

The Surprisingly Fractious Uniting Church

Dr David Pohlmann

When the Methodist Church of Australasia, the Congregational Union of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia finally entered into union under the name Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 1977 they acknowledged “that the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ. The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin.”ⁱ

The Basis of Union for the UCA situates her life and work “within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” and “declares her desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other Churches.”ⁱⁱ

Despite our stated desire to seek union with other churches, we in the UCA appear to be doing almost everything to ensure any days of union are now closed. I argue these fractious actions across at least three areas of church life.

1. Church Polity

The UCA is a congregational church... except that it has real limits to the congregation’s authority. It cannot call a minister without reference to other councils of the church, does not own its property, and in practice can be ignored on important matters that some will feel that are vital to the life of the church. A church council can decide what uses ‘their’ building may be used for, but they have no real power in directing their clergy. Congregations are much less privileged in UCA polity than say a Congregational or Baptist Church.

The UCA is a presbyterial church... in-so-far-as she recognises elders (or leaders) as those “who are called to share with the minister in oversight”ⁱⁱⁱ and that the church council, (consisting primarily of the elders) is the congregational governance body. Much less emphasis is placed on elders in the UCA than the Presbyterian Church, and some UCAs do not call their leaders elders. Some UCA folk have mistakenly thought we no longer have elders!

The UCA is a synodical church... but it is not as simple as that. While many churches use synods to discuss issues and make decisions, the UCA has developed a unique (in Australian terms anyway) polity of inter-related church councils: Assembly, Synod, Presbytery, Church Council. Each council has a unique role and have certain rights and responsibilities. This inter-conciliar polity leads to a certain amount of confusion amongst UCA members, and it makes it interesting, as a ministry-agent, when discussing how your church works with clergy from other traditions.

2. Our understanding of the three-fold order of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons

The UCA has deacons, presbyters and bishops (of a sort). But the UCA understanding is different to every church that has a three-fold order of ministry.

Our deacons are ordained ministers who are equal yet distinct from our presbyters who are called Ministers of the Word.¹ In every other church with a three-fold order of ministry, deacons are either seen to be either, a permanent but distinct ministry, or a transitional ministry leading to the presbyterate or the episcopate. In the UCA the deacon can preside at both the sacraments, pronounce forgiveness and give a trinitarian blessing whereas in most traditional churches deacons may not preside at the eucharist, pronounce God's absolution of sin nor the Trinitarian blessing.²

The UCA's understanding of episcopacy is also different. Most churches with a three-fold order of ministry practice a personal episcopacy. The UCA has no personal bishops³ but instead, she practices a corporate episcopate which is delegated to the district council – the Presbytery⁴ (made up of ordained and lay members). Before union, the Uniting churches were offered episcopal ordinations from the Church of South India (which is in fellowship with both the Anglican Communion and the Methodist church worldwide), but for a range of reasons this opportunity was not taken up.^{iv}

The UCA sees baptism and the eucharist as sacraments rather than simply ordinances. *This distances us from some protestant denominations.* While we are sacramental, we are not sacerdotal in our understanding of the sacraments. *This distances us from some other denominations.* Hence, we don't refer to our presbyters as priests but rather ministers (of the word), we permit deacons to preside at the eucharist, and presbyteries commonly give permission for lay-ministers to preside at the sacraments without ordination. We see ourselves within the faith and unity of the Apostolic Church but without the practice of Apostolic Succession.

There is another issue which causes confusion around vocational ministry. While women and men are ordained to life-long ministry as Deacons or Ministers of the Word as specified ministers of the church, we also employ and commission others in specified lay-ministry within the church (Together they are referred to as ministry-agents – we can't call them all ministers because some are not ordained⁵). For example, a person may be commissioned into a church by a presbytery for a specific time, but while there they may be permitted to function as if they were an ordained minister. They perform a clergy role, while technically remain part of the laity, and are regarded as lay members of councils for governance purposes.

¹ Ministers of the Word have a particular responsibility for safeguarding the unity of the body of Christ, for example in a specific congregation. Ministers exercise their responsibility to Christ and the church by supervising and empowering the general ministry of the church at the congregational and community level.

Deacons exercise their ministry in the world. A Deacon has no congregation; they begin with scattered people and shape them into a community.

<https://ucaqld.com.au/about-us/ministry-resources/ministry-and-leadership/>

² In some ways the UCA's understanding of the diaconate is closest to the Anglican Church's understanding of vocational or permanent deacons, but in the UCA deacons and presbyters can easily switch ministries as both are ordained.

³ Although Presbytery Ministers act in loco episcopate in certain situations but not in others.

⁴ The Presbytery is the council of the church which ordains ministers and commissions lay-workers and provides pastoral oversight and discipline of ministry agents.

⁵ Ministry Agents include (ordained) ministers and lay workers (e.g. Pastors). Only the ordained are technically ministers.

3. Doctrine

Doctrinally, the UCA is not miles away from the Lutheran Church of Australia. For example, the UCA believes that Christ is truly present in the eucharist. This view is probably closest to Lutheran theology which holds belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist.^v While in Australia the Lutheran Church does not practice an ordained Diaconate, their National President is seen as a Bishop. Seeing a number of similarities between the UCA and the LCA there have been a number of conversations between the two denominations.

At its 15th Assembly⁶ the UCA decided to allow two distinct definitions of marriage by adding that marriage may be between two persons (rather than solely between a man and a woman). In making this decision, the UCA became the first Australian church to recognise same-gender marriage. Also, in making this decision they have provided a further point of distinction between themselves and their closest denomination, the Lutherans, who remain committed to an orthodox view of marriage and sexuality.

This recent decision, riding on the back of previous decisions about LGBTIQ matters further puts the UCA at odds with most of the Evangelical traditions of the church. The redefinition of marriage has the propensity to impact Christology, Biblical theology, Hamartiology, Theology proper, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, Soteriology, and Theological anthropology, and is demonstrably divisive – inside and outside the UCA.

All in all – these are strange actions of a church that wants to remain in the faith and unity of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and to work together and seek union with other Churches. Unity in Diversity⁷ may be the common catch cry of the Uniting Church but confusion and division seem to be more like the reality.

In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's "sin" but we in the UCA have been busy redefining it. While in Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself", we seem to have been distancing ourselves from the rest of His church.

Dr David Pohlmann was a member of and an emerging leader in the Methodist Church at the time of church union in 1977. He is currently placed as a Pastor (a specified lay ministry) in the UCA in Townsville. He is an elected lay member of the 15th Assembly.

ⁱUCA Basis of Union, ¶1

ⁱⁱ Ibid, ¶2

ⁱⁱⁱ Eldership in the Uniting Church, <http://assembly2015.uca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/B25-Eldership-in-the-Uniting-Church.pdf>

^{iv} For the Sake of the Gospel: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/papers/sakeofgospel.pdf> ¶15.6

^v <https://assembly.uca.org.au/unity/dialogues/item/1398-the-eucharist>

⁶ The national council of the UCA.

⁷ This has more in common with the teachings of Eastern Religion than the Gospel.