CROSS Purposes

# Issue 7

## November 2006

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Margaret Blair

*Polity & Apostolicity*

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*In Service...*

*op. cit...*

*...and more*

Issue 6
September 2006

# CROSS Purposes

*A forum for theological dialogue*

WELCOME to the next exciting instalment of *Cross Purposes*! In this fun-filled issue we take stock after the 11th Assembly, among other things.

Rachel Kronberger, by way of a reflection on ministry, assesses the compatibility of Thomas Bandy's "thriving church" with what the Uniting Church understands itself to be. She acknowledges that some of Bandy's criticisms of traditional churches are perceptive. Nevertheless, she concludes that his idea of who Jesus is, and what the church is, may be quite different from ours.

Fran Barber's sermon "Sex, Lies and Faith" ponders whether we are indeed, as Augustine said, a *massa damnata* (damnable mass). The story of David and Bathsheba, full of "power, faith, sex, manipulation and murder", can still bear good news, through the action of our justifying God.

## In this Issue



*Cross Purposes* is published by the Committee on Doctrine and Liturgy, Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

For this issue's *Areopagus*, we have two reflections on the Assembly from prominent members. Gregor Henderson, the Uniting Church's national President, notes the new initiatives of the 11th Assembly towards the review of our church's polity. He welcomes the opportunity for more flexible church structures, especially given the great changes in our context since union in 1977. But we must not expect such major change to be accomplished overnight.

Max Champion, who chairs the Steering Committee of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, upbraids the 10th and 11th Assemblies for failing to resolve the controversy about homosexual ordination as a matter of doctrine. He critiques the last Assembly's Resolution 108, and explains how and why the ACC has come into being.

Finally, Craig Thompson responds to Geoff Thompson's article "Modernity, Doctrine and the Church" in *CP* 5. Craig continues the discussion of doctrine's "community-forming" function. He contends that, when a faith community ceases to define its borders with potentially divisive doctrinal statements, some other criterion will step into the breach and define the community. The Uniting Church is in danger of defining itself as a tolerant institution rather than as a people "called out" of the world for the sake of God's mission.

We hope this issue will prove stimulating reading!


# CROSS Purposes

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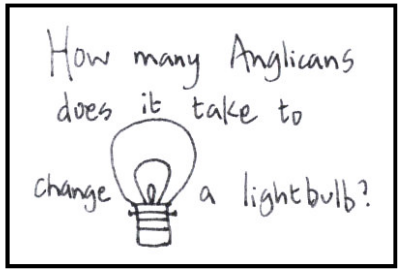


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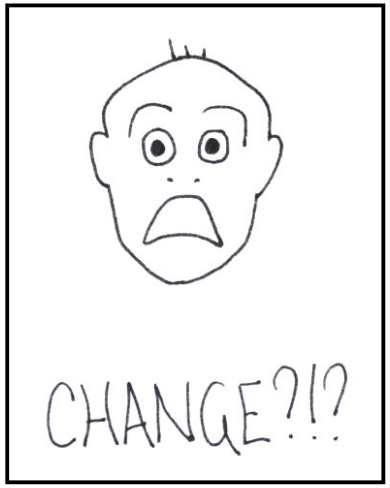




* *Ecumenical Disclaimer:* the cartoonist is Anglican. -Eds.

from the wider community. As was the case for the calling-out of Abram, Sarai and their descendants, this is for the benefit of the wider world and not for the church's own benefit. But the important point is that it is the distinction between the church and the world which is God's re-creative space, and not apparently more inclusive similarities and points of contact. Distinctive, community-defining doctrine is the sign we have of this distinctiveness.

If Jesus is who the Uniting Church's Basis and historically-received creeds and confessions declare him to be, then we cannot avoid the hard work of doctrine, or the pain of division that doctrinal statements may sometimes force upon us. Whatever those statements might turn out to be for the contemporary debates referred to above, we act more in accord with the works of God we actually proclaim when we seek – in fear and trembling – to speak his truth, divisive or not, and allow him to work to make that truth a reconciling and peace-bringing reality. If our doctrine is simply a lumped-together "inclusiveness", then we must still account for our attempts to include in terms of the exclusiveness of the God who identifies himself with the particular people Israel, and with a particular human being—Jesus, a son of Israel. Our salvation remains, and will always be, "from the Jews".

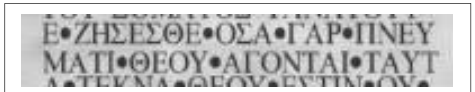
My fear is that as long as the councils of the church shy away from seeking to speak a truth which we expect to be held in common with other believers, we will be forced back onto our own very imperfect efforts to obtain the deeper unspeakable relational truths which are promised us and which we so much desire. Though this may seem the easier way (our ways always do seem more sensible than God's), with the loss of God-given christian doctrinal distinctiveness comes also the loss of God. This seems too high a price to pay for community.

CRAIG THOMPSON is an editor of *Cross Purposes* and minister at Kew and Auburn Uniting Churches.

**Note**

Geoff Thompson's essay (*CP* 5), in its original form, was written as one of a number of contributions feeding into the considerations of the Assembly's Working Group on Doctrine, as the working group sought to formulate advice to the Assembly on its handling of matters of doctrine, with the issues of the forthcoming 2006 Assembly in view. For the other contributions, see nat.uca.org.au/TD/doctrine/resources.htm.






## A Doctrinal Primer

*Geoff Thompson's account of the marginalization of doctrine in the UCA, and in the church generally, is certainly persuasive.*

*Perhaps all ministers and theological students in the UCA could be invited to read Jaroslav Pelikan's* Dogmensgeschichte *(History of Dogma):* The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine *(5 volumes, 1971-89): beginning with the post-dominical period and ending judiciously with Vatican II. It is a fine primer on the nature of doctrine, its changes and developments. With it could be wrestled the chief foe of doctrine, historicism* (Historismus) *as seen in Ernst Troeltsch's book* Religion in History *(1991).*

Rowan Gill

## Ministration and Administration

*Thank you for the work you put into producing* Cross Purposes. *It's great to have a publication that contains some meaty theological articles on topical subjects, which are also brief enough to digest on the run.*

*In the most recent edition, I particularly enjoyed Terence Corkin's discussion of his role as General Secretary of the Assembly, and how he sees this position fitting with his calling as a Minister of the Word. I think that all too often we can be guilty of seeing such positions as strictly "administrative", and not recognizing that such positions, to be fulfilled appropriately, require incumbents who not only have a certain degree of business acumen, but also a pastoral heart and a well developed theological understanding.*

*Of course, there are many lay people among us who have this combination of gifts and graces (and I am passionate in my advocacy for the importance of lay ministry in all areas of the church), but as Terence pointed out in his article, the type of ministry he exercises as General Secretary is certainly consistent with that of a Minister of the Word, so one should not be surprised to see a Minister of the Word in this position.*

Caro Field

# The Bandy Project:
## An Appreciation

*Rachel Kronberger*

NORTH AMERICAN mission consultant Thomas Bandy has been to Melbourne twice in the past two years: in July 2004, and again in February this year. Both times, around two hundred UCA members have gathered in the Union building at LaTrobe University for his open seminars. Participants sat at tables, much like our Synod meetings, and included sessions where table groups could talk together. I attended the first seminar because I had been asked to be a member of a panel to offer a response to Bandy's presentation. I wanted to be inspired about congregational renewal and to be part of a large-scale conversation about the future of the church, so I also attended part of the second seminar.

A great sense of anticipation preceded the first seminar. The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania invested heavily in time and energy for this event. In attendance were a number of groups representing rural congregations, yearning for inspiration; a large number of Synod staff, watching and listening and helping with logistics; and there were a number of ministers. Many of the ministers, were, like me, accompanied by a committed lay person or two. Those present shared a common passion for God's church – for the Body of Christ – and a longing to see life and abundance in our congregation.

Bandy began both seminars with a challenge to our personal faith. He asked his *key question*: "What is it about your experience of Jesus that your community can't live without?"[1] We were given time to reflect on our answer—was it the healing Jesus or the liberating Jesus or the transforming Jesus or the forgiving Jesus who brought me the revelation of God's love?

Bandy explained that our congregations would be transformed and our mission would thrive when we share our answer to the *key question* with the *public*. For some in the room it was a radically energizing question—the connection between faith and mission that they had been struggling to find in the midst of exhausting pastoral care. For others it was another burden, another thing "I have to get




work into our own hands. As such, these efforts indicate forgetfulness of how God has dealt with us, and so ultimately a lack of trust in God.

To get straight to the point: God brings peace to the world through the divisions in human being. This is not a "theory" of God so much as an account of what God has done, in response to the world as it really is, God being who he is. It is straight after the story of Babel, with the divisions in humanity which occur there, that God chooses an individual from one of those divided peoples through whom to bless all the nations. While perhaps not choosing to have had a divided human creation, God is nevertheless still able to work through human division for his healing purposes. More dramatically, the division between this chosen people and Jesus becomes the occasion for the most important realization of this same divine capacity: salvation through the Jesus whose body is not only broken for us but by us. Human exclusivity ("not you, Jesus") is the means God has used to bring the good news to us—that he can work for good not only in this broken world, but through its brokenness. This is by no means a justification of that brokenness (Romans 6.2!), but simply a statement about the extent of the righteousness of God—God's capacity not only to heal the world, but to heal it by the sign of its brokenness. It is also a statement about the inherently divided nature of human being.

This brings us again to doctrine. Doctrine, as that which sets us apart from each other, is itself a sign of our brokenness. As such, however, under the operation of this particular God, it also has the potential to heal. We do not deal adequately with this uncomfortable sign by replacing it with something else—membership of an institution or citizenship of a state; we simply bind ourselves to some deeper or broader doctrine which will itself ultimately become divisive.

Doctrine – in the christian, theological sense – becomes an issue for anyone who names Jesus of Nazareth as divinely significant. This is because "Nazareth" identifies the truth of God with a time and place which is not our time and place, and so excludes us, unless

**" God brings peace to the world through the divisions in human being. "**

somehow we can be joined to it by its historical effects (that is, the work of the church). And so the very church itself, as a community "called out" (Greek: ek-klesia), can be said to have been broken away

there. The broad applicability of the community-forming function of doctrine, and the usefulness of this function for testing our doctrinal awareness, can be demonstrated by noting other points at which the church is being tested in its understanding of community. The 2003 Assembly confronted basically the same question in its deliberations on the "Becoming Disciples" proposal and the questions of membership and participation associated with it. A controversial issue here was whether those participating in the Eucharist would "normally" be baptized Christians. This is similarly a question of what constitutes or forms community – baptism (as a confession of belief or doctrine), or simply the desire to be included or inclusive. The historical practice has been strongly on the side of baptism preceding eucharistic participation. What, then, is the logic of the community which baptism creates which is being denied in this change in practice?

More broadly, the same challenge is manifesting itself at the interface of different religions. As much as we might proclaim Christ as our peace within the church, this is a confronting and troubling claim for many Christians in our multi-cultural society (not to mention non-Christians). If the tension is too great here we may be tempted to resolve it by dropping, making optional, or limiting only to ourselves the "doctrine" about Christ and seek unity under the broader sky of "God", which is a more inclusive idea in inter-religious relations. The problem then arises, however, as to what we do about the few genuine atheists and the multitude of pseudo-atheists we also bump into. The logical step, to minimize social divisiveness, is for believers to seek a yet broader doctrine to enable the inclusion of believer and non-believer alike. The only place to go is a Godless place, seeking a new community-forming doctrine of the human being, constructed without reference to a god. These may seem extreme predictions of where the church's current view of doctrine might lead, but there are more than a few hints on the pages of official UCA publications and ministers' sermon websites that this type of thinking is already in place.

**Doctrine, division, and God**

To shift from the general descriptive analysis above to a more specifically theological account of our predicament, I suggest that our current attempts to prescribe community amount to attempts to take God's communion-forming



right". He asked us to raise a hand if we had an answer to the *key question* and share it with others at our table. By this time, some people were finding the session hard going.

Bandy was entertaining and energetic. He used a multimedia presentation complete with a diagram for every point he made—spiritual growth, church growth, getting the *public* from "out there" to "in here", getting church members from "in here" to "out there", the old *declining* church and its outdated structures, and the new *thriving* church and its focus on experiencing Jesus and *the touch of the Holy*.

Bandy wants us to tune in to our own experience of Jesus and then market it—share it with a *public* who is out there, waiting for what we have to tell them. We are to preach *Christ*, not *Christianity.* This is a strategy that fits with current christian marketing in Australia. A marketing expert employed by the NSW Bible Society is heading a campaign called "Jesus. All about life." The expert, Angus Kinniard says, "[Jesus] was the only place we had to go. The research shows that the church is an almost insurmountable obstacle to the campaign. The church was seen as the problem, not as the solution."[2] According to Martin Johnson of the Bible Society, "the classic line is that the church is hopeless but Jesus is cool".[3] In the current edition of *Quarterly Essay,* Amanda Lohrey's "Voting for Jesus: Christianity and Politics in Australia", describes Jesus as the ultimate marketing tool. Lohrey describes Jesus as the new "brand", the celebrity endorsement in the church's new marketing campaign. She notes that in the quest for a better image, Sydney Archbishop Peter Jensen (in the 2005 Boyer lectures) and Senator Steve Fielding (in Family First's federal election campaign) distanced themselves from the very institutions that have been the source of their personal public profiles.[4]

Bandy says, in effect, that the *public* see the church for what it is—a people more committed to institution and status quo than to being followers of Jesus. He calls for an iconoclastic stripping back of anything that "gets in the way" of ministry, mission and worship. Bandy challenges us to choose to be a *thriving church*, not a *declining church*. He wants us to begin with the *key question*, remove from leadership anyone who can't answer it, and make our experience of Jesus central. Then we join Jesus in his mission which is determined by the heartfelt longings – the *heart-bursts* – of our church members.[5]

Bandy's criticism of the *declining church* (in our case the UCA) extended to offensive caricaturing of church leaders and clergy. Nevertheless, he reminded me that we have some major struggles ahead. We have become burdened with administration designed for much bigger congrega-

tions. We have buildings that met the needs of a previous generation and its culture but are at best outdated and at worst are woefully inadequate for meeting the needs of generations X and Y. We have lost confidence in our capacity to read the times and so we are reluctant to update our resources in case they need to be replaced again in ten years. We are concerned for the stewardship of resources that were established by the ancestors and which we are saving for

**" Bandy says that the *public* see the church for what it is—a people more committed to institution and status quo than to being followers of Jesus. "**

a rainy day. We are shy and sometimes inarticulate about our christian faith. And we can be overly dependent on clergy for pastoral care, evangelism, faith education and leadership. As such, Bandy is right to challenge our church's focus. The church should be about Jesus, and at times we have lost sight of the One who calls the church into being.

However, I think the UCA and Bandy differ on who this Jesus is, the Jesus of our focus. Bandy's Jesus is primarily a personal saviour, unencumbered by institutional religion, who gives us categorical experiences of himself which we can then use to sell him on. As Andrew McGowan of Trinity Theological College tells Amanda Lohrey, "that religionless Jesus himself, supposedly above history and culture, always becomes the mirror image of the era's own cultural values. 'What would Jesus do?' ends up as something like a nice and thoughtful version of 'What my friends and I would probably like to do anyway'."[6] Bandy calls for a shedding of history and values in arguably much the same way when he asserts that it is all about *my experience of Jesus*.

The biblical image of the church as the Body of Christ, especially in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, has been foundational in the Uniting Church. Christ calls the church to be his body in the world. The *Basis of Union* draws strongly on this image: "The Church's call is . . . to be a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself".[7] Thus the UCA believes that the Body of Christ is made up of a diversity of members, with Christ as our head. In order to be the Body of Christ, we must allow the Spirit to move freely among us, releasing in each person their God-given gifts for the building up of the Body. If the Body is allowed to be the Body, then it doesn't need to join Jesus in his mission—it will be Christ to the world.



way within the UCA by implying – quite self-righteously and naively – that wider ecumenical division is everyone else's fault and that the matters of doctrine which keep us apart don't really matter, for should they not also see that "Christ is our peace"?

It should perhaps be re-stated that this article is not about the sexuality and leadership issue as

**" The difficulty is that institutional unity is being offered as the sign of our peace, and so as the sign of Christ himself. "**

such, but about the community-forming function of doctrine, and the problem the church seems to have with the particular type of community which doctrine tends to form. Consequently, a choice seems to have been made for a type of community which is not identifiable by any common doctrinal assent, at least in some important instances. In this connection, it is important to note that a significant part of the rationale of the 2003 and 2006 Assembly resolutions on the sexuality and leadership question seems to have been precisely the intention of maintaining a unity by not making a determination one way or another. It could be said that the community-forming function of doctrine was seen at this point – in its exclusivist effect – but that the community likely to come out of a universally applicable "yes" or "no" to the sexuality and leadership question was going to be smaller than the one with which we started, and so an unacceptable outcome. That is, a specifically doctrinal statement at this point would have had the effect of excluding people who believe otherwise, and they may well have left the UCA.

Inclusion wherever possible is a highly laudable policy, and if it really could be achieved without doctrines of some sort or another we would be saved all this bother. The problem is that uncritical policies of inclusion, in fact, also imply community-forming doctrines. The only difference is that they are hidden, and don't look like doctrines. "Everybody in (if you would like to be!)" is what most of us most earnestly want to be able to say, but it implies a wide range of assumptions about the histories and potentials of individual people which destine it to the tragedies of all utopian politics.

The sexuality issue in the UCA is one instance of where we are seeking to manage cracks in our faith community, or differences of opinion about what constitutes community. These tensions, however, are not only manifesting

a common perceived reality, but only the assertion of the common designation "Uniting Church", under which we are called to live in tolerance.

Apart from the different beliefs about sexuality, there are here competing two perceptions of what constitutes the community of the Uniting Church. At least in relation to this issue, one party clearly understands the community of the church to be defined in terms of holding a common belief, stated as unambiguously as possible. The other party – in this case, the majority at the Assembly – sees the community at this point to be sufficiently described by the common identity "Uniting Church", which identity it invites the discontents to retain. If it is correct to see doctrine as community-forming, the thing to notice is that the declared community which is the UCA is not doctrinally defined but is identifiable in terms of the institutional boundaries of the church. (By "institution" here is meant the umbrella identity "UCA", the "boundary" of which is the willingness of members, ministers and congregations to remain "Uniting Church"). Of course, there is a theological statement of this unity, most notably variations on the theme of Ephesians 2.14f: "for he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (NRSV). The problem is that the peace to which we are being called is considered by a large number to be a false peace, in that the commonality signified by institutional unity is scarcely "peace". (To use an analogy, having the nationality "Australian" in common does not signify peace between opposing political factions). This being the case, a serious theological problem arises, in that appeals to remain within the fold effectively submit christology to ecclesiology. That is, the theory of the church as communion – here understood in terms of its institutional boundaries – begins to define for us who Christ is by describing what the reconciliation he brings looks like. What reconciliation looks like in this call to peace is the very uneasy cohabitation of the same identity which "tolerance" brings. It is implied that the "christian" thing to do here is remain united, despite deep differences about what unites us, or how.

The issue here is not that the church has an institutional character. This is, of itself, unavoidable: where two or three gather in Jesus' name, there we have an institution. The difficulty is that institutional unity is being offered as the sign of our peace, and so as the sign of Christ himself. We might consider this an important ecumenical principle, but it can only be applied in this



However, Bandy tells us that the Body of Christ image is no longer adequate. He describes the church that is going to thrive in the 21st century. That *thriving church* is a *spiritual redwood* tree, a Tree of Life in the forest of contemporary society, standing tall and strong:

> In a sense, the Pauline image of the "Body of Christ" does not go far enough to describe this new species of church. These churches are multi-celled organisms in which every cell carries a similar genetic code. In Paul's image the loss of a "toe" will cripple a church, and the loss of a "head" will kill it. In the Spiritual Redwood, every cell replicates the entire tree. Even if the tree were to die, leaving behind only a stump or a twig, an entirely new tree can regenerate from that single cell.[8]

Since, in Paul's image of the Body of Christ, the head is Christ himself, the loss of the head will indeed kill the church. Bandy seems to be describing something other than the church, as constituted by Christ, in his description of the Spiritual Redwood. We are surely called to sit with the pain of, and seek healing for the broken toe, which does indeed cripple the church. This is life in the Body. The broken toe might be the pastors in the Philippines being murdered for their political activities, or the denominational divisions which prevent christian unity.

Further, Bandy's dismissive approach to anything that suggests tradition or ecumenism implies that the church is and can only be confined to those individuals who gather for worship. The church is not and cannot be confined to a single time and place any more than Christ can be so confined. While the church is always located in culture and history, it is never confined by either culture or history. The Basis of Union holds that:

> The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world.[9]

The recent World Council of Churches' statement "Called to be the one church" describes the relationship between each church and the church catholic. "Each church is the Church catholic and not simply a part of it. Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfils its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches."[10]

The UCA is the church, but it is not the whole church. We therefore

work towards a vision of the unity of the Body of Christ. We look for accountability between members, not just within our "mission teams" in local congregations, but also in presbyteries and synods and assemblies, and ecumenically. We have structures which support ethical behaviour and limitations on power; as power increases, so do ethical demands. We worship God using liturgies that draw us together in worship across time and place and denominational division. We read a lectionary of Scripture that holds us to a broad witness of the biblical text. Without these structures, we are vulnerable to rigid fundamentalism. Yet for Bandy these things are unnecessary. He believes we should focus on our experience of Jesus, get to know the needs and longings of the *public* in our neighbourhoods, and then match up the two.

I believe that "What is it about my experience of Jesus that my community can't live without?" was an inadequate response to the longings of those who attended Bandy's seminars. It is also an inadequate key question for us in the Uniting Church in Australia. Our corporate experience of Jesus and our experience of being the Body of Christ are among the layers we would want to search out in addition to Bandy's question. At the recent Brisbane Assembly, the National Director for Theology and Discipleship, Rob Bos, helpfully offered what he described as the key question for our faith: "How do we confess Christ in our context?"[11] The questions we ask of ourselves as we seek to be faithful to God's call will shape our actions and their consequences.

RACHEL KRONBERGER is minister at Coburg Uniting Church.

## Notes

[1]Thomas Bandy, *Thriving Church Leadership Conference* (Seminar Workbook for Australia), July 2004.

[2]Amanda Lohrey, "Voting for Jesus: Christianity and politics in Australia", *Quarterly Essay* 22 (June 2006) 28.

[3]ibid, 28.

[4]ibid, 32, 46.

[5]Thomas Bandy, *Tomorrow's Church Today* (Seminar Workbook for Australia and New Zealand), Feb-March 2006.

[6]Lohrey, 32.

[7]*Basis of Union* (1992 ed.) para 3.

[8]Thomas Bandy, "Growing Spiritual Redwoods", www.easumbandy.com/resources, 1998 (Bandy's summary of the book *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, with William Easum (Abingdon, 1997)).

[9]*Basis of Union* (1992 ed.) para 15.

[10]World Council of Churches, "Called to be the One Church" (2006) para 6.

[11]Robert Bos, speech to Brisbane Assembly (July 2006), quoted in *Assembly Word* (UCA, 2006).



participation in a public of some form or other, or even in several interwoven publics – is a given characteristic of human being, and is inseparable from the particular cultures and languages we have, and the view of God, ourselves and the world implied by those cultural-linguistic systems.

### Doctrine in the Uniting Church

Doctrine has, at many important levels in the UCA, ceased to be the defining or identifying feature of the church as a community of believers. As the main illustration of this, we'll consider the example of the UCA Assembly's recent handling of the "sexuality and leadership" issue.

It has been a matter of controversy as to whether or not this is a doctrinal issue, although for the moment it seems that the Assembly has determined that it is not. Leaving that question aside for now, the sexuality and leadership question can be said to pose to the church the problem of maintaining community when it seems that there are two competing, mutually critical understandings of community within the erstwhile united church community.

Of particular interest are the implications of the resolutions on this matter from the Assemblies of 2003 and 2006. Most significant for our purposes here is that, by relegating determinations on this matter to presbyteries and congregations, the Assembly has declared that a common mind is not necessary on the question of sexual practice (within the limits of "right relations"). It seems clear, then, that it is the opinion of the Assembly that the community of the Uniting Church as a whole cannot be defined with reference to its adherence to a particular teaching on sexuality and leadership. It is in this sense that the matter is thought not to be "doctrinal": this issue does not require universal assent one way or the other within the church. More will be said on this later.

Important in this connection is the way in which the Assembly now effectively calls the church to peace about sexuality and leadership. This peace – which is intended to be the reconstitution of the divided ecclesial community of the UCA – has its symbol not in a common statement (doctrine) on sexuality and leadership but in the integrity of the institutional bounds of the Uniting Church. Concepts such as tolerance, diversity, difference, unity and so forth are variously interwoven to make this appeal, none of which in themselves could be said to be implicitly "doctrinal". The critical point is, however, that the symbol of the peace is not a statement to which we may all assent, reflecting

# Doctrine and Communal Identity

*Craig Thompson*

IN THE MAY 2006 edition of *Cross Purposes*, Geoff Thompson helpfully described the impact of modernity upon the standing of doctrine in contemporary christian communities such as the Uniting Church. Largely in sympathy with the points he made there, this present article seeks to explore the "community-forming role" of doctrine noted by Dr. Thompson (*CP* 5, 20), without implying that he would necessarily agree with where I take the idea. I will argue that when the status of doctrine declines in a faith community, community doesn't cease to be defined, but is simply defined by something other than doctrine. The critical question to be answered is whether what steps in to take up doctrine's place here is adequate for the task.

### Doctrine as "Community-Forming"

"Doctrine" is a word which carries considerable baggage. Intellectualism, patriarchy, nit-picking, heteronomy, limitation and boundedness, past-orientation and general dryness and heaviness are common associations with the word. A community we might imagine formed around doctrinal statements would be expected to be defined by the ability of its members to affirm a doctrinal confession or statement of faith. As such, this community itself takes on characteristics of exclusivity, according to one's ability to join in the statement of its creeds. Excluding as it is, this is nevertheless in fact doctrine's community-forming effect. Doctrine effectively creates a particular community within a larger community or public. Those who hold to particular doctrines are distinguished from those who hold others—whether the doctrines are christian, white-supremacist, Marxist, economic rationalist or whatever. As such, doctrines tend to create insiders and outsiders, to varying degrees.

Wherever we stand, our particular doctrines are a communal description of ourselves in the world with which others will not agree. Whether by doctrine or other means, we need such publics or communities within which to live. Perhaps more fundamentally, whether or not we need them, we do in fact have them. Community –

**op. cit.**



# Sex, Lies and Faith

*Fran Barber*

I THINK it was that great father of the early church, St. Augustine, who coined the phrase *massa damnata*. It was his very uncomplimentary description for humanity. It is an understatement to say that Augustine had a few problems with our humanity (especially our physicality). Reading some of his writings you constantly come across what we might now say was Augustine's "very unhealthy body-image". He held things earthy and worldly in great suspicion—in fact our artificial division between body and soul, between spirit and matter, comes largely from Augustine. Many would say that it's thanks to this early church father that the christian tradition has had such a negative attitude towards sex and sexuality. Anyway, Augustine referred to humanity as *massa damnata*. *Massa damnata* basically means "damnable mass" (or mass of sin) in Latin. Not very cheery. But it is a phrase that comes to mind after reading our texts: 2 Samuel 11:1-15 and Psalm 14.

*through a glass darkly*

These readings are a heady mix of power, faith, sex, manipulation and murder. The stuff of many a Shakespearean play and of many a TV series (though the TV shows usually come without the faith ingredient!). Some might be surprised to hear that there are many biblical stories that deal with these matters, for it is in negotiating relationships, power – in the messiness of living – that the rubber of faith "hits the road", as it were!

First we have King David becoming intoxicated by his power and using people to his own ends—his story bears a brief retelling because we easily miss the subtleties. Where the reading begins we learn that it is spring, the time when armies fight; a time when a king should be with his army. But David has already developed a sufficiently confident view of himself that he has eschewed this responsibility and stayed behind, sending Joab instead. David stayed in Jerusalem. While lounging about on his couch he notices Bathsheba bathing. It appears David had a fairly studied look, because he sent a messenger off to find out who she was. Even when he found out she was Uriah's wife, David sent for her and "lay with her"—the biblical euphemism for having sexual relations. Whether it was consensual is unclear in the English, but certainly the Hebrew for "he went to get her" in verse 4 is more

like "he grabbed her", a phrase with far more violent overtones.[1]

As is the case with unwise or dastardly actions, there are unwanted consequences. And David finds that Bathesheba is pregnant. Rather than admitting his wrongdoing, he becomes more treacherous. He tries to make Uriah sleep with his wife ("wash your feet"), so that the child's paternity will be linked to him. Uriah, loyal to his warring mates, refuses the pleasure of sleeping at his home, claiming that it would be wrong while his comrades suffer. David is furious, and we are faced with the interesting dynamic of a Hittite soldier (i.e. not a native Israelite) behaving more righteously than the so-called righteous king of Israel.[2] David makes Uriah drunk to see if that will make him more persuasive. It doesn't.

**"While it might seem perverse to meditate on stories like David and Bathsheba's, in a funny kind of way it is liberating."**

Then David sinks still further. He plans to deliberately place Uriah in a dangerous position in the battle with the Ammonites, so that he is killed.

Power, faith, sex, manipulation and murder.

Our reading from Psalm 14 forms a kind of de facto commentary on David's behavior. *Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God". They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.* It's easy to read 21st-century atheism into this psalm, but, of course, that would be a misreading. Atheism would have been a nonsense during the time of this psalm's writing; nothing was understood outside the realm of God or the gods then. What the psalm highlights instead is the human propensity to act as if there is no God; to act as if there is no ultimate form of accountability; to act as if we are the arbiters of truth and meaning. The "fool" of whom the psalmist writes isn't a modern atheist, but a member of the community (of faith), who, like David, thinks they can get away with defying God. Or, in the psalmist's words, those who think they can get away with failing "to seek after God".

It is only a short jump from thinking "there is no God" to behaving as if we are God. The desire to be like God is hardly a foreign idea to us; it's the meaning of "original sin" as told in Genesis. But we do forget the sort of pervasive cancer that this sin permits. It allows us to put ourselves at the centre, so that we decide what is good, true and just. We don't have to look far beyond the church's front door (or indeed inside our church), to see that people are hurt by our society's



debate. The shallow views of diversity, tolerance, grace and love which are evident in R108 (and R84), and Assembly's failure to draw on the rich theological, liturgical, ethical and pastoral resources of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church to assist its resolve, are symptomatic of a widespread and deep-seated problem which is afflicting the UCA.

The ACC is committed to confessing its own part in these difficulties even as it is compelled to confess the lordship of Christ in the church in this way at this time.

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**Notes**

[1]See reformingalliance.org.au.

[2]For details, see Thomas Oden's *Turning around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church* (2006), available for $22 including postage from 7 Princetown Rd, Mt Waverley, 3149.

It is notable that the same distinction was applied to supporters of apartheid to argue that it was not a central article of christian faith. The South African Confessing Church, however, rightly insisted that apartheid was heretical because it betrayed the Reformed tradition by denying in practice her faith in God's reconciliation of the world in Christ. It was the social expression of a false view of humanity made possible by a false doctrine of God.

Now, great care must be taken in comparing these two situations, especially in view of strong feelings evoked by racism and homophobia. Clearly, there are similarities and differences which can be usefully explored in relation to concepts of social justice, human rights etc. But in both situations – and this is the point in the context of evaluating R108 – the issues are not secondary to the primary doctrines of the church. They are about *nothing less than theological anthropology*—the implications for our humanity of God's self-revelation in Christ. Sexuality should have been dealt with by the Assembly as a matter of doctrine.

**Responding to Resolution 108**

The seriousness of Assembly's refusal to resolve the matter theologically had a sequel on the 12 July when a meeting of 150 people from every state and territory resolved to form *The Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the UCA* (ACC). A charter, a Confessing Statement and the proposal on sexuality (which was presented to Assembly through Presbyteries and a Synod) have been approved. A Steering Committee has been formed to facilitate the inauguration of the new assembly in October.

The Confessing Assembly is committed to the reappropriation of classical christian faith and practice within the life of the UCA. Strong encouragement has been received from within other major Australian churches and from renewal movements throughout the Western world. In the USA, Confessing Movements are strong in all mainline denominations, with 643,223 individuals, 1,471 churches and 4,377 clergy joining in the United Methodist Church alone. A Confessing Theologians Commission has been established to advise the various groups within and across the churches.[2]

The ACC is fully committed to working "within the UCA" to do what it can to reclaim and reappropriate the classical faith and practice of the ecumenical church for the sake of mission today. It is not a single issue body but will seek to address the underlying theological issues, and associated problems, which have surfaced in the sexuality



judgments on truth and goodness—as the poor, the homeless, those with disabilities testify. On the global level we live in a world with abundant resources, plenty of food for everyone; yet it is the very few who use and waste the vast majority of God's abundant riches, to the detriment of millions of people in the rest of the world. It seems that we make a right mess of things when we try to live as if there is no God.

We do expect more of our leaders, though. A quick skim of any newspaper will usually reveal stories of a fallen politician, who's been found to have less than wholesome leisure-time activities, or who is found to have a slightly dark past. The articles usually feast far more hungrily on the politician's downfall than they would on any Jill or Joe Bloggs guilty of the same misdeeds. We expect a purity in leadership; we expect that our leaders will not succumb to the weaknesses of the rest of humanity. But what this story of David brings home is that no one is righteous; no one is so pure. David, we know, is a man of complex motivations: great faith and courage, and yet obvious weakness and selfishness. "Many other of God's greatest men and women have feet of clay—think of the impatient Moses, sceptical Sarah, reluctant Jeremiah and cowardly Peter" who denies Jesus and yet is the rock on which Jesus plans to build his church. Despite their and David's failings, God uses these ordinary, fallen individuals to lead his people.

And this is where we hear the good news breaking in for us. While it might seem perverse to meditate on stories like David and Bathsheba's, or on the pronouncements of Psalm 14, in a funny kind of way it is liberating. It is liberating to hear our humanity outlined in all its potential awfulness and unfaithfulness, because, as this week's New Testament readings hammer home to us: we are none the less justified; God is with us (John 6.1-21; Ephesians 3.14-21). It is in our weakness and ignorance that we are embraced by the faithfulness of God; we are not expected to be perfect. He chooses the ungodly. But this doesn't mean God does not call to account. It is, following today's psalm, foolishness to assume that God leaves the poor and destitute to fend for themselves—"The Lord is their refuge" after all. When the foolish abuse the poor, they must reckon with the poor's advocate, God. It is exceedingly foolish of David to assume that Uriah and Bathsheba are alone, away from the watchful guarantee of Yahweh, who calls even kings to responsibility.[3] If we read further into 2 Samuel we learn that David pays a very high price for his awful actions.

This faithful God also showers us with abundant riches. We witness this in the feeding of the 5000; Philip has no idea what is going on, but Jesus does. He has enough for all the faceless crowd—with more to spare. With the image of "bread", John shows us that our deepest needs, our most basic needs, are found in Christ—as he is God's Son.[4]

It is a shame we don't read more of the lectionary every Sunday in our local congregations, because the Epistle from Ephesians for this week takes us to the theological conclusion of our sermon. This Epistle emphasizes that we are not alone: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* We must let God be God. We are rooted and grounded in love; our roots are planted in the presence and being of God, which doesn't lead to knowledge or power in the worldly sense, but to love.

The writer outlines our task beautifully: through the power of the Spirit we are "to participate in flooding the world with God's love".[5]

This hardly sounds like the something of which the *massa damnata* would be worthy! But the paradox is that we are. Not that I would advocate returning to the terminology of Augustine's era. To use such a phrase as *massa damnata* is to tell only part of the story, it is to leave out the most liberating and transforming good news. Let us praise God who brings this liberation and who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever".

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**Notes**

[1]Anna Grant-Henderson, oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au.

[2]ibid.

[3]ibid.

[4]William Loader, staff.murdoch.au/~loader.

[5]ibid.



motion sponsored by Reforming Alliance and proposed by several Presbyteries and one Synod.[1]

It is said that baptism into Christ, not our creation as male and female, is the mark of our truly human identity. Baptism signifies that participation in the life of the church is conditioned solely by the grace of God.

**" These issues are about nothing less than theological anthropology—the implications for our humanity of God's self-revelation in Christ. "**

Of course, baptism is the mark of our identity. But this does not mean that our creation as male and female is thereby abrogated. Strangely, proponents of this view rarely mention the need for repentance and discipline in the life of the baptized. Nor do they say what actions would constitute the denial of our baptism. Therefore, it is unclear whether any kind of committed sexual relationships between members could be excluded in principle. Presumably, a loving incestuous relationship between consenting adults, or a loving *ménage a trois*, or a loving polygamous relationship would all be possible on the basis of such baptismal logic!

It is sometimes argued, too, that God's grace redeems us from the restrictions of the old law and our created bodily nature and enables us to follow the Spirit in new and liberating ways of being human. Thus, grace is not the "costly grace" of the Cross and discipleship, love is not the fulfilment of the law, and redemption is not the healing of our fallen nature. It is enough to be "accepted". Ignored is the admonition to "put on the new righteousness" (Eph 4:24) and to refrain from sexual and other behaviour which is inconsistent with our baptism in Christ (1 Cor 6:9ff).

Behind these arguments is a theological problem which has long bedevilled Protestantism—the failure to adequately articulate the relationship between nature and grace in the economy of salvation. Because "grace" now means mere acceptance, it has become abstracted from the structures of our natural life according to God's creative and redemptive purposes "in Christ". Ironically, those who support R108 on this basis share a deep affinity with Gnosticism!

Second, it is said that sexuality is not primarily a matter of doctrine but a secondary matter of ethics. The distinction is understandable, but misguided. While not directly about the person and work of Christ, it is a necessary corollary of what God has done in him for all. It is a fundamental question of theological anthropology.

UCA now believes that "variety is the spice of life". In essence this is what it says. The closest it comes to a "Christology" is in (7c) where we are advised "to recognise that the possibility of living with difference is a gift which Christ offers to the world". We do not need Christ to tell us to be nice to one another. What we do need, but are not given in this resolution, is guidance to distinguish between "differences" which are "in Christ" and those which are not.

Fourth, it contains self-congratulatory references to our "good faith" (1) and our appeal to "most people" (preamble) accompanied by insincere regrets about the impact of R84. Sorrow which does not lead to repentance is self-indulgent, and unbiblical. The cause of such "deep concern and disquiet" (1) can be removed only by acknowledging that R84 is schismatic and reaffirming the clear word of Scripture concerning our creation as male and female and the unique splendour of marriage between a man and a woman.

Fifth, although it purports to be even-handed, R108 goes further than R84 towards acceptance of "a minister in a committed same-gender relationship" (6b). Without determining whether such a relationship is right (the doctrinal question), Synods and Presbyteries are advised "to respect the decision of a congregation" which calls such a person. No corresponding respect is shown to congregations which are "unable in conscience to receive" such a person (6a).

What is critical here is that, without addressing the doctrinal question, R108 shifts the burden of proof from those who depart from classical christian teaching on sexuality to those who uphold it. "Conscience" is cleverly used in (6a) to imply that the orthodox are a minority who "shall not be compelled" to call "a person living in a committed same-gender relationship". Classical Reformed and Evangelical teaching and practice is now treated as an oddity which must be protected, but not necessarily "respected".

Moreover, the congregation, and not only the Presbytery (as in R84), is now given authority to decide whether committed homosexual relationships in ministry are right. This is a clear breach of its mandate. As the Polity Committee report points out, "the other councils must continue to recognise the limits of their authority in the matter."

### Theological Rationale of Resolution 108

In addition to appeals to diversity and tolerance, two basic arguments were used to support R108—and oppose the theological rationale of a



# A More Flexible Polity?

*Gregor Henderson*

THE 11TH ASSEMBLY'S long-term impact on the life of the Uniting Church is most likely to be in the realm of church polity—particularly on how the church is structured and governed beyond the life of local congregations and faith communities.

There's a cluster of Assembly resolutions which will lead to changes in how the Uniting Church is governed:

- a broad review of the church's Constitution is to take place in the next three years, the first full review of the Constitution since inauguration in 1977;
- one of the six key directions laid down for the Assembly over the next three years is "to critically evaluate the polity and governance of the church";
- the document "Being Church Differently" has been commended to the church, with its emphasis on the establishment of sacramental communities within the community service agencies and schools of the UCA and beyond;
- the move to establish the specified ministry of Pastor and to close the specified ministries of Lay Pastor, Community Minister and Youth Worker will simplify our professional" ministry structures;
- section 39 of the Constitution, which refers to the Assembly deeming a matter to be vital to the life of the church and referring it for concurrence to other councils, and which has never been triggered by the Assembly, is to be thoroughly reviewed;
- the current provisions for membership of the Assembly are to be considered, including the "appropriate size" for the Assembly;
- the move towards renewing the covenant between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the rest of the church may well have consequences on how councils like Synods and Assembly are to function;
- several decisions relating to migrant communities within the church will have a bearing on our governance structures, not least

## On Areopagus Hill

decisions to acknowledge a place for the national conferences of migrant communities and to take further steps towards the sharing of property.

Lying behind these resolutions are a number of changes, pressures and concerns which have emerged in the past decade or so. One of the biggest changes has been the decisions in South Australia and Western Australia to establish just one presbytery within the synod. That inevitably changes the nature of the relationship between congregations and presbytery, and presbytery and synod, and leads to other structures such as "networks" and "regional groups" not mentioned in our Basis of Union, Constitution or Regulations.

One of the biggest pressures has been the increasing list of responsibilities expected of presbyteries, at a time when most presbyteries are having to cope with diminishing numbers of church members and fewer ministers in placement to help resource the presbytery. Back in 1977 matters like professional supervision, prevention of sexual misconduct, codes of ethics, risk management, migrant-ethnic congregations and specified ministries (other than the ordained) barely registered, yet each of them now occupies a fair slice of presbytery oversight.

One of the biggest concerns has been participation in decision-making. The question of sexuality and leadership is the prime example, of course, where numbers of church members feel they have been disenfranchised from influencing what they regard as a vital question in the life of the church. But that's not the only example. The church's stance on various social justice issues, the use of our property assets, and the huge size of our community service activities provide other examples. Even the church's relatively new commitment to consensus decision-making has sparked criticism in some quarters.

A common thread in the 11th Assembly's resolutions is the desire for greater flexibility in our structures and decision-making. The proposal successfully brought to the Assembly for a review of the Constitution had a four-page rationale, with a strong emphasis on the need for more simplicity and flexibility in our constitutional provisions. It's worth quoting the key parts of the actual resolution:

> to establish a task group to review the Constitution so that it may
>
> (a) be simplified and made more clearly understandable;
>
> (b) not only enshrine the principles, ideals and ethos of the Basis of Union, but also allow a greater flexibility in structure; and
>
> (c) be not prescriptive, but rather permission-giving within a broad framework of shared values and beliefs so that there may be new structures for being the Church as it engages in the mission of God in the 21st century.



# The Collapse of Orthodoxy

*Max Champion*

RESOLUTION 108 (R108) is disappointing and unworthy of a truly ecumenical church. Instead of reaffirming classical theology and practice on sexuality, the Assembly chose to compound the problems caused by Resolution 84 (2003). The decision is a further sign of the crumbling of the UCA as a pillar of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

This is not melodramatic, but an accurate description of surely one of the most banal motions passed by a Reformed denomination on a matter to do with the substance of faith.

**Exposing Resolution 108**

In the first place, it is devoid of a genuinely theological-Scriptural rationale. There is no mention of the great biblical themes of creation and redemption in Christ; no attempt to set forth the triune love of God as the foundation of our co-humanity; no word of hope for the sexually broken. There are only vague and empty references to "our unity in Jesus Christ" and "our humanity in Christ" which make us feel good about ourselves without specifying what it means to be "in Christ".

Second, it refuses to recognize that the matter is doctrinal. The word "doctrine" is studiously avoided in the body of the motion. Thus, the Assembly failed to heed the advice of its own Church Polity Reference Committee that "sexuality is a doctrinal issue and [only] the Assembly has the responsibility to determine the church's position in this area".

During debate, the Revd. Dr. Andrew Dutney, Principal of Parkin-Wesley Theological College, said that, as a matter of fact, the received tradition of the UCA on sexuality is the traditional teaching of Reformed and Evangelical churches and the church has not yet decided to change it. Unbeknown to him, but not to the President or General Secretary, the Reforming Alliance had received legal advice that R84 (2003) was invalid because it contradicted church doctrine. In the light of the information received beforehand, the failure to ask the Assembly to take doctrine seriously was inexcusable.

Third, its main themes of "diversity" and "tolerance" are not particularly "christian". Much time and energy would have been saved if, instead of trying to convey the impression of fairness to competing views, it had simply said that the

# Double Take

by Hilary Howes




The substantive part of the resolution setting the key direction for the Assembly on the polity and governance of the church is also worth quoting:

> to critically evaluate the polity and governance of the church with a view to reducing the level of prescription, increasing the level of local permission giving and enhancing the capability of councils of the church to hear and respond to current missional imperatives.

There's clearly another common thread here—the desire for greater flexibility is not just for its own sake, it's for the sake of mission. The church well recognizes that the mission context we now face in Australia is far different from that of 1977. Australians are far less connected with churches than they were in the 1970s, the churches are no longer the lynch-pin organizations which bond the Australian community together, multiculturalism has brought enormous diversity to community and church life, we now live in an openly multi-faith and no-faith society, and we are nowhere near as isolated from the rest of the world as we once were. The prescriptions of a 1970s Constitution and of Regulations which have only become more complicated in the past 29 years seem inadequate to serve God's mission in and for Australia today.

**" The prescriptions of a 1970s Constitution seem inadequate to serve God's mission in and for Australia today. "**

The report of the Church Polity Reference Committee to the 11th Assembly is instructive here. Under the paragraph heading "From institution to movement", the Committee wrote, "The Uniting Church is in a process of significant change; in some respects moving away from an institutional mode to something that is far more fluid and dynamic". This echoes much of the talk around the time of church union. I well remember being in both Presbyterian and Methodist state meetings in Victoria in the early and mid-70s, where the argument was strongly advanced that we needed to form the Uniting Church so we could be liberated from the over-institutionalism, bureaucracy and trivia of our then denominational structures. Many of us who date back to pre-union times rejoiced in the new freedoms the Uniting Church would have to discern God's will and follow it, unencumbered by denominational heaviness.

Let me now offer a few comments on the directions the 11th Assembly is setting for the church here.

The possible changes to our polity will not move the Uniting Church away from the doctrines and teachings of the christian faith. There appears to be concern in some parts of our church that Assembly decisions amount to a removal of the Uniting Church from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. This is an accusation made particularly over the Assembly's decisions on sexuality and leadership. I reject that completely. I do note however, that in the christian traditions to which we belong – the Reformed and Evangelical tradition and the Ecumenical tradition – there is openness to change on matters not of the substance or essence of the faith. This is the context of our openness to change on matters of structure and governance.

The Basis of Union is the authoritative document which commits the Uniting Church to being within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church across the world and which outlines the polity of the church. Note the strong statement about the Basis in the Assembly resolution for the review of the Constitution, quoted above. Sometimes it's argued that the Basis does not allow us sufficient flexibility to meet the challenges of an Australian society which is very different from that of 40 years ago, when the Basis was being drafted. Fortunately our founding fathers were wise enough to build in to the Basis a commitment to constant review of the "law of the Church" (paragraph 17), which in my view gives us permission to develop new patterns of governance as needed. There is a qualifier of course—we cannot move away from the Basis of Union polity of church government by inter-related councils consisting of elected representatives.

I welcome the desire for greater flexibility in the interests of mission effectiveness, and the notion that the Uniting Church is called by God to be more of a movement than an institution. But a movement is by nature a much less controlled and less consistently organized body than an institution. One big question about a movement is how it holds together, how much diversity it can cope with, how it can prevent fragmentation. The question of the limits to the diversity of the Uniting Church remains a big issue for us in the next few years. This applies to our polity as much as it does to our multiculturalism, our covenant with the Congress, and to different practices in different presbyteries.

One of the Reformation principles that has always appealed to me, as it did to John Wesley long ago, is the principle "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love". While some believe this adage dates back to St. Augustine, it's more likely it comes from



German reformers of the early 17th century. As various task groups go about their work prior to the 12th Assembly, I would hope they bear this principle in mind. It relates to polity as much as it does to doctrine—except that in the Reformed and Evangelical and Ecumenical traditions there are fewer essentials in polity than there are in doctrine.

As the work on our structures and governance takes place over the next three years, I'm sure there will be opportunity for church members to have their say, especially through their presbytery and synod. While specific terms of reference are yet to be finalized for the review of the Constitution, I have no doubt there will be provision for input from the church. Watch this space…

Given the scope of the polity work set in train for the next three years, I'm a little anxious that we are falling into a common Uniting Church mistake—thinking we can solve almost anything in a short space of time. Especially with the review of the Constitution, I'm not fully confident that three years is sufficient time.

Being a member of the Uniting Church is never dull. Just keeping in touch with the many initiatives in mission and ministry taken by presbyteries, synods and the Assembly is a major time consumer. Being in leadership in the Uniting Church is even less dull. The next few years look like being a fascinating and very important period, as for the first time since inauguration, the Uniting Church reconsiders its pattern of administration and government. As ever, we will need God's guidance to show us the way forward for the next decades of life and mission in and through this church, which is God's much more than it is ours.

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