

# CROSS Purposes

CAMERON  
BURGESS

BARBARA  
GAYLER

NICOLE  
LOURENSZ

*Through a glass darkly...*

*op. cit...*

**Issue 8**  
**February 2007**

*In  
Service*

*Embodied  
Faith:  
The Church &  
its Agencies*

*...and more*

# CROSS Purposes

Issue 7  
December  
2006

*A forum for theological dialogue*

WITH THIS ISSUE, *Cross Purposes* has now been sailing alone for a year—thanks to all those who've travelled with us to this point, whether by paid subscription or online!

Our major articles in this issue come from Chris Mostert and Margaret Blair, who look at the question of authority and apostolicity in the life of the Uniting Church. That is, they address the question of how we might know whether the UCA speaks and acts according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. In the minds of some critics the UCA has gradually developed more strengths in its administration and processes than in its ability to reflect with theological depth on the challenges which confront it. A distinction between process and content will always ultimately be artificial, but it is not beyond the pale to suggest that right methods and

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processes have sometimes been considered the guarantor of the rightness of outcomes. Margaret Blair argues that the church necessarily assumes that Christ is present to it, and that the pressing task is discerning Christ's will for the church. This discernment takes place through the interconciliar structure of the UCA, by which Christ can address his church, not least through one council calling others to account by reference to the faith all hold in common. She sees in the advent of the consensus decision-making a process which makes possible the participation of a greater number of church members in discernment, and so also effects a broadening of the collegiality by which the church may be called to account.

Chris Mostert's paper argues implicitly for a more specific location of responsibility for discernment in the college of ordained ministers, drawing from an understanding that what the church determines how it might know. Being constituted as it is by the life of the trinitarian God, the church is necessarily concerned with the Word – Christ – which is its life. This leads to the conclusion that special attention be paid to those whose task it is in the church to be “ministers of the Word”. Such ministers do not only perform certain functions but re-present to the church the Word they are called to serve. As such, they exercise a particular responsibility for the confessional well-being of the church, and so also carry a corresponding authority.

# CROSS Purposes

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Council where people who have been silent for years have found a voice.

Gregor Henderson in a report on the World Council of Churches Assembly said that “One of the results of using the consensus procedures, I believe, is that they have changed the atmosphere of the meeting. The ‘feel’ of the meeting is now much more one of mutual seeking, of common action, rather than one of argumentation and dispute.” A fascinating effect of this is that the Orthodox Church, which has been increasingly unhappy about being marginalized in the formal debating procedures of previous WCC Assemblies, reported that they were delighted that their minority voice was heard with respect under the consensus processes.

In this example of consensus decision making I believe we can see that the Uniting Church is indeed prepared to seek ways to enhance how we can discern the will of Christ in our Councils. As Jill Tabart said, “How we make decisions does matter, because the processes we use can shape the pathway for discerning God's will

as we model what Christian community is like”. And how do we know that we are discerning God's will? It will be confirmed by the experience of the fruits of the Spirit amongst us—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

MARGARET BLAIR is Presbytery Minister in Westernport Presbytery.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Basis of Union*, §2

<sup>2</sup>“The Nature and Mission of the Church”, §E86.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, §E88.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, §E89.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, §F91.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, §F97.

<sup>7</sup>*Basis*, §15.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, §15.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, §4.

<sup>10</sup>J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 25.

<sup>11</sup>*Basis*, §12.

<sup>12</sup>*Basis*, §14.

<sup>13</sup>McCaughey, 89.

<sup>14</sup>Risk Book Series, WCC Publications, Geneva.

<sup>15</sup>*Basis*, §15.



graces each brings, in particular those marginalized by the previous processes such as many from the non-Anglo parts of our church. Consensus seeks to modify a proposal so that a final decision can reflect more accurately the wisdom of the church. Over and above all this, consensus decision making gives the space and time to pause and discern the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in trying to discern God's will within the community of those gathered.

There are still those who lament the passing of what they see as the loss of intellectual rigor and theological debate. Some who used adversarial debate well have felt somewhat disempowered. Whilst this is true, the consensus process has given others their voice. There has been an amazing shift that had at its centre the desire to be more open to the movement of the Spirit.

At our recent 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly, our President Gregor Henderson showed great skill in leading consensus decision making. An example of the use of consensus was in the ongoing debate surrounding accepting people living in same gender relationships into ordained ministry. Here consensus process included presentation of the raft of proposals, one-minute speeches, discussion in working groups, the reworking of proposals by the facilitation team and lengthy periods of discernment

by the Assembly in session. A few things stood out for me as affirmation of the consensus process. There was a strong sense of people wanting to respect each other across the divide of opinion. This was shown when members of the Assembly, having been reminded of their right to show their blue or orange cards after each speaker, showed great sensitivity to others in opting not to do so for the presentations and one-minute speeches. Another thing was two different conversations I had with people placed at the end of the spectrum of opinion. Both used almost identical words "I felt safe in expressing my views and I felt that I was heard". For some, the lack of what they see as a decisive decision is an ongoing frustration. Whilst feeling some of this myself, I want to acknowledge the strength of the position that the Assembly came to in asking the church to hold together across this difference. To be able to do this is not a weakness but rather a demonstration of the power of the Spirit at work. God's time is not our time. Consensus decision making not only allows the divergent voices of the church to be heard but helps avoid the pitfall of rushing hastily to decisions.

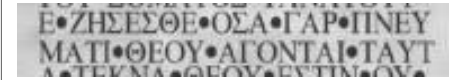
It is regrettable that some councils of the church are still not using consensus process and some are using it badly. I have seen the power of consensus within a Church

Elaine Oliver's reflection on ministry changes the pace entirely, but has some links to Chris Mostert's conclusions. She presents an account of her own path into retirement from settled ordained ministry, and then back into ordained ministry as supply to country congregations. Her reflection challenges the church and its ordained ministers to recognize that ordination is not to a 10, 20 or 40 year period of service before age 65 but a life-long calling which is not determined by the freedoms and limitations of our society's ordering of "work".

Our sermon this month comes from one of our editors, Garry Deverell. As we enter the season of Advent, he reminds us of the gospel's proposal that things might be different—indeed of God's promise that things will be different, and this by the work of his own hand.

And letters to the editor continue to pour in—great advances in theological dialogue!

Finally, if you were one of our first subscribers, your subscription will expire with this issue. If you are in this category you should have received a renewal form with this issue. We hope you've found the last year's offerings justification enough to sign up for another four issues! CP now has a print run of about 120 copies, which includes about 80 paid subscribers. Thanks, again, for your support!



## Letters

### Bandy Re-Appreciated

*Rachel Kronberger's article on Thomas Bandy (Cross Purposes 6) argues that his key question is inadequate for the Uniting Church. In conclusion Kronberger suggests that Rob Bos' key question, "How do we confess Christ in our context?" is better.*

*A great part of her assessment of the Bandy Project is a dismissal of his key question, "What is it about your experience of Jesus that the world cannot live without?" She argues that this key question leads us down the path of simplistic marketing techniques, individualism, and of providing a seedbed for fundamentalism.*

*There are two problems with her assessment. Firstly, her treatment of the question is simplistic and does what she accuses of Bandy of. Yes, Bandy's key question can be reduced to a simplistic application, but it can also be used as a useful tool to help people understand why they are Christian. In the church I serve the question has been used as a tool, its purpose being to encourage people's growth. Bandy does not provide us with a Christology. He only provides*

us with a tool to understand our Christology, and further to the point, one side of our confession of Christ. Bandy made it clear that he was providing tools and a model for the Church, not a theology.

This takes me to the second problem. In dismissing Bandy's key question Kronberger argues that Bos' question is superior. By implication she and Bos are saying that the confession of Christ is about content only, or at very best essentially about content, and the experience of Christ plays little or no part in confession. The problem with this is that the confession of Christ involves a statement about who this Jesus is, and it is a statement of what this Jesus means to us. The confession of Christ is a matter of the heart and mind (Romans 10:9-10). Our confession always implies we have encountered this Jesus and thus have an experience of this Jesus. The Gospel story is also the story of men and women who encountered Jesus and this encounter led them to name him as the Christ (John 4). Bandy's question is a fundamental part of the Church's encounter with the Christ, and helping people to understand what their experience of Jesus is so that their witness may be strengthened: "He told me all that I ever did" (Jn 4:39).

Let us take Bandy for what he is and give due respect to that. He is an inspirational speaker who encourages the Church to be missional. His key

question is a tool, rather than a theology statement. His significant contribution is his structural model for mission. Kronberger says nothing about this, electing instead to provide a theological critique. The Uniting Church needs to listen to Bandy, not blindly follow him, to help the Church be more missional. Many of our folk find it very hard to express what they believe. Giving them a credal statement will not help; they need to understand and recall how and why they came into the Church and faithfully followed Jesus. Secondly, the UCA needs to recognize that its regulations and structures suit a church in a Christendom period when membership was strong. Our regulations and structures do not help us be missional. Bandy, taken for what he is, provides a church with some useful tools and a well thought-out structural model for a missional church, but not exclusively so.

Revd. Peter C. Whitaker  
Burwood Uniting Church, Glen Iris

### Politics and Theology

In his vast project on *God and Globalization*, Max L. Stackhouse, professor of Christian Social Ethics at Princeton Seminary, has but one mention of homosexuality, a footnote that some people in the church would rather engage in war on it than address the great issues of our time.

councils" (Blackwood). Within the Uniting Church, there is no meaning to people gathering as church without this link.

Davis McCaughey says that the three essential elements of the Uniting Church are firstly the Congregation, secondly the Assembly which has responsibility to maintain the churches in unity with the faith and life of the whole Church and thirdly the Presbytery which has episcopal functions, oversight over the life of the congregations.<sup>13</sup>

So our polity certainly places at the centre our being as the Body of Christ, and our councils are charged with preserving the apostolicity of the Uniting Church within the Church universal. But how do we do this? Let's look more closely at one particular example of a change in practice in recent times. This example is the advent of consensus decision making.

Dr. Jill Tabart, a former President of the Uniting Church, recently wrote a book *Coming to Consensus: A Case Study for the Churches*.<sup>14</sup> This book was written as part of the process of the World Council of Churches adopting consensus decision making for their meeting in February 2006. Jill and Revd. Dr. D'Arcy Wood played a key role in equipping the WCC for this change. In this book, the steps to consensus decision making are described.

The Uniting Church's 5<sup>th</sup> Assembly in 1988 put in place a Task Group to look at the standing orders and rules of debate in use at that time. This was an adversarial parliamentary Westminster system. There were some discrepancies and ambiguities that still remained from the practices and understandings of the previous denominations. The work of the task group sounded like a routine and somewhat thankless task of reviewing and amending regulations. What happened was a *kairos* moment, not only for the Uniting Church but also for the wider church. The group recognized the "uniting" intention of the Uniting Church was not just to seek unity with other denominations but also to seek the unity of the body of Christ in our own midst. They sought to give a new and profound meaning to the words of the *Basis of Union* that "the task of every council is to wait upon God's word and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight".<sup>15</sup> They asked the question as to what is the unique nature of decision making in a faith community, compared with a business or secular organization.

This was the start of a six-year journey that resulted in consensus decision making being used for the first time at the 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly in 1994. Behind this was the desire to give all members of each council a voice recognizing the gifts and

servant. She acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of his Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding services: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ.” To speak of the membership of the church is to speak of the baptized.<sup>11</sup>

After this comprehensive setting of the scene and affirmation of the ministry of all people, the *Basis of Union* moves on to look at certain specified ministries with particular roles in the ordering of the Church. Here the work of Ministers of the Word, Deaconess, Elders and Lay Preachers is described, along with the possibility of a renewed diaconate. In this paragraph it states:

Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, she is assured that God, who has never left himself without witnesses to that Word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word. These will preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church.<sup>12</sup>

Commenting on this, Davis McCaughey writes:

The church does not belong to ministers, is not constituted by them; nor is it constituted by the democratic will of its members. It is constituted by the Word/Action of God in Jesus Christ present to people in the life of the Spirit.

In the light of these understandings of oversight in the Uniting Church and our place within the church universal, how then are we to view the “emerging church”? At times we hear about the congregation being replaced by a gathering of people based upon an agency, a school, a local setting in someone’s house, down the pub, or in the backyard. The “congregation” is where people congregate, seeking the way of Christ. The setting is not the factor. Peter Blackwood, in a recent unpublished paper “Towards a Theology of Presbytery in the Uniting Church”, suggested that “what is important is that each group that gathers, each congregation, is in one place and is Holy Catholic and Apostolic”. Davis McCaughey quotes Ignatius, “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church”. What is also important is that “all congregations in all places require that who they are in all their separateness can, nevertheless, be identifiable as One. Therefore there is a relationship between all congregations and in the Uniting Church this occurs by way of its

*In his article (Cross Purposes 6), Max Champion is right to say that homosexuality is part of the theological anthropology of the New Testament (Romans 1:18-25, but almost only there; and let us have transparent exegesis and not the usual slogans trotted out!).*

*Dr. Champion was quietly asked after his fine address on “Neo Paganism and Bonhoeffer” at the recent Bonhoeffer conference whether Bonhoeffer ever mentioned homosexuality. The answer from Max? There is no mention of homosexuality in the Ethics. And Jesus in the Gospels has no teaching on homosexuality. Jesus was not tempted by the devil to be a homosexual. Rather he was tempted to worship the devil in idolatry to gain an ascendancy over all the nations of the world (Matthew 4:8,9; Luke 4:5-7). Jesus said “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Luke 4:8, an Old Testament quotation).*

*Indeed it is revealed in his passion, death and resurrection that God has ascendancy over all things, over the principalities and powers too, and that it is from this point that political theology gains its impetus.*

*At the Bonhoeffer lecture I asked Max whether political arrogance and pride were not a more important matter for the witness of the church. He brushed my question aside as irrelevant; we were simply mentioning “normal” things.*

*The German Confessing Church was formed around Barth’s Barmen Declaration: “We believe in the one Lord Jesus Christ in life and death”. The Confessing Church of Barth, Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller did not mention homosexuality. They had bigger fish to fry. Their theology of the Word was a political theology and it cost Bonhoeffer’s life.*

*Augustine wrote of ancient Rome, “Remove justice, and what are the kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? And what are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms?” (City of God IV, 4, paraphrase). I believe it is this which the church should be aiming at with the political theology of the gospel and not peripheral things.*

*Max Champion and others have declared the UCA Assembly “apostate”. On what authority? Where is the Apostolic Succession behind them that allows them to pronounce on heresy? Or if the succession is in the UCA, will they now return to it?*

*I believe Max Champion and the others have wrong-footed a broad and slightly confused and tired church. They have retreated into their own comfort zone – and that is a political act – in an ever-shattered, suffering and terrible world. Will they now come back? Will they repent in sackcloth and ashes, or will we say in the words of Tillich “You are accepted” and will they accept their and our acceptance?*

Rowan Gill

## From Full-Time Ministry to Retirement

### A Personal Journey

Elaine Oliver

MY PREPARATION for retirement actually began during my second time in the Theological Hall, in studies for Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. One of the courses I elected to do was on mental health, and at one of the sessions the guest speaker was a senior social worker who was addressing a group of middle-aged folk. One sentence he said stuck in my mind: "The time to prepare for retirement is many years before it happens".

Over the years I've made a mental note of some comments made by retired ministers in church newspapers, or in conversation, such as a feeling of being forgotten by the church they'd served, or that their gifts and experience aren't tapped. On the other side I recall comments by parish ministers of unwanted interference in their parishes by retired ministers, making their position difficult. As I faced retirement much further down the track, I hoped that I would be able to avoid both scenarios.

Very early in my ministerial career I learned the value of having a number of interests and hobbies

that enabled me to "switch off" and achieve lower stress levels. Ministry can have its moments of high stress, and for me, gardening (including orchid growing) and arts and crafts were my favourite "levellers". It is these interests that now play a larger role in my retirement years and provide many opportunities for social interaction.

Attendance at a Beneficiary Fund retirement seminar, a few years prior to retirement, was a helpful exercise in confronting one with many of the issues to be faced at retirement, such as financial plans, lifestyle, and where does one live? These days, many ministers have made a decision on the latter long before retirement, but that wasn't so in my case, and is a story in itself which I won't go into now.

Attendance at the retirement seminar led to a consultation with a financial planner which has been invaluable, and I suggest would be



part of the oversight role. Each of these councils is made up of elected members of the church, lay and ordained. Each of these councils has its defined, particular responsibilities. Each of these councils has a part of the responsibility for holding the Uniting Church within the church universal, and maintaining the apostolic continuity of the church as a whole. Each of these councils assumes the presence of Christ and has the responsibility of discerning the way of Christ as it makes its decisions.

To ask, "Is the corporate discernment of the will of Christ something that the Uniting Church has never adequately addressed as a matter of ecclesial policy or process?" sits strangely with the whole underlying assumption of the church universal, "the Body of Christ", and indeed the *Basis of Union*. The church has no meaning other than as the Body of

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**"The church has no meaning other than as the Body of Christ and the Uniting Church has no meaning other than as a part of that church universal."**

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Christ and the Uniting Church has no meaning other than as a part of that church universal.

Paragraph four of the *Basis of Union* states:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because her Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God...who brings into being that which would otherwise not exist.<sup>9</sup>

J. Davis McCaughey, in his *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, makes it clear that it is the living Lord who addresses his people, not with a different message for each generation but with his completed work. Furthermore Christ comes to people through the preached message. He (that is Christ) reaches out, calls, constitutes rules and renews.<sup>10</sup> It is Christ's action not ours.

Davis McCaughey describes paragraph thirteen of the *Basis of Union* as "in some ways, the hinge between those parts which speak of the way in which the Church is constituted by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and lives by his presence with her in the power of the Holy Spirit, and those paragraphs which speak of how the life of the Uniting Church is to be ordered". This paragraph affirms that "every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be its faithful

are summed up in the term episcopate.”<sup>5</sup> This episcopate can be exercised in a personal way by a bishop, or in a collegial or communal form such as we have in the Uniting Church.

Collegiality refers to the corporate, representative exercise in the areas of leadership, consultation, discernment, and decision making. ... This implies leading the Church by means of the wisdom gained in corporate prayer, study and reflection, drawing on Scripture, tradition and reason—the wisdom and experience of all church communities throughout the ages. Sustaining collegiality involves preventing the premature closing of debate, ensuring that different voices are heard, listening to expert opinion and drawing on appropriate sources of scholarship. Collegial oversight should help the Church to live in communion while the mind of Christ is being discerned. It makes room for those of different opinions, guarding and preaching unity, [while] reflecting back to the community the legitimate diversity that exists within the life of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

At the formation of the Uniting Church the oversight of the church was vested not in a person or even a

single council but in our distinctive system of governance by inter-related councils. Our *Basis of Union* states that we recognize that:

Government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them. The Uniting Church therefore so organizes its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation to both the Church and the world. ... It is the task of every Council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in matters allocated to its oversight.<sup>7</sup>

In the Uniting Church we have this particular polity in which the Congregation is “the embodiment in one place of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit of Christ”.<sup>8</sup> No other part of the Uniting Church has such a claim made for it. The other councils of the church, the Church Council, the Presbytery, the Synod and the Assembly, then provide a specified

even more so at the beginning of one's career, in order to maximize whatever savings one has.

Months out from retirement found me prayerfully pondering other questions such as, “What happens to my call at retirement?”, and “What are my goals for this next phase of my life?” After due consideration I came to the belief that my call was for life, and therefore it was important to continue to express this in retirement albeit in a much more limited form and, of course, subject to the state of one's health. I also listed a number of goals which I could see myself tackling, and which included the writing of two books (I've nearly finished one!).

The first three months of retirement I found the hardest. Having been “disconnected” from my last parish, then moving to a larger centre where I was no longer at the centre of things but at the periphery, took some getting used to. And the phone was so quiet. But gradually, as I began to connect with my new home church and community, the process of moving on began. Requests to do supply ministry were soon forthcoming and I found myself engaging with this “bird's eye view” look at parish life in a number of different congregations. Short term stints don't carry the same responsibility as when you're in a full-time settlement, and people appreciate having someone to help keep things ticking over while they

sort out their future ministry needs. It has taken a little time to sort out just how much supply I wish to do, as I allow space for other priorities in my life. I found it helpful to make out a list of expectations and possibilities with each parish as a basis for negotiation and have found parishes very accommodating, as they are grateful to have someone who can offer some temporary leadership. There is certainly no shortage of opportunities to do supply ministries, especially in rural areas, which is where I am situated.

I've also found myself taking an interest in other people's attitudes in general to retirement, ranging from those who see it as “the end”, to those who see it as rich in opportunities of various kinds. I have been blessed by meeting up with some amazing seniors who inspire by their forward outlook on life and their determination to make the best use of their final years. I am grateful to that social worker who reminded me, right at the beginning, that many things in life, including retirement, required forward planning, contemplation and preparation if they are to be fruitfully embraced, and his assurance that at every turn of life we do not journey alone but have the Spirit to be our Companion and Guide.

ELAINE OLIVER is a retired Uniting Church minister.

# A Voice Cries Out

*Garry Deverell*

A sermon preached at South Yarra Baptist Community Church

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2,8-13;  
2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

DOWN AMONGST the ruins that used to be Jerusalem, a voice cried out:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God...

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The voice drifted on the morning breeze to where Joseph and Baruch were cooking their breakfast on a nearby hill. "What highway's he on about?" said Joseph to Baruch. "The highway of the Lord," said the other. "Apparently God is going to restore our fortunes. He's going to come roaring down this new highway they're making, rebuild the city, and set up court in the temple as if he

were Moses himself!" "Somehow I doubt it!" said Joseph, and their laughter pealed across the valley.

But after the silence had taken hold once more, Baruch said: "Still, that'd be nice, wouldn't it. A king in Zion who'd give blokes like you and me a go. I'm blowed if I'm going to slave my guts out to keep these new bloody nobles in their palaces!"

Joseph chewed his tripe thoughtfully. "Time for a year of ... ah, what did they call it? ... Jubilee, that's it. Time for Jubilee, when all that's been lost or screwed up gets put back to rights. You know, it was the grand-sires of these new bloody nobles that confiscated our clan-land back in the time of Uzziah." And then his eyes filled with tears. "I'd swear my troth to a Jubilee King. Bloody oath I would. Bloody oath." The cry of an eagle lifted their eyes to the sun while, in the valley below, a shepherd led his sheep through the ruins.

.....

"So who is this Baptist fella, anyway?" asked Simon. "A hermit," said Uriah. "He comes from a good family, by all accounts. His father was a temple bureaucrat and he was being groomed for the priesthood. But right in the middle of his training he had a bit of a turn and bolted for the desert! Apparently he spent some time with that monkish crowd out near the Dead Sea. What are they called?" "The

Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church recognizes that it is related to other Churches in ways that give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission. ... The Uniting Church declares its desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches."<sup>1</sup>

So how does the church universal understand the way that the apostolicity of the church is safeguarded? A recent paper of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission, "The Nature and Mission of the Church", having described the ministry of all through baptism, went on to describe the role of oversight.

In calling and sending out the Twelve and his other apostles Jesus laid foundations for the ongoing proclamation of the Kingdom and the service of the community of his disciples. Faithful to his example, from the earliest times there were those chosen by the community under the guidance of the Spirit and given specific authority and responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

The paper continues by describing the range of ways this has been lived out in the church, stating that the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon became the

generally accepted pattern by the third century. The chief responsibility of those in these orders was to build up the Body of Christ by proclamation of the Word of God, by celebrating baptism and the eucharist and guiding the life of the community in worship, mission and service. It makes it clear that this goes way beyond words to a ministry of love and service, and is shown in "a fair exercise of power and authority".<sup>3</sup> This ordering of the church has been the way that the apostolicity has been safeguarded. In the wider church this is broadly described as ordained ministry.

The church has used a variety of ways to maintain its apostolicity through time in different places and contexts. These include "the scriptural canon, dogma, liturgical order, and structures beyond the local communities. The ministry of the ordained is to serve in a specific way the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole."<sup>4</sup>

The paper points out that in the course of the first centuries, maintaining communion between local congregations by informal links such as letters and visits was gradually replaced by more institutional forms. The purpose of this was to "hold the local congregations in communion, to safeguard and hand on apostolic truth, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the gospel. All of these functions



*through  
a glass  
darkly*



# Polity & Apostolicity

Margaret Blair

I HAVE BEEN ASKED to reflect on these questions—If our *Basis of Union* declares that “Christ constitutes, rules and renews...his Church”, what does this mean and how does it happen? How do we distinguish between what is of God and what is not? Do we as a church have, as a matter of polity, normative and functional mechanisms for such discernment, or is the corporate discernment of the will of Christ something that the church has never adequately addressed as a matter of ecclesial policy or process? How may the church discern what is apostolic in its life, and what is not?

*The summary of my line of reasoning is this:*

*Firstly, the Uniting Church only exists as part of the Church universal. Christ is not only present in the Church but the Church is indeed “the Body of Christ”. As we live out our being as the Body of Christ, the reality of this is not affected by our inadequacies and failings. So the question as to whether Christ is present is indeed a “non-question”. The question is our discernment of this presence.*

*Secondly, the Church throughout history has safeguarded the Body of Christ, the apostolicity of the church. This has traditionally been done by setting aside some people for leadership who have this special responsibility. Since early in the life of the church this has been vested in bishops, presbyters and deacons. In our reformed tradition this role is conciliar rather than individual. In particular the key role of oversight, episcopate, has been vested in the bishop or in our case the Presbytery.*

*Finally, I will reflect upon how we live this out in the Uniting Church by looking at the particular example of our move to consensus decision making and how this is manifest in the councils of our church. I would argue that, far from the church ignoring this vital question of discerning Christ’s will, the Uniting Church in its formation and its practice actively addresses this question.*

The Uniting Church does not sit alone on some ecclesial island. Our place within the one holy, catholic and apostolic church now and through the ages gives the context for our thinking. That is, any consideration of the polity and apostolicity of the Uniting Church must be set in an ecumenical framework. “The Uniting Church in Australia lives and works within the faith and unity of the one Holy Catholic and

Essenes,” answered Simon. “Yeah. They’re pretty strange, by all accounts, waiting for their beloved Messiah to come! My uncle Max, (you know, the psychiatrist who trained in Rome?) reckons that these separatist groups don’t have the ego-strength to mix it in the real world. So they run away to the desert, where they can set up their own little fantasy. Makes life simpler, I’m sure. But it’s such a cop-out. They could never cope with the real world that you and I know about, that’s pretty clear!”

Uriah took a drag on his cigar and ordered another carafe of red. “I went out for a look the other day,” he said, casually. Simon nearly choked on his café-latté. “You went out for a look? My God, man, what possessed you to do something like that? Surely you’re not having a mid-life crisis! Not at the tender age of 35!” His laughter filled the restaurant, but Uriah didn’t join in. Flushing, he stared down into the blood-red of his Shiraz. Simon stopped laughing. “I’m not sure why I went, exactly,” said Uriah, looking up and out, as if towards an empty sky. Then he turned to look his companion in the eye. “Listen, Simon. This is going to sound weird, but... I’m feeling a little jaded right now. This ‘real world’ we live in, you and I, isn’t feeling like much fun at the moment. What’s real about being part of the Jerusalem middle-class? Most Jews live in landless poverty! What’s real

about doing legal work for the Romans? They’re the occupying power, for Christ’s sake! I feel like I’m betraying my own people, stomping on their heads just to get a leg up! Add to that the fact of a bloody disaster of a marriage! I work so hard that I hardly ever see my kids, and I really don’t know who Priscilla is these days, or what she gets up to...”

Simon’s face has turned pale. “Mate,” he said. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Listen, life might not be all it’s cracked up to be at times. But this is how it is! This is reality! This is Realpolitik! God Almighty! What did that preacher say out there anyway?”

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” said Uriah. “Prepare the way of the Lord’ ... That’s what he said. He was baptizing people in the river to wash their shitty lives away. And he spoke of a Great One to come who would baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.”

Suddenly the space around the two men was different. Something shifted, the world changed. Even the sunset and the evening breeze seemed to speak in a different voice. For a moment, Simon was caught there. From a place deep in his people’s history he heard the mad voices of nomads, prophets and saints, crying out with anguish and longing for a world made new. And for a moment, just a moment, he joined them in their longing. But he shook himself free from the

reverie, and rose from the table. "Uriah," he said, "you're losing it mate". And away he walked. Back to the real world. The world of cafés and credit and nights on the town.

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When you come to worship, why do you come? Is it to escape from the real world, to run away from the awfulness of life? Or is it the opposite? Did you come, perchance, to enter, albeit for a moment, a world which is somehow *more* real, a world that takes your reality seriously, and addresses you where you are afraid, and hurting, and in need of healing?

If this Advent season is about anything it's about taking the voices that cry in the wilderness seriously, the mad voices of nomads, Aborigines and saints, the voices that tell the truth. And what is the truth? Simply this: that the "real" world is a fake; that capitalism and the mad rush to accumulate and consume is killing us all, body, mind, and spirit; that television and celebrity are stealing away our capacity to live our own lives. Ha! I remember a schizophrenic friend being afraid to turn on the television. "When I do," he said, "the demons suck my spirit away." I thought he was dangerously unstable at the time. But now I'm not so sure. Now I reckon he was onto something.

The voice that cries in the wilderness tells another truth too. "Things can be different," it says, "Things can be different from what they are today. Why? Because the glory of God is coming! It is on its way, and it is nearly here." You see, what John the Baptist promised people out there in the desert was not just change, but metamorphosis. What's the difference, I hear you ask? Well, let me put it like this. Change is when you swap from Pears shampoo to Décoré. Change is when you sell up in Balwyn and move to Templestowe. Change is watching "MDA" instead of "Blue Heelers". But metamorphosis? Metamorphosis is when a Tutsi family in Rwanda is able to invite their son's Hutu killers to dinner. Metamorphosis is when Senator Macarius of Rome becomes a hermit monk, and plaits ropes for a living in the Egyptian desert. Metamorphosis was when my dad stopped beating people up because he found somebody who could truly love him—my mum.

To be metamorphosed: in the Greek of the gospel the word is *metanoia*, and it is expressed and performed in the practice of baptism. In the early days of the faith, when the church was possibly more Christian than it is today, baptism was taken very, very seriously indeed. For baptism was not just a ceremony of change designed to welcome people into a church they can neither

by Christ to maintain his authority in the church. The gospel is not the "Christian tradition" but the message about Christ; the sacraments are not our ritual expression but his gifts. In that the ordained are at once servants of Christ and servants of the congregation, it is their pastoral role to make these ownerships plain; even, if need be, to defend the authenticity of the gospel and its sacraments against wishes or fears of the congregation.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

The position set out in this paper, and which calls for more nuanced development, rests on two main convictions. The first is that the church must have a deeper, more theological understanding of its nature than it appears to have. In particular, it must know itself as the creation of the triune God and see itself at every point as serving the mission of the Father, under the rule of Christ and in the power of the Spirit. The second is that the church must regain a more robust view of ministerial office, in addition to a view of the "ministry" (*diakonia*) of every Christian, and that a merely pragmatic view of ministry fails to do justice to the nature of the church.

I am not claiming that proper attention to these two points would solve all the problems of the church or that all questions about discern-

ment of the will of Christ or enactment of his rule in the church would have their answer in these two points alone. I do believe that what is proposed in this paper reflects the proper ordering of the church; it also represents an increasing ecumenical consensus across the churches. Finally, it would suggest to the rest of the church, which sometimes struggles to understand us, that the UCA takes the *apostolic* character of the church with deep seriousness.

CHRISTIAAN MOSTERT teaches systematic theology in the Synod's Theological College.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) vii.

<sup>2</sup>Wolfgang Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Clark & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 102.

<sup>3</sup>See Jenson, *ST*, Vol. 1, 81; cf. *ST*, Vol. 2, 167ff.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, Vol. 2, 178f.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, Vol. 2, 227.

<sup>6</sup>*The Basis of Union*, §3.

<sup>7</sup>*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), §36.

<sup>8</sup>Jenson, *ST*, Vol. 2, 229.

<sup>9</sup>It goes without saying that the eucharist includes the ministry of the Word.

<sup>10</sup>*Basis*, §8.

<sup>11</sup>Jenson, *Unbaptized God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 58.

liturgical or diaconal life, in principle to be carried out by any member of the community, implies a serious curtailment of what already the New Testament has in view.

Continuity with the church of the apostles implies continuity with apostolic proclamation and teaching. It follows that those members of the church who have demonstrated the requisite gifts of the Spirit, received formation for their distinctive ministry and been ordained to hold ministerial office in the church must have a commensurate authority. What authority? Clearly, not the authority of overlords; not an arbitrary authority; not an authority that has no room for reciprocity and accountability. It is an authority under the Lord, under the Gospel.

More specifically, it is the authority to preach the Gospel and to teach the faith, taking seriously the apostolicity of the church in its faith. It is, therefore, the authority of an apostolic ministry. It is the authority to say, under Christ, what the Gospel *is* and is *not*, and to articulate the teaching of the church. It is also, collectively, the authority to determine what is (and what is not) consistent with this teaching and what new decisions might (or might not) be considered to be coherent with the Gospel.

Some may object that this overlooks the conciliar responsibility for such things, the responsibilities of Presbyteries, Synods and Assemblies

(which comprise equal numbers of ordained ministers and lay members) for precisely these matters. I can only say that it is seriously questionable in our own time and sociological context whether they have the resources and understanding for such responsibilities. I am not advocating preaching and doctrinal decision-making by ordained ministers alone. Many lay members of the church have gifts for these tasks, though it is not their office *per se* to discharge this responsibility. We could learn from our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Australia, whose national synod has the responsibility for making doctrinal decisions but only after such matters have been considered by the conference of pastors (ministers).

By a similar logic, I would conclude that only those holding ministerial office should preside at the eucharist, though the argument presupposes the centrality of this sacrament in the liturgical life of the church.<sup>9</sup> The church actualizes its communion with Christ (and the communion of the members with each other) principally in the eucharist, in which Christ seals his presence with his church and feeds his people on their way.<sup>10</sup> Those appointed to a ministerial office instituted to speak and act in the name of Christ and his Gospel are the appropriate persons to represent him at his table. The point is, again, succinctly made by Jenson.

Ordained ministers are authorized

comprehend nor belong to. Rather, it was a powerful sacrament of metamorphosis, a piece of method theatre in which the candidate bound themselves so intimately to Christ that everything they had been before they heard his call was literally cast aside

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in order to make room for the new life which Christ had promised them by his love and his grace. In approaching the waters, the candidate would remove their clothes. Then they would descend, naked, into the waters, where the priest would pronounce the sacred words. Then, when they emerged, the choirs would sing and they would put on the new garb of white, which symbolized the glory of Christ. No longer would they live from their own powers. From now on, they were dead, marked with the scars of Christ. The life they now lived in the body would be that of the Son of God, who loved them, and gave his life for them. Here there was no gap between ceremony and life. Life became baptism, and baptism became the life in Christ.

In baptism we pledge ourselves to Christ, to become his slaves, to give ourselves into his hands completely. But in doing so we respond to a love and promise that always already precedes our decisions: Christ’s promise to always be there, on the other side of the waters, there to raise us from the depths, and array us in the splendour of the redeemed. The promise assures us that our time of penance is ended, that it is God, himself, who now comes to work the forgiveness, freedom and deliverance we so long for. Without this promise, all of our being sorry and all of our determination to change makes for nothing.

In this we find out what Advent really means, as the season of promise *par excellence*: that within and beyond the appalling squalor of our greedy, seedy lives; within and beyond our self-hatred and despair; within and beyond the awful inhumanity of our politics; within and beyond all this Christ arrives. Christ arrives with love enough, with peace enough, with hope enough to make things very, very, very different.

Glory be to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as in the beginning, so now and for ever, world without end. Amen.

GARRY DEVERLL is the minister of St. Luke’s Uniting Church in Mt. Waverley and an editor of *Cross Purposes*.

# Double Take

by Hilary Howes



Nevertheless, authority is not an option but an unavoidable necessity. In the church it is primarily the authority of *Christ* of which account must be taken. Another form of this is the authority of the Gospel, which is integrally related to, but not identical with, the authority of Holy Scripture. None of this means anything particular, however, unless we consider the particular organs of authority through which the authority (rule) of Christ can be expressed in concrete terms.

In principle, nothing the church does lies outside the rule of Christ, though clearly this takes on greater importance in relation to proclamation, doctrine, pastoral care and mission than, say, matters of house-keeping. The range of the authority of Christ is identical with the extent of the mission of Christ, which it is the church's call and task to serve. A recent World Council of Churches statement on the church expresses it as follows:

The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 8:18-25). Through its worship (*leitourgia*); service, which includes the stewardship of creation (*diakonia*); and proclamation (*kerygma*) the church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit the

Church testifies to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.<sup>7</sup>

The church's mission is the mission of Christ, which is none other than the mission of the Father through the Son and the Spirit. The authority by which it undertakes this mission is his, and the strength and direction which it needs for this mission come from the Holy Spirit. As it reads the Holy Scriptures and looks to the enlivening power of the Spirit to make ancient words the living Word of Christ for its own time and place, the church submits to the authority of the Word (the authority of the Gospel), without which no Christian community can be faithful and fruitful.

To speak of the authority of the Word is necessarily to consider the *ministry* of the Word. Although our rites of ordination still speak of "the office and work of a Minister of the Word [or Deacon]", we think mainly of ministerial work and very little of ministerial *office*. This is a serious loss. The New Testament, notably the Pastoral Epistles, already knows a rudimentary form of ministerial office and ordination. Those who hold such office have the responsibility of caring for the community, ensuring its continuity in the apostolic faith, guarding it against threats from within and without, and appointing successors in this office.<sup>8</sup> To think of "ministry" only in terms of some *functions* in the community's

*koinonia*, for which the Son works and to which the Spirit draws us, is the Father's Kingdom".<sup>5</sup>

I have argued that to understand the church properly, in a theologically adequate way, we have to see it in relation to the triune God, with reference to whom alone it can be understood as what it truly is. Three of the most common metaphors for the church are "people of God", "Body of Christ" and "Temple of the Holy Spirit". Since none of these is to be understood in isolation from the others, their cumulative force drives us to a trinitarian account of the church. Such an approach to a theology of the church stands in sharp contrast to the flat and pragmatic thinking which has become dominant in the UCA in recent years. We must now consider whether, and in what ways, an approach such as that indicated above has implications for the discernment of the will or rule of Christ in the church.

### The exercise of authority

The church, as we never tire of saying, is "a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal".<sup>6</sup> We are an eschatological people, anticipating the reign of God but not yet at the point of its consummation. We live in faith and hope. We do not see clearly the way to which Christ points; nor do we clearly hear his voice or perfectly read his mind. In short, his rule and our

governance of the community do not yet—by a long way—coincide. Yet we have no choice but to go on with the great commission to "make disciples", to "baptize" and to "teach" all nations (Matt. 28:19f.), not excluding our own!

We can only do so on the basis that Christ himself, having all authority, has promised to be with us and that the Spirit (*his* Spirit and the Father's) will guide, strengthen and correct us, though we will have to open ourselves both to that authority and that guidance. The key question—what the whole difficult matter of discernment comes down to—is: how can we, who are inescapably fallible and whose judgments are at best provisional, bring to expression the rule of Christ in his church, hear and articulate what the Spirit is saying to the church (Rev. 2:7), and echo more truly in our communal liturgy, life and mission the life of the triune God?

There is no blueprint by which to arrive at answers to this multiple question. Materially, the answers are as varied as the contexts in which Christian communities worship and witness. Formally, too, there is no single answer. In this short article, I shall focus on one matter: *authority* in the church. There are many risks in doing so; chief among them is that I shall be quickly dismissed or taken to be unaware of how delicate and fraught the whole matter of authority in the church has become. We can all agree that authority is easily abused.

# The Church of the Triune God

*Christiaan Mostert*

## Introduction

WHEN WE TALK about the church we quickly find ourselves in disagreement. This disagreement is not, I think, the result of our disagreements about other things, like the claims of the culture in which we live or the authority of the Bible or particular moral questions. The disagreement is more fundamentally theological; it is about the inclination or disinclination to think ontologically about the church, i.e. to consider what actually makes the church the church.

This essay is concerned with questions about discernment, in particular the discernment of the will of Christ for the church. In language which we now hear only seldom in the church, it is about the "rule" of Christ in his church. One of the striking things about the *Basis of Union* is the frequency of references to Jesus Christ as one who acts in his church. He is not merely an object of pious memory and hope.

In the *Basis of Union* Jesus Christ is described as "reach[ing] out to command attention and awaken faith" (§4). It goes on to say that "in

his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews [people] as his church". This says exactly what must be said about the church, without which almost anything else we could say about the church would miss the point. However, it says it in a way which needs expansion: trinitarian expansion.

Not only is the church divided into many churches, all claiming to be (or to be part of) the one holy catholic and apostolic church, but most of these ecclesial bodies are themselves divided over questions of faith and life. Most Protestant churches know the struggle of trying to maintain a unity of faith in tension with a diversity of belief, ethics, worship style and understanding of mission. The danger of fragmentation is something which the Uniting Church, in particular, knows at first hand. What can authority in the church mean in such a situation? Can any reading of the mind of Christ authenticate itself in

## On Areopagus Hill



the church? Can we hope to come to agreement about the way Christ rules his church and the form in which such rule expresses itself in doctrinal, moral, liturgical and missional decisions? Can we hope to give a better than equivocal content to what is implied in the apostolicity of the church?

Important as these questions are, they cannot be addressed in one step; they require a preliminary step. The Christ who rules his church also constitutes it, and these two propositions are not merely accidentally related. So this short essay comprises two main parts. The first part states some fundamental theological propositions about the church, for it makes little sense to discuss what the church should do unless we are first clear about what the church actually is. The second part considers more directly some of the questions posed above: questions about apostolicity, authority and discernment.

### The trinitarian constitution of the church

Let us begin christologically, that is, with the church in its relation to Jesus Christ, which is only the converse of thinking about Jesus Christ in his relation to his church. To insist on this as methodologically correct implies a critique of the usual pattern of ecclesiological discussion in the Uniting Church, no doubt with paral-

els in many other churches. To put it bluntly, our thinking about the church is mostly too *flat*, or theologically *thin*. We begin with the empirical church, the church as we see it, hear it, observe it and experience it. We concentrate on what we see happening in congregations or in church councils or in the bureaucracy. (Actually, if we focused on what happens in the congregation's *liturgy* there is a chance that it would point us to the one who "constitutes, rules and renews" the church, though also a fair chance that it would not!)

Theology, as Robert Jenson suggests, is "the church's enterprise of thought, and the only church conceivably in question is the unique and unitary church of the creeds".<sup>1</sup> If this is true, as I think it is, our concern must be primarily with the faith and theology of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, not any one part of it. This need not be understood narrowly; how the church's "enterprise of thought" relates itself to its culture and how it addresses particular contexts will take seriously many variables. But it will not begin with these variables. It should begin with the ontological question of what (or who) constitutes it as the church that the creeds declare it to be.

The UCA's *Basis of Union* names Christ as the one who constitutes his church (§4), just as it can be built only on him (§3). This means, too, that Word and Sacrament, through

which he makes himself present to his church (§§4,8), constitute the church, for participation in these "holy things" is "participation in Jesus Christ himself".<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiology and Christology cannot be severed; our view of each is reflected in our view of the other! As we understand him, so will we understand the church.

Except for occasional reminders, we have forgotten how to think of Jesus Christ as "the total Christ" (*totus Christus*), i.e. the one who lived and died, who was raised and who includes and is included in his community.<sup>3</sup> Nothing less can be said of any community that confesses itself as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). It is a communion *in* him and *with* him, and it is constituted and renewed as such again and again through the body of Christ, i.e. his sacramental presence. This is a statement about the church of any time or place. Not only is he its foundation in a chronological sense but also in an ontological sense; at no time can it be what it confesses itself to be apart from him.

Here we must also speak of the Spirit, whom the Father has sent in the Son's name (John 14:16,26). Easter is followed by Pentecost. In a characteristically compact sentence, Jenson speaks of Pentecost as "the Spirit's particular personal initiative to delay the Parousia: when the Spirit descends eschatologically yet without raising all the dead and ending this

age, the time for the church is opened".<sup>4</sup> There can no more be a church without the *Spirit* than without Christ. It is the Spirit who enables followers of Jesus to be the body of Christ. The Spirit makes the church both the body of Christ and the "temple of the Holy Spirit". (1 Cor. 3:16f.) It is by the Spirit that the church lives and has its guidance (Gal. 5:25); and by the same Spirit, the Spirit of truth, it may hope to be guided into the whole truth (John 16:13).

Even to say this, however, is not yet enough. For the church has its place in the history of God in and with the world, the God who has identified himself as the Father of the Son. It owes its being to the electing grace of the Father. As everything has its origin in God, so does the church. It has its "election" in Christ and in consequence of *his* "election" by the Father. In addition, to understand the church truly, it is necessary to think eschatologically as well as in terms of origins. Just as the Son and the Spirit serve the kingdom (reign) of the Father in and over all things in creation, so does the church. Indeed, the church, neither creating nor extending the kingdom, actually *anticipates* it in every aspect of its life—brokenly, patchily, ambiguously at best. It does *not yet* embody the reign of God, but it *already*, in the power of the Spirit, anticipates it. In Jenson's compact sentence, "The great goal of our