

**Questions and Answers in relation to the recent decisions of
the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc.
8 October 2018**

Following the ACC National AGM in Sydney, ACC member congregations and individual supporting members have been learning about the decisions made at the conference and seeking to understand their practical consequences for the ongoing life of congregations. We have already reported on the decisions in the document ‘Standing Aside and Moving Forward’ (*a rationale for the decisions taken at the recent AGM of the ACC Inc 21 September 2018.*). The following should be understood in addition to that document.

The decisions of the ACC conference were made in response to an impossible situation that many have felt the 15th Assembly has put them in as a result of its decisions on marriage.

For their part, the Assembly and Synod leaders are maintaining that those concerned about the 15th Assembly’s decisions should realise that their concerns are unfounded, that the Assembly is right in the decisions it has made, and that everyone should calm down, accept what the Assembly has decided, and follow where the Assembly is leading. Furthermore, Assembly and Synod leaders are asserting that (as the South Australian Synod CEO/Secretary has written) ‘the recent decisions of the ACC place that organisation outside the polity of the Uniting Church’.

But as we have said in our statement, ‘we simply cannot allow ourselves to be forced, against our faith, integrity and freedom, to live and work within a state of contradiction whereby orthodoxy, as outlined in the Basis of Union, has now simply become a part of the ‘diversity of religious views and ethical practices’ within the Uniting Church’. To have two contrasting doctrines and practises (which is sometimes called the ‘two integrities’ solution) is acceptable to those with a liberal theology in which diversity is a higher value than biblical truth. But to those who take the plain reading of Scripture as authoritative, that is unacceptable. We also believe that having freedom of choice at the individual and local level (as the 15th Assembly decisions allow) is unworkable, will create countless local and personal difficulties, and ultimately will lead to freedom of choice and belief being restricted.

Some will say that what the ACC has decided is impossible in relation to the polity of the Uniting Church. To this we reply that the 15th Assembly has put us in an impossible situation, and this impossibility needs to be borne in mind in understanding what the ACC is advocating.

Questions and Answers in relation to the recent decisions of the ACC

1. By this decision has the ACC moved outside the UCA church polity, structures and processes?

The Uniting Church has four levels of governance: the Congregation, the Presbytery, the Synod, and the Assembly. In the light of the impossible situation created by the 15th Assembly, the ACC conceives of its way forward in the following way:

At the **Congregation** level, a congregation is a member of the ACC and confesses Christ according to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union of the UCA. The congregation upholds the biblical view and practice of marriage. In all of this it is very much in the ethos and Christian tradition of the Uniting Church.

At the **Presbytery** level, the ACC is looking to steps being taken to seek the creation of non-geographic presbyteries to which ACC congregations can belong. Alternatively, they may continue to belong to those presbyteries that uphold the orthodox view of marriage. Given that the Uniting Church already has non-geographic presbyteries for the UAICC and Korean congregations (in NSW), it would seem illogical and discriminatory for Synods or the Assembly to say that NGPs do not fit the polity of the UCA.

At the **Synod** level, the ACC and its member congregations have no problem in working with the Synods in as much as the Synod is primarily an administrative servant body according to the Basis of Union. We see no problem in dealing with the Synods in matters of property, finance, insurance, etc. (The question of ministry training is addressed in point 5 below)

It is at the **Assembly** level that ACC and its member congregations have the major difficulty. The Assembly, in its role of ‘determining responsibility for matters of doctrine’ has made decisions that we believe are unbiblical, divisive, and unworkable.

With its ‘two integrities’, which define Christian marriage in contradictory ways, the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church is speaking the word of God with a divided tongue. The ACC has spoken up and called out this duplicity and heresy. It has further declared that henceforth the Assembly of the Uniting Church will be unable to lead its people in the right path, but will, in the future, lead them further and deeper into error.

The ACC, therefore, ‘humbly, and in dependence upon God alone, offers to Congregations the role of a replacement Assembly in matters vital to the life of its Confessing Congregations’.

2. How can the ACC offer itself as an alternative assembly and still say we remain Uniting Church?

We believe that Resolution 64 of the 15th Assembly goes against Paragraph 2 of the UCA Constitution in which the Uniting Church, affirming that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end, lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union. We also hold that the Assembly’s very selective reading of the Basis of Union – ignoring Paragraphs 5 and 11, as well as misreading Paragraph 3, makes their decision unconstitutional.

Believing that Resolution 64 is illegitimate, and noting that the 15th Assembly resolved not to consult with the other Councils of the Church about its decision, ACC has offered itself to congregations who simply cannot accept the nature and direction of the Assembly as reflected in the 15th Assembly’s decisions on marriage.

This offer is as a national covering and leadership that holds fast to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union. This national covering and leadership should be understood primarily in theological, spiritual, and relational terms. That is, ‘in matters vital to the life of these confessing congregations’.

This offer is until such time as the Assembly rescinds its decisions on marriage.

3. But is such a situation possible?

Some will argue that such a move is impossible, however it needs to be seen as an alternative to the impossibility of continuing under the leadership of the current Assembly. Assembly and Synod leaders may wish to interpret ACC’s action in legal terms of contravening polity, etc, but the reality is that the Assembly is leading in a direction that our congregations will not, and cannot, follow. The question is, ‘what will they do with us if we do not follow?’ Is it realistic for Assembly and Synod leaders to try to threaten and coerce our consciences into submission? Or do they wish to drive us out of the Uniting Church, sell our properties and redirect the funds to other purposes?

4. Is the idea of having non-geographic presbyteries really workable?

While the Uniting Church already has non-geographic presbyteries for UAICC and Korean congregations, the Assembly and the Synods are maintaining that because doctrine is determined by the Assembly, a presbytery cannot have a specific doctrine and practice, for example, in relation to marriage. However, South Australia has had Mission Networks (HopeNet, 3DNet, and others) for 15 years, and some of these have memorandums of understanding with the Synod that contain statements of specific doctrine and practice. It seems disingenuous for this to be the case for 15 years and then say it can’t happen. We believe that NGPs can work and help to deal with the current impossible situation.

5. What about training for ministry?

The Synod has the responsibility for oversight of training for ministry leadership; however we see almost no possibility of reformed/evangelical people wanting to be trained at UC colleges that teach a double-minded theology and practice of Christian life and ministry. In time, this loss of candidates for ministry will create a critical shortage of suitable ministry leaders for our congregations. The unsatisfactory outcome would be congregations having to accept ministers whose teaching contradicts the beliefs of the congregation. This has proven disastrous for some congregations in the past with people leaving and congregations being decimated.

We will, therefore, need to explore alternative pathways whereby those called to ministry can be equipped in a manner consistent with the Basis of Union and an orthodox interpretation of Scripture. It is noteworthy that some of our partner churches overseas recognise a diverse range of seminaries for training of ministry leaders, and their approach may provide us with a possible model for the future.

6. What will be the situation for ministers identifying with the ACC?

The ACC recognises that all those engaged in Specified Ministries are bound by the Code of Ethics and therefore subject to discipline should Presbyteries of Synods take exception to their stance. It also recognises that Presbytery and Synod authorities deal more harshly with leaders of small congregations than they do with leaders of the large congregations. The ACC will develop a support network for ACC ordained and lay leaders, and seek to provide support, encouragement and counsel to ministry agents, congregations, clusters and groups who are being coerced against their conscience.

7. Are there groups or networks other than ACC suggesting a way forward, and is there a possibility of these different groups working together or amalgamating?

There is broad dissatisfaction with the 15th Assembly's decisions on marriage and several groups and proposed networks are considering possible options for a way forward. ACC is having ongoing conversations with these other groups and is open to working with other groups in a coalition, or indeed joining with them, at a national level.

8. How will all of this work out in the end?

It is difficult to answer this question. The situation is unfolding every day. At present Assembly and Synod leaders are giving no ground. They are asserting (with slight variations in each Synod) that ACC is outside the polity of the Church, that presbyteries cannot have specific statements of doctrine and practice, that ministers must accept the twofold doctrine of marriage or face discipline, that congregations must have 'Uniting Church in Australia' and the UC logo on their signage, and that congregations that choose to leave the UCA will forfeit their property.

Only God knows how such an impossible situation will work out. ACC does not claim that it has a solution that covers all bases and answers all questions. At the present time we are standing aside and seeking to move forward as the Lord leads us. We are encouraged to remember that Jesus is Lord and loves his church, and we declare our 'readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church'; to 'remain open to constant reform under his Word'; and to 'seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit'.

9. Is there any chance of the Assembly being forced to reconsider its decision?

Some have been speaking of asking the Assembly to seek the concurrence (i.e. agreement) of the other councils of the Church. However, some years ago the Assembly changed the UCA Constitution, removing the need to do this. Clause 39 (b) (i) now says that if half of the Presbyteries in half of the Synods, or half of the Synods, notify the President that they believe 'a decision includes a matter vital to the life of the Church and that there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision', the President will suspend the decision while the Assembly undertakes further consultation. Following this consultation, the Assembly shall determine whether to affirm, vary or revoke the original decision.

At the time of writing, 3 Presbyteries (out of 8) in Queensland have invoked Clause 39 (b) (i). There are two others that may do so. Proposals to enact Clause 39 (b) (i) are also being considered in presbyteries in the Northern Synod, SA and NSW. However, in the end the decision still rests with the Assembly.

10. What can congregations and individuals do to assist the ACC in finding a way forward?

The greatest assistance is believing prayer. That is, prayer that believes that God will give to us a way forward that enables us, in good conscience, to hold fast to the faith once delivered, and to continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Please pray for all those who are seeking a way forward in this impossible situation, and especially pray for our ACC leaders: Rev. Dr Hedley Fihaki (national chair) and Peter Bentley (national director), and the members of the National Council. Pray also for congregational leaders and ministers, especially those who are being pressured by Synod and Presbytery leaders because they belong to the ACC.

Another way to assist is by providing financial support for the ACC so that its leaders and staff can continue their work.

Here we stand, we can do no other, so help us God.

**The Officers and Members of the ACC National Council
8 October 2018**

Extract of the decisions made at the AGM of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc. on the future of the ACC: 18 September 2018

5.1 Resolved: That the Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc:

- a) receive the Discussion Paper on the Future of the ACC dated 23 August 2018, and;
- b) change the words “within the Uniting Church in Australia” to “of the Uniting Church in Australia”, and that the Constitution be changed accordingly.
- c) determine that, until such time as the Assembly of the UCA repents of its apostate decisions and returns to the faith of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, as that faith is described in the Basis of Union, the Assembly of Confessing Congregations humbly, and independence upon God alone, offers to Congregations the role of a replacement Assembly in matters vital to the life of its Confessing Congregations.
- d) encourage ACC member congregations and clusters to join an existing orthodox Presbytery that has rejected the UCA Assembly decision, and invite those presbyteries to realign themselves with the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, and;
- e) affirm the ACC National Council working with other networks seeking to establish orthodox non-geographical presbyteries for those congregations that are not part of an orthodox presbytery, and;
- f) affirm that the make-up of the ACC National Council be broadened, where the National Council considers it appropriate, to include up to three (3) members from those Presbyteries, groups and networks who have a similar purpose to the ACC regarding the direction of the UCA, and;
- g) encourage the ACC School of Faith to negotiate with like-minded evangelical theological and bible colleges in order to develop an alternative pathway for the teaching and training of candidates for ministry, ministry leaders and ministers, and;
- h) authorise the National Council to develop a support network for ACC ministers and leaders; and commit the ACC to provide support, encouragement and counsel to ministry agents, Congregations, clusters and groups who find it difficult to pursue evangelical, reformed and orthodox ministry; and ,
- i) amend the ACC Constitution to accommodate Resolution 5.1 (b) along with the Amendment to Section 25.3 as outlined in Appendix A of the AGM Papers.
- j) in light of Resolutions 5.1 (b) & (c), the ACC accepts the responsibility for the spiritual and doctrinal oversight of its member Congregations; and encourages its member Congregations to advise the UCA Assembly of their Congregation’s support for this action.

Assembly of Confessing Congregations Inc.

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