

# Church Polity Reference Committee

## 1. THE PLACE OF POLITY

It is the Mission of the Church Polity Reference Committee:

To advise the Assembly, the Standing Committee and the General Secretary on the polity of the church, in the light of the Basis of Union, the Constitution and the Regulations.

That is our small contribution to the Mission of the church:

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. (Basis of Union paragraph 3)

Polity is the doctrine of how Christ rules and renews us as this church. Questions of polity arise naturally in relation to the wide range of proposals and initiatives that continually emerge within the life of the Uniting Church – locally, regionally and nationally. If we do this, are we being consistent with what we believe to be the way Christ rules and renews us as his church? Believing what we do about the way Christ rules and renews his church, what courses of action are available to us in this new situation?

## 2. INDICATIVE QUESTIONS

In the last triennium questions of polity have been posed in relation to a very wide variety of proposals and initiatives. But the Reference Committee has noticed that two broad themes have been evident: questions concerning the specified ministries, and questions concerning the relations between the councils of the church.

Some concerned the introduction of the specified ministry of Pastor. For example, must a person be a confirmed member of the Uniting Church to be eligible for recognition as a Pastor? Should a Pastor be a member of the Church Council *ex officio*? Etc. It was not surprising that there would be a lot to reflect on given the novelty of the situation, but questions also arose concerning familiar specified ministries. For example, can a minister of the Word or Deacon who is in a non-congregational placement or retired be elected as an Elder in his or her home Congregation? If a serving member of the Australian Defence Force is accepted as a candidate for the ministry of the Word or ministry of Deacon, indicating at the time that he or she intends to serve as a military

chaplain, is it legitimate for the ADF to pay the church for his or her theological education?

Many questions arose out of interactions between the councils of the church. For example, What are the respective rights and responsibilities of the Congregation and the Synod in regard to property? Can a Synod override the wishes of a Congregation regarding the use of property as part of a broader missional strategy? Must every Congregation provide its own representative to Presbytery? What does it mean for a Congregation and its Church Council to be “inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities”? Might one overreach itself and encroach on the distinctive responsibilities of the other? Is our present use of a “series of inter-related councils” the only model of governance consistent with the vision of the Basis of Union?

It is not the Reference Committee’s place to determine “the right answer” to such questions, but to take the questions seriously and to contribute its best wisdom to the deliberations of other Assembly agencies (such as the Legal Reference Committee, the Doctrine Working Group, or the Task Group on Governance) and to the Assembly Standing Committee. It is unsurprising that such questions are rarely answered “yes” or “no”. There are nuances to be accommodated, if only by a judicious use of the word “normally”.

## 3. ALL CONGREGATIONS GREAT AND SMALL

But over the past triennium the Reference Committee has noticed that the issues associated with a given question change according to the assumptions being made about the size of the Congregation – especially when we envisage a Congregation which is either particularly small (<30) or large (>250).

A Congregation of, say, 25 might find that it makes better missional decisions by holding more regular Congregational meetings instead of maintaining a functioning Church Council. It may have no members in the specified ministries mentioned in 3.1.12(a)(i)-(iii) and although it will probably have elected some of its members as Elders or Leaders it may find it rather artificial to form them into a distinct Church Council. By contrast a Congregation of 500 or more may find its health is best served by a relatively small Church Council. This practice could be challenged if it has been employing several people in specific roles who are now to be recognized as Pastors – each of whom “shall be...a member of the Church Council...unless the Presbytery, after

consultation with the Congregation, determines otherwise" (2.14.17(b)). There is no insuperable barrier to either of these Congregations being organized in a way that suits its particular situation. It is the Presbytery's role to help them do that. But in each case the "default setting" will have to be "customized".

Continual "customizing" of Congregational arrangements can be a source of frustration and / or anxiety for the "unusually" large or small Congregation. This has already been recognized by the Assembly's approval of Alternative Regulations for Church Councils in Small Congregations. But in the course of our deliberations on many disparate questions over the past triennium the Reference Committee has gained the impression that our system of church government is being strained both by the increasing number of very small Congregations (a phenomenon of both decline and church-planting) and by the way large, growing Congregations can be frustrated by or feel forced to ignore the expectations and requirements of Regulations that do not easily accommodate their distinctive needs and opportunities.

#### **4. QUESTIONING THE DEFAULT SETTING**

In reflecting on our work over the last triennium, then, the Reference Committee has found a question of its own. Do the Basis of Union, Constitution and / or Regulations have an unstated, default Congregation in view? Or, is the default Congregation really in the mind and imagination of the reader of the Basis of Union, Constitution and/or Regulations? In either case, given what we believe about the way Christ rules and renews us as his church, is that default setting an unnecessary irritant in the life of the Uniting Church or, worse, an impediment to our capacity to fulfil our calling: 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. (Basis of Union paragraph 3)

Emerging as it did in our review of the triennium, this question remains unanswered. But it will be tested as we attend to the next series of questions concerning polity that arise from the ongoing life of the Uniting Church.

**Rev Dr Andrew Dutney**  
**Chairperson**

## CHURCH POLITY REFERENCE COMMITTEE MANDATE

- Responsible to:** The Assembly
- Reporting arrangements:** The Assembly and the Standing Committee
- Mission Statement:** To advise the Assembly, the Standing Committee and the General Secretary on the polity of the church, in light of the Basis of Union, the Constitution and the Regulations.
- Mandate:**
1. To provide advice on matters of polity at the request of the Assembly, the Standing Committee or the General Secretary.
  2. To initiate with the General Secretary, the Standing Committee or the Assembly consideration of issues and concerns relating to the polity of the church.
  3. To assist other Assembly agencies (eg. Theology and Discipleship, Legal Reference Committee, National Secretariat) with advice on matters concerning the polity of the church.
  4. To assist with the drafting of amendments to the Constitution and the Regulations, as requested by the Assembly, the Standing Committee, the Legal Reference Committee or the General Secretary.
- Power to appoint:** The Reference Committee has power to appoint working groups to operate within this mandate.
- Membership of the Reference Committee:**
- Chairperson, appointed by the Assembly.  
Five to nine persons appointed by the Standing Committee, following receipt of nominations from the Reference Committee.
  - Chairperson and attending members to be resident within the Synod of South Australia.
  - One corresponding member from each of the other five synods, appointed by the Standing Committee.

*Approved by Assembly Standing Committee August 2006*