

THE BASIS OF UNION

(the 1971 text approved by the uniting Churches)

HEADINGS have been added to each section of this printing of the Basis of Union for ease of reference but do not form part of the Basis of Union approved by the Churches.

BASIS OF UNION

1. THE WAY INTO UNION

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 his 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 praise God for his 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 mankind. 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 she 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 his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.

2. OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

The Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. She recognises that she 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, she looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated, and the Church's unity expressed, in similar Councils. She thankfully acknowledges that the uniting Churches were members of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies, and she will seek to maintain such membership. She 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. She is encouraged by the existence of United Churches in which these and other traditions have been incorporated, and wishes to learn from their experience. She 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 she commits herself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific. She declares her desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches.

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. In love for the world, God gave his Son to take away the world's sin.

Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive the Father's love. He 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 him on earth, he reasserted his claim over the whole of his creation, he pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. To God in Christ men are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth his Spirit that men may trust him as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of man's salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone.

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over her own life, she also confesses that he is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new mankind. God in Christ has given to men 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 he will bring; she is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here she does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds her with Word and Sacraments, and she has the gift of the Spirit in order that she may not lose the way.

4. CHRIST RULES AND RENEWS HIS CHURCH

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because her Lord comes, addresses, and deals with men in and through the news of his completed work. Christ who is present when he is preached among men is the Word of the 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 men's attention and awaken their faith; he calls them into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way he constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.

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 she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom man's 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 her members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits her 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.

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. He himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is he who by the gift of the Spirit confers upon men the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is he who awakens, purifies and advances in men the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

7. BAPTISM

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates men into his body by Baptism. In this way he 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 men into his 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.

8. HOLY COMMUNION

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people 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 he will bring to consummation.

9. CREEDS

The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by her use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. She 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. She commits her ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age. She 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.

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 reformation fathers 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 she will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793). She will commit her 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.

11. SCHOLARLY INTERPRETERS

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

12. MEMBERS

The Uniting Church recognises and accepts as her 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

she commits herself to undertake, with other Christians, to explore and develop the relation of baptism to confirmation and to participation in the Holy Communion.

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. She acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of his 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 her life in response to his call to enter more fully into her mission.

14. MINISTERS, ELDERS, DEACONESSES AND LAY PREACHERS

The Uniting Church, from inception, will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise among her members men and women 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, she is assured that God, who has never left himself without 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. She recognises his call of the individual to be his minister; she prays for the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to equip him for that service. By the participation in the act of ordination of those already ordained, the Church bears witness to God's faithfulness and declares the hope by which she 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. She 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. She 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 she 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 men and women offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God's people, in the service of mankind in the face of changing needs. She will so order her life that she remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diaconate: in these circumstances she 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. She 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 the Christian man 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 men and women are called vary from time to time and place to place, and that in particular she 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 her 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 his 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 her through any of her councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey his 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 her 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 her 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 him 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 other 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. She 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 her unity. She prays that God will enable them to order their lives for these purposes.

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. She sees in pastoral care exercised personally on behalf of the Church an expression of the fact that God always deals with men personally: he would have his fatherly care known among men; he would have individual members take upon themselves the form of a servant.

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 her law. The aim of such law is to confess God's will for the life of his Church; but since law is received by man and framed by him, it is always subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel. The Uniting Church

will keep her law under constant review so that her life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and man, and her 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 mankind under God's sovereign grace.

18. THE PEOPLE OF GOD ON THE WAY

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

NOTES