

## **‘What it means to ~~live out of the vision of~~ (adhere to) the Basis of Union’**

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*“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. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.”*

*(Uniting Church in Australia, Basis of Union paragraph 14)*

*“Ministers have a responsibility to represent accurately the teachings of the Scriptures and of the Church. When teaching, preaching or leading worship, Ministers have an obligation to present the gospel of Jesus Christ, guided by the witness to Christ in the Scripture, to take seriously the tradition of faith and worship of the church catholic; and to share that faith in the language and forms of the particular worshipping community and to address its issues.*

*In particular, Ministers shall:*

*(a) live out the vision of the Basis of Union;*

*(b) accurately represent the meanings of biblical passages.*

*(c) accurately represent the degree to which experts in a discipline support their views.*

*(d) accurately represent opposing views;*

*(e) uphold the theological and liturgical tradition of the Church;*

*(f) be guided by the decisions of the Assembly;*

*(g) be open to challenge and correction from colleagues*

*(Code of Ethics 3.2)*

### **Faithfulness and Accountability**

It should be obvious that leaders of a church be expected to live and work within the faith of their denomination. Their preaching and teaching ought to be defined by that church’s expression of the Christian faith.

Further these leaders ought to expect to be held accountable to that expression of faith. The intent of the Code of Ethics for Ministers in the UCA tries to do that. It fails.

This paper describes what that accountability to the faith of the church ought to look like. This is particularly important because inconsistencies present Ministers with an ethical conundrum. Demonstrable inconsistencies exist within the Code of Ethics and between the Code and Assembly policies and the Basis of Union.

Life has many ethical dilemmas. We live and make many choices in the world often without clear information and between conflicting requirements. “Do I support individual freedom or what benefits the greater community?” is one example. That became intensely practical issue in 2020 with mandatory quarantine.

While some ethical problems are hard to solve, inconsistencies in guidelines do not help. They do not help church leaders to be or to feel both faithful and accountable.

## **Inconsistency within the Code of Ethics**

There are inconsistencies within the Code of Ethics which make it a problematic standard for judging faithfulness and accountability to the gospel.

The 'live out the vision' statement from the code of Ethics can be read several ways.

This could be a typical post-modern approach. That is that different readers will bring or discern different meanings from the text. This is not the case. This section the Code of Ethics is badly and imprecisely worded. This imprecision means that this part of the UCA Code of Ethics cannot be used as a standard to assess the conduct of ministers.

"Live out the vision of the Basis of Union" could equally mean

1. Live out what the Basis of Union states as literally interpreted.
2. Use the Basis of Union as a starting point to be adapted to circumstances. Eventually, what may be preached and taught may end up looking very different to the original. This is okay, so long as one can justify why with a story about how they got to where they are now. They can say they look back to the Basis of Union. That is even if this person's preaching and teaching are unlike anyone else.
3. Live out as being outside the Basis of Union. That is live by moving away from the Basis.

The issue is not which interpretation is correct. The issue is that this standard by which ministers will be held to account can be interpreted so differently as to make the standard meaningless or arbitrary in application or a disciplinary setting.

## **Code of ethics vs Basis of Union**

Ministers are required in their ordination and induction promises to adhere to the Basis of Union. These promises fit the first interpretation of "live out the vision."

The Basis of Union is more strongly worded than the Code of Ethics in this case. The Basis requires that ministers must ensure that their preaching, teaching and ministry falls within the faith of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic church. That is that their preaching, teaching and ministry are:

- obedient to Christ;
- matching the scriptural witness;
- consistent with the creeds and reformation witnesses.

This is much stronger wording than being merely guided as the Code of Ethics suggests. According to their promise to the Basis of Union, leaders cannot simply be guided and then go their own way.

Notwithstanding this, there exist within the Basis of Union requirements significant differences. The best example is that the different Reformation witnesses represent a wide range of theological interpretations. However, as the

Basis suggests these are not about matters of substance. There will be differences of opinion and leaders need to recognise and accept that they exist.

Leaders have opinions.

They will preach and teach them.

The people came into church union expected that. Many united only because that was permitted.

The Code of Ethics requires something different. It requires ministers to preach and teach what they do not believe! That is that they must share differences in scholarly opinion and detail opposing views. While accuracy is necessary and needs to be encouraged, ministers must preach and teach what they are convinced is within the faith. They must proclaim, confess and enact what they believe.

Much of the authority of ministry comes from this conviction. The difference is the same as that between Jesus' preaching and that of the scribes.

(Matthew 7:29) Scribal teaching of scripture would regularly say Rabbi ben Levi has this opinion and Rabbi Rashi states the opposite and Rabbi Goldberg has a curiously different interpretation. Jesus taught simply and with authority. The Basis speaks of a ministry under Christ that shares his authority. It derives its authority from this. The Code of Ethics sounds more like an invitation to become scribes rather than ministers of the gospel

### **Code of Ethics vs Assembly policies**

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.

The Code of Ethics in this instance sounds more like Assembly policy than the original Basis of Union.

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? Yes, there is a dilemma.

This is a pearl of wisdom from a rebellious young teenager. She defiantly said, "We get taught that we can believe what we like – That means that it doesn't matter what we believe. That means that belief is not important!"

There is no fault in this young teenager's logic. It is the logic of the Code of Ethics and Assembly policy. Nevertheless, we should strongly disagree with the teenager. What we believe is vitally important. "Nothing really matters to me ...". So goes the famous line from Queen's "*Bohemian Rhapsody*." But this is simply not true. Not for her and not for us. It really is not true in the song either as it is a matter of life and the character's pending execution.

The Basis of Union says “belief doesn’t matter” is not true for the ministry of the church.

### **The shape of the gospel in the Basis of Union.**

The faith of the church has a definite shape in the Basis of Union.

The Basis of Union states that the church’s faith and the church’s confession, worship, witness and service are controlled and ordered by;

- sole loyalty to Christ the living head of the Church.
- the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.
- being nourished and regulated by the Biblical witnesses,
- the creeds and Reformation witnesses
- applying the learning of faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture
- the faith of Christ Crucified as confessed by every member.

Church union was an historical action in obedience to this faith. The ordering of the church’s councils (its polity) is subordinate to this confession. It serves this obedience to the faith rather than controls it.

### **A variety of reading of the Basis?**

Is there a diversity of ways to read the Basis of Union and, if so, what is the ethical implication of such diversity?

In a recent dispute between councils of the church it has been argued that there are a number of ways of reading the Basis of Union. This may well be true. Andrew Dutney sees the Basis as a licence to explore and freedom to move forward from an historical starting point. His opinion deserves serious consideration. We cannot foresee the issues that will face the church and society into the future. The events of 2020 should teach us this.

There is however another interpretation which states that the opinions and decisions of the Assembly should determine how we understand the Basis. This cannot be allowed as valid.

This interpretation states that the policies and codes produced by one council of the church such as Assembly are binding on the church and supersede the status of past interpretations of the Basis of Union. It is even argued that these supersede the plain reading of the Basis. This appeal to the authority of a magisterial council or magisterium is no less than a rejection of the Reformation and the reformation confessions of faith. It is an interpretation that rejects the traditions of the Uniting church. It attempts to roll back the governance of the church to before the Reformation to be in church leadership rather than the gospel. It enables the illusion of control to a small leadership but actually defies our part of the Christian tradition.

The authority of Christ in the church is located not in a council or councils but in the whole church. Just as each minister must be accountable to remain within the faith of the church each council and leader must also be accountable in the same way.

### **The way forward**

Revision is needed in the imprecise language of the Code of Ethics. This has happened previously. There is a generation of ministers who can remember the clumsy wording of the original code which stated that they were not allowed to care for their spouses.

All codes of ethics by their nature tend to be works in progress that need regular revision.

The ethical choice facing ministers is this. Are we called to preach with authority and conviction or as scribes offering all opinions convincing no one and convinced by none?

Obedience should be to Christ as the head of the church

Preaching needs to be with authority. Preaching the gospel is not meant to be merely amusing or mentally stimulating. It is meant to be life changing.

Good preaching and teaching will be amusing and mentally stimulating and much more. Preaching must be Godly, challenging us to faith in Christ. God chose preaching and teaching ministry to contain the power to drastically change people's lives. That power is precisely why the responsibility to preach must be taken seriously. It is why ministers need to be accountable. That accountability within the UCA is measured by how well it accurately reflects the confession of the gospel we receive and live out in the contemporary world.