



## Annual Ecumenical Lecture 2011

### **CHRISTIAN UNITY TODAY: POST-DENOMINATIONAL, POST-COLONIAL AND MISSIONAL**

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#### **1. The Missional Character of Christian Unity**

Christian unity today, at its heart, is the same as it was yesterday. It is still “Christ’s gift and his will for the Church”. Our unity is ontological – in Christ. And our unity is teleological – in the mission of Christ, the reconciliation of all things to God. Here is the essentially missional character of Christian unity.

#### **2. The Contextual Character of Christian Unity**

At its heart, Christian unity is the same today as it was yesterday but the context in which we receive Christ’s gift of unity and obey his will for unity is constantly changing. In Australia, key elements of this changing context include

- massive institutional decline, and
- immigration.

The former draws the eye to the post-denominational character of Christian unity today. The denominational conceit against which the quest for Christian unity once contended is no longer sustainable. Institutional weakness is no basis for any kind of negotiation. Denominations are simply not relevant to Christian unity. The latter draws the eye to post-the colonial character of Christian unity.

#### **3. The Priorities for Christian Unity in Australia Today**

In particular, it is my contention that the priority in the quest for Christian unity in Australia today has shifted from reconciliation between separated denominations to

- reconciliation between First Peoples and Second Peoples, and
- cross-cultural reconciliation

I will explore this proposition with reference to two important statements of the Uniting Church’s character and commitment within the mission of God (appended)

- *The Revised Preamble to the Constitution*, and
- *The Vision of a Multicultural Church – Eight Principles*

## **THE REVISED PREAMBLE TO CONSTITUTION**

The Uniting Church in Australia was formed on 22 June, 1977 by the union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia after the approval of "The Basis of Union" by the Councils and Courts of those three churches, guided by the belief that they had been called by God into this union.

The Church in accordance with the Basis of Union accepts that the responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them and so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally, government is entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing gifts and graces, with which God has endowed them for the building up of God's Church and that therefore the Church shall be governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation to the Church and the world.

The Church in accordance with the Basis of Union acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel and the discipline which it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law, the aim of which is to confess God's will for the life of Christ's Church.

As the Church believes God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many land, and as part of that to

### **RECOGNISE THAT**

1. When the churches that formed the Uniting Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.
2. Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning 'sovereign' in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.
3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways.
4. Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their well being, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.
5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.
6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and

harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

7. From the beginning of colonisation the First Peoples challenged their dispossession and the denial of their proper place in this land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Uniting Church in Australia.

8. In 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

9. In 1988 the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

10. After much struggle and debate, in 1994 the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia discovered God's call, accepted this invitation and entered into an ever deepening covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

AND THUS the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

1. amend the Constitution by adding the following definitions to Clause 3

Covenantal relationship is the relationship which exists between the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Assembly, which began in the invitation of 1988 and response of 1994, in which both groups commit themselves to developing more just, inclusive and equal relationships in the Church that recognise the place of First Peoples, the difficult history of this nation since invasion, and the particular responsibility of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for ministry with and among Aboriginal and Islander peoples.

First Peoples are the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of Australia who are the indigenous peoples of this land. These peoples are a diverse group with many languages and communal identities.

Second Peoples are all those peoples who have come after the First Peoples and who are beneficiaries in some way of the invasion and dispossession of the lands of the First Peoples. Among Second Peoples within the Church are many whose racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, experiences and expression of Christian faith are not those originating in Western.

## **THE VISION OF A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH – EIGHT PRINCIPLES**

The following eight concepts are part of the book *The Vision of a Multicultural Church*, published in 1998. Six people were appointed by the Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry Committee in 1995 to review the 1985 statement, “the Uniting Church is a multicultural church”. They met regularly many times to discuss and seek the definition of multicultural church. It took nearly 2½ years for the booklet to be published.

**We believe that a multicultural church is one where the following concepts are embraced and put into practice.**

### **1. A Common Faith**

The multicultural church is united by a common faith in the triune God and the desire to serve and witness to the compassion, love and justice of God. The image of the church as the body of Christ means that we who are in Christ have a variety of gifts, functions and cultures and yet we can be connected to each other without doing everything the same way. We have our cultural differences and yet we can work together within the framework of what the Uniting Church in Australia is. This framework is set out in The Basis of Union and Constitution which establishes the foundations of our commitment to Christian unity.

### **2. Affirming One Another’s Culture**

A multicultural church is one with an inclusive understanding and acceptance of all cultures. It is a church where one can sustain one’s own cultural identity while affirming others. It is a church where every culture is embraced but where the barriers are broken down. It is open, accepting and joyful. It respects and nurtures mutuality of ministry. It acknowledges a variety of cultural expressions of the one faith.

### **3. Sharing of All Resources**

A multicultural church is able to share everything, including cultural richness as well as property and resources (power). It shares each other’s language, values and customs. When we share property and resources well, feelings of racial discrimination or nationalistic superiority will be overcome.

### **4. Equal Participation in Decision Making**

A multicultural church is like a table, a round table. At a round table, people can participate as equals. No new migrant member should have to feel like a guest in such a church. It is a place where we are welcomed as we are. There is cultural sensitivity in decision making where the minority groups are consulted and decisions are not solely made according to western value systems. People whose mother tongue is not English are often diffident about contributing to a debate in synod or presbytery meetings, but this should not prevent their experiences and views being sought more extensively in the whole life of the church.

Equal participation also means sharing of responsibilities as a congregation and individual members. Each group needs to endeavour to fulfil their tasks according to their capacity and capability, regardless of when they joined or the cultures from which they came.

## **5. Inclusiveness**

A multicultural church is inclusive of all peoples and cultures, women and men, young and old. It affirms different cultural groups worshipping in their own language or operating in their own way. But all congregations also need contact with the wider church, striving to work together as one body in Christ. It sometimes involves distinguishing between what is cultural and what is faith. It holds an ecumenical perspective that seeks the unity of all those who bear the name Christian.

## **6. Being a Sign of Hope and Reconciliation**

A multicultural church is a sign of hope within the community and particularly to those who are pushed to its fringes. It actively works for the reconciliation or restoration of different individuals or groups who are otherwise alienated from each other. It binds all people together in the name of love. It is a church that works for justice and peace for all. In this area a multicultural church takes its prophetic task seriously.

## **7. Growing in Mission and Evangelism**

A multicultural church reaches out to people of different cultures with the clear message of the gospel of Jesus, proclaiming it joyfully, sharing its life with them and serving them. While maintaining the need to take a strong role in global mission, it also sees the need for an effective evangelism in Australia, which is becoming racially, religiously and culturally a microcosm of the world.

Many people such as Asian students, refugees from Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe and others are arriving here to reside. These people are in need of jobs, housing, language training, social links, community integration and spiritual nurture.

## **8. Accepting and Preparing for Changes**

A multicultural church is not static. It is a church which is able to adjust to the changes of our time and life. A multicultural church is serious about the meaning of changes to prepare for the future. The implications of these changes are enormous. They directly affect structure, mission strategy, administration, and Christian education. As the community surrounding us is rapidly changing, changes in the church will be inevitable, because the church is an agent to serve the community.

Rev'd Dr Andrew Dutney  
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