

A BRIEF STATEMENT ON ORDINATION

Approved by the Assembly Standing Committee, November 2008

1. **Baptism: the foundation of all Christian ministry**

Baptism is Christ's gift.
It is the sign by which the Spirit of God
joins people to Jesus Christ
and incorporates them into his body, the Church.

Thus, claimed by God
we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit
that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,
share his ministry in the world and grow to maturity,
awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.
(‘The Meaning of Baptism’ in ‘The Service of Baptism’, *Uniting in Worship 2*, 2005, p. 74)

Not only a sign of personal renewal in Christ, baptism incorporates people into the life of the body of Christ, the Christian community, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The Christian life is inherently communal and missional. Through baptism into the communion of the Spirit, we are caught up into the mission of the triune God in the world:

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 (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 3).

All Christians participate in the ministry of Christ. It is our vocation: ‘every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant...the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and...there is no gift without its corresponding service’ (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 13).

Some members are recognised ‘through the guidance of the Holy Spirit’ by the Church as ‘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’ (para. 14). This process of discernment and setting apart is concerned with the ordering of the Church's life ‘in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission’ (para. 13).

2. **Ordination: set apart for a new relationship**

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 (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 16).

Ordination is the ‘setting apart’ of baptised women and men, called by God as discerned by the Church, to serve as deacons and ministers of the Word (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 14(a)). The importance of ordination for the Uniting Church can be seen in the special care with which the *Basis of Union* addresses the liturgical requirements for 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 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. (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 14(a))

Ordained ministers exercise their ministry as part of the ministry of the whole people of God, the body of Christ. However, they have a particular relationship to other parts of the body of Christ:

Ordination places the minister in a new relation to others in the community, as a designated leader who is authorised to be such. The person is given a new status in the community, not in terms of hierarchical advantage, but in its proper sense of a new 'standing place', in the same way in which marriage places two people into a new relationship with each other which will never be the same again. The new place in which the married couple stand with regard to each other is thus called their 'marital status', which should imply not a new hierarchy between them, but a new set of responsibilities and privileges in relation to one another. Nor does the couple's marital status remove them from the world, but places them in a new relation to other people because of their relationship to each other. Similarly, ordination does not place a minister 'over' the rest of the community, but in a new status within it (*Ordination and Ministry in The Uniting Church in Australia*, 1994, Part 3, para. 6)

The new relationship recognised and established by ordination is normally for life, and the Uniting Church maintains that this new relationship is with the *whole Church catholic*, not just within the Uniting Church. In the service of ordination, the presbytery ordains a person as a deacon/minister of the Word 'in the Church of Jesus Christ'. And at the Declaration of Ordination, the liturgy says that 'in the name of Jesus Christ, the sovereign Head of the Church', and by the presbytery's authority,

NNN is now a deacon/minister of the Word in the Church of God.

With this new relationship come particular responsibilities. In the *Basis of Union*, these particular responsibilities are described in this way:

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 (1992 ed., para. 14 (a)).

The threefold task of preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments and exercising pastoral care is specifically the responsibility to promote and maintain the Church as the missional community it is called to be—a place where every baptised Christian may find themselves in the ministry of Christ which is the mission of God in and for the world; and where new people may be enfolded through baptism. Ordained ministers have a particular role in not only the formation of individual Christians or groups of Christians, but of the body of Christ as a whole. They have a particular responsibility to work for the integrity of the body of Christ: the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. (This is not just the local congregation, nor even just the Uniting Church, but the whole Christian church.)

The ministry of the ordained is a representative ministry. It is ministry exercised 'personally on behalf of the Church' (*Basis of Union*, 1992 ed., para. 16), the body of Christ. Ministers exercise their responsibility to Christ and the Church by representing Christ to the people and the people to Christ. This representative ministry involves focussing, modelling, supervising, shepherding, enabling, and empowering the general ministry of the Church. In seeking to safeguard the apostolic faith and unity of the Church, ordained ministers are called to:

- embody the Church's essential nature in the exercise of the ministries of word, sacraments and service;
- bring the apostolic tradition of the church into a new context, requiring a thoroughgoing task of interpretation of that received tradition in the setting in which the Church is placed;
- set forth God's true and living Word in their own life and teaching; and
- equip members of the Church for their ministries.

The ordained ministry of the Uniting Church consists of two offices: the ministry of the Word and the ministry of deacon. Both these ministries have a responsibility to safeguard the apostolic faith through preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments and exercising pastoral care. This threefold task mirrors the threefold nature of the call of the Christian life as expressed by the *Basis of Union*—'worship, witness and service' (para. 1). Each of these ordained ministries has a different focus.

Ministers of the Word have a particular responsibility for safeguarding the unity of the body of Christ—for 'reconciling and gathering'; and Deacons, for the church's participation in God's mission in and for the world—for 'dispersing and reforming' (*Ordination and Ministry in The Uniting Church in Australia*, 1994, Part 3, para. 80).

In the Uniting Church, it is the Presbytery that has the particular responsibility for oversight of the ordination of ministers. The chairperson of the presbytery presides, and at least two ministers and two lay people must take part in the act of ordination. Only members of the presbytery, or associated members of other presbyteries, may take part in the laying on of hands. This provision demonstrates the seriousness of the role of oversight in maintaining and handing on the apostolic ministry of the Church. The participation of faithful church members among those who lay hands in ordination affirms the understanding that ministry is not only maintained and passed on by those already ordained, but by the community of the body of Christ.

Part of being in the new relationship that ordination establishes is being accountable to the Uniting Church in some specific ways. Ministers are under the discipline of a presbytery; they are not freelancers, and cannot perform official functions without the authorisation of presbytery, given in their induction.

Is ordination just a functional issue given that we need order and leadership in the Church? Or, in ordination, is a person somehow changed in themselves and given a new authority? This has been a perennial discussion. For the Uniting Church, it is instead being called by Christ, as discerned by the Church, into a new relationship of general responsibility within the Church, in order that all may be equipped for their particular ministries. It follows that an instrumental understanding of ministry is inadequate; 'doing the job' of a minister cannot be reduced to mere performance without reference to substantive spiritual relationships. Discernment of a call by God through the Church is essential to decisions concerning ordination.

3. Commissioning: recognising particular tasks.

Not all 'specified ministries' in the Uniting Church are ordained ministries. Lay specified ministries are 'commissioned ministries'. Individuals are commissioned for a specific task, a specific role, a specific project, for a specific time in a specific place. Elders are commissioned by the congregation for the work and witness of the congregation. Lay Preachers are commissioned by the Presbytery for the specific task of reflecting on God's Word for our lives from a lay perspective (i.e., from the perspective of one whose vocation is lived out beyond the gathered Church). They often preach in a number of different congregations. Pastors will be commissioned for specific appointments designated by the Presbytery for a specific role or project. They offer leadership that draws a particular group or particular individuals into responsive participation in the mission of God, the ministry of Christ.

Insofar as a commissioned pastor or a lay preacher may be given responsibilities in the preaching of the Word, in presiding at the sacraments and serving and seeking justice, they may be said to be participating to a degree in the changed relationship that ordination conveys. However, there are two critical differences: firstly, this person will usually be limited geographically and in time in the practice of ministry, by the terms of appointment; secondly, the Uniting Church does not claim that this person is in a new relationship with the whole Church catholic. The commissioning is into a limited ministry within the Uniting Church only.

4. Formation and discernment of ministries

Formation is the process of finding our place in the ministry of Christ which is the mission of God in and for the world. That process is a continuing one: a journey. Formation is a part of the journey of the Christian life begun in baptism into the life, death and resurrection of Christ and of Christ's continuing ministry.

Preparation for baptism, confirmation or another reaffirmation of Baptism is formation. The 2003 Assembly instituted the 'Becoming Disciples' process which recognises the need for such formation and encourages congregations to help people enter intentionally into it. 'Becoming Disciples' is a process for members (and potential members) to grow together in faith, discover their particular gifts among the wide diversity of gifts the Holy Spirit gives, and be encouraged to develop the form of their service or ministry most appropriate to their gifts.

Formation does not cease after Baptism. It continues in the ongoing Christian life of worship, witness and service.

Ordained ministry presumes a life-long and continual formation in the body of Christ. The Church needs ordained ministers who learn to love and understand the body of Christ and its ministry in the world over lifetimes. The Church must be satisfied that a candidate for ordination demonstrates the commitment and character that is required for such a lifelong call to this ministry with particular responsibilities.

The call of the Church to be an ordained minister is a call to represent the living tradition of the Church, the universal nature of the Church, the oneness of the Church, and the mission of the Church. This is not only about leadership, or authority given for the ordering of the Church, or courses taken, it is a process in which the person re-evaluates their life in terms of the call of Christ.

The Christian Church has always tested and prepared ministerial candidates, and evaluated them for character and spiritual maturity. In the Uniting Church, the process of becoming ordained is a time both of the Church's testing of a person's calling and gifts, and of the person testing if God is calling her/him to enter the diaconate or the ministry of the Word. This process is often referred to as the formation of ministers. It is a partnership between the candidate for ministry and the Church which seeks to enable the candidate to find her or his place in the ministry of the Church. In the Uniting Church, the process of becoming ordained consists of several stages:

- Selection: an applicant meets with committees and panels appointed by congregation, presbytery and synod;
- Education and formation as determined by the Ministerial Education Commission;
- The receiving of a call to a placement;
- Ordination by prayer and the laying on of hands;
- Taking up the ministry in a particular placement.

Further, continuing education for ministry (CEM) is required of persons in ordained ministries.

This process underscores the importance of ordination through a protracted period of testing and training. The Church does not take it for granted that a person will be ordained, and there is no 'right' to ordination.

5. Statements by the Assembly

Statement on Ordination (1982)

* Report on Ministry (1991)

* Ordination and Ministry (1994)

* Affirmations on Ordination (1997)

* Sacramental Protocols (1997)

* The Church and its Ministry (2004)

(indicates statements contained in Bos, R. and Thompson, G., Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, Uniting Church Press, 2008)*