, than in any of the previous 19 centuries! The final sentence is about “fresh words and deeds”. This might call on us to produce a new confession of faith, as happened, e.g. in the 1930s with the Barmen Declaration against Nazism. This call is met, in part, by the collection of “statements of faith” in Uniting in Worship, but “new occasions teach new duties” as an old hymn puts it.

PARAGRAPH 12

12. MEMBERS
The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as members all who are recognised as members of the uniting Churches at the time of union. Thereafter membership is open to all who are baptized into the Holy Catholic Church in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptized may have confirmed to them the promises of God, and be led to deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptized. To this end the Uniting Church commits itself to undertake, with other Christians, to explore and
develop the relation of baptism to confirmation and to participation in the Holy Communion.

This paragraph was relevant particularly to the time of union in 1977, as it receives all existing members of the three denominations at that time, including any that, for whatever reason, were not baptised. For the future, it says, membership will be by baptism. We are “baptised into Christ” and thereby become members of Christ’s body, which is the Church.

It is a false exegesis to say that the “membership is open to” means either that baptism is NOT sufficient for membership, or alternatively, that membership may arise from some other source.

Confirmation occupies more than half of this paragraph, which illustrates that our recent Assembly paper on membership is not the first attempt to reassess confirmation and membership!

This paragraph again affirms that the UCA lives within an ecumenical family, and an issue like confirmation is not properly settled by any one denomination in isolation. We explore issues like this “with other Christians”, so to invent new policies (still less, doctrines) in isolation is contrary to the Basis of Union. (Perhaps the recent Assembly paper is out of line in this respect.)

The issue about “participation in Holy Communion”, was really settled in the 1980s when the Church said officially that children are welcome at the Lord’s Table. There was careful discussion, and some disagreement, but the overwhelming view was that the Church should not require confirmation before a member is admitted to Holy Communion. This has now become the norm, and most Churches around the world do the same. Orthodox Churches have always given communion to children, including small babies.
PARAGRAPH 13

13. GIFTS AND MINISTRIES
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 that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. The Uniting Church, at the time of union, will recognise and accept the ministries of those who have been called to any task or responsibility in the uniting Churches. The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission.

By our baptism we are all ministers of Christ. We have one ministry in this sense. We all

(a) confess the faith of Christ, and
(b) become servants of Christ in witness and outreach.

Within that one ministry there are different ministries, which correspond to the different gifts that are from the Spirit (see especially I Corinthians 12).

In 1977 all existing ministries of the three churches were welcomed and affirmed in the UCA. This paragraph then goes on to say that new ministries, beyond 1977, may be required, and this has in fact happened. This is part of the “ordering” of the Church. At the end of the next paragraph (14) this thought is developed further. We shall look at ministry and government in the Church in the next session.
Lecture 4

14. MINISTERS, ELDERS, DEACONESSES AND LAY PREACHERS

The Uniting Church, from inception, will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise among its members women and men called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world.

To this end:

(a) The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as ministers of the Word all who have held such office in any of the uniting Churches, and who, being in good standing in one of those Churches at the time of union, adhere to the Basis of Union. This adherence and acceptance may take place at the time of union or at a later date. Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that Word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word. These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church. Such members will be called Ministers and their setting apart will be known as Ordination.

The Presbytery will ordain by prayer and the laying on of hands in the presence of a worshipping congregation. In this act of ordination the Church praises the ascended Christ for conferring gifts upon men and women. It recognises Christ’s call of the individual to be his minister; it prays for the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to equip the minister for that service. By the participation in the act of ordination of those already ordained, the Church bears witness to

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7 Delivered on 27th August at Western Heights Uniting Church.
God's faithfulness and declares the hope by which it lives. In company with other Christians the Uniting Church will seek for a renewed understanding of the way in which the congregation participates in ordination and of the significance of ordination in the life of the Church.

(b) The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as elders or leaders those who at the time of union hold the office of elder, deacon or leader appointed to exercise spiritual oversight, and who, being in good standing in any of the uniting Churches at the time of union, adhere to the Basis of Union. It will seek to recognise in the congregation those endowed by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight. Such members will be called Elders or Leaders.

(c) The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as deaconesses those who at the time of union are deaconesses in good standing in any of the uniting Churches and who adhere to the Basis of Union. It believes that the Holy Spirit will continue to call women to share in this way in the varied services and witness of the Church, and it will make provision for this. Such members will be called Deaconesses.

The Uniting Church recognises that at the time of union many seek a renewal of the diaconate in which women and men offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God's people, in the service of humanity in the face of changing needs. The Uniting Church will so order its life that it remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diaconate: in these circumstances it may decide to call them Deacons and Deaconesses, whether the service is within or beyond the life of the congregation.

(d) The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as lay preachers those who at the time of union are accredited lay preachers (local preachers) in any of the uniting Churches and who adhere to the Basis of Union. It will seek to
recognise those endowed with the gift of the Spirit for this task, will provide for their training, and will gladly wait upon that fuller understanding of the obedience of Christians which should flow from their ministry. Such members will be called Lay Preachers.

In the above sub-paragraphs the phrase "adhere to the Basis of Union" is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.

The Uniting Church recognises that the type and duration of ministries to which women and men are called vary from time to time and place to place, and that in particular it comes into being in a period of reconsideration of traditional forms of the ministry, and of renewed participation of all the people of God in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the building up of the fellowship in mutual love, in commitment to Christ's mission, and in service of the world for which he died.

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

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. 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.

To this end the Uniting Church makes provision in its constitution for the following:

(a) The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. The congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life in such matters as education, administration and finance.

(b) The Elders' or Leaders' Meeting (the council within a congregation or group of congregations) consists of the minister and those who are called to share with the minister in oversight. It is responsible for building up the congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.

(c) The Presbytery (the district council) consists of such ministers, elders/leaders and other Church members as are appointed thereto, the majority of elders/leaders and Church members being appointed by Elders'/Leaders' Meetings and/or congregations, on a basis determined by the Synod. Its function is to perform all the acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area for which it is responsible, except for those agencies which are directly responsible to the Synod or Assembly. It will in particular exercise oversight over the congregations within its bounds, encouraging them to strengthen one another's faith, to bear one another's burdens, and exhorting them to fulfil their high calling in
Christ Jesus. It will promote those wider aspects of the work of the Church committed to it by the Synod or Assembly.

(d) The Synod (the regional council) consists of such ministers, elders/leaders and other Church members as are appointed thereto, the majority being appointed by Presbyteries, Elders'/Leaders' Meetings or congregations, on a basis determined by the Assembly. It has responsibility for the general oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship, witness and service in the region allotted to it, with such powers and authorities as may from time to time be determined by the Assembly.

(e) The Assembly (the national council) consists of such ministers, elders/leaders and other Church members as are appointed thereto, the majority being appointed by the Presbyteries and Synods. It has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church's mission, the establishment of standards of theological training and reception of ministers from other communions, and the taking of further measures towards the wider union of the Church. It makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils. It is obligatory for it to seek the concurrence of the councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.

The first Assembly, however, will consist of members of the uniting Churches, appointed in equal numbers by them in such manner as they may determine, and is vested with such powers as may be necessary to establish the Uniting Church according to the provisions of the Basis of Union.

Until such time as councils other than the Assembly can be established, the Uniting Church recognises and accepts the various agencies for the discharge of responsibility which are in existence in the uniting Churches. It invites any such continuing bodies immediately to 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.

On reading paragraphs 14 and 15 in 2011, one is struck by how much has changed since they were written in 1971, and even since the UCA was inaugurated in 1977.

In expounding these two paragraphs, the longest in the Basis of Union, I shall try to distinguish between the underlying theology, on the one hand, and the changing detail on the other.

So my first question is, “what is the theology of ministry in the Basis?” Here is a list of the enduring principles. You might want to add to them.

- Christ himself ministers in and through the Church.
- The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to the Church (see I Corinthians 12).
- Each gift has a corresponding service or “ministry”.
- These ministries differ from each other, but they are not hierarchically arranged. On the contrary, they are mutually dependent, like the various limbs and organs in our physical body.
- It follows from this that all Church members are in ministry, by virtue of their baptism, so we can’t say that some are in ministry while the rest are “ministered to”. Another way of saying this is that all are servants of Christ and servants of the world. Some serve the world mainly through the Church, while others serve the world more directly.

What are the changes to the detail of paragraph 14 on ministry?

- ELDERS: the “rule and oversight” that are attributed to the ministry of elder are now minimal. The Assembly of 1997 brought about this change.
Nor is there any Council of Elders (in the Basis called “Elders’ or Leaders’ Meeting”). We shall return to this point in paragraph 15.

• DEACONESSES: no longer do we ordain people to this ministry. The “renewed diaconate” foreshadowed in the Basis has now arrived, after much discussion and debate. Even now the reshaping of diaconal ministry is incomplete.

• LAY PREACHERS: this ministry continues, but the Basis did not envisage that many (most?) of those who now preach, as lay people, are not commissioned to this ministry. Is their equipment for the task adequate?

• New specified ministries, not mentioned in the Basis, have been established; for example, lay pastor (now phased out), community minister (now phased out) and the (new) pastor. There are also varieties of chaplaincy.

The final sub-paragraph here speaks of “reconsideration of traditional forms of the ministry”. We have certainly done that! It could be argued that we have spent too much time, money and effort in reshaping the ministries of the Church.

You will notice that I have not mentioned changes to the ministry of the Word, yet there have been numerous studies and reports on the theology of ordination. Why do we keep re-visiting this? I don’t know, but here are some possibilities, for discussion this morning:

• Is it because Australians hate to make distinctions between people?
• Is it because we are not attracting enough candidates for ordained ministry?
• Is it because many ordained people have major problems in their ministry?
• Is it because (as sociological studies have shown) that the status of clergy in our society has dwindled considerably in recent decades?
A story of a false start:

In the late 1980s the Assembly appointed a task group on ministry, which came up with a report recommending “one ordination and two commissionings”, i.e. ministers of the Word and deacons. This proposal was confused theologically. Why? Because ordination is always into a specific ministry and NOT into “ordained ministry” in some non-specific way. The proposal suggested that ministers of the Word and deacons shared the one ordination but were actually in two categories. No church in the world that I know of has entertained such an idea, but the Assembly of 1991 adopted it.

The theology of ordination in this report was so weak that I felt that my own ordination was under question. It was a crisis of conscience for me. To make matters worse, I was president of the Assembly when much of this discussion was going on!

Fortunately the Assembly of 1994 reversed the decision of 1991 and the UCA reverted to the theology of ministry and of ordination which is set out in the Basis of Union. I give this story to show that the theology of the Basis still guides the Church, despite hiccups.

Leadership and responsibility:

Although we don’t have a hierarchy in the UCA, we do need leadership! This leadership is of many kinds, e.g. pastoral, administrative, liturgical, missional. We need to be seeking out people for these roles, then encouraging and equipping those who are called.

Leaders in the Church do not operate in isolation but in and with the Body of Christ. (More on this in paragraph 15.)

Adherence (next-to-last sub-paragraph)

In ordination and commissioning services, the candidate is asked whether he or she “adheres” to the Basis of Union.
“Adhere” reminds me of Tarzan’s Grip, and it means we can neither ignore the Basis nor treat it lightly. But there are two limitations on this:

- Some provisions in the Basis, as we have seen this morning, have changed with time. However, the theological affirmations remain.
- There is the allowance for “difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith”. What is this “substance”? Clearly the Trinitarian faith is one, and the doctrine of salvation in Christ is another, but how far does this “substance” extend? I believe this can only be determined by particular circumstances, especially when doctrine is challenged in the Church’s debates. It is open to the Assembly to declare at any time that something is of substance and is required of all those in a specified ministry—although the Assembly rarely does so, and probably that is a good thing, as robust debate is good for the Church. (There is a relation here to that part of paragraph 15 (e) which speaks of “concurrence”. We shall come to that.)

In paragraph 15, again, there are enduring principles, but allowance for change in the light of experience. Here are some of the enduring principles:

Government “belongs to the people of God”, i.e. not to an exclusive group or to a hierarchy.

- Some people have gifts for particular aspects of government. Early in the life of the UCA the idea floated around that “anyone can do anything”, which is NOT what the Basis is saying. The Basis says “government is entrusted to representatives”.
- The structure of government is “inter-related councils”, not a top-down series of “courts”. Each council “has its tasks and responsibilities”. Each council must “wait upon God’s word”; that is, not look to some other council to tell it what the Gospel implies for its context. Each council has oversight or
episcope, but as it carries out its responsibilities it will “give heed” to other councils, so mutual responsibility applies not only to ministries but to government as well.

Some things have obviously changed! Notice that the Introduction says “the UC will make provision in its Constitution for the following”, and it is possible for the Constitution to be altered, although this is not a quick or easy process. Here are some of the changes:

- The “Elders’ or Leaders’ Meeting” no longer exists. The name we knew was of course “Council of Elders”, but the Assembly of 1997 abolished it, and at the same time downgraded the ministry of elder and instituted the “church council”. This body is not mentioned in the Basis.
- The presbytery is very similar to what is stated in the Basis, although the mode of election has changed somewhat. In South Australia and Western Australia the presbyteries have been absorbed into the Synod, thus eliminating one level of government.
- Soon after union “parishes” were invented. They are not mentioned in the Basis and after lasting for a generation have now been replaced by clusters and similar arrangements.

Further Comments

Davis McCaughey hoped that the key councils would be congregations and presbyteries, the Assembly being less so and the synods less again. This has not happened! Because of the strength of our capital cities and the distribution of money, synods are quite powerful. There is a parallel here with Gough Whitlam in the 1970s, who hoped that “regional government” would become more important at the expense of the states. He began with this process but never finished it.

In the sub-paragraph on the Assembly there are nine points in its list of responsibilities. These remain pretty much the
same, although I am told there is a move to abolish the Commission on Theological Education.

The Assembly is to seek the concurrence of other councils on “matters of vital importance”. Who decides what is “vital”? Only the Assembly itself, although it consults with synods and presbyteries on that. An obvious example is changing the Constitution, where the Assembly is REQUIRED to consult other councils. A case in point is the recent addition of the Preamble. On other matters, such as bishops, the Assembly has decided to consult other councils (and it received a clear message!).

The Constitution must be in harmony with the Basis, but the Joint Constitution Council in the 1970s decided not to make this relationship too tight, saying that the Basis must be a “guide” rather than a law. The Constitution is difficult to change, and this is a good principle, but the regulations are quite easy to change, and I believe this is also good. Even the Assembly Standing Committee can do this, between Assembly meetings.

**Concluding Remarks**

Government in the UCA is about promoting the mission of the Church, not about controlling things for the sake of control. Government is a witness to the Gospel and is an act of ministry.

Mistakes will be made, but there are mechanisms by which these can be corrected, e.g. one meeting of a presbytery, synod or Assembly cannot bind the next meeting.

An over-arching principle is “co-responsibility” (cf. Hans Kung during Vatican II).

Paragraph 17 (next session) sets out that law is not immutable because the Church is always in need of reform— *Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda.*
Lecture 5

Introduction

We have examined paragraphs 1 to 15, and I have tried to establish the continuing importance of the Basis of Union. We have looked at the Trinitarian theology of the Basis; its Christology; its emphasis on the Word of God; its theology of the Church, of ministry and of Church government. Along the way we have discovered that the Basis is a missional document and that it presents the Church as ecumenical.

PARAGRAPHS 16 to 18

In the early 1970s, when the Joint Constitution Commission was at work, the lawyers on that Commission saw paragraphs 16 to 18 as a sort of “concluding flourish”, with little relevance to their work on the Constitution - but that is wrong!

PARAGRAPH 16

16. PARTICULAR FUNCTIONS

The Uniting Church recognises the responsibility and freedom which belong to councils to acknowledge gifts among members for the fulfilment of particular functions. The Uniting Church sees in pastoral care exercised personally on behalf of the Church an expression of the fact that God always deals personally with people, would have God’s loving care known among people, and would have individual members take upon themselves the form of a servant.

This paragraph

(1) re-emphasises the co-responsibility in the Church that I outlined at the end of our last session;

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8 Delivered 29th October at North Essendon.
states that the Church is pastoral as well as missional;
(3) affirms that the whole Church is part of the servant ministry of Christ;
(4) leaves the door half-open for bishops, by stating that pastoral care is both personal and corporate.

PARAGRAPH 17

17. LAW IN THE CHURCH

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel, and the discipline which it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law. The aim of such law is to confess God's will for the life of the Church; but since law is received by human beings and framed by them, it is always subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel. The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel of Christ. The law of the Church will speak of the free obedience of the children of God, and will look to the final reconciliation of humanity under God's sovereign grace.

This is about law in the Church (constitution, regulations, etc.) The law is to reflect the will of God for the church, not to set up a system of restriction or control. However, discipline is a necessary part of the church's government.

The law is not immutable: it is always “subject to revision” so as to better serve the Church's mission; therefore there is a process in the Constitution whereby the Constitution itself may be revised; also the regulations of the Church.

The framing of the law influences, whether we like it or not, the preaching of the Gospel, the Church's worship and its service in the world.
This paragraph speaks of “free obedience” on the part of members, because the Church is a voluntary organisation and its members therefore choose to place themselves within the Church's guidance, its procedures and its discipline.

PARAGRAPH 18

18. THE PEOPLE OF GOD ON THE WAY

The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

The Church must be seen eschatologically; that is, it is part of God's eternal purpose for humanity and for the whole creation.

In this process the Church will have its “ups and downs”, and because the Church consists of forgiven sinners it will always be imperfect. It is easy, therefore, to become disheartened (imperfections, disagreements, decline etc.) but God promises to use the Church’s “worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.”

APPENDICES

The first Assembly in 1977 “received” these, which could mean it didn’t “adopt” them, but other resolutions in the Minutes make it clear that the Doctrine Commission, and the whole Church, are to act on them.

Appendix I:

“Concerning the Celebration of the Sacraments”

In paragraphs 7 and 8 of the Basis of Union the Uniting Church receives the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s
Supper; and in paragraphs 5 and 6 she sees these acts as proclamation of the Gospel set forth in Scripture. In order that the sacraments may be administered with due regard to the ends for which they were instituted, the Uniting Church will on an early occasion set up a Committee on Public Worship (or a Liturgical Commission, or some such body) to guide the Church’s life of worship. Until the work of such a Committee has been assessed and approved by the appropriate council or councils of the Church, ministers and congregations will continue to be guided by the books used for these purposes in the three Churches at the time of union, namely The Methodist Book of Offices, The Book of Common Order of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, A Book of Public Worship and A Book of Services and Prayers.

In particular the Uniting Church draws the attention of ministers and congregations to the following matters:

1. CONCERNING BAPTISM

(i) The sacrament of Baptism is normally to be celebrated in the presence of a congregation of God’s people, or their representatives, who welcome and take responsibility for the one baptised.

(ii) The context of celebration of the sacrament will be the preaching of the Gospel, an affirmation of faith, and the prayers of the people.

(iii) A passage of scripture bearing on the significance of the sacrament should be read.

(iv) Baptism is by water, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

(v) It should be made clear to all present that baptism renders the person a member of the Holy Catholic Church.

(vi) In normal circumstances, ministers of the Word will administer the sacrament of Baptism.

2. CONCERNING HOLY COMMUNION
(i) The sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated by a congregation of God’s people who wait upon his presence in words read from scriptures, proclaimed in the life of the Church and made evident in the sacramental acts.

(ii) In every service of the Lord’s Supper bread and wine shall be set apart with the use of Christ’s words of institution as found in the Gospels or Epistle, and the manual acts there commanded: the breaking of the bread, the taking of the cup, and participation in both kinds by minister and people.

(iii) In normal circumstances a minister of the Word will preside at celebrations of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

(iv) The Lord’s Table is open to all members of the Uniting Church and to all persons who in any fellowship of Christ’s people may receive Holy Communion in that fellowship.

This envisages the establishment of a Commission on Liturgy (now the Working Group on Worship) and this body has done much publication and education. My two years full-time on this work indicates the seriousness of the Assembly on this task.

(a) Baptism: is not an entirely local matter! Services of baptism should include specific elements (see little ii and little iii) and the Trinitarian name should be used: this was re-affirmed in (I think) 1997. Finally, baptism “makes” people “members”, and members not just of the UCA but of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

(b) Holy Communion: again, certain content is essential, and not just Scriptural words but “manual acts”, i.e. visible actions.

“Normally” ordained ministers will preside at both baptism and Holy Communion.
The so-called “open table” is defined in an interesting way as

- members of the UCA (including children, as stated in the 1980s), and
- members of other Churches.

Notice it doesn't say “anyone at all”. How then to invite participation at the sacramental celebration?

An example: “those who love the Lord Jesus and seek to follow him in daily life”. This implies both faith and discipleship. This formulation doesn't say “only the baptised”, although paragraph 8 says that Christ “feeds his baptised people”. I believe ministers and elders should encourage any unbaptised people who receive holy communion to seek baptism.

**Appendix II:**

“Concerning the Ordering of the Ministry”

*In paragraph 14 of the Basis of Union, the Uniting Church recognises those who have been set apart to various ministries or services in the uniting Churches and are in good standing at the time of union. The Uniting Church will in due course lay down its own procedures for the selection, training and designation of men and women called to various ministries. Meanwhile, the Uniting Church declares its intention in certain important matters in this Appendix to the Basis of Union.*

1. **THE EDUCATION OF MINISTERS OF THE WORD**

The Uniting Church requires that normally ministers of the Word shall before ordination have received at least six years of formal education after being qualified for matriculation at a recognised University. At least three years shall be spent in preliminary study, preferably at a University, and three in theological study.
2. CENTRES OF THEOLOGICAL STUDY

The Uniting Church undertakes to support and develop centres of theological study and teaching in as many of the University centres as is necessary, where the University itself does not provide adequately for such study; and she further undertakes to secure and support scholars in the main fields of theological study, in order that they may give their full time to this work.

3. ORDINATION

(a) The Uniting Church lays down questions to be asked and answered at the Ordination of Ministers in the following form:—

(i) Do you, depending upon the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit, confess anew Jesus Christ as Lord, and, acknowledging him as the Word of God, do you undertake to set him forth for the salvation of mankind? (I do.)

(ii) Do you receive the witness to Christ in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and do you undertake to preach from these? (I do.)

(iii) Do you undertake to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may be clearly proclaimed and made effective in the lives of believers? (I do.)

(iv) Do you intend to live in fellowship with all God’s people, confessing the name of the One Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the One Spirit, and do you receive for use in instruction and worship the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds? (I do.)

(v) Do you adhere to the Basis of Union of this Church? (I do.)

(vi) Will you continue to allow your mind to be illuminated, your conscience quickened, and your prayers deepened by study of the confessional documents specified in the Basis of Union? (I will.)
(vii) Will you seek the peace of this and all the Churches of God, speaking the truth in love, watching over those people and things entrusted to your charge, obeying lawful authority with a good conscience, committing your ministry to God who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or conceive? (I will.)

The presiding minister shall then say:

May God give you strength to fulfil these vows, and to him be the glory in the Church and in Jesus Christ from generation to generation for ever.

And all the people shall say:

Amen.

(b) Ordination in the Uniting Church shall be by prayer with the laying on of hands of members of the Presbytery or those commissioned by the Presbytery. While hands are laid upon the head of the ordinand, the presiding minister shall say these words in the ordination prayer:—

Almighty God, who hast called thy Church to be thy people and promised to be their God, continue in her, we pray thee, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and grant power to this thy servant whom we ordain in thy name that he may fulfil the commandments, preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and exercise pastoral care, in the name of Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord. Amen.

This is clearly stated as an interim provision and therefore is largely superseded. However, the principles are quite important.

Those who preach the Gospel should be properly equipped. (In 1970, when this was written, it was described as “six years after Year 12”.) Changing times have meant modification of this, e.g. because of the large number of mature age candidates, but the principle remains that
expounding Scripture is a very responsible and quite difficult ministry, therefore serious study is necessary.

Theological teachers who are full-time should be appointed and supported.

Ordination is by prayer and the laying on of hands, and the presbytery is the ordaining body. The identity of those who lay on hands can be contentious, but clearly the majority should be members of the presbytery.

The questions at ordination have been revised several times in the past 30 years but the content is basically similar in all the versions. These questions are important because they not only place the ordinand under the discipline of the Church but they reflect the UCA theology of ordination.

**CONCLUSION**

The Basis sets out “basics” of the Faith and a basis for the life of the UCA. It should therefore be studied regularly in the life of the Church and referred to on issues of doctrine, ministry and government.

Commentaries and similar books and booklets help in this process (see following list).

Within the Basis itself the “places where faith is to be found” (a favourite phrase of Davis McCaughey) are identified.

The UCA sees itself as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church (paragraph1) and seeks greater unity with other Christians (paragraph18).
Bibliography

Recommended reading

Bos, Robert & Thompson, Geoff (Eds), *Theology for Pilgrims: selected theological documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Sydney, Uniting Church Press, 2008.


Additional Reading


**Documents and UCA publications**

The Assembly and Synod websites contain valuable resources including the Basis of Union, the Regulations, and the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice. Information on the work of the various commissions, committees and working groups.

Many helpful articles and book reviews will be found in the journal *Uniting Church Studies*, published by the United Theological College, Sydney. Vol. 1, No. 1 was published in May 1996.

All the reading material listed above is available in the Dalton-McCaughey Library at the Centre for Theology and Ministry in Parkville.