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The 15th Assembly decision on marriage sparked many conversations across the Uniting Church. These papers have been written as a resource to those ongoing conversations.

2 What is the substance of the faith?

Summary Sentence:

Across many differences of culture and doctrines, Christians can recognise each other as sharing together in core convictions about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To ask the question what is the substance of the Christian faith is a bit like asking, 'What is the core of the faith?' Or to put it more specifically: What is it without which Christianity would not exist and which allows Christians to recognise each other as Christians across their differences?

Nowhere in the resources of the Christian tradition are we given a clear and universally-agreed formal statement of the 'substance of the faith.' The statement that might come closest would be the one we share with the earliest Christians, 'Jesus is Lord.' The Nicene Creed would also be close, confessing as it does basic convictions about Jesus' relationship to God and God's works of creation and redemption.

In a denominationally-divided church, however, every particular church has its own way of discerning and submitting itself to what it believes is the substance of the faith of the whole church. In the case of the Uniting Church, to address that question, we are directed to the *Basis of Union*.

According to Paragraph 3, the faith which the church is called to confess is grounded in and generated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's work of reconciliation in him, Jesus' lordship over the whole creation, the coming reconciliation and renewal which will be the final consummation of God's work in Jesus Christ. Without these realities, Christianity would not exist.

We should also note the language of Paragraph 14. It is this paragraph that defines "adherence to the Basis of Union" as a "willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in the Basis of Union." The last few words are important: *as that way is described in the Basis of Union*. In other words, the *Basis* does not point to a pre-existing or external formula of the substance of the faith. The *Basis* itself offers its own confession of what this faith is. It is most explicit in doing so in Paragraph 3.

The Uniting Church is able to recognise those who share these convictions about Jesus' life, death and resurrection as fellow Christians even if we have different views on, for instance, the remarriage of divorced persons. Some churches disallow such marriages on the basis of the Gospels' record of Jesus' teaching (Mt 5:32; 19:9 c.f. Mk 10:10-11). The Uniting Church allows remarriage because it believes that this teaching is not of the substance of the faith.

Because we agree on more fundamental matters, our disagreements on remarriage do not prevent us from recognising each other as fellow Christians.

The biblical witness

Quotable Quote

Connections

Texts: 1 John 1:1-4; Col 2:9-17

Comment: Notice how 1 John, a letter written in the midst of theological controversy, begins by indicating that the theological basis of fellowship amongst Christians is a set of convictions about the incarnation. The Colossians reading includes a declaration about how diverse and controversial beliefs and practices are 'shadows' of Christ who is the 'substance'.

The expressions 'the faith' and 'the Deposit,' which had been handed on to the church through the apostles and which the church is enjoined to guard intact and hand on again, refer not merely to a body of belief in Christ but to the living substance and foundation of faith in Christ and what he has done for us and our salvation. It is in this sense that we are surely to understand the expression 'the substance of the faith.'

T. F. Torrance, "The substance of the faith," in Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics and Traditions, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 176.

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?

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**Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY**