

Theological Foundations for a Covenant as an Expression of the relationship between the UAICC and other parts of the Uniting Church

Preface

This paper is a support document for the paper presented to the 2006 Assembly entitled “Developing a Covenant as an Expression of the relationship between the UAICC and other parts of the Uniting Church”

In this paper we have tried to develop further some of the issues raised in the Assembly document.

As we said in the Assembly Document, while we have been the actual writers of the two documents/ papers, the ideas have emerged and been refined in meetings held between the UAICC and the General Secretaries of the Synods and Assembly. We also owe particular thanks to John Adams (a national staff person of the UAICC) for his work on justice, and Clive Pearson (acting-Principal at UTC, Sydney) for his comments on the way the material has been organized. Neither, of course, can be held responsible for what has finally emerged.

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Preamble

Twenty One years ago the UCA recognized the UAICC as a body that is, in the language of the Constitution of the Uniting Church, “recognized by the Assembly as having responsibility for the oversight of the ministry of the Church with Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia”. (Section 3)

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress exists to encourage Indigenous people to be a sign of the Kingdom of God, a people of holistic evangelism, a people with the ability for self-determination and access to support and resources.

The decision to recognize the Congress was part of the UCA’s understanding of the difficult relationships and struggles which exist in Australia because of our colonial history and its continuing impact on Indigenous people in this land.

In 1988 the Assembly and the Congress entered into a covenant as an expression of the relationship between the UAICC and other parts of the UCA. The Covenant expressed a commitment to a relationship which would enable Congress to have oversight over ministry with Indigenous people, and to share in the struggle for a more just and equitable society

Our present conversation has been shaped by a growing concern within Congress that the present relationship between the UAICC and the rest of the UCA does not allow Indigenous people to fully express their desire for self-determination, control of ministry, access to resources, or a proper voice in the Councils of the Church. Although there is a strong desire for continuing relationships with other parts of the UCA and for a place within the UCA, there is also a strong desire to develop the particular identity of the Congress as an Indigenous body within the church. There is a desire for a reconsideration of our relationship.

The ministry of the Congress and the whole of the UCA occurs in the following context:

- Indigenous people were the first people of the land and remain its owners and custodians.

- The identity of Indigenous people is rooted in the land. The earth is Mother, God is revealed through the land, and all of one's relationships depend on the land.
- The modern Australian nation was built on a history of colonial invasion which led to the destruction of language and culture, the stealing of land, absence of respect, and the perpetuation of violence, abuse and exploitation.
- This colonial history has created the climate for continuing disadvantage. In 2001 there were 460,140 Indigenous people in Australia, representing 2.4% of the national population. This community:
 - Is over-represented in the gaol population
 - Suffers significant disadvantage in education, employment, and health.
 - Has a lower life expectancy, and higher suicide rate

The birth of the Congress was a reaction by its founders to the discrimination and injustice suffered by Indigenous Australians and their relative powerlessness within Australian society and the church. This situation continues today. The small membership of Congress means that it is easy for its voice to be overlooked or dismissed in Synod, Assembly and other meetings. We are called to consider how we can ensure that this does not happen.

The present task

This document arises from a request of the ASC that, in the light of concerns expressed after the 2003 Assembly, the issue of a new covenant be considered. The 2003 Assembly resolved:

“ ...

- (b) to assure the UAICC of the strong desire of the UCA to continue to live under God in the covenant relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous members of the Church;
- (c) to request the President to ensure that steps are taken as soon as possible to participate with the UAICC in response to their and our concerns for the future of the covenant relationship;
- (d) to request the Standing Committee to consider ways in which the Assembly decision-making procedures may become more culturally sensitive and more informed by our cultural diversity.” (Minute 03.44)

In response to this decision the National Executive of the UAICC determined:

“The National Executive is of one mind that the UAICC and the UCA should work toward redefining their relationship and reshaping the covenant agreement **to better achieve more equal power sharing and greater autonomy for the UAICC within the overall structures of the Uniting Church.**” (Minute 11/03. 16)

Initially the Assembly General Secretary, the Synod General Secretaries and the Executive of the UAICC, being concerned for the impact of the Assembly meeting on the UCA's relationship with Congress, took up the task of exploring those relationships. This led to concern for Covenant, and the practical expression of that covenant relationship, and to a sharing of these matters with the Assembly Standing Committee. The ASC has continued to give oversight to this task.

This material is written by a group of people who have struggled for some time to understand our need of each other, and to celebrate our difference as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Australian community. We have sought to understand what it means to be at some level strangers, people of different cultures, experiences, religious life, and place within the colonial history and invasion that marks the modern history of this country. Indeed, our desire for Covenant is a desire to understand how as strangers we can

embrace in a way that does not crush and assimilate us into one, indistinguishable community.

We are willing to do this because, whatever the nature of the differences which make us strangers to each other, we are bound by our faith in Jesus Christ as brothers and sisters, and by our common identity as ‘aliens and exiles’ (1 Peter 2:11).

This document is in two parts:

- Theological foundations
- The Covenant

Readers are encouraged to see the document presented to the Assembly for further suggestions about the practical implications of covenanting.

It is important that we understand that the three parts of this conversation (theological foundations, the actual covenant, and the practical implications) are interwoven and interdependent. The drafting group found it was helped to understand the three parts and their relationship when it drew on the covenant of marriage, and what it illustrates about theology, covenant commitment, and practical living.

- When we think about marriage we can begin with a theology of marriage that helps us to understand the nature of marriage and its place within God’s purposes for humankind. The Theological section of this document seeks to explain the way in which we relate together, our common discipleship, the foundations for our common life as Christian people, and what we believe our relationships means.
- The marriage service speaks about the actual relationship of the couple being married, their commitments and their hopes. It reminds them how the Church’s understanding of marriage actually touches their lives. The Covenant statement within this document is the statement of our particular commitment – it rehearses our relationship, indicates our commitment, spells out our understanding of the relationship and our hopes for it. There is a statement of our understanding of covenant.
- After the wedding, couples must sort out their living arrangements, the things they will do together, how their lives will be lived together as they deal with the practical matters of life in the light of their understanding of marriage and the promises they have made. The third section of this document sets out our understanding of how we will actually live together. It explores the way we relate, the roles and authorities people have, the way we meet together, the way resources are shared.

It is not a simple, linear development – theology, covenant, practice. We develop a theology in the first place to explain how our practices fit into the purposes of God. We use that theology, and the covenant which seeks to reflect that theology, as a way of checking if our practices are appropriate. But we also use our practices to check whether the theology really is helpful in expressing our understanding of God and Christian discipleship. There is a moving back and forth – a way of re-enforcing, checking, calling to confession and repentance and new beginnings.

Two major assumptions

As a Catholic, Reformed and Evangelical Christian community we claim that we are saved through grace alone through faith alone in Christ. Justification (being put right with God) and sanctification (being made holy) are what grace achieves in the community of faith. That is, God both frees and forgives us out of deep love, and forms us into a pattern of living that reflects that freeing love. Beliefs make practices intentional. We seek to live lives where God’s grace takes actual shape among people

For the Uniting Church in Australia how we understand our faith, and how we put that faith into practice is inescapably tied up with our relationship with Indigenous people. This theological imperative is not merely a case of social justice, although that is important. How a church that has its roots in a colonial history relates to an Indigenous people is also part of the bigger question of who Christ is for us in this place, in this here and now. The theological issue at stake is one of redemption, healing, wholeness, reconciliation and forgiveness. All of these concerns involve our response to Christ's call to take up our cross and follow in the Spirit of the risen Lord.

As a Church we have to make sense of the suffering of Indigenous people as a result of colonial history in which the church shares, and we have to find a new foundation for the relationships which exist in the Church between Indigenous people as the First peoples of the land and all those who have come since.

Second, this is a conversation which is best served by us talking about the 'first peoples and those who have come after'. As the original people of the land, placed here through the gracious purposes and actions of God, Indigenous people are First people and remain First people even in the church. This is not the first of 'privilege' but of respect for their place in this land and their experience of God in this place, and of the need for them to be treated justly. It is respect for their voice and wisdom, and for how they have incarnated life.

To speak this way highlight two things:

- it is inappropriate for the church to see its relationship with Indigenous people as another part of our multi-cultural relationships. Indigenous people are not another migrant-ethnic community, but the original inhabitants, the first people of the land and, thus, the relationship must be marked by all that this implies.
- All the rest of us are the people who came after. It is not that Europeans are somehow a special group, and then there are others who have come. We all came as immigrant people, and we all need to explore what this means for our relationship with Aboriginal and Islander peoples.

To be a church in Australia we need to take seriously the fact that Indigenous people are the first people of this country. We will need to wrestle with such questions as: "How then does this relate to the theological claim that all people are equal before God? What does being 'first people' have to do with faith in Christ and the life of the church? Why are people treated differently? How does the mission of the church and, particularly, the task of evangelism relate to cultural identity and traditional spirituality?"

There is a need for repentance and renewal in the Church. These are not simply matters of intellectual assent, but of the heart and desire. These are matters of our real commitments, and of the way we are faithful to Jesus Christ.

It is hoped what follows will provide a solid foundation for a discussion about Covenant and what it means in our life. The prayer is that it will lead to the building of relationships, to a new engagement with issues of justice in Australian society, to change that only comes as we are involved in practices and ways of doing things that reflect who we really are as the Church of the crucified Christ.

Theological Foundations

Introduction

What is the foundation for our relationship with each? How does our following of Christ shape the way in which we seek to be church together? This section seeks to develop the theological foundations that provide a basis for the particular covenantal relationship which exists between Indigenous people and other members of the Uniting Church.

The present is a time in which we are called to constantly live with and encounter others. We are human as we celebrate our need for the other, and our ability to embrace them in their difference and otherness, to recognise, acknowledge and find a place for those who are not bound by our laws, memories, language and silences.¹

To be human is to relate to other people in all their diversity and difference. It is to accept that we cannot be human beings as isolated individuals, yet at the same time as we embrace and relate to the other we must give them space to be themselves (and not simply a mirror image of ourselves).

As Miroslav Volf reminds us, when we embrace another person we both open our arms to provide space for the other, and we close our arms around them when they come.

The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the others to come and feel at home with me, to belong to me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the others – not tightly, so as to crush and assimilate them forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently, so as to tell them that I do not want to be without them and their otherness. I want them to remain independent and true to their genuine selves, to maintain their identity and as such become part of me so that they can enrich me with what they have and I do not.²

Gospel, culture and identity

Whether we be Indigenous people or peoples of the many other cultures which have come into this country, we share the realization as Christians that we share the identity of Jesus Christ who “came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1: 11). We are always a people in but not of the world. As Volf says:

It is not at the disposal of Christians whether to be alien in their own culture. The ‘difference’ from one’s own culture – from the concrete world one inhabits – is essential to the Christians’ cultural identity.³

This does not mean we deny our culture or flee from it when we become Christians, as if there is some ‘Christian culture’ that only Christians share.

Rather, to be alien and exile must be a way of living *in* a culture and *for* a culture. In biblical terminology, the kingdom of God is not *of* this world, but it is *in* this world and *for* this world.⁴

The reason for this distance from my culture is because, as Paul writes, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5: 17). That is, when we become disciples of Christ, our life is a sign of the new reality, the new creation, that is found in God. Our identity is found in Christ, and not simply in our culture (whatever culture that may be).

¹Miroslav Volf “Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the wake of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ in Judith M. Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging* (Trinity Press International, 1997) p. 41 Volf is a native Croatian who writes out of his firsthand experience of the vicious war in the former Yugoslavia.

²Volf pp. 58-59

³Volf p. 42

⁴Volf p. 43

Because my life is in Christ, I am open to all others, including my own culture. I am distant from my particular culture so that I might be able to transcend all exclusion of people of other cultures.

Christians are not simply aliens in their own culture; they are aliens that are at home in every culture because they are open to every culture.⁵

Thus, we share a common struggle: to discover how as people of different cultures we might embrace the otherness we find in each other as people of shared faith, and to discover from each other what it might mean that the first part of our identity is always 'Christian'. We are 'Christian' Indigenous people, and we are 'Christian' people of other cultures, and our common struggle is to know what we affirm and question in our cultures, and what this means for how we are church.

Understanding our theological location

All our knowing – of each other and of God – is conditioned by the context in which we exist, by the time and place (geographical and social) in which we live. Context alters meaning. We are a people who are shaped by our age, gender, ethnicity, language, social class, and place in time and country. Where we are located will shape the way in which we see, interpret and value the world, it involves who we are and what we bring to our understanding of faith.

One of those locations is our theological location. By theological location we mean the sense of where God is in the world, who God sits with, and has a special care for. Jesus sat with outcasts and sinners, he looked at the world through the eyes of those who were given no place in society. When he was confronted by the sick he saw their need for healing, and ignored the view of those who thought the issue was protection of the law. He saw through the eyes of the woman caught in adultery (who were the really sinful people in that story?) and the Good Samaritan.

The Uniting Church has seen the call to solidarity and justice, to a sense of theological location that places us alongside those who struggle most, as an outworking of our vision of God, salvation and the call of the church within the Mission of God.

The challenge in this conversation is for non-Indigenous people to share, as far as that is possible (and it is never completely possible), the location of Indigenous people and the way in which they see and experience this issue of Covenant. There is a commitment to sit with Indigenous people, to try to see through their eyes, to understand the world and God through their experiences. It is about sympathetic hearing, and effort to walk where others walk, and remain open to other ways of living in this world.

The theological foundations of our relationship

This theological foundation is written to provide a way for us, as members of the Uniting Church, to consider the relationships which mark our life. It seems helpful, therefore, to begin our reflection by thinking about the nature of God who is revealed in the suffering of Jesus and whose life is best described as Trinity (i.e. Father, Son and Holy Spirit in community). That is, we begin by thinking about the sort of relationships which exist for a people whose God allowed suffering love to be at the heart of God's relationship with humanity, and whose life is an expression of unity in diversity.

The Suffering heart of God

⁵ Volf p. 44

What difference does it make to the life of the church that we understand Jesus to be the one who chose to be located in human life among those who were sinners and outcasts (e.g. Luke 15: 1-2), and whose saving location was painful death on a cross? What does that say about the nature of the relationships which should exist between us?

An ancient claim of the Church is that God is seen as the all powerful, all controlling alternative to our brief human existence. Our foundational assumption about God is more likely to be “sheer might, authority, supremacy, potency” rather than “compassion, mercy, identification, grace, benevolence – *agape*”⁶.

Yet if we understand God most clearly in the life of Jesus, then we must see suffering as the heart of God rather than power. As Douglas John Hall says:

If we posit a God who both wills the existence of free creatures and the preservation and redemption of the world, then we must take with great seriousness the biblical narrative of a God whose providence is a mysterious internal and intentional involvement in history; a God, therefore, who is obliged by his own love to exercise his power quietly, subtly and, usually, responsively in relation to the always ambiguous and frequently evil deeds of free creatures; a God who will not impose rectitude upon the world but labor to bring existing wrong into the service of the good; a God, in short, who will suffer⁷.

Yet Paul reminds us that power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12: 9). God does not lack power, and could at any time have rescued Jesus and saved him from his suffering (see, for example Matthew 26: 53). Yet if the purpose of God is that we be God’s people in a close and wonderful relationship, if the point is to change and renew and befriend us, then love not power is the only way. St Francis knew this in his life as he sought to give expression to his understanding that God was in a non-hierarchical solidarity with God’s creatures.

There is, of course, a political function to the way we see God. A God of power is the One who guarantees and legitimates the power of earthly rulers and church authorities. Those who rule have little space for a God of suffering, love, compassion, justice or anything that qualifies power.

If we follow a God who is found in suffering, and in constant reaching into the life of the world with a compassion that calls us back into God’s life, we will build relationships, the community of the church and the structures that shape us on the basis of co-operation and sharing, and the desire to struggle together, rather than on hierarchical power and the need to force people to follow our wills.

God as the God of community (Trinity)

The way we understand our relationship together has its foundation in the way we understand the essential nature or heart of God as relationship and self-giving love, as Trinity, as three persons in joyful interaction.

We speak of Trinity because, in the light of the life of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we need to find ways to speak of God whose heart is costly love. God journeys into the far country of human existence, sin, brokenness, misery and struggle in ways that bring life, liberation and renewal.

In the family of churches to which we belong – Reformed and Evangelical – there has been a concern to emphasise the unity of God, the one-ness of the life of God, in order to

⁶ Douglas John Hall *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p. 77

⁷ Hall p. 87

combat any hint that 'Trinity' might have meant three gods. We often find it hard to know what the 'three' means in God. When we do express the relationship it is often in hierarchical terms, with the Father having authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit. To speak of God this way is to allow, indeed encourage, hierarchical relationships.

In the Eastern or Orthodox parts of the church, on the other hand, they have been clear about the equal importance on the three 'persons'. Their concern has been to see how the three find their unity or oneness.

The heart of God is personal life in relationship, rather than solitary isolation or a self-contained, unfeeling existence. One part of the Eastern tradition, which seems helpful, describes that life in relationship as being like a dance. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three who are continually indwelling, who "encircle each other, being united in an exquisite divine dance; or to use still another metaphor, they 'make room' for each other, are incomparably hospitable to each other"⁸. The unity within God is found in a changing, emerging, celebrating relationship that alters through the dance as God moves around those who share the floor.

This dancing God faces us not as a closed, monarchical entity but openly, as three persons in open, joyful interaction. Christ has gone to be part of this joyful life-together, and in him we are invited to *join* the wedding feast going on in God's heavenly household. We are addressed not as individuals, but as a community of women and men, brothers and sisters, parents and children. 'The socially open companionship between people,' Moltmann writes, 'is the form of life which corresponds to God'.⁹

The world exists because the love that holds the Trinity in its community bursts out into the need for other life, flows out into the desire for love for that which is not God. The act of hospitality, and the dance of love within the Trinity, also makes space for other life that is called into the love of God.

To speak of God as Trinity is to affirm that it is God who creates and sustains the world, who continues to speak a word that keeps the world going, and also brings salvation, healing and renewal. It is to speak of a Spirit that hovers over the whole world, so that none are separated from that presence. It is to speak of a God in whose heart is the desire for relationships and community and a people sharing God's story of the world; and to know that our lives are always significant enough to be in God's telling of the world's purpose.

Thus, we wish to suggest that the foundation of our life together as Congress and the rest of the UCA is the social nature of our being in God's image that allows for diversity and seeks joyful and open interaction. This dynamic nature allows us to celebrate diversity, rather than argue for it in the face of the demand for unity. Diversity and difference is our beginning point, a diversity we can celebrate and explore because we are bound together in a relationship whose heart is God. In that relationship we can explore many ways of expressing and exploring our unity and being together.

It is neither our sameness nor any organisational likeness that provides the basis for our relationship, but a common commitment to explore together our relationship with God and what that means for the wholeness of the earth and God's people.

If the triune God is self-giving love that liberates life and creates new and inclusive community, then there is no salvation for the creature apart from sharing in God's

⁸ Daniel L. Migliore *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2004. Second Edition) p. 79

⁹ Lewis S. Mudge *The Church as Moral Community: Ecclesiology and Ethics in Ecumenical Debate* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998) pp. 159-60

agapic way of life in solidarity and hope for the whole creation (cf. Rom. 8:18-39).¹⁰

Incarnation and concern for particular people

At the heart of God's Trinitarian life, and the life of Jesus Christ, is God's generous reaching out into the life of the creation. It is the story of incarnation, of becoming a particular life among a particular people.

The very idea of incarnation, as Douglas John Hall¹¹ reminds us, is concern for embodiment in a particular time and place. The incarnation is about Jesus being human and, thus, is about the socio-cultural and political particularity of Jesus' life. It is about what Luther described as God's 'deep sympathy with human weakness and wretchedness', situated in a particular geographical, social and political location.

The mission of God in Jesus Christ is an incarnational and contextual one, a movement of grace towards people. The life and death of Christ is an act of unconditional participation by God in the world. God has become *our* God, and has accommodated Godself to human weakness and struggle. The event of the cross is not simply an additional or special event; rather it is the culmination of God's movement towards the creation. The divine compassion of God is a movement of absolute grace and freedom, a turning to a world that God believes has such value, and is so good and beautiful that it is worth dying for. It is a moment of wonderful hospitality.

The incarnation points to the embodiment of human life, its daily ordinariness, and the way that fits into the purposes of God. It may be that faith in Christ challenges our ability to see any piece of land as part of the promise of salvation, yet we cannot be human apart from land, place, location, community and particular social situation. People can only be 'Indigenous' Christians or 'European-Australian' or Tongan-Australian' Christians, with all that implies about culture, experience, the place from which we see Christ.

The love that flowed from God into the creation of the world embraced all people, it was a hospitality that made space for each and every community in their struggle to know God. Like all other people, Indigenous people have been part of the divine dance.¹²

While the stories people tell are different, and give expression to different journeys with God, we wish to affirm that God was in the land with Indigenous people, and is recognized and honoured in the Dreaming and the law and the lives of the Indigenous community. There is no theological equivalent of *Terra Nullius*, no claim that the land was empty and unoccupied by God, or that the people lived with false claims and empty expectations. There is no claim that God was brought to Australia by the church but, rather, that we need to discover what it means to affirm the presence of God in this land from the beginning of creation.

We wish to affirm that God was known and active among Indigenous people. As the Rev Djinyini Gondarra has said in the preface to one of his books:

¹⁰ Migliore p. 81

¹¹ Douglas John Hall *Professing the Faith* (1993)

¹² The working group responsible for this paper has struggled with one issue that we still do not feel confident to make suggestions about: "what, in the providence of God, is the purpose of non-Indigenous people being in Australia?" It is an issue reflected in the Covenant promise to Abraham – that he would be given access to a land already occupied. What place did the Canaanites have in the purpose of a compassionate and just God? This is an issue of the way we understand the biblical witness, and the way we talk of the providence and purpose of God. So it is with the invasion of Australia a little over 200 years ago. How do we talk about this event? What does it mean in God's purpose? Was it simply a sinful act, that had no purpose in God's sight? What then do we do with this? We can only say we are aware of the issues, but have not yet been able to offer something helpful in the context of this paper.

This [booklet] will make us more aware of the fact that God was already active in Aboriginal people and was already present with our ancestors long before the early missionaries came to our country.

The Christian God was already at work through our customs and faith. And thus we affirm that God worked through our people and through our lives as Christians. Today, in our Christian understanding, God's saving act is through Jesus Christ. This points out to us that we should not consider one culture and faith inferior to the other, but rather should try hard to look for the good things in our traditional culture, and then take what is good and make both of them the means of praising God's name and glory.¹³

We also affirm that as disciples of Christ we see God revealed in new ways that may both affirm what Indigenous people know of God and may question that experience and way of seeing God. This is, of course, the case in all cultures and communities.

When Indigenous people come to understand who Christ is for them, it will always be as a people who have shared life with God, and who experience the world in a particular way. It is not that their experience is another version of the Old Testament, anymore than ours is, but an experience of God working uniquely with them.

Jesus Christ: God's love for the World

While we have begun our conversation with the Trinity, this is only possible because of what has been revealed of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The beginning of the relationship between indigenous Christians and other members of the UCA will always be our common faith in Christ.

What we hold in common is:

The heart of the Christian proclamation is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the good news of salvation and new life found in him. *The Basis of Union* says:

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' (2 Corinthians 5: 19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. (Paragraph 3)

The Bible, while speaking of the profound significance of the gospel for human life, is concerned primarily for what God has done and is doing in the world. It concentrates on the living, teaching, suffering and triumph of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love. Jesus 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 God on earth, reasserted God's claim over the whole creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone. (*Basis of Union* para 3)

The good news is about God, who, out of the deep love and desire for relationship, creates the universe and calls all life to a new and emerging household of LIFE. It is about the pain and suffering of God as we reject that relationship, and build a life that finds its heart

¹³ Djijini Gondarra *Let my people Go: Series of Reflections on Aboriginal Theology* (Bethel Presbytery, Northern Synod, 1986)

elsewhere. It is about the way God enters deeply into human life in Jesus Christ who proclaims the reign of God, the presence of God, the way of life that those who follow him should live, and who lives with a faithfulness that says that God and God's reign are worth dying for. It is about God's affirmation of that life and death, and of what that life does to the life of God and the way God's Spirit is present in the world.

The good news is the call to live with Christ, to shape our character, virtues and way of being in the world so that our lives show Christ's life in the world. This is the Christ who ate with sinners, mixed with outcasts, talked with women and foreigners in public, taught people to love their enemies, healed the sick, and reversed all ideas of importance and service. It is the Christ whose church has no place for distinctions of "male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free" (Galatians 3: 28).

The *Basis of Union* reminds us that the good news is both a present reality and a future promise.

... Jesus is head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of the coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation... The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring..." (Paragraph 3)

The church is the gathering of people who commit their lives to being friends and followers of Jesus, who offer praise and worship to God on behalf of the whole creation, encourage each other in discovering what it means to live as a people who bear the name 'Christian', and are a sign and foretaste of God's reign.

Out of our shared faith we believe that there are claims about God and the life affirmed in Scripture that provide a foundation for the way we respond to each other, and to the way we can build a new covenant.

Hospitality and Mission

Consideration of the relationship between the Congress and other parts of the UCA has generally been conceived in terms of the way the organisational unity of the church can be maintained. The matter has been seen as a matter of church polity and structure.

The section of this paper that spoke of Trinity suggested that the heart of God is 'hospitality' a making space for the life of others, and a welcoming of the other into our lives. This section suggests that we may benefit from thinking about relationships in the church more in terms of divine hospitality as that is expressed in the ministry of Jesus, and less organizationally.

Clive Pearson makes the point that

The notion of hospitality is a deeply biblical theme. It is to be found in both testaments and is closely related to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. It is found in fellowship meals, the care for the stranger, the one on the margins, the widow, the alien. It is found in parables and references that compare the kingdom [reign] of God to a banquet. It is to be found in the language of the eucharist / the Lord's table / communion. It is associated with the idea of being a 'companion' which literally means being one with whom we break bread, with whom we eat. It is a quite pivotal and foundational theme.

The biblical and theological tradition of hospitality presupposes difference, the welcome of the stranger. It is the exact opposite of the setting up of boundaries. It is the opposite of xenophobia where you are afraid of the other. It presupposes that

in the act of hosting the other that you become, in the process, their guest and in a sense they are hosting you back in return by simply being present. It is interesting that we get the ideas of hospital, hospice etc from this biblical understanding of hospitality. There are no strings attached.¹⁴

In a commentary on Luke's Gospel, Brendan Byrne¹⁵ says that in emphasizing hospitality events "the Gospel's essential purpose is to bring home to people a sense of the extravagance of God's love in their regard"¹⁶ He says:

'Hospitality' conjures up the context of guests, visitors, putting on meals for them, providing board and lodging, making strangers feel 'at home' in our home – enlarging our home to make that wider 'at home-ness' possible.¹⁷

The point is not that many events occur around meals in the gospels or that hospitality is a framework for Jesus' ministry. Rather

Luke sees the whole life and ministry of Jesus as a '*visitation*' on God's part to Israel and the world. From the start this raises the question: how will this guest be *received*? The crucial point is that those who do receive him find that he brings them into a much wider sphere of hospitality: the 'hospitality of God'. The One who comes as a visitor and guest in fact becomes *host* and offers a hospitality in which human beings and, potentially, the entire world, can become truly human, be at home, can *know* salvation in the depths of their heart.¹⁸

When Jesus responds to the hospitality of Zacchaeus, for example, and says to him "today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9), there are at least two things being said to us. First, salvation is about life now, and not just something for later. Salvation has to do with restoration to community, to being moved from the edges to the center of life, from being lost to being found within the hospitality of God and God's new people.

Second, salvation comes to Zacchaeus because he extends hospitality to Jesus.

Zacchaeus, one of the marginalized despite his wealth, provides hospitality to Jesus and finds in return the hospitality of God: a welcome into the community of salvation, his dignity and decency defended. At the same time, the exchange of hospitality that occurs between himself and Jesus enlarges the sphere of God's hospitality. It challenges the community to become more effectively a beachhead of the kingdom, where lost human beings can find welcome and new life in the grasp of a hospitable God.¹⁹

The issue being raised by the UAICC about its place within the UCA is a questioning of the way we have organized the world, of the structures and symbols which indicate where Indigenous people 'belong' – both in society and church.

All communities have symbols that express how they understand social order and meaning. In particular there are symbols that indicate social power, and group boundaries (who is inside and who is outside).

These symbols are fairly clear within religious systems (e.g. baptism as a ritual of entry, or rules about who can come to the Table), yet nations also do this with public events and rituals, national holidays and patriotic events (e.g. ANZAC day), and the events which surround elections.

¹⁴ Clive Pearson "Christ as Guest and Host". This was a resource paper prepared as part of sexuality discussions in the NSW Synod during 2003

¹⁵ Brendan Byrne *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's, 2000)

¹⁶ Byrne p. 2

¹⁷ Byrne p. 4

¹⁸ Byrne p. 4

¹⁹ Byrne p. 152. It should be acknowledged that there is significant disagreement among scholars over this point. While Byrne represents the position of a significant minority of scholars in regard to the meaning of this text, it is not universally agreed.

These symbols, celebrations and rituals re-enforce a person's social location, their place in society, around such issues as class, race, gender or sexuality. They are also intended to indicate who should be excluded from society, or who should be on the margins.

Miroslav Volf reminds us that Jesus was concerned for the way in which religious leaders defined sin so that some people became social outcasts. In part his mission was to “demask the mechanisms that created ‘sinners’ by falsely ascribing sinfulness to those who were considered socially unacceptable”²⁰ This was a mission of renaming. This mission was inseparable from a mission of re-making – calling people to repentance, and offering forgiveness.

The mission of re-naming what was falsely labeled ‘unclean’ aimed at abolishing the warped system of exclusion – what people “call clean” – in the name of an order of things that God, the creator and sustainer of life, has “made clean” (cf. Acts 10: 5)... In addition to removing the label “unclean” placed on the things that were clean, Jesus made clean things out of truly unclean things... The mission of re-making impure people into pure people aimed at tearing down the barriers created by wrongdoing in the name of God, the redeemer and restorer of life, whose love knows no boundaries.²¹

The challenge in this conversation about covenant and new structures is how we will become “more effectively a beachhead of the kingdom”, a place of hospitality.

The danger in language of hospitality

The danger in of making ‘hospitality’ central to our theology is that non-Indigenous people will again explore this image in a condescending and power retaining way. It will be assumed that they are offering the hospitality to Indigenous people, that the house belongs to them to share if they will with others, that they create the opportunity for others to know the hospitality of God.

We need to recognise and name the racism which still marks this country and which the church participates in. The tone and perspective of media reports still show the stereotypes that mark our society, the ‘good citizenship’ images that are juxtaposed with claims about Indigenous people, the view that people are recipients of ‘our’ help rather than responsible and free adults. We move between a refusal to trust people with control over their own lives, and an unwillingness to move beyond rescue to allowing people to be accountable and responsible for their own behaviour. In the church there still remains the sense that this is our church, and it is up to us to decide how others will participate.

The issue, in fact, is about the way the Church recognizes that it is guest, and that the hosts are Indigenous people on whose land we live. How do we learn to become a guest and stop acting as the householder who offers others a space?

But, more importantly, it is about how our relationship can be understood as *mutual* hospitality that opens us up in new ways to the hospitality of God. How can we see our relationship and the structures of the church as a way of finding “at home-ness”, rather than a structure that all must fit into in the same way?

Our Theological foundation and Christian life

²⁰ Miroslav Volf *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 72

²¹ Volf p. 73

What does this foundation imply for the way we live our life as Uniting Church and as individual Christians? What are the ethical implications, the praxis implied in our concern for God and the saving work of Jesus?

Jesus sought to create a new outlook on life, to suggest new ways for people to live. The heart of this new life is summarized in the Beatitudes:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 1-12 NRSV)

Here is the preamble to the new way of life for the people of God, the new covenant between God and the people who are disciples of Jesus (notice that it is spoken to disciples not the whole crowd (vs 1). This is the blueprint for the reign of God which Jesus establishes and of which the Church is meant to be a sign and foretaste.

The way we understand 'justice'

One of the important issues which influences the way in which our faith shapes the relationship between the UAICC and UCA is the way in which we understand 'justice'. We are helped in our understanding by considering (i) the way justice can be understood in the criminal justice system, (ii) a more general understanding of justice, and (iii) some aspects of the biblical understanding of justice.²²

(i) Retributive and restorative justice

Within our current judicial system there are two basic kinds of justice: retributive justice (including rehabilitative justice) and restorative justice.

Retributive justice assumes that justice is achieved when people are punished for their breach of the law (the crime being a crime against the state). In order that the person may not continue to commit crimes, it is hoped that the punishment might also lead to rehabilitation. In this system of justice victims are largely reduced to the status of witnesses, and offenders to the status of spectators, in a contest about the law.

A key characteristic of restorative justice is that it centers on the victim, and that a crime is a violation not simply of the law but of people and relationships. In order to achieve restorative justice the offender is primarily accountable to the victim and then to the community. So, for example, the offender may be required to meet with the victim, hear the story of what their crime has done to the victim, and make restitution for what they have done.

²² This section owes a great deal to the writing of Rev John Adams, staff worker for the UAICC.

The crime of colonisation and dispossession committed against Indigenous people has happened. It cannot be denied. It was a fundamental violation of people and relationships, which will forever create obligations to make things right.

If Indigenous people had had access to retributive justice in dealing with the crimes of invasion and colonisation, then we would have seen the instigation of mechanisms such as war crimes tribunals and forced repatriation of colonists (rehabilitation!) conducted under Aboriginal and International law. Not only is such a thing unlikely in our society and world, but it would contradict the church's understanding of the way justice is best pursued.

Rather, the conversation about covenant and treaty, about sharing of resources, access to just structures, and building new relationships, places the victims at the center of our concern, and invites us to consider what restorative justice might mean.

(ii) Distributive and end-pattern justice.

Debates in Australia about positive discrimination (e.g. the setting of quotas to ensure that women are represented in committees or jobs) have revolved around the nature of justice. The understanding of justice which has its roots in liberal political philosophy and law, and which is known as 'distributive justice', says that justice means that all people are treated the same. This is an important understanding of justice, particularly in the legal system, for it seeks to ensure that people are dealt with according to the merits of the case, regardless of their wealth, gender, ethnicity or other factors.

But in many areas of life this understanding of justice simply ignores the realities of power in our community. In many situations treating everybody the same inevitably means that outcomes will always be unjust. So, for example, if a particular community has been denied access to equal education or if a culture exists in which a particular group defines the work situation, then equal treatment or equal access will mean some do not get a fair go.

That is why 'positive discrimination' is based on an understanding of 'end pattern' justice. That is, a situation is not just simply because all people are treated the same, but because people have an equal opportunity to achieve the same results. This may mean that some people receive additional help to overcome historic and social factors that discriminate against them.

Thus, for example, conversations about resource sharing are based not only on an understanding of restorative justice in regard to the history of the nation, but on issues of 'end pattern' justice and the need to ensure equal outcomes after generations of discrimination and social situations which make equal outcomes unlikely.

(iii) Redistributive Justice.

This sense of 'end pattern' justice is closely tied to what biblical commentator Ched Myers calls redistributive justice.²³ This is a broad biblical concept of justice that is about shifting resources of power and wealth from the rich and powerful to the poor and oppressed in order to create a fair and equal society, the hallmarks of the kingdom of God. The process of distributive justice in the biblical narrative also includes the dynamics of reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation. They incorporate the principles of restorative justice.

As Myers²⁴ has argued, redistributive justice must involve, for the rich, the act of repentance. And there can be no repentance unless there is reparation to the poor. In his

²³ Ched Myers *Who will roll away the stone?* (New York: Orbis Books)

²⁴ Myers p. 166

analysis of the story of Jesus and the rich man (Mark 10: 17-31) he claims that economic justice (which includes giving back to the poor) is a hallmark of the kingdom and of discipleship.²⁵

Fairness in resource distribution is also about equality in power. Luke eloquently states this in the Magnificat (1: 46-55) – the revolutionary prescription of a transformed society under the reign of God announced by Mary upon the knowledge of her pregnancy:

“He has stretched out his hand and scattered the proud with all their plans.
He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.” (1: 51-53)

Power is redistributed (vss 51-52) and, at the same time, so are resources (vs 53). This is the nature of the kingdom of God.

Jubilee

One way in which the grace and hospitality of God is expressed is in the claims of the Jubilee. It is a working out of what is meant by justice.

Jesus most sharply brings this idea to our attention in his words in the synagogue at Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4: 18-19)

In declaring the year of the Lord’s favour Jesus is bringing to mind the promise of the Jubilee. Leviticus 19 instructs the people on habits of life that will sustain the community and protect the poor of the land. They are a people whom God has brought out of slavery to a new place and a new way of being. They are to reflect in their life the liberation that God has brought to them. In a later chapter this liberation extends to the way people deal with land and people.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years.... And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the undergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. (Leviticus 25: 8, 10-11)

John Howard Yoder points out that

The jubilee year or the Sabbath year included four prescriptions: (1) leaving the soil fallow, (2) the remission of debts, (3) the liberation of slaves, (4) the return to each individual of his family’s property.²⁶

These laws recognise that, over time, people will lose their land, make unwise decisions, have bad luck, not work as hard as others, get into debt. As a reminder of the giftedness of life, each fifty years the slaves are to be set free, and the land is to be returned. No, its not strictly fair, and it does seem to penalize the thrifty and reward some who may not have tried as hard. But the land was a gift, a sign of God’s care of the people. They are not to be alienated from that land, it is not to be seen simply as real estate. The basis for the

²⁵ Myers pp. 161ff

²⁶ John Howard Yoder *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972) p. 64

community's life and relationships and responsibility for each other cannot simply be measured the way our society does in terms of wealth, reliance on the free market and care only for the individual rather than the common good. Jubilee is about what needs to be done, over time, to ensure a just and inclusive society, to return the society to its Covenantal glory.

The foundational assumptions for Jubilee are well reflected in 1 Kings 21 – the clash between Naboth and the king. The king approaches Naboth with his need – he needs Naboth's land for extra garden space for the many guests that come to the palace. He is not wishing to be unjust, and will buy the land for a fair price, or swap it for another block somewhere else. For us this is a fair and reasonable exchange. But Naboth says that he has no right to do this thing that the king asks of him. This is his birthright, a sign of his place in the land, what God has given to his family as a sign of the covenant and their place in it. It is relational and belonging space, not real estate. Rejected, the king goes home, climbs into bed, turns his face to the wall and sulks. His wife comes from another place, and brings other values and understandings of land and kingship and honesty. She arranges for Naboth to be falsely accused of religious falsehood, and those who collude with the Queen (it is not easy to resist those with power) put him to death. Naboth is apparently without heirs, and the land reverts to the king. But the judgment of God is fierce on this king who betrays the very community which God desires, who has no place for hospitality, and who prefers to stand with and be an oppressor rather than being the representative of God and shepherd of God's people.

Yoder reminds us that Jesus not only opened his ministry in Luke by referring to the Jubilee (Luke 4: 18-19) but that his ministry was concerned for the way the Jubilee was enacted among the poor and dispossessed of the land. Jubilee was, for Jesus, one of the anticipatory signs of the reign of God.

There are a couple of references in Jesus' teaching, touching as they do on what it means to be a Jubilee community, that we need to hear in this context.

First, the demand for a fallow year was about trust – about the community's ability to trust that God would care for them during a year when they did not plant and sow. It is this which is reflected in Jesus' comments to his disciples that they must not be anxious because they have left fields and fishing, for God will care for them (Luke 12: 29-31). There is still a need for Sabbath and rest in our ministry, mission and life together.

Second, Yoder points out that when the Lord's Prayer speaks of forgiveness of debts, it is speaking of real financial debts. This is a jubilee prayer. And the difficult bit in the prayer is the claim that if we do not forgive the debts of others, then we cannot receive the grace of God. Our relationship with God rests in real acts of forgiveness of real debts.²⁷

In Jesus' day there was real struggle with the demands of the Jubilee, not least because people were unwilling to lend money if they knew that it might not be returned at the Jubilee. When considered with the law against interest (Exodus 22: 25), loans were extremely hard to get. In response to this situation the religious leaders had developed laws which allowed interest and provided ways for people to collect their debt even if the Jubilee arrived.

Jesus, suggested another way for his disciples – the rich are to be generous and not worry about the return of their money, for God will care for them. And those who have borrowed the money are to honour the generosity of the lender and seek to repay it, and not hide behind the Jubilee law.²⁸

²⁷ Yoder pp. 66-67

²⁸ Yoder pp. 68-70

Third, and the issue which may challenge us most, is the return of the only capital people knew in Jesus' world – land and the flocks. When Jesus says that we are to sell all and give alms (Luke 12: 33), we are faced with two questions: (i) did he mean that we should give from both our income and our capital, and (ii) was this command meant for all people or is it a 'counsel of perfection' aimed at some saintly people.

The church has assumed that we give of our income, and that only the particularly saintly should live without capital and the income it raises. Yet, drawing on such passages as Luke 11: 42 and Mark 12: 41-44, Yoder argues that the giving that Jesus demands of us is not simply from the money with which we live (a tithe on our income), but from the capital we use to make ourselves secure.

So when Jesus formulated the celebrated commandment, "Sell what you possess and give it as alms" (a better translation would be, "sell what you possess and put in practice compassion), this was not a "counsel of perfection," but neither was it a constitutional law to found a utopian state of Israel. It was a jubilee ordinance which was to be put into practice here and now, once, in A. D. 26, as a "refreshment," prefiguring the "reestablishment of all things."

Such a redistribution of capital, accomplished every fifty years by faithfulness to the righteous will of God and in the expectation of the kingdom, would today be nothing utopian.²⁹

Rather it would be a realistic and faithful response to real human need.

There is in this a deep challenge to the Australian community and church. When will there be a Jubilee in this country? When will there be a return of the land, a re-distribution of the capital held, a waiving of the interest on the money borrowed by those who are poor in the pursuit of ministry?? When will there be a recognition that there can be no just and inclusive community without a return of land that is not simply a real estate transaction? How can the actions of the church be a foretaste of the coming of God?

As colonialist white inheritors of privilege, non-Indigenous Uniting Church members can neither ask for nor expect forgiveness from the dispossessed Indigenous people. We can only create the conditions for reconciliation "and we do this by practicing reparation as a good faith sign of our repentance"³⁰

Conclusion

Because churches have played a prominent role in colonisation, we have a particular responsibility. We have taken important steps in the past as we have recognised the UAICC, entered into a Covenant, made an apology for the stolen generations affected by our past practices, and expressed our shame at the failure to stand by the people of Mapoon in North Queensland whose community we allowed to be shut down, the people removed and the houses and building burned by the Queensland government in 1963.

Now it is time to take further steps; to develop a Covenant and to reconsider the way in which we relate to each other as we share ministry and mission in Australia.

Our Covenant Relationship

²⁹ Yoder pp. 76-77

³⁰ Myers p. 190

Introduction³¹

A covenant is an expression of commitment between two parties, a statement of their intention to relate to each other in particular ways. It is a promise of faithfulness. It is a statement of what one offers to, and seeks from, the other. Covenants bind the parties to each other in mutual commitment and call the partners to certain obligations.

In the Bible the primary covenant is always God's covenanting relationship with humankind and, in particular, with Israel. Any covenant we enter into within the UCA will always presuppose God's action and intention.

There are three significant points in the Bible where God expresses God's covenanting intention and purpose:

- i. The creation represents the primary covenant between God and the whole creation, and expression – as was suggested in the theological foundations – of God's deep love and hospitality that flows out of the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In creation God commits God's life to a relationship with humankind, and in so doing chooses to live within the limitations imposed by that relationship.
- ii. The covenant with Abraham and the people of Israel through which God deals with one people to bring the promise of salvation to the earth.
- iii. The new covenant established through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, in which people are called into a new creation, into an alternative way of life, and into unity in the Body of Christ.

Biblical covenants arise from the gracious care of God and call the whole community into the promises and obligations of the covenant. They are more than legal obligations, but arise from a loving relationship, commitment, mutuality, joint histories and shared 'fates'. They arise from the passion of God that will never cease to name people as God's children.

The purpose of this covenant

The relationship which exists between us is found in our being created together in the image of God, and sharing faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Head of the Church.

It is a relationship which has been distorted by colonial history and its ongoing impact on Australian society and the church, one reflection of which is the racism which still exists among us.

Within the church the UAICC still does not share fairly in the way resources are distributed, and its voice is still not heard at crucial times.

We seek to commit ourselves to a relationship which reflects the compassion and justice of God, which recognizes our shared humanity and our common faith, and where we struggle together with open-ness and honesty to find justice for all people.

We enter a covenant relationship as a sign of our desire to remain together despite our differences and disagreements about matters of faith and justice. In the covenant we name each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, whose relationship is forever shaped by our place in Christ. We acknowledge that because of this relationship we cannot exist without each other. Our lives are incomplete, we are named wrongly, when we name ourselves without the other. We seek to create a hospitable space in our lives for each other.

³¹ This Introductory section draws considerable on "Study Three: A Covenant within the Church" in Chris Budden *Reconciliation, Celebration and Aboriginal People* (Assembly SR&J, 1988)

For the UAICC the Covenant is a commitment to share faith in Christ with other people, to share what Indigenous people know of God in this land so that the faith of others might be enriched, to be an Indigenous Church community, to be the 'different other' who challenges the church to be just, hospitable, compassionate and kind.

For other parts of the church the Covenant is a reminder of the place of Indigenous people among us, of past injustice, racism, exclusion and inequity, of the challenge we have to be the church of Jesus Christ the crucified friend of all, of the need to take seriously a spirituality found in 50,000 years of relationship with God in this land.

It is a covenant entered into that we might become friends, that we might learn to sit together and learn from each other, that we might have time to hear of each others stories and struggles and faith.

It is a covenant entered into so that our faith might be deepened, our lives be made more just, our church more hospitable, caring and inclusive.

The call for a new covenant between Indigenous and other members of the Uniting Church, and for new structures that reflect that covenant, is based in our sense of the wondrous grace of God, the call for human community that reflects the community of the Holy Spirit, and the need for justice in our relationship. It is a call that seeks to explore a relationship of hospitality, of welcome and inclusion and open-ness to difference, that understands the way in which the UCA is actually an uninvited guest in Indigenous land that is also God's land.

The Covenant

Suggestions about the way in which the actual covenant might take shape are included in Sections 8 and 9 in the Assembly Document, and it is recommended that readers refer to those sections.