

# DISTURBING MUCH DISTURBING MANY

Theology Provoked  
by the *Basis of Union*

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## CHAPTER 10

### 'No longer an addendum': Ecclesiological fragments provoked by the *Basis*

#### 1. Introduction

"The Church can no longer be regarded as an addendum to the biblical message: she is integral to it."<sup>1</sup> So declared the Joint Commission on Church Union in its first report. The Commissioners did not specify when or why the church was regarded as 'an addendum to the biblical' message. Nevertheless, intended or not, this correction will always confront the popular Protestant anxiety about the church intervening in the relationship between the individual believer and God. Although none of the Uniting Church's antecedent traditions actually had such low ecclesologies, any suggestion about the salvific importance of the church very easily brings deeply embedded Protestant theological anxieties to the surface. The language through which that anxiety is articulated can be quite varied. Frequently, however, it surfaces in playing off some putative vice against an assumed virtue: the 'church' frustrates the 'kingdom', the 'institution' hinders the 'movement', 'religion' taints 'spirituality'. In short, the church is an *addendum*, and an unwelcome one at that.

The authors of the *Basis* were well aware of the church's capacity to distort itself and to become a parody of, rather than a witness to, the gospel. But they did not thereby conclude that the church was unimportant, or that somehow the church played an unnecessary or incidental role in the economy of salvation (after all, why bother with a union of churches if that was the case). Yet (as I have shown in Chapter 2), the authors of the *Basis* were careful not to exaggerate the importance or status of the church. The way this dual commitment to both the necessity and provisionality of the church is held together in the *Basis* is important to note. It is also instructive. Yes, the church is penultimate, but what keeps the church in its place is not the rights or piety of the individual believer. What keeps both the church and the individual Christian in their respective places is the drama of God's cosmic work of reconciliation in Christ.

Locating the church in this way within the horizon of God's universal mission does, however, expose ecclesiological discourse to another potential strategy of rendering the church an addendum. This is the suggestion, common in missiological discourse, that the church participates in what God is already doing in the world. In principle this is unproblematic, and the indifference to this axiom is exactly what has often led to the church inflating its self-importance and claiming to itself a mission independent of God's.

At the same time, the emphasis on 'participating' in what God is 'already doing' can obscure what exactly it is that the church brings to a particular situation if God is already engaged in God's mission. It can also render unclear whether God wills to do anything particular in this mission through the church. If not, then why would the church join in?<sup>2</sup> It is right to stress that the church has no mission apart from God's mission, but care needs to be exercised in preventing this theological truth being used to render the church an addendum to, in this case, God's mission. Jürgen Moltmann holds this dual commitment to, on the one hand, the priority of God's mission and, on the other, the novelty and particularity of the church in that mission. He formulates it in a very helpful way: "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."<sup>3</sup> On this reading, God does not just call the church into what God is already doing, God creates or sends the church to do something not otherwise being done. In short, by 'creating' the church in any context, or 'sending' it into a new context, God gathers a particular and visible community which lives by its hope in Jesus Christ. As such it consciously bears witness, in its words and deeds, to Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One. It is in this *particular* way that the church *participates* in God's mission.

I would argue that the *Basis of Union* invites us to hold these commitments together in something like the way which is hinted at in the above quote from Moltmann. Even though there are various factors at work in the development of the missional commitment in the *Basis*,<sup>4</sup> it is ultimately grounded theologically in its remarkable integration of Christology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology. Take any one of those elements away, and the theological basis of mission simply collapses. It risks becoming an arbitrary

manifestation of activism. To put it bluntly: the church cannot be missional *unless* it is also other things. The adjective 'missional' is simply the tip of an iceberg: beneath it are all sorts of other ways in which the church is to be the church if it is to be missional. Take those away, and once again, the discourse about mission simply dissolves.

Within that framework the *Basis* invests the church with a status, importance and vocation which will always confront the unreflective Protestant suspicion of the church. Therefore in this final chapter I will take up several images or claims about the church which find their way into the *Basis*. No attempt is being made to offer even a sketch of a comprehensive Uniting Church ecclesiology. It is more modest than that. The five 'fragments' have been chosen somewhat randomly, although manifestly they reflect my own perception of important connections between the *Basis* and contemporary Uniting Church reflections on itself. The sample is not exhaustive, but it touches on issues which are frequently contested in the Uniting Church's discussions about itself and its mission.

## 2. Church: a community which preaches (going to P. 259.)

The Church preaches Christ, the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. (*Basis*, 3)

There is a deep nervousness throughout the Uniting Church about preaching. There are many reasons for this. Some argue that there is something fundamentally wrong with preaching as a mode of communication. Others suggest that this nervousness is a result of preaching having been done poorly. Still others see that preaching *per se* is recumbent, the relic of another era. In the midst of this anxiety, the Uniting Church has rightly emphasised that the gospel is proclaimed in both 'word' and 'deed'. Throughout the history of the Uniting Church it could be said that the recovery of proclamation through deed has been developed as a proper corrective to a certain history of *mis*proclamation through word. And alongside this corrective to *mis*proclamation by word, there has also been a corrective to a history of neglect – and even a disparaging – of proclamation through deed. Those correctives are justified. Alongside these correctives to *mis*proclamation, Protestants have also learnt to be properly suspicious

### 5. Church: organised pilgrims

The Uniting Church therefore so organises 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 both to the Church and the world. (*Basis*, 15)

It would be fair to say that the word 'organises' would come a distant second to the word 'pilgrim' if a tally was made of which was the most quoted word from the *Basis*. The reference to the church as a 'pilgrim people' in Paragraph 3 resonates deeply, not only with biblical language and concepts, but also with the anxiety about the church *per se* which is latent in much Protestantism (as noted at the outset of this chapter). The reference in Paragraph 15 to the Uniting Church organising itself and 'being governed by a series of inter-related councils' strikes some as an impediment to being part of the pilgrim people of God. One way of dissolving this potential tension, however, is to make the point that pilgrims are not nomads. Pilgrims, as the *Basis* itself reminds us, are "on the way to a promised goal"; and they are sustained by Christ and the Spirit that they "may not lose the way".<sup>18</sup> Of course, that sustenance is given through Word, Sacraments and the gift of the Spirit. But why should we not think of the church's organisation as one of the ways God does not let the church lose its way? This is not to say that any one organisation has the task of keeping the church on track. Rather, the church can receive the reality of being organised as a gift which helps keep it on course. To think in those terms requires some fairly significant ground clearing. Anxiety about the church *per se* is focused more sharply on the issue of organisation than perhaps anywhere else.

At least some of the roots of that anxiety come from the Reformed polemics against ecclesiastical authority. Consider this from John Calvin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer whose ideas and convictions have greatly shaped the Protestant tradition from which we have come:

We see that some form of organisation is necessary in all human society. ... Since such diversity exists in the customs of men (*sic*), such variety in their minds, such conflicts in their judgements and dispositions, no organisation is sufficiently strong unless constituted with definite laws....<sup>19</sup>

Calvin has much more to say than these remarks on organisation, and there is much we can learn from him. But note here his tone: organisation is a necessary concession to our diversity, variety and conflicts. It is this particular polemical tone, even if it is not entirely representative of Calvin's ecclesiology, which often surfaces in Protestant discussions about ecclesial councils and organisation. But is that really all we can say about the virtue of organisation? Are there not domains of Christian existence and particular Christian practices we enter only because we are given the gift of belonging to an organised community?<sup>20</sup>

In their deliberate attempt to avoid the polemics of received Protestant theology, the authors of the *Basis* do indeed provide us with a step in this direction. Notice the quite different tone which is struck when the issue of church government is addressed in Paragraph 15 of the *Basis* as quoted above. Instead of the polemical, grudging tone of the sixteenth-century, the language of government and councils is embedded in a discourse of trust, of gift, of grace, of building up. It is a discourse that is explicitly affirming rather than defensive. This different tone is no accident. In commenting upon this paragraph, Davis McCaughey drew attention to the deliberate displacement of the Presbyterian idea of 'courts' of the church (with all its judicial allusions) and its replacement with the more ancient and more ecumenical notion of *councils* of the church. He also drew attention to the way the commitment to 'inter-related councils' was a deliberate rejection of any top-down conciliar structure which, he suggested, had been a feature of Methodism.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, the commitment to inter-related councils was not an endorsement of a bottom-up conciliar structure. D'Arcy Wood makes this point by distinguishing the government of the Uniting Church from that of a democracy.

The Uniting Church is not a democracy, because a democracy is a form in which the people as a whole rule. The Uniting Church does not aim to represent the will of the people on any given issue, but to seek the will of God by prayer and by consulting together in the light of the Word of God.<sup>22</sup>

The inter-related nature of our conciliar structure is neither top down nor bottom up. The relationship of the inter-related councils is, like the body of Christ itself, variously angular, overlapping, tangential and organised by the Head. The grudging posture towards councils and organisations has a long history in our Protestant traditions. Yet those who helped to bring the

Uniting Church into being attempted to strike a quite different tone. But can we rest content with references to seeking the will of God, to prayer and listening together to the Word of God? Perhaps this language itself easily spiritualises processes that are inevitably political and therefore inevitably institutional. Actually, I would argue that spiritual processes can only be what they are by being political and institutional.

I'd like to unpack this last claim a bit, and will do so by drawing an analogy with the tension in secular political discourse between 'communal' and 'institutional'. In his book *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, American sociologist Richard Sennett explores the social and cultural impact of global capitalism on the realities of work places. He begins the book by referring to the quest of 1960s radicals to dismantle the institutions of big government and big corporations because their complexity and rigidity held individuals in their grip. He notes that the radicals' wish was granted, but only in part and not with the desired result.

The insurgents of [the 1960s] believed that by dismantling institutions they could produce communities: face to face relations of trust and solidarity, relations constantly negotiated and renewed, a communal realm in which people became sensitive to one another's needs. This has certainly not happened. The fragmenting of big institutions has left many people's lives in a fragmented state: the places they work more resembling trains stations than villages....  
-Taking institutions apart has not produced more community.<sup>23</sup>

Sennett goes on to write: "Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions."<sup>24</sup> By analogy it might be said that pilgrims can flourish and keep on track only if they are provided with relatively stable and relatively coherent paths. If pilgrimage is a way of being spiritual, it is not opposed to being communal, and being communal can't avoid being institutional. As pilgrims we are called to sit lightly to institutions without denying our need of them. Institutions can exist to create and sustain community. Some of those institutions are councils of government which bring accountability, identity, and authority to the community of pilgrims. There is nothing unChristian about that. The polarity for the church is not so much between being a movement or an institution; it's between being *flexibly institutional* and becoming *institutionalised*. Even pilgrims need places to rest and structures upon which occasionally to lean.

## 6. Church: a constantly corrected community

The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. (*Basis*, 18)

None of us likes to be constantly corrected. It is irritating and, if the corrections are warranted, it quickly becomes embarrassing. The 'constant correction' mentioned here in Paragraph 18 of the *Basis* is actually something the Uniting Church is enjoined to pray for. This is a correction we request! Of course, behind these words are deep convictions about confession, repentance, forgiveness and renewal. To that extent, the correction at issue is to be welcomed. It is part of our reception and appropriation of the gospel. Nevertheless, I wonder if the present mood of the church makes it particularly hard for us to engage the language of correction, at least the mood of those parts of the church that have lived through, and are living through, Christianity's increasing marginalisation in Australia. In his Retiring President's Report to the Fourteenth Assembly in 2015, Andrew Dutney referred to the "traditional mainstream of the church [being] so mesmerised by its own decline that it can't lift its eyes to see the wonderful thing that the Spirit is doing in gathering the church afresh – from the edges."<sup>25</sup> So mesmerised, perhaps, that we can't receive the Spirit's correcting, and therefore, renewing work.

Perhaps also parts of the church are so mesmerised by its decline that we forget that it will not necessarily be the intention of whatever correction the Spirit brings to reverse the decline. It has been easy for us to be trapped in the mindset that the marginality of the Uniting Church has been caused by our failures in mission. If we overcome those 'failures' we will 'succeed' – at least, that is the instinctive hope. Yes, there have been many failures. But our marginal position is also the result of the Australian culture moving beyond Christianity. Significant tracts of our society are just not interested. Like us, they are captivated and engaged by other claims to their lives. And a corrected and renewed church that has overcome its own missional inertia may not necessarily grow or become any less numerically or culturally marginal. Indeed, a renewed and corrected church might be given the energy and imagination to inhabit this position of marginality in ways that

we simply cannot imagine if we persist with the narrative of decline and keep wishing for its reversal.

Perhaps also the correction and renewal the Spirit will bring to us is the capacity to regain our identity at the deepest levels of our self-understanding. A self-understanding grounded not in church's status, size or cultural location but in its vocation to be a witness to Jesus Christ, the risen crucified one. A self-understanding grounded in the idea that the church is called to be an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. A self-understanding grounded in the call to be the community through which Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith, calling them to be the disciples of a crucified Lord. Such correction and renewal could indeed be to 'God's eternal glory' as Paragraph 18 suggests. If this is where an appropriation of these ecclesiological fragments might take us, then it is, I think, worth allowing ourselves to be theologically provoked by the *Basis of Union*.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Joint Commission on Church Union: *The Faith of the Church in Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church* (Sydney: Uniting Church Assembly, 2008), 35.
- 2 An example of the ambiguity about the 'added value' of the church's mission can be found in proposals taken to the Fourteenth Assembly in regard to the future of remote area ministry. In the report accompanying the proposals it was affirmed that "God is already present and engaged in mission in remote Australia and among the people who live there" and the Uniting Church is called to "discern how the UCA might participate in what God is doing in remote areas". See Uniting Church in Australia, *Reports to the Fourteenth Assembly*, Supplementary Report from the Assembly Standing Committee: National Consultation on Remote Area Ministry, B4-1-Supplement.
- 3 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: Ecclesiology in Messianic Dimensions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM, 1992), 64.
- 4 See Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal: The Shaping of a New Church*, rev. ed. (Unley: Mediacom, 2016).
- 5 Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 32.
- 6 Moltmann, *The Church*, 225.
- 7 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), xiv.
- 8 Alain de Botton, *The News: A User's Manual* (London: Penguin, 2014), 11.
- 9 De Botton, *The News*, 11.

- 10 Andrew Dutney, "A Worldly Calling: The Uniting Church Begins a Second Decade," *St. Mark's Review* No. 135 (1988): 15.
- 11 Dutney, "A Worldly Calling": 16.
- 12 The revolution was, of course, the ecumenical rediscovery of baptism as the foundation of all ministry. Graham Hughes has commented on the links between this shift and Paragraph 13 of the *Basis*: "The Uniting Church was fortunate to enter its life at a time in which 'ministry' was being uncoupled from its hitherto exclusive linkage with ordination so as to be given a new primary reference in baptism." See Graham Hughes, "Limping Priests: ministry and ordination," *Uniting Church Studies* 8 no. 1 (2002): 4.
- 13 Dutney, "A Worldly Calling": 17.
- 14 Dutney, "A Worldly Calling": 18. In as yet unpublished research, Damian Palmer has demonstrated a further striking factor reinforcing this focus on the church's internal ministries and contributing to the confusion identified by Dutney. In the draft of Paragraph 13 adopted at the May 1968 meeting of the Joint Commission, the first (slightly different) sentence concluded "to be his faithful servants, to bear witness to him and to serve him in the world." The final version, adopted at the December 1968 meeting just seven months later, inexplicably omitted 'in the world'. I am grateful to Damian for sharing this research as well for more general conversations about theologies of ministry. I have learnt much from those conversations and look forward to seeing the fruits of this important research entering the public domain in due course.
- 15 See "Report on Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia" in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia* ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 233-321.
- 16 Dutney likewise focused on vocation in "A Worldly Calling" although in different directions than I follow here.
- 17 To the extent that this is correct, the passivity has emerged notwithstanding the intentions of the Period of Discernment.
- 18 *Basis*, 3.
- 19 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.x.27 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2: 1205.
- 20 Despite Calvin's willingness to endorse church government, the concessionary note continues when he goes out of his way to argue that structures of church government are not "to be associated with the worship of God, and piety thus be lodged in them." See Calvin, *Institutes* IV.x.27, 2: 1205f.
- 21 See J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), 87f.
- 22 D'Arcy Wood, *Building On A Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986), 52f.
- 23 Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 2.
- 24 Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, 3.

25 Andrew Dutney, "Retiring President's Report", *Andrew Dutney: The President's Blog*, accessed July 22, 2015, <https://andrewdutney.wordpress.com/2015/07/13/retiring-presidents-report/>.