

# UNITING – Basis of Union

Katherine and Walter Abetz

Published in ACCatalyst Volume 4 Number 2/ April 2010

---

*In July the UCA will hold a conference on “Engaging the Basis” in Melbourne. The UCA basis of Union is such an important topic that ACCatalyst wants to start the discussion early, with three short essays on the UCA’s founding document. The Conference details are at [www.engagingthebasis.ucaweb.com.au](http://www.engagingthebasis.ucaweb.com.au)*

## 1. Why the Basis of Union is important

The place of the Basis of Union became an openly contested item 1994-1997, and the 8th Assembly decided to do what was assumed to be unnecessary ten years earlier: to state in the Constitution of the Uniting Church that the church “lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union.” (Clause 2 of the Constitution)

If any one wishes to claim that ‘guide’ is a weak word, allow me to remind them that ministers are required to be ‘guided’ by the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice. The Assembly website reflects the strong sense of ‘guided’:

“[The Basis of Union] states the central affirmations of the Christian faith and is a guide to what is central in the life of the Uniting Church.” Assembly website [www.assembly.uca.org.au/resources/20-historicdocs](http://www.assembly.uca.org.au/resources/20-historicdocs) accessed 19/3/10

This is a clear statement of the ongoing importance of the Basis of Union. The statement reflects the intentions of the writers of the Basis of Union.

“The Basis of Union was intended as a call to the church to renew her commitment to the faith by which she lives and to go out boldly on her mission.”

One of the chief writers of the Basis of Union and First President of the Assembly, J.D. McCaughey, says in his *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 1980, p5 “Apart from a full and deliberate process for the amendment or replacement of the Basis, including amending legislation in the parliaments, the Uniting Church and its councils must themselves abide by the Basis of Union, in accordance with which the Church was formed. To fail to do so, would be to break faith with all who have entered the Church on the understanding that it was founded on this basis, and also to create a completely contradictory situation for office-bearers who are themselves required to adhere to the Basis of Union.”

Note the date and the defensive style by one of the other writers of the Basis of Union, Michael Owen, *Back to Basics* (1996), p188: “The writers of the Basis of Union had no doubt that the document was more than an instrument to facilitate church union. Nevertheless, attempts to undermine the status of the Basis of Union continue.”

President-elect of the 12th Assembly, Andrew Dutney describes the Basis of Union in these words: “And the permanent symbol of that process [i.e., church union] - the charter, the manifesto, the vision statement of that generation – is the document called the Basis of Union.” Andrew Dutney, *Where did the joy come from?*, 2001, p8.

By calling the Basis of Union a ‘permanent symbol of that process’, and then adding the limiting phrase ‘vision statement of that generation,’ he appears to want to consign the Basis to the pages of history.

The proposed Preamble follows that same path of wanting to consign the Basis of Union to history. Yet the Assembly website declares that the Basis of Union contains matters central to the Christian faith and is central in the life of the Uniting Church.

The Basis of Union, on careful reading, will show that the Uniting Church was meant to be a beginning of wider church unity: hence the name Uniting rather than United (cf United Church of Canada vs Uniting Church in Australia).

We set out not to be a denomination, but to be an authentic part of the one holy catholic (i.e. universal) and apostolic church (as in the tradition of the apostles). The desire of the authors of the proposed Preamble, to make the Uniting Church uniquely Australian, is not part of the vision of the Basis of Union.

The Basis of Union deals with the ‘substance of the faith’, those matters which the church has always believed, which are described in Paragraphs 1-14. The Basis insists that Christ as the head of the Church ‘can speak through any of its councils’, not just the Assembly (Paragraph 15, and 15e), and so affirms interrelated councils.

The Basis describes the process into union in Paragraph 1. It then sets out the fundamentals of the faith that come to us through the incarnation. The church’s relationship with Jesus Christ comes before the Bible and the sacraments. But the Bible is the witness which nourishes and regulates our faith and obedience, and it controls what we say about Jesus Christ (Paragraph 5). This Paragraph sets boundaries to diversity: the possible rejection or misrepresentation of New Testament teaching and practice.

The Uniting Church is not stuck in the past by adhering to its Basis of Union. Paragraph 11 places the Uniting Church into the worldwide fellowship of Christ’s Church.

As part of that fellowship we take note of scientific developments, and contemporary issues, but always in the context of listening to faithful and scholarly interpreters. Again, we do not want to be a denomination riding our own hobby horses, but be participants in the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. And as such we recognise the need to proclaim our Lord Jesus Christ in fresh words and deeds.

Paragraph 5 anchors that process. We are not permitted to ‘re-imagine’ Jesus Christ. Paragraph 18 concludes with the prayer that ‘God will constantly correct what is erroneous in the life of the church.’

Much more could be said about the Basis of Union. The ACC’s constitution requires adherence to the Basis of Union from its members. Therefore I commend the Basis of Union

to your careful and prayerful reading. It can be found on the Assembly and Synod websites. And it can be googled!

NB: The Wikipedia article on the Basis of Union contains some inaccuracies, the chief of which is that the Basis of Union ‘functions as a Constitution’ for the UCA.

*Walter Abetz*

## **2. Faithful & Scholarly**

Paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union commonly appears with the heading ‘Scholarly Interpreters’. This heading was added for ease of reference and did not form part of the Basis approved by the churches at union. We should note that scholarly scriptural interpretation is linked with faithful scriptural interpretation and that such interpretation occurs within a worldwide fellowship of churches.

But the heading that was added later may mislead some people into attributing a narrower kind of scriptural interpretation to the writers of the Basis than is meant.

In *Crosslight* (December 2009) Rev. Bob Faser claims that the founders of the UCA did not interpret the Scriptures in a ‘literal’ manner. He bases this statement on paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union. But the paragraph does not mention the word ‘literal’. So what is the ‘literal’ interpretation that the UCA founders supposedly ruled out and what alternative interpretation did they supposedly adopt?

‘Literal’ could be contrasted with metaphorical interpretation of scripture. But such interpretation would not be specific to ‘literary, scientific and historical enquiry which has characterised recent centuries’. Metaphor is not an invention of recent centuries.

‘Literal’ could be contrasted with ‘sceptical’. Some scientific or, more strictly, philosophical theory of recent centuries might cast doubt on miracles for instance. But paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union states: ‘when the church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses’. Strong language.

Perhaps Bob and others are reading too much into paragraph 11. It concludes with a prayer that the church may be ready to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds. This is by no means a prayer to express the faith in fresh words and deeds in the sense that the substance of the faith is open to change. The need for church leaders to adhere to the substance of the faith is made clear in paragraph 14.

*Katherine Abetz*

## **3. The un-Australian conditioner**

There was once a church that was governed by inter-related councils. Some councils had smaller areas of responsibility and some had greater but even the one with the greatest responsibility of all was obliged to seek the concurrence of the other councils in matters of vital importance to the life of the church. In this way even the smallest councils had a responsibility for the whole church.

The winds of change blew over the church bringing new beliefs and many of the smaller councils felt so battered that they erected strong walls of self-protection and forgot about their responsibility for the whole church.

The Greatest Council of All saw that the church was divided by many beliefs and concluded that no one belief could claim validity over another but that all must be offered hospitality within the church and be treated in a democratic way. This idea came from one of the new beliefs. The idea was that there was no access to an external source of validation which would say which belief was right. Nevertheless, hospitality and democracy were regarded as values. These values were set free from any external source of validation.

But the church had a document called the Basis which described the external source of validation. It was the Basis that had given the church its structure of inter-related councils. The Basis prevented the church from offering the kind of hospitality and democracy that some in the church thought it should.

One special group had a strong cultural objection to one of the new beliefs. The Greatest Council of All refused to recognise this belief as a matter of vital importance to the life of the church but did not wish to alienate the group. The Greatest Council of All proposed changes to the Constitution of the church, recognising the culture of the special group but weakening the system of referring matters of vital importance to other councils for concurrence. The changes paved the way for increasing the power of the Greatest Council of All and the Committee that acted on its behalf, at the expense of the other councils and of the Basis that held them all together. The recognition of the special group's culture was a sham because it disguised the intention not to refer this matter of vital cultural importance to other councils in accordance with the Basis. The smaller councils could have objected to the changes but most were deceived and did not do so.

So the new belief that seemed to offer democracy destroyed the democracy of inter-related councils. The new belief that seemed to offer hospitality to many beliefs allowed the Committee to impose its own belief on the many. And the smaller councils that had erected walls of self-protection found that their walls came crashing down.

*Katherine Abetz*

*Katherine Abetz is married to Walter Abetz. She has 4 adult children and one and three quarters grandchildren. She affirmed Walter's call to ministry at age 44 in 1991 and joined Walter in studying for a BD. She has edited a collection of essays on the Basis of Union with Walter.*

*Walter Abetz is married to Katherine. Venturing into his first Uniting Church parish in 1995 in Bendigo aged 47, he served there for 11 years. He was a foundation member of EMU Victoria.*