

Why a Code of Ethics?

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

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?

If one enters a high-class dining-room, one may be required to adhere to a dress code. In such circumstances, there would be little point in a code which allowed for a diversity of understandings about dress. By its nature a dress code sets boundaries in terms of acceptable dress. By the same token, a Code of Ethics might be expected to set boundaries in terms of acceptable ethical understandings. The Uniting Church Code of Ethics states that its ministers and lay preachers 'shall live out of the vision of the Basis of Union'. If this vision is intended to mark boundaries of belief and ethics, such boundaries must necessarily be plainly understood. One sees this necessity clearly in the case of a dress code. Diners will need to know that thongs are not acceptable wear: otherwise there will be an argument at the door.

The Uniting Church Code of Ethics directs ministers and lay preachers to be guided by the decisions of the Assembly. But in one key matter the Assembly has mandated respect for a diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings. What does this mean in ethical terms? Let us ponder the effect in a dress code example: strict rules for dinner wear except for sun-glasses which are optional. As we may suppose, designer sun-glasses are an innovation for dinner wear. Some diners are enjoying the freedom of wearing them. Others prefer to keep their tables free of the innovation. Still others are writing to Management to ask why they bother with a dress code at all!

Such matters might be solved by having separate dining-rooms. But it is one thing to offer a choice of secular dining-rooms and quite another to promote this in a Church. Perhaps, however, separate dining-rooms may not be necessary. The Assembly obviously thinks they aren't because there has been no admission that the matter is of vital importance to the life of the church. The Assembly seems to still believe in a church-friendly solution in spite of differences: different tables may have different codes, says the Assembly, but let's all sit in the dining-room together. This is of course the same as saying the dining-room as a whole doesn't have a dress code and that it is up to guests what they wear. At the same time it is not really a free-dress policy because, for practical purposes, the Assembly seems to admit that those sitting at the same table need to agree on a code. Certainly an unusual dining-room!

None of these practical details would appear to have anything to do with the Code of Ethics because, if they did, the code would apply to the whole room. Perhaps dress, to continue the analogy, is a minor matter, unlike the weightier issues discussed in the Code of Ethics. But isn't a need for separate tables in itself a sufficiently weighty matter? What effect might separate tables have on inter-related councils for example? And isn't it the case that some tables are reading the Basis of Union with different eyes? How then does the whole room share the same ethical vision?

When a Church sits down to dine the meal is a sacred one. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One dining-room. One dress.