



**A church of passionate disciples**  
...rethinking church membership



**A discussion paper from Uniting Church National Assembly  
(March 2007)**



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### **Purpose of this Paper**

This paper introduces a discussion about the meaning and function of membership in our church. The trend toward denominational change means some who have not been confirmed are among our most dedicated members.

Contrasted with the reality that some who have been confirmed do not participate in regular congregational life, and the fact that the Regulations currently state only *confirmed members* and *members-in-association* may vote at Congregational meetings and be elected to Church Councils, Presbyteries, Synods or the Assembly, the question of membership demands our attention.

Active individuals may be left out of the voting process, and less active individuals may exercise the rights of church membership without adopting its responsibilities in the congregational community.

This paper asks that we consider the role of baptism, confirmation, covenant, and membership while remaining committed to tradition, encouraging the exploration of possibilities for a way forward and inviting responses.

The paper has been prepared by the National Assembly's Working Group on Doctrine and is being circulated across the church to help Congregations, Faith Communities, Presbyteries and Synods to reconsider how we define membership.

Each council is being encouraged to engage with the paper and to respond to the suggestions made within it. These responses will be collated and then the Assembly Standing Committee will prepare proposals for the 12th Assembly in 2009.

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### **Acknowledgements**

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Additional copies of this resource can be downloaded from the Theology and Discipleship website at <http://nat.uca.org.au/TD/doctrine/resources.htm>

## 1 The challenge



1.1 God in Jesus Christ turns our lives upside down. As we follow Jesus, God's Spirit re-centres our lives. Instead of being focussed on ourselves, *our* security, *our* comfort, *our* influence in the world and values which serve mainly *ourselves*, Jesus commands: "Love God. Love your neighbour." We do this out of gratitude for God's inexhaustible love and grace. Jesus invites us to be counter-cultural, to have different values and to have different goals and priorities from those which may come naturally, or those which may be promoted by our society. In this way, our lives are actually turned the right way up!

1.2 In so doing, he invites us on an exciting adventure, in which we will never be the same. He also calls us into community with others so that jointly we may worship, witness to and serve the God who is the centre of our lives. In being members of Christ's body, we are also members of a fellowship of people who share the journey together, a Congregation or Faith Community.

1.3 How then, do we avoid church membership becoming a dull and sometimes meaningless routine? How do we avoid nominal membership, in which our names are on a church roll, but it makes little difference to our lives? How do we avoid people claiming the "rights" of church membership without Christian commitment or active involvement in the life of the church?

1.4 On the one hand, there are many people in our congregations who feel that they are members because they participate actively; for them it has little to do with formalities or regulations. They may never have been baptised, or baptised and confirmed. On the other hand, there are many people who have been confirmed but are no longer active in the life of the congregation. In the middle are many faithful people who live out their baptism and confirmation through joyous, willing and sacrificial participation in the life of the church and the wider community.

1.5 One key problem is that the Regulations currently state that only *confirmed members* and *members-in-association* may vote at Congregational meetings and be eligible for election to Church Council<sup>1</sup>. Currently only *confirmed* members are eligible to be elected as members of Presbytery, Synod or Assembly<sup>2</sup>.

1.6 This has much less relevance now than it once did. Some of the difficulties this now creates include:

- The people who are most active in the worship, witness and service of the Congregation, and may be most suitable to participate in decision-making, might not have been confirmed.
- People who have been confirmed, but are no longer active, may choose to participate only in the voting on crucial decisions and have little or no other involvement in the life of the church. This sometimes has the effect of blocking an important mission initiative or development in the church.
- Confirmation (a key component in the *Becoming Disciples* process<sup>3</sup>) should rightly mark a baptised person's growing spiritual maturity, and not be a formality to enable participation in Councils of the church.

<sup>1</sup> Reg. 3.1.9 and Reg. 3.1.12(a).

<sup>2</sup> Regs 3.4.15(d), 3.5.2(d), 3.6.2(b).

<sup>3</sup> For the *Becoming Disciples* process, see <http://assembly.uca.org.au/TD> and click on 'Becoming Disciples.'

Please note that it is not the intention to make decision-making more legalistic. Many decisions, especially in smaller congregations, are made fairly informally, and through consensus. That is appropriate. What we strive for is to free things up, whilst overcoming some of the current problems.

## 1 The challenge

1.7 Therefore the Tenth Assembly (2003) resolved to:

request congregations and presbyteries to engage in serious theological reflection on issues of membership and the sacraments, including:

- (i) How do we live with the tension of being an open, hospitable, welcoming community and having a committed, covenanted membership whose sole loyalty is to Jesus Christ?
- (ii) The place of baptism in the Christian life, including:
  - Baptism as a gift of God's grace ...
  - the relationship between baptism and being a covenant community...

affirm the general direction of moving towards a category or categories of membership which are based more on baptism and actual participation in the worship, witness and service of a congregation, rather than once having been confirmed (extract from minute 03.17).<sup>4</sup>

1.8 Now that we have had an opportunity to explore the issues which the Tenth Assembly asked us to address, the challenge is to find a solution which is both consistent with some of our most basic beliefs and commitments (our theology) and takes seriously today's realities. This paper therefore considers some key concepts and suggests a way forward, to which your response is invited.

### **For discussion**

1. In what ways do you think your life has been changed through being a follower of Jesus?
2. What do you think are the key issues the Uniting Church needs to consider as it reviews its understanding of membership?

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<sup>4</sup> The full text of the minute is in Appendix 2.

## 2 Some important concepts

### 2.1 Baptism



2.1.1 Our understanding of baptism comes from the New Testament. A key passage is Romans 6:1-14. Here we discover that baptism means dying and rising with Christ to new life. We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

2.1.2 Baptism tells the story of God's love and embraces us in that love. In baptism we rediscover that God is active in the world and loves the world. Baptism recalls and makes real Jesus' life, death and resurrection and unites us to Christ. Baptism is the sign of the new covenant between God and God's people. We receive the Holy Spirit and wait expectantly for the coming kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

2.1.3 In the service of baptism, we hear:

*Baptism is Christ's gift.  
It is the sign by which the Spirit of God  
joins people to Jesus Christ  
and incorporates them into his body, the Church.*

*In his own baptism in the Jordan by John,  
Jesus identified himself with humanity  
in its brokenness and sin;  
that baptism was completed in his death and resurrection.  
By God's grace,  
baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ,  
so that whatever is his may be called ours.  
By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own  
and set free from the power of sin and death.*

*Thus, claimed by God  
we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit  
that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,  
share his ministry in the world and grow to maturity,  
awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.*

2.1.4 Baptism is not "owned" by the Uniting Church. We are baptised into the one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic church. A person who is baptised, and later joins another a congregation or parish of another denomination, is not baptised again. We have agreements in place with other denominations in Australia and have a common baptismal certificate.

<sup>5</sup> To read more about Baptism, go to: <http://assembly.uca.org.au/TD/doctrine/beliefs.htm>.

## 2 Some important concepts

### 2.2 Membership



2.2.1 Again, our understanding of membership comes from the New Testament. Some of the key passages are: Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 3:19, 3:6, 4:25, 5:29-30.

2.2.2 Some of the emphases in these passages are:

- We are members of God's family through being united with Christ by grace.
- This union is brought by the Spirit in baptism.
- Christ cares for his people.
- Membership of Christ's body implies a new set of values and lifestyle.
- We are different, with different gifts and tasks, yet all belong.
- We all bring our various gifts and abilities for the one common purpose.

2.2.3 Note that this is quite different from the common understanding of membership of a society or club, in which a person decides to pay a fee and, in return, receives certain rights and privileges.

2.2.4 It is also different from being a member because we all agree about everything. Our unity does not arise from what we choose to agree on, but from our common baptism into Christ.

### 2.3 Confirmation

2.3.1 The New Testament was written in the earliest days of the church, when mostly adults (and soon whole families) came into the life of the church with the sign of baptism. We therefore do not find mention of confirmation in the Bible. It developed later as a way for the Bishop (as the pastor of the church) confirming the baptism of the person on a visit to the congregation following the baptism.

2.3.2 Later, as more and more babies were baptised, confirmation came to be the sign by which those who were old enough to understand "owned" their baptism for themselves and promised to follow Christ as Lord and Saviour. This has primarily been the understanding in the Reformed tradition to which the Uniting Church is heir.

### 2.4 Covenant

2.4.1 In the New Testament, the emphasis is very much on the communal nature of the church. The church is not just a collection of individuals who are individually connected to Jesus. Where people are gathered in his name, there Christ is in the midst. The Holy Spirit is given to *the church* corporately. The *Basis of Union* tells us that the congregation is "the embodiment in one place of the one holy catholic and apostolic church." We are disciples within our local community, and the local community is connected with the wider Christian community through the various councils of the church.

2.4.2 How then, do we express our relationship with the local faith community or congregation? If we are baptised into the universal church, what is the local connection? We suggest that this be done through people entering into a covenant with God and each other.



2.4.3 Covenant expresses a particular relationship between God and God's people. In the Bible, we read of covenants between God and humanity; God and Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)<sup>6</sup> and the new covenant in Christ in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament)<sup>7</sup>. In these covenants God takes the initiative and embraces the community. Covenants are expressions of God's grace.

2.4.4 The Biblical covenants are not agreements between equal partners in which the terms of the covenant are negotiated until both sides are happy. God initiates the covenant, decides the terms of the covenant, and places the people within the covenant. God then gives both privileges and responsibilities. The response of the people is a response of gratitude to grace, and people live their lives in response to God's gift of the covenant.

#### **For discussion**

3. In these brief comments on baptism, membership, confirmation and covenant, are there some new insights here for you? If so, what are they?

4. Are there some things which are not yet clear?

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) mentions covenants with Noah in Genesis chapter 9; with Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, 17; with Moses in Exodus 19, 20; and with David in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89. The new covenant is also foreshadowed in Jeremiah 31:31ff.

<sup>7</sup> There are many passages in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) which speak of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, including Matthew 26:26ff; Galatians 4:21ff; and Hebrews 9.

### 3 A suggested way forward

3.1 As we rethink the whole matter of membership, we need to hold on to these central understandings of the faith. At the same time, we need to overcome some of the challenges mentioned in 1.6 above. In the process we pray that the Holy Spirit renews our passion for discipleship. We seek a form of membership which can become a means of grace. (As we noted in 2.4.1, in our membership of the local congregation or faith community, we are also a member of Christ's church across space and time.)



3.2 What the Assembly Standing Committee, following advice from the Working Group on Doctrine, proposes is as follows:

- a. That we retain the essential link between baptism and membership. We are not free to vary this. As noted, the Uniting Church does not “own” baptism. It is grounded in Scripture. We share this with the universal church. We have formal agreements in place with other churches.
- b. That we allow confirmation to be what it is intended to be, the reaffirmation of baptism, marking an important step in a person's faith journey, but disconnect confirmation from church membership.
- c. That we retain the category of member-in-association as we presently have it, but ask such members to participate in the annual covenant service. There are people who participate regularly in a Uniting Church congregation, but are not ready to give up their membership their own church (e.g. Anglican, Baptist). The regulation regarding members-in-association is reproduced in appendix 1.
- d. That the person's tie with the local congregation be expressed in an annual covenant service such as that offered in *Uniting in Worship 2*. This will normally occur at the beginning of the year, as soon as people return from holidays. We envisage that within the covenant service will be embedded a section which invites individuals to commit to specific ways they will live out their baptism in the year to come. What the members will agree to, as part of this service, is based on a suggested wording to be provided by the Assembly, so that a similar one is used in all congregations.
- e. That congregations maintain rolls of baptised members and members-in-association, but that only members who have participated in the annual covenant service (or for whom special provision has been made by decision of Church Council) be regarded as “active.” Only these active members will be allowed to participate in decision making, be eligible to vote at congregational meetings, and be eligible for election as members of Church, Council, Presbytery, Synod or Assembly.

### 3 A suggested way forward

3.3 The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church repeatedly speaks of the functions of the congregation as “worship, witness and service.” We therefore envisage that the actual form of commitment would include reference to:



- regular participation in public corporate worship, personal prayer and reading;
- witness (faith sharing);
- service (individuals may offer to engage in such activities as community service, seeking justice, peace making, caring for creation, fulfilling church ministry tasks, support for family members etc; these may be expressed through paid employment or voluntary work).

One way this might be done is that the congregation together makes a general commitment, but individuals may be asked to write down how they personally will express this. The rubrics (directions) for the service could make this clear.

It may also include:

- commitment to the *Basis of Union*.

3.4 Clearly the congregation needs to make provision for those who could not be present on the day of the annual covenant service for good reason (including the aged and infirm).

#### For discussion

5. In what ways could this be helpful? Is this an improvement on the current Regulations?
6. What difficulties do you envisage?
7. If you support the new direction, do you agree with those things suggested for the form of commitment?
8. Membership includes being eligible for election to the Councils of the church, and hence decision making on behalf of the Uniting Church. Therefore, should some expressed commitment to the *Basis of Union* be included?

#### 4 Your response invited

Please forward any responses to the seven questions, including details of who is responding (i.e. congregation, presbytery, synod or individual), as well as other comments, to:

Rev. Dr Robert Bos  
National Consultant, Theology and Discipleship  
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PO Box 483  
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or robertbos@optusnet.com.au

by 30 October 2007 at the latest.

#### 5 Where to from here?



The responses will be collated.

A full report will be provided to the Assembly Standing Committee early in 2008.

It is then envisaged that proposals will be prepared for the Twelfth Assembly in July 2009.

## Appendix 1

### **The current Uniting Church Regulations state:**

#### *Forms of Membership*

1.1.2 The membership of the Church shall be in one of the following forms:

- (a) baptised members — comprising all baptised persons not yet admitted to confirmation;
- (b) confirmed members — comprising persons confirmed by the Church or in a manner recognised by the Church;
- (c) members-in-association — being persons who are granted such recognition in accordance with Regulations 1.1.11 and 1.1.12.

#### *The Regulations also currently say that:*

- Only confirmed members and members-in-association may vote at Congregational meetings and be eligible for election to Church Council (*Reg 3.1.9a*)
- Only confirmed members are eligible to be elected as members of Presbytery, Synod or Assembly (*Regs 3.4.15, 3.5.2 and 3.6.2*)

#### *Regarding members-in-association, Regulations 1.1.11 states:*

“A person may apply to the Church Council for recognition as a member-in-association if the person:

- (a) is a member of another Christian denomination but not actively engaged in the life of that denomination and participates in the corporate life of the Congregation and accepts the discipline of the Church: or
- (b) participates actively in the corporate life of two Congregations and is enrolled as a confirmed member of the other Congregation.”

[Note that Reg. 1.1.11(b) will, of course, be changed if the Assembly accepts the suggestions in this paper.]

Minute from the Tenth Assembly

03.17 THEOLOGY AND DISCIPLESHIP

The Assembly resolved:

03.17.01 “Becoming Disciples”

- (a) to receive the report;
- (b) to commend the Becoming Disciples Process (the catechumenate) to congregations and faith communities;
- (c) to prepare resource materials and training programs to assist congregations to implement the Becoming Disciples Process;
- (d) to declare the resourcing of Congregations for implementing the Becoming Disciples Process a priority for the next triennium;
- (e) to commend to congregations and faith communities the use of an annual service of commitment such as *A Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism* or *The Covenant Service*;
- (f) to request congregations and presbyteries to engage in serious theological reflection on issues of membership and the sacraments, including:
  - (i) How do we live with the tension of being an open, hospitable, welcoming community and having a committed, covenanted membership whose sole loyalty is to Jesus Christ?
  - (ii) The place of Baptism in the Christian life, including:
    - Baptism as a gift of God’s grace and the place of Baptism in the Christian life.
    - the relationship between Baptism and being in covenant community.
    - the relationship between Baptism and the Lord’s Supper including the issue of what we mean by “an open table”.
    - the desirability, or otherwise, of parents who bring children for Baptism affirming their faith and/or reaffirming their own Baptism.
    - the possibility of people transferring from non-sacramental churches being accepted as members of the UCA.
    - the desirability or non-desirability of dual membership, either in two UCA congregations, or in a UCA congregation and in a congregation of another Christian church.
  - (iii) Can we find a more adequate term for the individual person’s relationship with the congregation than “affiliation”?
  - (iv) To what extent is our own identity as the UCA important in the light of (a) our “post-denominational” context, and (b) our commitments to ecumenical partners?
  - (v) In small rural congregations, where people from many backgrounds worship in the UCA, to what extent should the unique ethos and contribution of the UCA be emphasised?
- (g) to commit itself to prepare resources to assist the Church, such resources to:
  - (i) aid the church in its reflection on the meaning of membership and the sacraments;
  - (ii) consider biblical and theological foundations in the light of the current context and to be presented in a style which allows as many people as possible to engage in reflection and discussion;

- (h) to affirm the general direction of moving towards a category or categories of membership which are based more on Baptism and actual participation in the worship, witness and service of a congregation, rather than on once having been confirmed;
  - (i) (i) to request Theology and Discipleship to bring a detailed report on the issue of membership and, in particular, its relationship to the sacraments, to the Standing Committee;
  - (ii) to authorise the Standing Committee, on advice from the Legal Reference Committee, to make a decision regarding any changes to the Constitution and Regulations;
  - (iii) to direct the Standing Committee that if significant changes to the Uniting Church's understanding of membership are envisaged then there be a comprehensive consultation with synods and presbyteries.