

What it means to live out of the vision of the *Basis of Union*

A theological reflection

Dr David J Pohlmann

The Uniting Church Code of Ethics requires ministers and lay preachers to ‘live out of the vision of the Basis of Union’. Assembly policy supports ‘a diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings’ in key practical areas. Is there an ethical dilemma in this or is it possible to ‘live out of the vision of the Basis on Union’ in accord with current Assembly policy? Is there a diversity of ways to read the Basis of Union and, if so, what is the ethical implication of such diversity?

In responding to the topic, this paper will reflect on each paragraph of the Basis of Union (BoU) (1992). It will then propose a hypothetical answer to the question underlined above.

1. The way into union

This paragraph points to the unity of the church that can only be found in our sole loyalty to Christ. While there is room for some diversity of belief and understanding, the overarching force of the BoU is one of unity, and according to the Basis the only organising idea around which any beliefs and understandings may be gathered in such a unity is to be found in Christ himself.

Given the unity Christians have in Christ, paragraph 1 commits us to make disciples. Only within this Christo-centric position can one hope to be an answer to Jesus’ prayer: ²¹”that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17).

2. Of the whole Church.

There is only **one** church – the catholic and apostolic church. The universal church based upon the witness of the Apostles. This church is in three states – militant, penitent, and triumphant. The BoU calls Christians to seek to enter deeply into the mission of God and making disciples as para 1 indicates (militant), to admit when we’ve got it wrong, as we gather around Christ alone, moving towards the unity outlined above (penitent), and remaining committed “to the faith that was **once** for all **delivered to the saints.**” (Jude 1:3), such unity including those who have gone ahead of us to receive their reward (triumphant).

3. Built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ

The third paragraph of the BoU is entirely orthodox as it reminds us of our need as Christians to cling to Christ as both Saviour and Lord. The BoU describes our relationship with Christ as of course being salvific, but also being one of diligent discipleship and obedience to Him as Lord. It also looks forward to that wonderful day when Christ shall come again.

4. Christ rules and renews the church.

Picking up from where para 3 leaves off, the 4th paragraph of the BoU reminds us of Christ's proper position as the Word of God. In doing so it reminds us of His role as salvific, life-giving and as the Lord whose right it is to command us.

5. The Biblical Witnesses

The BoU emphasises the importance of scripture (although not to the overt extent of the Anglican 39 Articles). The scriptures are the prophetic (OT) and apostolic (NT) witnesses to Christ the Word found there. These are unique – they have no peer (not in our Constitution, Regulations nor in academic writing). The Scriptures are to be our primary source of nourishment and regulation. Ministry agents are to preach from these, and the laity are to be encouraged to read and study them.

6. Sacraments 7. Baptism 8. Holy Communion

We are also a sacramental church. In paragraph 6 of the BoU we find the recognition of the importance of what God is doing amongst us. Baptism and Communion are ordinances, but they do not remain solely thus: we believe that God is somehow present and active through these special means of grace. While some in the church catholic have a broader definition of the sacramental – with the whole church, Baptism and Holy Communion are declared to be central. We are both paedo-baptists and credo-baptists and in this, the BoU links us again to the church universal.

9. Creeds 10. Reformation Witnesses

According to the BoU we are a creedal church, and we are a reformed church. We do not jettison the wisdom of the past, whether this wisdom is from our early church or reformational fathers along the way. But all must necessarily be informed by (nourished) and come under the authority (regulation) of the unique Biblical Witnesses.

11. Scholarly Interpreters

The BoU says that God has never left us without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture. From the above, it may be argued that departure from the clear meaning of scripture, and the way that the reformation witnesses understood scripture is not open to us. Such interpreting may be scholarly but hardly faithful.

12. Members

This paragraph speaks of the importance of linking baptism and confirmation – an emphasis overlooked at our peril. The BoU encourages an active membership (militant) and a life of true discipleship.

13. Gifts and Ministries, 14. Ministers, Elders, Deaconesses & Lay Preachers

We are a Pentecostal church in the sense that we see the first Pentecost after the resurrection as the birthday of the church. We accept that as Paul taught in Ephesians 4 that “⁷ ...to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”” In this the BoU recognises that God has given gifts for ministry within the church to men, women, lay, commissioned, or ordained. When they are recognised within their ministries in the church men and women agree to adhere to the Basis of Union.

Because ‘the phrase "adhere to the *Basis of Union*" is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis, [and that such] adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith’ we are free to accept that the issues that the BoU addresses are those which **do** enter into the substance of the faith. Hence the BoU is more than an historic and /or descriptive statement at the time of union, but a living document with an ongoing and normative role for the UCA. Otherwise we would not require such adherence.

15. Government in the church 16. Particular functions 17. Law in the church.

The BoU outlines a scriptural (c.f. Acts 15:28 - it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit) and an almost unique governance (among church polities) through a series of interrelated councils: **congregation**, church council, presbytery, synod and assembly. Emphasis needs to be given to congregations and church councils. Too much emphasis falling to synods and the assembly distances us from the vision of the Basis of Union.

Rule by *standing committees*, which although being a reasonable part of the constitution and regulations, is not included in the BoU. When the UCA was constituted at law, the constitution and regulations were to be created in line with the provisions of the BoU. The BoU does not give ruling power to particular members of Synod or Assembly standing committees, (e.g. General Secretaries, Moderators or Presidents), just as it doesn’t give episcopal powers to Presbytery Ministers.

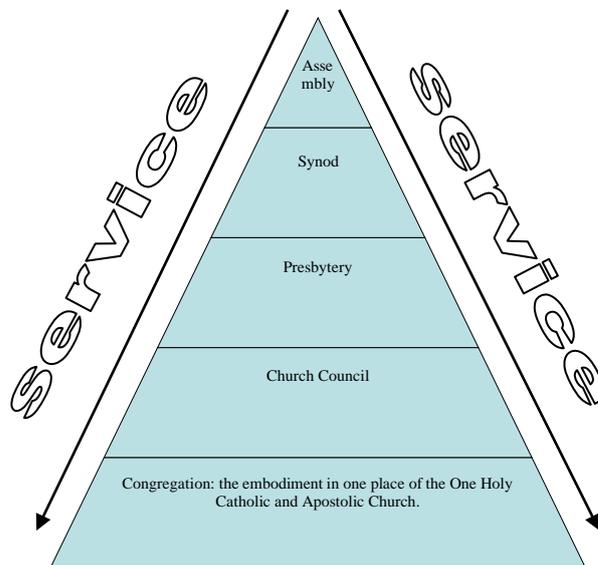


Figure 1: Polity of the UCA

As in Figure 1 above, all the councils of the church relate to each other working in their sphere of influence and authority, in order to support the Congregation **which is** the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. As the BoU states “there is no gift without its corresponding service”. Each of the councils of the church are gifted and thus must provide their corresponding service to the whole body which culminates in the Congregation – where the coalface of the church is!

While the early church fathers might have stated that where the bishop is, there is the church; the BoU declares that where the congregation is, there is the church.

Summary: The Basis of Union provides a high Standard of orthodoxy which is positioned guard the heart of the Uniting Church. It should be applauded, and its vision lived out.

Conclusion

If any council of the church were to pursue a humanistic form of unity that: put distance between the UCA and the Church, Catholic and Apostolic; built upon something or someone other than Christ as pointed to by the prophetic and apostolic witnesses in Scripture; or jettisoned our creedal or reformational past through heterodox interpretation, it would:

- put its members in peril;
- mock the vows of ministry agents;
- diminish the sacraments; and
- turn the polity of the UCA on its head to become yet another unremarkable hierarchical religious entity doing its own thing,

but sadly, it would not be the Australian church imagined in the Basis of Union.

David Pohlmann JP(Qual), Dip Teach, BEd, MEd, GradCertHumBehav, GradDipMinStud, PhD, MACE, MACEL, MANZMHA has been a confirmed member of the UCA since 1977 and is a pastor in placement at Mt Louisa in Townsville

The UCA's BoU speaks of a...

Unity solely built on
Christ, faithfully built on the teaching of the
Apostles, following Jesus the Christ as Lord,

Upheld by the teaching of Scripture
Celebrating God's work
Amongst us in the sacraments,

Upholding the wisdom of our forebears, remaining faithful to our heritage,
encouraging discipleship, exercising our gifts faithfully trusting God to speak
through our

Church Councils...
All of them

Utterly retaining and fighting for our interconciliar polity and recognising the
importance of the local

Congregation, taking our
Adherence to the BoU as a solemn vow.