

Guidance for the Church's faithful thinking

This paper has been prepared by the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine as an aid to the Assembly in dealing with controversial matters of doctrine.

Discerning God's will

The Uniting Church confesses faith in the triune God, and seeks to obey God's will in our life together. The Uniting Church is frequently faced with complex issues. The way the Church deals with contentious issues is by engaging together in responsible, prayerful, thoughtful theological reflection and sometimes rigorous debate. As a church we deal with disputes differently from other organisations.

Some current controversial issues include:

- How should the servant-leadership of the church be exercised?
- What is the mission to which Christ calls us and how do we share the good news?
- Who should be regarded as a member of the church?
- What is the place in the Church of people in committed same-gender relationships?

The task of the National Working Group on Doctrine is to advise the Assembly on the doctrinal dimensions of these and other issues. The *Basis of Union* points us to the way to do this. We therefore offer the following considerations to the Assembly.

Built on Jesus Christ

The *Basis of Union* first points us to Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God, the embodiment of the Good News of God's Reign. "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" (*BoU*, par 3). Our faithful task must always be then to address the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

The faithful use of Scripture

Secondly, we are called to a responsible use of Scripture. The Bible is witness to Jesus Christ as God's living Word; it is "unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which the Church hears the Word of God" (*BoU*, par. 5). This always involves more than quoting a few verses or appealing to one or other theme in the Scriptures.

Other sources: tradition, reason and experience

Thirdly, the *Basis* reminds us of other sources which inform the Church in interpreting Scripture: the ancient Creeds, the Reformation witnesses and Wesley's sermons, and contemporary thought through "literary, historical and scientific enquiry". Furthermore, the *Basis* recognises the place of "scholarly interpreters" (par. 11) in helping to guide the councils of the church as they discern the leading of the Spirit. This work should always be conducted with prayer and in humility.

The heritage of the Church's doctrine reminds us that Jesus Christ addresses the Church through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. While Scripture is primary, the Church necessarily makes use of the other sources as it seeks to be faithful to Jesus Christ in its worship, witness and service.

The Catholicity of the church

"The Uniting Church lives within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: (*BoU*, par 2). In considering particular issues, we therefore need to take into account how other parts of the Church have understood the issue and how other parts of the church currently understand it. In doing so the Uniting Church looks especially to those in the Reformed and Evangelical traditions which it shares.

Within our system of "inter-related councils" (*BoU*, par 15), there are also times when the Assembly needs to speak authoritatively.

Taking time

In discerning God's leading, members of the Church may disagree with some of the things that have been said, but may not ignore them. It is not unusual in the life of the Church, in contention over issues of doctrine, that considerable time is taken to listen to each other and the Spirit in order to discern the will and purpose of God. For example, it took several centuries for the church to agree on statements about the two natures of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, and several decades to agree on the ordination of women and the sinfulness of apartheid.

Our new humanity in Christ

The church trusts that in Jesus Christ God makes a new beginning, by grace acquits the guilty, and calls men and women to share in his new humanity through baptism. (*BoU*, paras 3, 4 & 7). From the apostolic confession in Scripture, Creeds and the Basis of Union, we confess God as three distinct persons in community who creates and redeems us as different and unique persons in community. The Scriptures proclaim Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word, the beginning of a new creation and a new humanity. Through his obedience we receive our true humanity. By the Holy Spirit, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, we learn to trust God's sovereign grace and receive our new personhood, learning to love God, our neighbour and our enemy (*BoU*, par. 3).

Our unity

We also wish to remind the Assembly of the nature of the Church's unity. We are one because Jesus Christ is Lord and Head of the Church, and it is he who graciously reconciles us to the Father and to one another. We are one not because we all agree on every point of theology, nor because we all worship the same way, or witness and serve in the same way. Our common baptism unites us to Christ and to one another as a pilgrim people on the way to God's promised goal. This is not a result of human achievement or choosing, but the work of God's Spirit.

On the way

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which he will bring. The Lord constantly challenges us and calls us beyond our cultural and personal convictions to costly discipleship. Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's 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. (*BoU*, para 4)

We pray that we may be obedient to God who constantly corrects what is erroneous in the Church's life as it moves on the way to the promised end which he will bring and we have the gift of the Spirit so that we may not lose the way (*BoU*, par 3, 18).

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