

UCA RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS IN THE WCC 9TH ASSEMBLY'S TEXT, 'CALLED TO BE THE ONE CHURCH'

Towards the goal of full visible unity the churches are called to address recurrent matters in fresh, more pointed ways. Among the *questions to be addressed* continually by the churches are these:

- a. *To what extent can your church discern the faithful expression of the apostolic faith in its own life, prayer, and witness and in that of other churches?*
- The Uniting Church in Australia was established in 1977. "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".¹ The Basis of Union contains a clear commitment to seek a wider unity under the guidance of God's Spirit and the very name 'Uniting Church' implies that the process of union is incomplete. "The Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church recognizes that it is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission."²
- "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 it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church."³ The UCA accepts the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as normative for the expression of the apostolic faith.
- We can discern a faithful expression of the apostolic faith in our own life, prayer and witness, while acknowledging an awareness of our own shortcomings, unwise enthusiasms and mistakes. 'The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church 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.'⁴
- One of the most important developments in the life of the UCA has been the emergence of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, formed in 1985. Congress (UAICC) comprises Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander congregations and agencies within the UCA. The relation of Congress to the rest of the UCA is given in the form of a covenant. At this time, there are discussions aimed at renewing this covenant. We regard our mutual commitment as a faithful response to the Christian Gospel.
- Another important development is the recognition that the UCA is a multi-cultural church. This was affirmed in 1985 with an intentional commitment to multi-cultural ministry. This combines support for specific communities with promotion of the opportunities for learning and sharing of life across our cultural and linguistic differences. On one recent count, it was estimated that God is worshipped in the UCA in 41 different languages each Sunday. Many of these non-English-speaking congregations relate to UCA partner churches overseas. The UCA is still at an early stage of coming to terms with its own multi-cultural reality. We are finding that

¹ 'The Basis of Union' (1992 revision), 1.

² BoU, 2.

³ BoU, 5.

⁴ BoU, 9.

it is important to move well beyond 'tolerance' in embracing, valuing and learning from our cultural and ecclesial diversity through cross-cultural sharing. We regard our mutual commitment to each other as a faithful response to the Christian Gospel.

- Our decision to move to consensus methods of decision-making has been motivated by the need to value all voices within our councils for the contribution that they make to our collective discernment of the will of God. We regard the regular acceptance of the challenge of achieving consensus as a faithful discipline in the life of the UCA.
- The UCA continues to experience deep divisions around important issues of our church life. A current and salient example of this is the continuing unresolved tensions in our church over issues concerning sexuality and leadership. We do not yet see a clear way to a full resolution of this matter and believe that continued waiting on God is the most faithful response that we can currently make.
- The Uniting Church in Australia is a member church of the National Council of Churches of Australia, the Christian Conference of Asia, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council as well as the World Council of Churches. As such, it recognizes all other member churches of these bodies as churches.
- We can discern faithful expressions of the apostolic faith in other churches, particularly those churches which are members of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, whose life and witness is grounded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and the contemporary spiritual presence of the Risen Christ.
- We discern faithfulness to Christ in those churches which participate in the work of the National Council of Churches of Australia (currently fifteen full members, three churches applying for membership and other churches who join with the NCCA in certain activities). We particularly note the statement 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together'⁵, signed in 2004 by all fifteen NCCA member churches. In signing the Covenant, each of the fifteen member churches of the NCCA recognized one another as Communities of Faith, Hope and Love, committed to following Christ and pledged to serve God's kingdom.
- We welcome in this statement, 'Called to be the One Church', the emphasis upon a common participation in the apostolic mission of the church as a pathway into greater unity.
- The published liturgies of the UCA, 'Uniting in Worship' (1988) - both the Leader's and People's Books – and 'Uniting in Worship 2' (2005), include many of the historic prayers of the Church throughout the ages, agreed texts prepared by the English Language Liturgical Consultation and new texts specially written. The UCA also promotes the regular use of the Revised Common Lectionary.

b. Where does your church perceive fidelity to Christ in the faith and life of other churches?

- We discern fidelity to Christ in other churches through the language and the forms of worship that we use in common with them. The Uniting Church perceives fidelity to Christ in other churches where there is faithful proclamation of the Word of God and administration of the sacraments instituted by Christ.
- We discern fidelity to Christ where church members live gracious and loving lives which show a firm commitment to holiness and service.
- We discern in other churches a connectedness with the apostolic mission of Christ in our common actions of solidarity in service to the suffering world.

⁵ Copies available from the National Council of Churches in Australia.

- We discern fidelity to Christ particularly in those churches whose witness to Christ remains faithful under persecution and the martyrdom of some of its members.

c. Does your church recognize a common pattern of Christian initiation, grounded in baptism, in the life of other churches?

- Yes. In Australia, there is a mutual Recognition of the rite of Baptism that is agreed between ten churches, the Anglican Church of Australia, the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Congregational Federation of Australia, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Roman Catholic Church in Australia, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Uniting Church in Australia. 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by baptism. . . . The Uniting Church will baptize those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment the Church takes responsibility.'⁶
- We also recognize as churches some which do not baptize, such as The Salvation Army and the Society of Friends.
- We also recognize as churches some which do not share our theology and practice of Baptism, such as the Baptist Churches and the Churches of Christ. To us, it seems that the important feature for them is the necessity of faith as a precondition of Baptism. Our understanding is that baptism incorporates us into the faith of Christ through the prevenient action of the triune God which reaches us through our own imperfect or unformed faith and the faith of others.
- We recognize that mutual recognition of baptism does not always lead to mutual recognition of a common pattern of Christian initiation, which can be seen, for example, in different understandings of confirmation.

d. Why does your church believe that it is necessary, or permissible, or not possible to share the Lord's Supper with those of other churches?

- "The Uniting Church acknowledges that the continuing presence of Christ with his people is signified and sealed by Christ in the Lord's Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church"⁷. We believe that Christ calls all baptized people to share in the Lord's Supper, so that it is necessary – and therefore permissible – to share the Lord's Supper with those of other churches. We believe that we come to the Lord's table as sinners in need of Christ's help and forgiveness. Our ecclesial divisions show our continuing, knowing disobedience to the prayer and the will of Christ for Christian unity. For the UCA, where the Lord's Supper is approached in penitence and faith, it is a powerful means of restoring unity.
- We respect the views of other churches who see the Lord's Supper as an expression of unity achieved, not a means to the fullness of unity, while affirming our strong belief that the Lord's Supper is a central means of receiving the gift of unity from God.
- We note that, in 2004, the UCA and the Churches of Christ were the only NCCA member churches that were prepared to make an unrestricted commitment to invite and welcome members of each other's church to share in the Eucharist according to pastoral need⁸.

e. In what ways is your church able to recognize the ordered ministries of other churches?

- "Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide 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,

⁶ BoU 7.

⁷ BoU 8.

⁸ ACCT, Dii.

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.”⁹ The UCA understands ordained ministry as a special calling to an individual person from the Risen Christ, received and affirmed by the church. We understand that for many churches, the essential ecclesial recognition of this special calling comes through the bishop who stands in historic succession from the apostles. While the UCA affirms the importance of episcopal oversight in the life of the church and the connection with Christ’s apostles, our form of this oversight and connection is primarily conciliar. The UCA is committed to ordaining women and men whose call from the Risen Christ into ordained ministry is recognized and affirmed by a Presbytery.

- The UCA does not re-ordain those ordained ministers seeking recognition in the UCA who come from churches such as the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox and United/Uniting Churches. In the case of ministers coming from some other churches, such as the Churches of Christ and the Baptist Churches, the question is whether or not there has been a recognizable ordination to life-long ministry. Where this is not apparent, ordination by the UCA takes place.
- Mutual recognition of ordained ministries is the current aim of the dialogues between the UCA and the Anglican Church of Australia¹⁰ and between the UCA and the Lutheran Church of Australia.

f. To what extent can your church share the spirituality of other churches?

- “The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God’s eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.”¹¹ Through its central commitment to being in fellowship with the whole church which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, the UCA is open to the spirituality of each of the other churches with which we have relationships. We acknowledge the degree to which our corporate spiritual life has been formed and enriched by our participation in the ecumenical movement.
- The antecedent churches of the Uniting Church (Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian) joined with the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches to produce ‘The Australian Hymn Book’ (1977); its revision ‘Together in Song’ (1999) was the work of representatives from the Churches of Christ and the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Churches. In addition, UCA congregations also use a wide variety of hymns from many sources, including the Iona and Taize communities.
- We acknowledge that since 1977, the UCA has incorporated into its life many forms of spirituality from other Christian traditions, such as spiritual direction, meditative retreats and Pentecostal-style praise and worship. Individual congregations continue to develop fresh styles of meeting and worship in response to the availability of widely diverse resources.

⁹ BoU, 14a.

¹⁰ The most notable result of this bilateral dialogue has been ‘For the Sake of the Gospel: Mutual Recognition of Ordained Ministries in the Anglican and Uniting Churches in Australia’, a discussion document produced in 2001 and received by both churches. It includes substantial affirmations, such as: ‘We see in each other’s churches an authentic desire to witness faithfully to the Gospel and to be engaged in God’s mission in the world.. . . we affirm that in each of our ordained ministries there is a real and effective expression of the proclamation of the Word, an authentic celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, and an accountable practice of pastoral oversight. . . . we recognize in each other’s churches the presence of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

¹¹ BoU, 18.

- A common feature of UCA spirituality could be characterized as a 'spirituality for justice', particularly visible in prayers of confession and lament, prayers for the world and a 'way of being in the world' with a heart for welfare and justice.

g. How will your church stand with other churches to contend with problems such as social and political hegemonies, persecution, oppression, poverty, and violence?

- The UCA participates in the responses of the ecumenical movement (NCCA, WCC, CCA and WARC in particular) to these socio-political problems. "Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith"¹². The UCA Assembly¹³ has agencies dedicated to research and action in these areas such as UnitingJustice, Uniting International Mission and the Uniting Church Overseas Aid. The UnitingCare network of agencies is the largest non-government welfare provider in Australia. The UCA also co-operates fully in the work of the NCCA and Christian World Service, the aid and advocacy agency of the NCCA. Our leaders join with other Heads of Churches in addressing particular issues with the Federal government and with state governments, both on a regular basis where this is possible and in relation to specific issues of concern. One recent focus of activity has been actions of solidarity with refugees. Another recent solidarity action has been with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines concerning the spate of murders of civil society activists, including church workers, in that country.
- Recognizing the crucial importance for the future of Australia of a just reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the UCA has entered into a covenanted relationship between the UAICC and the rest of the UCA. Until some acceptable form of national reconciliation has been achieved between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the witness for justice of Australian Churches, including the UCA, will remain unfulfilled. The UCA affirms the desire of Congress to explore closer co-operation with other indigenous sections of Australian churches.
- The Uniting Church supports people in need by prayer, by providing them with practical help where this is possible and by raising awareness of their plight with government and the wider community.
- Together with other churches, the Uniting Church celebrates Social Justice Sunday in September each year, and it distributes to all congregations the NCCA resource kit. Resources are also provided by the NCCA on an annual basis for Simply Sharing Week, Refugee and Migrant Sunday, the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation and for Christian Unity and the Christmas Bowl. Kits are also produced by the NCCA for specific campaigns such as the Decade to Overcome Violence and Make Indigenous Poverty History.

h. To what extent does your church share with other churches in the apostolic mission?

- The UCA "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 the Uniting Church commits itself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific."¹⁴ The UCA has entered into partnership in mission with 33 churches in Asia, in the Pacific and in Southern Africa.
- "The Uniting Church in Australia declares its desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other churches."¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the UCA is the only NCCA member church to commit itself to all of the forms of sharing that are listed in 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together'.

¹² BoU, 4.

¹³ The UCA Assembly is the national council of the UCA.

¹⁴ BoU, 2.

¹⁵ BoU, 2.

The UCA participates fully in the life and work of the NCCA. At Synod level, we co-operate with other churches in relating to State governments. At more local levels, there are frequently close relationships between the Uniting Church and other churches. These close relationships sometimes find expression in forms of relating to the wider community, often through local government. Local co-operation between churches has in many Australian communities given rise to public celebrations such as Carols by Candlelight in Advent and Palm Sunday or Good Friday processions.

- The UCA participates in a significant number of joint congregations with Anglican, Baptist, Churches of Christ and Lutheran Churches. There are more numerous local examples of the sharing of church buildings with other churches. The UCA supports fresh mission initiatives through synod, presbytery and congregational budgets. We note with regret that there appears to be some resurgence of denominationalism in Australia, partly due to the adverse pressures on Christian faith coming from the secular Australian culture and partly from an inward-looking concern for church structures, to the detriment of Christian mission.
- Some of the mission work of the UCA is channeled through the state ecumenical councils. State ecumenical councils are significant agents of communication, agenda-setting and common action between the churches. As one notable example, Uniting Church chaplains, together with those of other churches, exercise an ecumenical ministry in schools, universities, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and the armed services. The UCA has participated for many years in the provision of religious education in some government schools, on an ecumenical basis.

i. To what extent can your church share with other churches in faith formation and theological education?

- The UCA co-operates with other churches in its theological education of ministerial candidates in its six theological colleges, though the pattern of co-operation is different in each place. Nungalinga College in Darwin is based on co-operation between the UCA, the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran and the Anglican Churches. Wontulp-bi-Buya is an ecumenical theological education network primarily used by indigenous people in Queensland. In Perth, the UCA joins with the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches to form the Department of Theology at Murdoch University. In Adelaide, the UCA Parkin-Wesley College joins with the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church in forming the Adelaide College of Divinity and the School of Theology of Flinders University. In Melbourne, the Uniting Church Theological College forms the United Faculty of Theology with the Jesuit Theological College and Trinity (Anglican) Theological College. The United Faculty of Theology is an Associated Teaching Institution of the Melbourne College of Divinity, itself an old, established institution based upon ecumenical sharing between the UCA, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Churches of Christ and Baptist Churches. In Sydney, the United Theological College is now fully linked with Charles Sturt University and shares with St Mark's National Theological Centre in the Charles Sturt University (CSU) School of Theology. The United Theological College continues to relate to the Sydney College of Divinity, another old, established institution based upon ecumenical sharing between the UCA, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. In Queensland, Trinity Theological College (UCA) participates fully in the Brisbane College of Theology, based upon co-operation between the UCA, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. Academically recognized theological degrees in Australia are usually awarded by an ecumenically based body in which the UCA participates or by an Australian University.
- The UCA offers various forms of support for theological education in our partner churches. A significant number of graduate students in theological disciplines come to study at UCA-related institutions in Australia from UCA partner churches in Asia and the Pacific. The Alan Walker College of Evangelism, a College that is related to the UCA, runs courses which are mainly for members of UCA partner churches and other churches in the Pacific.
- Through its theological teachers, the UCA participates fully in professional theological associations, notably the Australian and New Zealand Society for Theological Studies and the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools.

- Specifically theological libraries have been formed through inter-church co-operation, to the significant enhancement of their usefulness. A prominent example is the Dalton-McCaughey library based in Ormond College, Melbourne, named for the first president of the UCA, the Rev. Professor Davis McCaughey and Fr. William Dalton SJ. This library comprises an integration of the library of the Jesuit Theological College with that of the UCA Theological College.
- Theological study is also available in the form of distance education through Coolamon College, another UCA agency. There are 29 different Christian denominations represented in the student body of Coolamon College.
- Many schools are run or supported by the UCA, either alone or on an ecumenical basis. These schools will usually have chaplains, a religious education programme and opportunities for some form of Christian worship and formation.
- Faith formation is one of the central responsibilities of UCA congregations. Faith formation also happens on an ecumenical basis through the general sharing of life between the churches already mentioned. The UCA co-operates with two other Australian churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, in their development of their contemporary versions of the traditional catechumenal formation process.
- In many communities, particularly in rural areas where Christian education for children through Sunday school is no longer sustainable, ecumenical efforts have co-operatively incorporated Advent workshops into after-school faith/education programmes.

j. How fully can your church share in prayer with other churches?

- All member churches of the NCCA, in signing 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together', have agreed to join in common prayer with one another and to intercede and care for one another. For the UCA, there are no theological or liturgical impediments to sharing in prayer with other churches. The major difficulty arises with the Eucharistic question mentioned earlier. However, the UCA at all levels encourages people to seek to share as fully as possible in prayer with other churches. This is the most common form of local ecumenical sharing.
- The Uniting Church promotes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the World Day of Prayer and ecumenical services arranged by Australian Church Women.
- In many local areas, Uniting Church congregations share in worship with other churches, especially during the major Christian festivals – Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost – and as part of community events, including responses to community crises.
- The UCA participates with state Ecumenical Councils and more local ecumenical bodies in arranging gatherings for inter-faith prayers at times of international and community crisis, such as the onset of war and the recent Asian Tsunami. There is also a growing realization of the importance of interfaith dialogue, both for its own sake and for building community peace.

In addressing these questions churches will be challenged to recognise areas for renewal in their own lives, and new opportunities to deepen relations with those of other traditions.