

A Hitchhikers' Trip Through *The Basis of Union*

*A study of The Uniting Church's
Founding document,
'The Basis of Union'*

In 1997, Duncan Harrison and I were asked by the Queensland Synod of The Uniting Church in Australia to write a study book on *The Basis of Union* of The Uniting Church. The request coincided with the 20th anniversary of the inauguration of the UCA.

It was also written out of a concern that many people in this church were pretty unaware of the document on which the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia agreed to unite at its inauguration in 1977. There was also some concern that the document did not enjoy high regard by some in the church, and that there were also some expressions of opinion that *The Basis of Union* was of historical interest only and had no real role in the ongoing life and development of the church.

The study book, *A Hitchhiker's Trip Through The Basis of Union*, attempts to enable people in groups to get a 'feel' for the document and its biblical contexts by giving them slabs of material to read and explore together.

Each chapter has a worksheet for groups use. In this version on the Web, the spaces provided in the worksheets for writing have been closed up. If you are printing it out, you can use your own discretion about how you re-format them for your own use.

It gives clergy and lay people an opportunity to explore together the riches of *The Basis of Union* – and so share together in 'hitchhiking' through a document that has much to say to our church about who we are as participants in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

A HITCHHIKERS' TRIP THROUGH THE BASIS OF UNION

What we offer you in these pages is not a detailed, analytical study of *The Basis of Union*, but an opportunity to get something of a 'feel' for what it has to say to us as Christians who are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the inauguration of this part of the Church.

That celebration acknowledges the past in our thanksgiving to God for grace that gives us reason to be grateful for the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit. It is also - as the first and last paragraphs of *The Basis* acknowledge - reason for confession that we have not always given God full and faithful obedience to the Gospel of Christ.

Celebrations, however, are true to their meaning when they focus our attention on the future. For Christians, that focus is always with confidence that it is by God's grace and not by the strength of our own efforts, plans and imaginations that we are the Church. So our prayer is that, by our openness to the Spirit, we may not lose the way, but be constantly renewed in our worship, witness and service as the people of God on the way into the future into which Christ beckons us.

For deeper, more detailed study of *The Basis of Union*, we recommend that you explore some of the writing that has been around for some time now, like:

Dutney, Andrew: *Manifesto for Renewal*,
Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1986.

Dutney, Andrew: *Where Did the Joy Come From?* Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 2001.

Gillman, Ian: *Committed to Worship, Witness and Service*,
Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1982.

McCaughey, J Davis: *Commentary on The Basis of Union*,
Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1980.

Owen, Michael : *Back to Basics*, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1996.

Wood, H D'Arcy: *Building on a Solid Basis*,
Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1986.

The Assembly study paper: *'The Status, Authority and Role of The Basis of Union'*,

This booklet was written at the request of the Queensland Synod in 1996. The aim is to provide some studies for people through which we explore with each other something of the message of *The Basis of Union* for our Church as we move forward together as people of faith into the twenty-first century.

We write with three basic convictions about *The Basis of Union*:

- 1. It bears timely and timeless witness to Jesus Christ as the Church's one foundation.**

2. **It is much more than a founding document on which three streams of Christian tradition agreed to unite, and can now be stored in dusty archives.**
3. **It offers unique insights into what it means to live as God's people, and is a rich resource for taking discipleship seriously in our worship, witness and service.**

Each chapter is a comment on an aspect of *The Basis of Union*, followed by a worksheet for use in groups.

There may be more material in some chapters than groups can handle in a single session. You may need to spend more than one session to explore them.

We were initially asked to write three studies - on the themes of 'Worship, Witness and Service'. We found that *The Basis of Union* invited deeper exploration than three studies could handle. So we've given you eight! We offer them with the prayer that they will enrich your journey too, as we celebrate the twentieth birthday of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Grace and peace

Duncan Harrison

Don Whebell

Epiphany 1997

CONTENTS

A Brief Sketch

Jesus the Christ of Grace

The Congregation

The Scriptures

Sacraments

Membership and Ministry

Worship

Witness

Service

**Hitchhikers are picked up
...and carried on**

Acknowledgements

A BRIEF SKETCH:

THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA:

Recalling some of our story...

The Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated on 22 June 1977.

That event was the culmination of a process that began in 1901.

We didn't exactly rush into it.

With Federation in the air, some of the leaders of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches thought it would be a good idea if their churches caught the mood.

They got some discussions going on the possibility of a merger of the three denominations.

It was the beginning of a long process.

But each time the possibility of union drew dangerously close, the Presbyterians raised some reservations or objections.

This killed off the negotiations in 1924, but they were resurrected in the 1940s.

In the 1950s, things got going in earnest.

The World Council of Churches had been inaugurated in 1948. There had been significant unions of churches in Canada in 1925 and South India in 1947.

The ecumenical movement was being described as "one of the great new facts of our time."

Vatican 2 was just around the corner. And Pope John 23rd was winning universal respect. For the first time, the Roman Catholic Church referred to Protestants Churches as their 'separated brethren'.

Protestant attitudes to Rome determined on which of those two words you put the emphasis: **separated**, or **brethren...** But overall, the Protestant response was positive.

By the 1960s, there were several Parishes around Australia working in co-operation with each other, in anticipation of the union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.

A Joint Commission on Church Union was established, and the serious business was under way.

The Joint Commission's task was to draft a statement on which the three denominations could agree as a basis on which to unite.

The preliminary work for this was the writing of two major theological Reports.

The first was titled: *The Faith of the Church*. The second Report, *The Church: its Nature, Function and Ordering*, included a proposed *Basis of Union*, to be submitted to the three churches for response.

It was widely debated, but not accepted in full, and returned to the Joint Commission for revision in the light of the feedback received.

The feedback indicated that the three participating churches were not willing to include in the structure of The Uniting Church the Joint Commission's proposal that there be 'bishops-in Presbytery' and a recommendation to enter into a special relationship (a 'Concordat') with the Church of South India.

So the first proposed *Basis of Union* was rejected.

In 1971, a second draft of *The Basis of Union* was submitted by the Joint Commission to the three churches.

That was followed by five years of pretty rugged debate, and the pain of seeing 35% of the Presbyterian membership choosing to stay out of the union.

However, the new Church was finally inaugurated at a Service in the Sydney Town Hall on 22 June 1977. Philip Potter, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, was the preacher.

It was able to present itself to the world with the name **Uniting** - to indicate a commitment to further ecumenical endeavour, in spite of all that we had gone through to reach that point. The ecumenical imperative of the Gospel of Christ continues to challenge and disturb us.

We had a new logo, which spoke of the cross of Christ standing in the stark contrast of white against black: the white of light and love (the cross), against the black background - a symbol of the sin of the world.

There is the dove of the Spirit in the centre, with wings of flame, and beneath it all the semi-circle: not just a 'U', but an incomplete circle, speaking of the yet-unfinished task of the quest for Christian unity.

The new church set about the task of preparing liturgies for its life, and it was a happy coincidence that *An Australian Hymn Book* appeared at that time.

For the first time, Australian ministers of Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian backgrounds wore the ecumenical alb and liturgical colours - as a significant departure from the tradition of wearing academic gowns and hoods. The attire of the Church replaced academic dress.

But with the usual genuflection in the direction of our rugged Aussie individualism: i.e., wear whatever you like!

Since then, the liturgical life of The Uniting Church has become more in tune with the Church catholic than was the case before union. It is also true to say that worship in The Uniting Church has, in many congregations, developed along lines that reflect the impact of the 'charismatic movement' on our life since 1977.

The publication of *Uniting in Worship* in 1988 was a significant step, which provided our people with liturgical resources that affirm us as part of the Church catholic, as well as up-dating many of the resources that we inherited from our own three traditions.

This less-than-scholarly pen-sketch of the story of this still-young church briefly outlines where we have come from. You will have to look elsewhere for a more detailed treatment.

22 June 1997 sees the twentieth birthday of this church. That may seem a long time for some - especially the young people for whom this is the only church they have known.

It is also possible that, in that time, we have lost some of the corporate memory of our life together.

So these studies invite you to explore *The Basis of Union*, not simply to re-capture some of the theological memories we need to be aware of, but to use it as a stimulus to grasping afresh the call of God to be the 'Pilgrim people on the way to the promised end' that God has for us. And - more importantly - to be grasped afresh by that vision which, by God's grace, called this church into being.

JESUS THE CHRIST OF GRACE

...whose Church is it anyway?

The Church - as we know it and structure it - is usually associated with the many activities to which we give time, thought and energy.

With all this, it can be possible that we get to thinking and acting as if it all depends on us and our efforts. We get involved in committees, councils, groups, building projects, departments, working bees, fund-raising and all the rest of it. In the midst of it all, it's possible that we might lose sight of what it's all really about - and just whose Church it really is.

When that happens, it is vitally important that we be called back to the fundamental fact that the Church is not some institution or club that we humans created and is nice to belong to. It is the creation of Jesus Christ, given for the sake of the world that needs to know about God. And that knowledge is best shared through people whose lives have been touched, changed, empowered and enriched by God's Spirit.

That has to be the foundational and motivating drive that underlies every activity, every prayer, every group in which we participate.

So it is important that we attend to the basic affirmations which *The Basis of Union* makes about Jesus Christ. It is tempting to go to the paragraphs that describe how The Uniting Church is structured, and about the statements it makes about the roles of ministers. But those paragraphs make no sense at all until they are read in the light of what the document says elsewhere about the Church's one foundation: Jesus Christ.

The Basis of Union is a Christ-centred statement of faith and commitment. It strongly affirms that Jesus Christ is the foundation of faith and of the Church. Affirmations about salvation, ministry, preaching and fellowship are all made with reference to Jesus Christ. The uniqueness of the Bible is in its central witness to Jesus Christ as the Word of God, on whom our salvation depends.

- **Faith** is that living relationship people have with God because of the crucified and risen Christ:
 - ◆ *"...The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things that Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way to the promised goal..."* [para 3]
- **Salvation** becomes a reality for people, not because of their own efforts and piety, but because God has acted for us in Christ:
 - ◆ *"...God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord..."* [para 3]
- **The Church** - necessarily composed of human beings - exists solely because it is the creation of God in Christ:
 - ◆ *"...the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses and deals with people in and*

through the news of his completed work..." [para 4]

- **The renewal of the Church** will not be achieved by our human efforts, but by God as Trinity living in and through the Church:

- ◆ *"...Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith...in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church..." [para 4]*

- **Preaching** is authentic only when it is faithful proclamation of the Risen Christ:

- ◆ *"...Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist..." [para 4]*

- **Fellowship** is more than a gathering of friends who like each other - it is a self-giving, accepting relationship that mirrors the self-giving acceptance of Christ, who *"...loved us before we loved him..."* [1 John 4: 7-21]:

- ◆ *"...The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, a new humanity..." [para 3]*

"...(Christ) calls people into the fellowship of of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord..." [para 4]

- * **Ministry** is grounded in the gifts of the Spirit of Christ - and is expressed in terms of our response to the grace of God, and not the work we choose to do for God:

- ◆ *"...The Church's call (is) to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself..." [para 3]*

"...(The Uniting Church) acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ..." [para 13]

- **Worship** is 'meaningful' only when it is a faithful response to the Word of grace that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ:

- ◆ *"...The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel*

of Christ..." [para 17]

The Basis thus speaks of Jesus Christ in terms that are dynamic in their evangelical proclamation.

And the word that most powerfully and succinctly describes it all is that word which effectively describes and defines the Gospel- **grace**:

"Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love.

Jesus himself, in his life and death made the response of humility, obedience and trust which God had long sought in vain.

In raising him to live and reign, God confirmed and completed the witness which Jesus bore to God on earth, reasserted his claim over the whole of creation, pardoned sinners, and made in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love.

To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God has sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father, and acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

The whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone. [para 3]

That's pretty powerful, Gospel stuff.

It is a confession of faith.

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WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from Scripture:

- Luke 4:14-21
- Ephesians 1:3-14
- John 17: 6-19

* **Read through the following extracts from *The Basis of Union*.**

1. In the margin, write notes about how these extracts speak to you personally.

"...The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life.

The Church also confesses that Christ is Lord over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.

God in Christ has given to people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, and instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which God will bring.

The Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here it does not have a continuing city, but seeks one to come.

On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way." [para 3]

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because the Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in through the news of his completed work.

Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives new life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken their faith; he calls them into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church." [para4]

2. Thinking of your Congregation, write some notes about those aspects of your congregational life that reflect what is written in the extracts:

3. Suggest one thing in the life of your Congregation that you would like to see happen in response to the extracts from *The Basis of Union*:

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- ❖ Share with each other the notes you have written in 1 above, then in 2, then in 3.

- ❖ Discuss what you think is meant by

*"...in his own strange way
Christ constitutes, rules and renews
them as his Church."*

- ❖ As a small group, identify **two** areas of your congregational life that reflect the extracts from *The Basis of Union*, and **two** suggestions that you would like to make about changes in the Congregation's activities, goals, programs.
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THE CONGREGATION

...where it all really counts...

In a way that is rather different from other confessional documents of churches, *The Basis of Union* has some pretty strong things to say about where the Church's life is manifest.

It is common among some Christians to think of the Church as an abstract 'out there', to see it as a 'thing' to be praised and celebrated, or criticised and ridiculed.

Or to think of the Church as a lofty institution that belongs to ancient, medieval, inaccessible history.

For some, the words 'holy, catholic and apostolic...' may have a ring of the lofty and ancient about them. *The Basis of Union* brings it all down to the local, personal level: the Congregation is the gathering of people like you and me who are addressed by the God of the Ages:

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work..." [para 4]

To some, the Church is Councils: Elders, Presbyteries, Synods, Assemblies, and is somehow identified with the 'star quality' of ministers, priests, bishops, moderators and presidents.

The Basis of Union has something to say about that.

The Church finds its most significant and powerful expression at that place where worship is offered, discipleship is experienced, and where ministry happens - the **Congregation**.

"...The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world..." [para 15a]

The Congregation: if it doesn't happen there, it doesn't happen anywhere. The New Testament knows of no other Church than the local Congregation.

In that piece quoted from paragraph 15(a), there is a checklist by which congregational life and the way the Uniting Church is structured may be measured:

- some Parishes organise their agendas around the themes of Worship, Witness and Service when discussing aspects of the life of the church and its congregations.
- The statement is a reminder that worship is the primary function and task of the Church, but adds the essential elements of fellowship, involvement in the life of the Church beyond the local community of faith and the call to service in the world.

- All structures of the church at Congregation, Presbytery, Synod and Assembly levels exist to serve and resource of the local Congregation.

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WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following passages of Scripture:

Acts 2:42-47;
Romans 12:1-21;
Matthew 16:13-20.

Jot down some notes about:

1. One instance in your Congregation where it was very clear that Jesus as Messiah was witnessed to by the rock-like faith of a 'Simon Peter' among you. [Matthew 16: 13-20].
 - How did that build people up in faith and love?

2. The range of the gifts of the Spirit that you see in the people of your Congregation. [Romans 12:1-21]:
 - In what way(s) are those gifts affirmed and exercised:

3. The extent to which the description of the church community life in Acts 2: 42-47 is reflected in the life of your Congregation:

Read through the following extract from *The Basis of Union*.

In the margin, write notes about how this extract speaks to you personally, and what it is saying to the life of your Congregation.

"The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.

Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider

responsibilities of the Church and to serve the world.

The Congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life in such matters as education, administration and finance." [para 15(a)]

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other what you have written in 1 above, then in 2, then in 3.
- Discuss what you think is meant by:

"...The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church..."

- As a small group, write a sentence on how each of the following are lived out in the life of your Congregation:

Fellowship of the Spirit in Christ:

Building each other up in love:

Sharing the wider responsibilities of the Church:

Serving the world:

- Arrange to have these sentences shared with the Congregation in Worship next Sunday.
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THE SCRIPTURES

...the Bible gets into the Church...

The Basis of Union speaks powerfully of the **uniqueness** of the Scriptures, and of the strong, central place they have in Christian living.

It does not define the Bible as 'the Word of God'. Nor does it use words like 'inerrant' or 'infallible' to speak about Holy Scripture.

The Basis of Union speaks of the Word of God in the same way as does the prologue to *The Gospel According to John*:

The Word of God is Jesus Christ.

And it says this in confessional, evangelical terms that are Gospel proclamation:

"...Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what could otherwise not exist..." [para 4]

The Basis also speaks of the Word of God to which the Scriptures bear witness in their unique way - that is, in a way that can be found nowhere else:

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the biblical witnesses..." [para 5]

The Basis of Union is the only confessional statement of any Church which calls on the people of the Church to engage in Bible study:

"The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures..." [para 5]

It is also the only confessional statement that commits its ministers to ensure that their preaching is grounded in guided by the Bible. It also demands that their administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper be a faithful setting forth of these 'effective signs of the Gospel' found in the Scriptures [para 5].

Here is a statement of faith - not in the Bible as a book, but in Jesus Christ, the Word on whom salvation depends.

To this Christ the Scriptures inerrantly bear witness, and thus nourish and regulate our faith and obedience.

D'Arcy Wood puts it this way in his commentary on *The Basis of Union*:

"...Paragraph Five implies that faithful prayer and preaching, with proper administration of the sacraments, will do more than any new technique to renew the church in our day. The church can, if necessary, survive without many things, including buildings,

committees, liturgical dress, schools and budgets. But it cannot survive without Word and sacrament.

The Word in Scripture is not something to be put on a shelf and adored. It is to be used. The Basis does not seek to decide between various theories concerning the authority of Scripture. It implies that theorising is less important than using Scripture as the foundation of prayer and preaching. The Word must be 'appropriated' [Paragraph Five]. That is the key." [Building on a Solid Basis, p 19]

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WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from the Bible:

- Luke 24: 13-35
- John 1:1-14
- 2 Timothy 3:10-17
- 2 Peter 1:16-21

Read through the following extract from *The Basis of Union*.

In the margin, jot down some notes about how it speaks to you about the Word of God.

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because the Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in through the news of his completed work.

"Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives new life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.

"Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken their faith; he calls them into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church." [para 4]

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and

obedience are nourished and regulated.

"When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.

"The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits its ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures." [para 5]

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other the notes you wrote about the extract from *The Basis of Union*.
- Discuss what you think is meant by:

"...The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church..."

- As a small group, write a prayer based on the Scripture passages and *Basis of Union* extracts used in this session.
- Pray that prayer together.

SACRAMENTS

...the Word of Grace - VISIBLE...

Jesus Christ is central to everything that happens in the Church: ministry, fellowship, programs of social welfare and justice, ministries of pastoral counselling. Patterns of organisation and structure in the operation of the church's life have validity only to the extent that they reflect the Christ-like imperatives of *'mutual submission to each other in the service of the Gospel.'* [para 15]

That is to say, Christ is central to the Church's worship, witness and service.

The Scriptures point to Jesus Christ in a unique way, and preaching is valid only when it is a true and faithful setting forth of the Word to which the Scriptures bear witness.

The Basis of Union describes the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper in these Christ-centred ways.

In the water, bread and wine of these two visible acts, Christ is present, and through them the Word of grace is addressed to people. That Word of grace is about new life in Christ, incorporation into Christ, nourishment by Christ, anticipating the feast of Christ's kingdom:

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

"Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies, and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted." [para 6]

Baptism is a visible sign of God's grace. That is most powerfully expressed in the practice of baptising infants as well as adults as an expression of God's gracious welcome into the community of faith.

This is worth bearing in mind when we ask questions about whether or not an infant ought to be baptised when she/he has no understanding of what it is all about. Baptism is about the action of **God** - not about the maturity of the person.

That is true also for adults who seek Baptism on the profession of their faith in Christ. It is not a celebration of the achievement of a person who is affirming faith, but a celebration of the Christ who brought that faith to birth and now incorporates him/her into the Body of Christ.

The Service of Baptism in *Uniting in Worship* makes these points very clear. The action of Baptism takes place and **then** the Baptismal promises are made - as a response to the grace declared in Baptism. God's grace precedes our human response.

The liturgy for the Baptism of infants in *Uniting in Worship* includes a statement which the Minister may make to the child, and which clearly expresses the Church's understanding of the grace of Baptism:

*"Little child,
for you, Jesus Christ has come,
has lived, has suffered;
for you, he has endured the agony of Gethsemane
and the darkness of Calvary;
for you, he has uttered the cry, 'It is accomplished!'
For you, he has triumphed over death;
for you, he prays at God's right hand;
all for you, little child,
even though you do not know it.
In Baptism,
the word of the apostle is fulfilled:
'We love, because God first loved us.'" [Uniting in Worship, Leaders' Book, p42]*

It is said that the grace of his Baptism was a source of encouragement to Martin Luther. At his lowest ebb and when everything appeared to conspire to destroy him, he took a piece of chalk and wrote:

"I have been baptised!"

In a sermon titled *'I am Baptised'*, a Minister affirmed that point in this way:

"In his baptism, Jesus is given his identity. He is declared the Son of God. When we are baptised, we too are declared the children of God. Baptism places us 'in' Christ; we are given the status of God's daughters and sons, the status of royalty, the status of sharing Christ's sufferings. The baptism of Jesus changed John's baptism forever - it is now a washing which incorporates us into Christ's body, not a sign of our repentance. It has become a sign of God's action in us, even if we are helpless infants, not something we do for God." [Revd Dr Paul Walton, in a sermon based on Mark 1-4-11]

Holy Communion also speaks to us about what Christ has done for us long before we were able to hear about it, comprehend it, or accept it for ourselves.

Long before we were born, Jesus met with his friends in the upstairs room of a borrowed house to have a last conversation, a last time of prayer, and a last supper with them before his execution.

But it was not the **last** supper!

It still goes on. Each time Christ's friends meet at table, that supper is repeated in the life of the Church, and we hear afresh those same words that he said that night:

"This is my body - for you."

"This is my blood - for you."

In Holy Communion, we experience much more than the taste of bread and wine and the process of an ancient symbolic act.

The Lord's Supper is much more than an historical ritual to remind us of the life and teaching of Jesus in the distant past. By the power of Christ's Spirit, this same Jesus is with us at the Lord's Table as he promised: giving us not just bread, not just wine, but the very life-giving nourishment of God. Christ gives himself anew each time we eat from the loaf and drink from the cup.

At the Table, we gather with Christ and with all who have gathered with him down through the ages and with generations yet unborn. And Christ's invitation is to 'feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.' In this Sacrament,

"...In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptised people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom..." [para 8]

How Christ is present in the Holy Communion has been a matter of great debate over centuries. At the Sacrament, The Holy Spirit takes the things of Christ and brings them home to us here and now. We can only but simply respond with faith and thanksgiving. No human words can adequately describe how this happens.

So, in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Order of Service for Holy Communion in *Uniting in Worship*, there is always a prayer calling on the Holy Spirit, by whose presence and power Christ, in body and blood, is with us.

To take three examples:

❖ *"Pour out the Holy Spirit on us
and on these gifts of bread of wine,
that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ."*

❖ *"O God, by your word and Spirit
bless and sanctify this bread and this wine,
that they may be for us
the communion of the body and blood of Christ,
and that he may ever live in us,
and we in him."*

❖ *"Send to us the Holy Spirit,
that this meal may be holy
and your people may become one.
Unite us in faith, inspire us to love,
encourage us with hope,
that we may receive Christ
as he comes to us in this holy banquet."*

[From *Uniting in Worship*, Leaders' Book, pages 103, 108 and 110]

Holy Communion is not just a memorial ritual. It is a celebration of the living presence of Christ.

So the sacrament of Christ's body and blood is also known as the '**Eucharist**' - the word which means '**thanksgiving**'.

^^

WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from the New Testament:

- Matthew 28: 18-20
- Mark 10: 13-16
- Acts 2: 38-39
- Romans 6: 3-4
- I Corinthians 11: 17-34
- Luke 24: 28-34

Read through the following extracts from *The Basis of Union*.

1. In the margin, jot some notes reflecting on how the extracts describe your own understanding of Baptism and Holy Communion:

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen

and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

“Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.

“The Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment the Church takes responsibility.” [para 7]

“...Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which Christ will bring to consummation.” [para 8]

2. In what specific ways does your Congregation act on the statement in *The Basis of Union*:

“...The Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are brought for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment the Church takes responsibility.”?

3. Paragraph 8 of *The Basis of Union* identifies six aspects of Holy Communion (see above). List them here, and comment on ways in which they are expressed in your life and the life of your Congregation:

a:

b:

c:

d:

e:

f:

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other the comments you have written above.

- As a group, make a list of points that you would like to share with your Congregation to highlight the meaning of:

- i. **Baptism**

- ii. **Holy Communion**

MEMBERSHIP AND MINISTRY

...all together now!...

MEMBERSHIP:

Among the great declarations of faith and obedience in the Church Catholic, *The Basis of Union* has its own way of making strong Biblical affirmations about God's call to discipleship.

It strongly affirms the gifts of the Spirit for ministry in a way that is unusual in Church confessions:

"The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ..."

"...The Uniting Church will provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission." [para 13]

It's important that we realise that this statement ought not be distorted to the point where lay ministry is de-valued to the point of making it inferior, equal or superior to ordained ministries.

Paragraph 12 speaks about Baptism as the basis of membership in the Church, and opens the way to exploring the relationship between Baptism and Confirmation - and to share that exploration with other churches.

It is interesting to note that, on the Baptismal Certificate given to parents of children who are baptised and to adults who come for Baptism, there is the acknowledgment that the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting Churches recognise each others' baptism: baptism is into the Church catholic, not into a denomination - no matter what Grandma says.

MINISTRY:

The question of Ordination gets raised for discussion now and then - indeed, *The Basis of Union* encourages such exploration of the meaning of Ordination [para 14 (a)]

So...a couple of quick quotes from what is found in one of the documents that was written before the drafting of *The Basis of Union*: *'The Church: its Nature, Functioning and Ordering'*:

"The foundation of the ministry is first and foremost, the ministry of Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole head of the Church, and all ministry within the Church and within the world, flows from Christ's ministry..." [p 29]

"The New Testament concern for continuity and unity with the apostolic ministry in message and life, does lead naturally to a concern for an ordered and continuous ministry, e.g., Acts 14:13."

"Ordination by prayer with the laying on of hands symbolises the continuity of the ministry thus set aside by Christ to responsibility for the proclamation of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of pastoral rule and oversight within the Church..." [p32]

You'll recognise there something of what is found in both *The Basis of Union*, and the description of the Responsibilities of the Minister of the Word in the *Regulations* [2.3.10; 1.1.17].

There is something in those statements that echoes also the ecumenical study book, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*.

Paragraph 14 of *The Basis of Union* requires all ordained and commissioned ministers to make a vow of adherence to *The Basis*, and goes on to say:

"...Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that Word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be Ministers of the Word.

"These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church.

"Such members will be called Ministers and their setting apart will be known as Ordination..."

"In company with other Christians, The Uniting Church will seek for a renewed understanding of the way in which the Congregation participates in ordination and of the significance of ordination in the life of the Church."

In this, we also have to acknowledge that we do not travel alone, as an isolated denomination, but in company with other parts of the Church catholic.

In building ecumenical relationships, we need never be meek about the nature of the ordained Diaconate and Ministry of the Word in The Uniting Church, but affirm them as God's gift to the Church:

Nor need we be hesitant about recognising the ministries of other churches, which is also an attitude encouraged by *The Basis of Union*.

In working towards that fullness of the Church which Paul describes as The Body of Christ, the act of ordination in this part of the Church affirms that we

"...live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, recognising that we are related to other churches in ways that give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission..." and we acknowledge that *"... the faith and unity of the holy catholic and apostolic Church are built on the one Lord Jesus Christ..."* [paras 2 and 3]

The Basis of Union anticipated the renewal of the Diaconate, and opened the possibility for development of other forms of ministry in The Uniting Church: e.g, the Commissioned ministries of Youth Minister and Community Minister.

Those ministries are now well established in the life of The Uniting Church, and are proving their value.

Paragraph 14 also acknowledges the ministries of Elders and Lay Preachers as people whom the Spirit has endowed with gifts for their participation in the ministry of Christ.

The Basis of Union and the *Regulations* acknowledge the calling of all people to participate in ministry together - each with unique gifts to contribute to the life of the Church. The connections with the discussions about the Body of Christ in the New Testament letters are obvious.

This too is a distinctive feature of *The Basis of Union*.

No other confessional statement makes such strong recognition of the ministry of the whole people of God, ordained and lay, as the ministry of the **laos**.

^^

WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from the Bible:

Numbers 11: 1-23
1 Corinthians 12: 1-31
Ephesians 4: 1-13
Mark 3: 13-29

Read through the following extracts from *The Basis of Union*.

1. In the margin, jot down some notes about what the extract says to you about the ministry of Christ's Church.

"The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant.

"It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ...

"...The Uniting Church will therefore provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission." [para 13]

"Since the Church lives by the power of the

of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that Word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word.

“These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic Christ in the Church.

“Such members will be called Ministers and their setting apart will be known as Ordination.” [para 14(a)]

“...(The Uniting Church) will seek to recognise in the Congregation those endowed by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight. Such members will be called Elders...” [para 14(b)]

“The Uniting Church recognises that...many seek a renewal of the diaconate in which women and men offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God's people, in the service of humanity in the face of changing needs.

“The Uniting Church will so order its life that it remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diaconate: in these circumstances it may decide to call them Deacons or Deaconesses, whether the service is within or beyond the life of the Congregation. [para 14(c)]

“...(The Uniting Church) will seek to recognise those endowed with the gift of the Spirit for this task (ie, lay preaching), will provide for their training, and will gladly wait upon that fuller understanding of the obedience of Christians which should flow from their ministry. Such members will be called Lay Preachers.” [para 14(d)]

2. In what ways do the people of your Congregation share together in the ministry of Christ?

3. In the light of your experience in the Church, how have you seen its ministry enriched by the ministries of Ministers of the Word, Elders, Deacons and Lay Preachers?

4. What other forms of ministry do you believe are needed in the life of the Church?

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other the notes you jotted in the margin, and your responses to questions 1-3.
- Discuss what you think is meant by:

"The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and to be God's faithful servant.

"It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service; all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ..." [para 13]

- Discuss the links you see between the extracts from *The Basis of Union* quoted in this chapter and Ephesians 4: 1-16.
(The same theme is found in Romans 12: 1-8; and I Corinthians 12: 4-31).
 - As a small group, write a letter of appreciation to ordained and commissioned ministers and lay people who exercise ministry in ways you value.
 - Arrange to have the letter read at Worship next Sunday.
-

Worship, Witness and Service

Like a refrain, three words keep recurring through *The Basis of Union*:
Worship...Witness...and Service.

They usually appear together - and when they do, they are always in that order.

That, we suggest, is quite deliberate.

WORSHIP:

Worship is the central activity - and prime work - of the people of God: both personally and corporately.

In the life of the age to come, when witness and service will no longer be required of us, we shall still offer worship to God.

The Church is primarily a worshipping community, and all our other activities must be inspired by, and lead into that worship.

***A church without a liturgy
would at best
be no better or
no different
from a benevolent welfare society or
a service club.***

That word, '**liturgy**', springs from the Greek word that means '**the work of the people.**'

And the prime work we are called to do is to offer worship to God.

In worship, we repeatedly discover both who we are and what we are called to do, because here we discover whose we are, and what God in Christ has done for us.

This centrality of Worship is a timely reminder - and corrective - to us at those points where we may want to follow our inclinations into areas like counselling, youth groups, children's clubs, community service activity, social justice advocacy, etc.

All of these are vital and necessary commitments that call for dedicated time and energy.

But they can degenerate into good works that feed our need for warm fuzzies, if they are not informed and motivated by that encounter with the living God from whom we draw breath and inspiration - that encounter is Worship.

In worship, the Gospel of Christ is made present to us in the here-and-now so that we may face our pasts with the assurance of God's forgiveness, and our todays and tomorrows with confidence and reason for hope.

It is crucial that worship must never be trivialised by what Ian Gillman calls

"...musty antiquarianism, any more than by gimmickery masquerading as relevance, or by idle, vain repetition any more than by liturgical 'ad-hocery' dictated by busyness'.

"To be on the wrong track here will put us on the wrong track everywhere, because here is laid down what makes sense or nonsense of our witness and service. Ultimately it is by our worship that we shall know and be known, and this because here we are met by our Lord who comes, addresses and deals with us, and here we enter upon that unity and faith built upon Jesus Christ as he is preached and acclaimed in worship..."

[Committed to Worship, Witness and Service, p4]

As paragraph 17 of *The Basis of Union* reminds us, worship is to exercise a renewing role in the life of the Church, for that is where we are met by the grace and truth that are found in Jesus Christ, and where again and again we are met and addressed by God's judgement and forgiveness:

"The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel of Christ..." And:

"The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. 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. Amen." [para 18]

At a Presbytery conference, a minister responded to all this by saying:

"We hear so often about worship being the central, most important thing that we do," and added the question:

"If it is so central, why do we do it so badly?"

Which calls to mind the haunting question asked by a priest at Vatican II - a question that is disturbing:

"What have we done to Christ's Church that makes people want to stay away from it?"

And a comment by David Gill:

"...one wonders what Australia's happy pagans must make of their occasional contact with the liturgical life of the Uniting Church. We tie ourselves in knots trying to satisfy the customers. We perform handsprings for the sake of something called relevance - yet all too often the effect obscures the objective reality of the divine glory..."

(There is) an urgent need to develop an approach to worship that includes a profound sense of the mystery of the One to whom our praise is addressed, a revitalised sacramental spirituality, a creative mix of catholic substance and charismatic freedom, an enlarged appreciation of the liturgical riches to be found in other parts of the Christian family, and more imaginative use of non-verbal symbols for the awe-filled celebration of what ultimately remains beyond words..."

[Worship in the Wide Red Land, p 5]

*We leave it to you
to reflect and
ponder
on all that.*

WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read the following extracts from the Bible:

Isaiah 6: 1-9
Micah 6: 1-8
John 4: 1-26
1 Corinthians 14: 26-40

1. Write your own response to the comments about Worship made by David Gill:
2. In what ways does Worship give inspiration and motivation to Witness and Service in the life of your Congregation?

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other what you have written in response to 1, 2 and 3 above.
 - Agree on three points that characterise Worship in the life of your Congregation.
 - In what ways would you like to see Worship further enrich the lives of people in your Congregation?
 - As a small group, write two prayers on the theme of '*Worship*'. Find statements in *The Basis of Union* to incorporate in the prayers:
 - a. A prayer of Confession;
 - b. A prayer of Thanksgiving.
 - Pray the prayers together.
 - Arrange to have these prayers used in Worship next Sunday.
-

WITNESS

In focussing on worship, we highlight what is not only central in our life together, but an area to which we need to apply some Spirit-driven attention.

The Basis of Union has two other words that belong to its statements about discipleship and the life of the Church: **witness** and **service**. They are also crucial.

It's a bit like speaking about God as Trinity: you never can say all that needs to be said about God until you have spoken of Father, Son, Holy Spirit - all three together. To neglect one is to be left with an inadequate way of speaking about God, and to be vulnerable to false teaching (heresy). We never can speak of the Church without including all three elements that belong together: worship, witness and service.

PERSONAL WITNESS

The daily lives of Christians will be lived out in ways that make it clear to people around them that there is tangible consistency between the Worship they have offered on Sunday, and the ways they live the faith for the next six days in witness and service.

Their witness will be expressed in personal values and life-styles, in participating in public expressions of their faith, say, in 'Reclaiming Easter' demonstrations, processions of witness and the 'Global March for Jesus'.

There will be that personal, often unassuming witness that stands alongside people in the name and Spirit of Christ during the course of daily life, work and recreation.

Such witness is not done with any thought of 'evangelising' in the sense of 'winning someone for Christ' - although it's nice when that happens, and we give thanks to God rather than exalt the evangelist. It is witness in terms of simply, naturally and transparently - as Martin Luther put it - 'being Christ among people.'

*Thus may people see
who we are,
through whose we are.*

Nor should we ever under-estimate the place and power of regular public worship as an opportunity to witness before the world to the God who has judged, loved, saved and renewed us for service - for mission in the world. Such witness is, of course, both personal and corporate.

ECUMENICAL WITNESS

The Basis of Union calls us to bear witness to Christ in ecumenical relationships that impel us to share our faith with other members of the Church universal, that we may,

with them, declare before the world that "...unity which is God's gift and will for his Church..." [para 1]

We live in the knowledge of the prayer that Jesus offered for us:

"I pray, Father, that they may be one, just as you and I are one...that the world may believe that you sent me..." [John 17: 22-23]

And dare we believe that, in response to this prayer, God may lead us to the point where we can all sit down at a table together, on which there is bread and wine.

That would be a real occasion for thanksgiving: **Eucharisto!**

In the meantime, it ought to be possible for Christians to find ways of doing together those things which God wants us to do together, but which for too many centuries we have chosen to do separately.

In 1995, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane circulated an ecumenical check-list among Catholic Parishes at the same time as a rather similar list was commended to the Queensland Uniting Church Synod by the Moderator.

The Moderator's list was:

- *What can we do to make contact with, or improve our existing contacts with, our counterparts in other churches?*
- *What can we do (about this item on our Agenda) with other churches?*
- *What have other churches done about this issue?*
- *What can we learn from them?*
- *What can we do with - or for - other churches?'*

Such a list is not restricted to ecumenical co-operation between Catholics and Protestants, but can be applied across the whole church spectrum.

*Perhaps if we start to ask questions like these,
we will begin to discover
afresh
the unity of the
Church for which Jesus prayed.*

For it is very clear that the future of the Church will not be a denominational one. Denominational name tags are coming to their 'use-by' date.

Actually, Jesus never thought of denominations. Nor, we are reliably informed (by Scripture) are there any denominations in heaven!

The time is now. **Now** is the date when we have to take seriously that unity for which Jesus prayed, and to which the New Testament letters bear witness.

JUSTICE WITNESS

Further, our call to witness drives us out into the world, where there is need for us to stand, with Jesus, beside the poor, the abused, the exploited, the ill, the marginalised: to speak and live the word of reconciliation, justice and peace that spring from the Gospel's call to be witnesses to Christ in a sin-riddled, divided and broken world.

It's never easy.

Here's where witnessing to Jesus Christ moves out of the kind of witnessing where the worst that could happen to you is that people make jokes about you, reject you or insult you because of your Christian stance.

But now we're talking about that aspect of Christian discipleship that has cost millions of Christians their lives down through the centuries.

And we live in a century in which that has been more often the case then previously.

*For the word 'witness'
comes from the New Testament Greek word
that means 'martyr'.*

Christians become martyrs/witnesses when their convictions lead them into situations where they know they have no other choice than to stand for justice and peace in the name of the Christ who got thrown out of the Nazareth synagogue for proclaiming justice in the name of the God of the Scriptures (Luke 4).

But here we are in the tricky business of finding the connections between politics and pulpit and pew.

But how can we avoid what the Scriptures tell us about God's attitude to political corruption? About injustices that widen the gap between the rich and the poor? About a Christian conscience on issues like abortion and euthanasia? About standing with Aboriginal Australians in their quest for human dignity and justice? About Australia's attitudes to migrants and refugees? About ministry among homosexual people - and others against whom the laws of our nation discriminate?

The list could go on and on and on and on...

Being Christian is not to be reserved for 'little quiet moments between me and God', or restricted to prayer groups that may be no more than little horrid holy huddles.

It is following Jesus, and taking the kinds of risks that won't be given praise, and which - as people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero found - can cost you your life for the sake of the Kingdom.

But we must never lose sight of the fact that any kind of witness must be grounded in, and inspired by worship and prayer. Otherwise, what's the point? And who are we witnessing to?

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WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from the Bible:

- Matthew 28: 16-20
- Acts 1: 6-11
- Luke 4: 14-30

Read through the following extracts from *The Basis of Union*.

- ◆ Jot down some notes in the margin about what these extracts say to you about the call of God to Christian witness.

"...(The Uniting Church) believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end The Uniting Church commits itself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific. The Uniting Church declares its desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches." [para 2]

"...The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.

"God in Christ has given to people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

"The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, and instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.

"The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which God will bring.

"The Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here it does not have a continuing city, but seeks one to come.

"On the way Christ feeds the Church with

Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.” [para 3]

“Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord...” [para 4]

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- ◆ Share the notes you jotted in the margin beside the extracts from *The Basis of Union*.
- ◆ Discuss the possibilities of what can happen when your Congregation takes action to witness to Christ in:

Personal witness:

Ecumenical witness:

Justice witness:

- ◆ Write a prayer of Intercession that gives attention to these three areas of Christian witness in the life of your Congregation.
 - ◆ Pray the prayer together.
 - ◆ Arrange to have the prayer included in Worship next Sunday.
-

SERVICE

Along with Worship and Witness, *The Basis of Union* calls us to a life of **Service** because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christian service is not an optional extra any more than are worship and witness.

In worship, we are in awe before what God had done for us in Christ, the Crucified and Risen Servant Lord.

Such awe-filled worship so grips us by the grace of God's love that we are impelled to bear witness to Christ in the world into which the Word of Mission sends us at the end of the Service of Worship.

The link between worship and service is that, in the early Church, one word was used to describe both the act of worship and the acts of service to which we are called.

That word is **'liturgy.'**

At its root, that word means 'the work of the people.'

Liturgy is the work that God's people do when we gather to offer worship.

It is also the Christ-like service which our response must be when we leave the Church building.

When, at the end of the Service of Worship, the minister raises hands in benediction, the gesture is not one that waves us goodbye until next Sunday.

Rather, it is at this point that we are being sent out into the world with the Gospel word of mission that calls us to go out there.

Not to take Christ with us, but to go out there to find that Christ is there already, as the Parable of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25 makes compellingly clear.

The Biblical images that inform us are not only parables like the Good Shepherd and the Good Samaritan, but also the image of the Suffering Servant.

As *The Basis* reminds us:

"Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives new life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.

"Through human witness in word and action, and in power of Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and to awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church." [para 4]

***Christian service
is not a simple matter of good works,
but a deep response to the
suffering servant Lord.***

If it is true to say that a Church without liturgy would be no more than a benevolent society or a service club, it must also be true to say that a Church which gathers only for Worship, prayer meetings and Bible study groups runs the risk of becoming so heavenly minded that it is of no earthly use. It has distanced itself from the Lord

"... who came not to be served, but to serve..." [Mark 10: 45]

The Uniting Church has a strong record in Australian society for the work its community service agencies operate.

It earns great respect from the community for the work of Life Line, the Blue Nursing Service, Centres for Retirement Living, hospitals, Crossroads and Unicare ministries to people with people who have disabilities, child and family care services, and many more.

Sometimes, the link between these agencies and the Church does not seem to be all that clear. And there have been instances where Congregations have little awareness of the agencies that operate in their name their town or city.

In Maryborough (Queensland), a model has developed that commends itself to Congregations elsewhere.

Four community service agencies operate in the name of the Uniting Church in that city: Life Line, Blue Nursing Service, St Stephen's Hospital, and Meals on Wheels.

The Uniting Church Congregations in the city are fully aware that these are Christian operations, and representatives of each agency meet regularly to share resources and discuss common concerns.

It is one instance (and there are others) of the Church's involvement in Christian service to the community, and of agencies working together in a spirit of co-operation. The through-the-week concerns and ministries of the agencies are regularly on the prayer agenda of the Congregations on Sundays.

And the wider community is aware that these community service activities are part of the mission of the Church.

Beyond these kinds of 'institutional' forms of Christian service, there is also that daily, unself-conscious service which Christians in which Christians get involved in the name and spirit of Christ - and which are informed and strengthened by prayer and worship.

It can be acts of practical care by neighbours for each other in having care for each others' welfare and sharing each others' burdens and joys. It can be sitting with the newly-bereaved in quiet consolation as witnesses to the Resurrection.

It can be making sure that the lonely are offered friendship, the stranger made welcome, the prisoner visited, the hungry fed, the refugee given haven and hospitality, the sick made aware of prayerful concern, the naked clothed...(Matthew 25).

All in the name and Spirit of Christ. Worship does not exist for its own sake. It must become the liturgy - the work - of Christian service.

The people of God are the means through which God answers the prayers they offer in Worship.

To quote again from paragraph 13 of *The Basis of Union*:

"The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and to be his faithful servant.

"It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ."

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WORKSHEET

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Read through the following extracts from the Bible:

Isaiah 49: 1-6
Mark 10: 35-45
Matthew 25: 31-46
James 2:14-26

1. Read through the following extracts from *The Basis of Union*.

- ◆ Jot some notes in the margin about how Christian Worship is connected to Christian Service.

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism...

"...Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into God's mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit..." [para 7]

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people in the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church.

"In this sacrament of Christ's broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptised people on their way to the final inheritance of the Kingdom.

"Thus the people of God, through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,

proclaim the Lord's death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which he will bring to consummation." [para 8]

"The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and to be God's faithful servant.

"It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service; all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ..." [para 13]

"...(a) The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.

"Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church and to serve the world..." [para 15]

IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Share with each other the notes you have jotted beside the extracts from *The Basis of Union*.
 - Agree on **three** reasons for the Church being committed to service in the community.
 - List the ways in which your Congregation - as a group and as individual Christians - engage in Christian service in the world.
 - As a small group, write a poem on the theme of Christian service, based on group members' experience.
 - Arrange to have the poem read in Worship next Sunday.
-

HITCHHIKERS ARE PICKED UP...

and carried on...

The Uniting Church, alone among all the churches, states that it has not always 'got it right'.

The opening paragraph of *The Basis* declares that the churches that entered into this union had not

"...responded to God's love with a full obedience [and] look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people..."

The closing paragraph picks up that theme as it looks to the future:

"...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 the Lord."

And the last word of *The Basis of Union* is:

"Amen".

In those statements, two meanings of the word 'confession' are powerfully expressed:

- *a confession of faith in the God by whose grace we are called to be the Church;*
- *a confession of our sinfulness, in spite of which Christ dares to call us his Body.*

It is also a confessional commitment to seek the unity of the Church which is - in the words of *The Basis of Union*:

"Christ's gift and will for the Church." [para 1]

***"...but I press on to make (the goal) my own,
because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own,
but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind
and straining forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize
of the heavenly call of God
in Christ Jesus..."***

[Philippians 3: 12-14]

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WORKSHEET

1. *The Basis of Union* declares that Christ is central to our living.

In a number of places, it speaks, for example, of
"Christ meeting us...",
"Christ being present with us...",
"Christ receiving us...",
"Christ as God's Word of salvation to us...",
Christ feeding us...",
"Christ forgiving us...",
"Christ renewing us..."

WORKING BY YOURSELF:

Jot down some notes
...or write out words from a hymn or poem
...or write your own poem
...or do a sketch or diagram:

...something that expresses your experience of what The Basis of Union says about the meaning of Jesus Christ for you.

2. The *Basis of Union* speaks of the Church as "*...a pilgrim people on the way...*"

Reflect on some of the stages of your own pilgrimage. Write some words that remind you of them, and some prayer-thoughts that come to mind about the:

Joys:
Desert places:
Oases:
Goodbyes:
Pain:
Forgiveness:
New beginnings:
Hope:

Where are you now in your pilgrimage?

◆ **Reflect** on Psalm 139: 1-12.

Jot down some notes about what it says to you.

◆ **Reflect** on the pilgrimage of your Congregation:

◆ **Jot down some notes about:**

a. When God's grace has been most evident in the life of the Congregation:

b. When your Congregation found the pilgrimage hard going:

3. The *Basis of Union* speaks of our faith and obedience "*...being nourished and regulated by the Scriptures...*", about "*...Christ feeding his baptised people by the sacrament of his broken body and poured out blood...*", and calls all its councils (including the Congregation) to "*...wait upon God's word and obey his will...*".

Quotations from the liturgies of the Uniting Church are taken from:

The Uniting Church in Australia Commission on Liturgy: *Uniting in Worship - Leaders' Book*, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1988.

Quotations from the Scriptures are from *The New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford University Press Inc., copyright 1991.

Revd Dr Paul Walton of Indooroopilly Parish (Q) gave permission to quote from his sermon, *'I am Baptised'*.