

The Ministry of the Laity in the UCA

A Christian Unity/Doctrine Working Group Discussion Paper

This paper is intended to open discussion on how we currently recognize and order ministries other than the ministries of the Word and of Deacon in the UCA.¹ There is a clear need for better integration of the Ministry of Pastor into our general ecclesial and theological understanding and practices. The most appropriate starting point for this discussion is our current understanding of lay ministry.

The UCA is committed to the full recognition, support and enhancement of the ministry of the whole people of God. This ministry is the ongoing ministry of the risen Christ, exercised overtly by Christ's body, the church. It is in no way restricted to the gathered life of the church in worship, but includes all forms of witness and service in the wider life of the world. It is the world which is the object of God's redemptive mission. The primary calling of the church is to participate in the redemptive mission of God to the world in all its brokenness and rebellion.

The Basis of Union speaks of this ministry in terms of the gifts given by God to every individual member of the church and of the exercise of these gifts in the wider mission of the church as well as within the gathered life of the 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, at the time of union, will recognise and accept the ministries of those who have been called to any task or responsibility in the uniting Churches. The Uniting Church will thereafter 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.²

¹ Closely related papers are 'Receptive Ecumenism' and 'UCA Doctrine Concerning "Lay Presidency" at the Eucharist' which are available from the CUWG Secretary (E-mail address: cuwg@nat.uca.org.au).

² Basis of Union (BoU), 13.

It seems clear that the emphasis is upon the call of Christ into membership in the church and faithful service in response to that call, both within the gathered congregation and in the wider mission of Christ to the world. The statement emphasizes that Christian ministry is in the service of God's mission, which encompasses both church and world.

This commitment to the enhancement of the ministry of all the people of God has been a major shaping factor in the life of the Uniting Church. The commitment itself is fully commendable and it provides a sound theological basis for further reflections and practical decisions about Christian ministry and service. The Basis of Union makes clear that the Church universal is called into being by God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, so that it needs to be responsive to the leading of God for its very existence. One important consequence of this is that domination by any person or group within the Church betrays the very nature of church life. This makes the exercise of human authority in the life of the church a fraught matter.

Perhaps the most significant moment in the working out of the Uniting Church's understanding of Christian ministry was the acceptance of the report, 'Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia'³ by the 1991 Assembly. This report was the result of a wide and thorough consultation within the UCA. It had a wide-ranging brief which it did fulfil. It marks the full affirmation by the UCA of the call of God to all who are baptized into a life of worship, witness and service. While this paper is seeking to identify and review what has been cast into the shadows by this triumphant affirmation, there is no need or reason to reject the general affirmation itself. It therefore provides the appropriate reference point for further reflection on the ministry of the whole people of God as we have come to understand it in the UCA.

The first chapter, 'Mission and ministry'⁴, grounds Christian ministry in the mission of God, the mission of the Church of God and the ministry of Christ. This provides a secure basis for consideration of the ministry of the Church of God. This ministry is from God, as expressed and authorized in our baptism. Christian ministry is not primarily oriented to the life of the church, but looks to serve God's mission to the whole world. Even so, service of the servants of God within the life of the

³ In *Theology for Pilgrim*. Ed. R.Bos & G.Thompson, Uniting Church Press, Sydney, 2008, pp.235-321.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.243-51.

church is fully included as one of the essential dimensions of the mission of God. We should not lose sight of these ever-challenging markers for our understanding of the nature of Christian ministry.

Nevertheless, we should note that the use of the term ‘Christian ministry’ in the 1991 report was intentionally very broad. This leaves open the question of how we should now refer to what we used to mean by ‘Christian ministry’, which was the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament⁵. We have not been ready to adopt another word, such as ‘Presbyter’, to refer to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, though we have adopted fresh terminology in referring to our two forms of ‘ordained ministry’, (‘Minister of the Word’ and ‘Deacon’). What seems to remain problematic is an understanding of what these two forms of ministry have in common. Even the phrase ‘ordained ministry’ is not fully satisfactory as a descriptor for this, as it refers only to the method of authorization for certain offices approved within our polity. It does not indicate what the essential basis or characteristics of these forms of ministry may be. We note with regret the confusion that we have taken on by designating all Christian ministry as ‘ministry’, as if we could simply require our people to stop using this word to mean the specific role of an ordained minister in a congregational placement.

The second chapter of the report seeks to give practical content to the global nature of the mission of the church as expressed in the previous chapter. It notes in particular the ecumenical movement as our frame of reference for understanding both church and world. This reference to the ecumenical context of UCA considerations of Christian ministry is essential, as it identifies the commitment of the UCA to review its life in terms of the faith of the whole church, not any one expression of that faith. Our various ecclesial traditions give expression to aspects of that faith, but no one tradition, our own as well as those of our ecumenical partners, can be definitive of the fullness of the faith. This is why we maintain an openness to all Christian traditions within an eschatological framework. We see ourselves as a ‘pilgrim people always on the way towards a promised goal’⁶, not simply wandering in the desert. It therefore follows that, while we should not change our way of doing things simply because another church does not like what we do, we

⁵ There is room for regret that the Basis initiated the dropping of the (admittedly wordy) designation, ‘Minister of Word and Sacrament’ in favour of ‘Minister of the Word’. See BoU, 14.

⁶ Basis of Union, 3.

cannot avoid the duty of careful consideration of these differences of viewpoint and practice.

The second chapter of this report then goes into a general account of our Australian context and finishes with a reiteration of the imperative of mission within this context. It is a mark of the real value of this report that the statements about the Australian context still seem relevant and even timely twenty years later. There is also no reason for the UCA to withdraw from the challenge of mission within this context.

The heart of the report is to be found in the third chapter entitled ‘The ministry of the whole people of God’⁷. The text is clearly shaped as an attempt to name and value all the kinds of ministry that could be discerned within the life of the church, with explicit and positive reference to the mission of the church within the life of the world. As the report itself says, ‘The vision of ministry contained in this report is centred on equipping the whole people of God for God’s mission and ministry in the world’⁸. One result of this emphasis would seem to be a focus on the many tasks of equipping the servants of God rather than a focus oriented upon the presence of the baptized in various sectors of the world. Do we see here the seed of a pattern that has been criticized as ‘clericalizing the laity while sidelining the clergy’?

While we can acknowledge that all Christians participate in the mutuality of supporting and equipping each other for Christian witness and service, it is surely important to value the specific leadership in this supporting and equipping expected of those called into ordained ministries in the life of the church. We have become aware of the need to redevelop a ‘culture of call’ to ordained ministry within the UCA in recent years. There has been a successful effort to avoid ‘clergy domination’ in the life of the UCA. This effort has not been without cost. One aspect of this has been an overemphasis upon the congregational focus of the Ministry of the Word and the ‘beyond-congregational’ focus of the Ministry of Deacon, to the detriment of an understanding of what they have in common. Both ministries offer leadership to the church in identifying and participating in the mission of God in the world and in maintaining apostolic Christian faith. While this leadership is ‘with others’, it is still leadership for which people are specifically prepared and which can and should be expected from these people.

⁷ Ibid., pp.259-310.

⁸ Ibid., p.262.

It should be acknowledged that the task undertaken in this chapter is almost as impossible as the task of identifying the immeasurably multitudinous forms taken by the Spirit of God in God's mission to our world. The report remains a credible attempt to identify and articulate forms of Christian ministry across the whole people of God. The report itself acknowledges the difficulty of this task. 'The investigations of this Task Group highlight the variety of ways in which Uniting Church Parishes [sic] and agencies⁹ organise their life, so as to respond creatively to the demands of the gospel and of their context. The stories abound. They are all different.'¹⁰

The report suggests that forms of Christian service can initially be classified into four streams (with some overlap and difficulty of classifying some situations). The four streams are employment by the church, commissioned, specified and ordained ministries. The UCA employs many non-UCA members (who may not even have any form of Christian commitment), so that the persons themselves may or may not see their work as a form of Christian ministry. Commissioned ministries are envisioned as any form of service recognized and authorized by a congregation or mission agency. The prominence of the idea of commissioning for specified ministries, as distinct from ordination, has been a later development.

It would seem that this proposed set of distinctions has succeeded in identifying broad categories around which to shape UCA regulations and practices, but without offering an independent rationale for why these need to be maintained as separate and distinctive categories. Not every person involved in what the UCA calls Christian ministry would identify themselves as a 'Christian minister'. It is this lack of an agreed rationale and focus of commitment which continues to cloud 'boundary disputes' concerning some of these categories, particularly the distinction between specified and ordained ministries.

The importance of ordained ministry for the UCA can be seen in the prominent place accorded to it in the Basis of Union. The subsection on Ministers, Elders, Deaconesses and Lay Preachers¹¹ is, in length, second

⁹ It is worth noting that church agencies are a major focus of Christian witness and service in the life of the world and that they form a significant 'extra-congregational' context for reflection on Christian ministry. We do not seem to have been very successful in co-ordinating chaplaincy roles with our ministerial categories.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 260.

¹¹ Basis of Union, 14.

only to Section 3, 'Built upon the One Lord Jesus Christ'¹². It will be noted that ministers of the Word and Sacraments are referred to simply as 'Ministers' in the heading supplied to this section of the Basis of Union. This is all taken as a given in the 1991 report where ordained ministry is described alongside all the other forms of ministry that are identified. This was a deliberate and appropriate strategy, as ordained ministers do not cease to be members of the people of God, the 'laos', upon ordination. The distinction commonly made between 'lay' and 'ordained' suggests otherwise and is inconsistent with our UCA understanding if taken in an absolute sense.

Nevertheless, we have struggled to balance this truth with the need to affirm that something significant is conveyed at ordination. We can see in retrospect that the task of broadening the meaning of the term 'minister' without undermining the clarity of the traditional call into ordained ministry could not be achieved, due to the primacy of the need to support and enhance all the other forms of calling. The unenthusiastic introduction to the discussion of ordination in the 1991 report would seem to show this to be the case. 'The Uniting Church's current understanding of ordination is the setting apart for service of Jesus Christ of those called by God to the ministry of Word or Deaconess'¹³. With the use of the word, 'current', there is a suggestion that these ministries are under review and that the 'setting apart' is justified by the fact of the existing offices rather than a freshly stated rationale.

If the church does indeed live under guidance and correction from the Word of God, should we not have a special concern for the ministry of those agents charged with this task? It is most unfortunate that we have come to see this as a privileging of some human voices rather than as identifying primary sources for the ongoing formation of the church by Word and Sacrament. The understanding of the Ministry of the Word that we uphold in the UCA has become deeply counter-cultural within a post-modern world-view. The dignity and the very meaning of this role can only be sustained where there is active belief in a God who is able to address us. It would therefore seem imperative that we recognize the need to articulate and promote the dependence of any church upon correction and guidance from God through the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of recognized agents. The difficulty of this requirement gives rise to the need for ministries of oversight within the polity of the church.

¹² Basis of Union, 3.

¹³ Ibid., p.281.

There is value in remembering the sacramental character of the Ministry of the Word, as we should not allow a merely rational understanding of the Word of God to dominate our thinking. While there is indeed full rationality here, there is also at work the mysterious and unfathomable depths of God on which we rightly rely for salvation. We should note that placing all forms of Christian ministry on the one level does lead to the suggestion of a spiritual equivalence between sacramental leadership and all other forms of Christian service. There will be dimensions of comparison for which this is fair and valid, but should we not ask if this equivalence can be sustained for all dimensions of comparison?

It seems clear that the framers of the 1991 report were keen to move away from any view which identified traditional ministerial roles as the 'real Christian Ministry'. This missional emphasis has now been largely accepted within the UCA. The necessary subsequent question, 'What then do we say about the ministry of Word and Sacrament?' has been addressed by the Assembly in a series of statements, but seemingly without full acceptance and reception by the wider UCA. This can be seen in the history of the debates and Assembly decisions that followed the acceptance of the 1991 report. Two issues stand out in this history, namely, the meaning of ordination¹⁴ and criteria for persons authorized to preside at the sacraments¹⁵, especially the Lord's Supper. The only other major revisiting of the 1991 report has been the simplification of the ministries of Youth Worker, Lay Pastor and Community Minister into the one specified ministry of Pastor at the 2006 Assembly.

Our general commitment to being part of the apostolic church is not in question. 'Being an apostolic church is therefore both a description and a calling for the Uniting Church as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church'¹⁶. If we ask how Christian ministry features in this fine paper by Chris Walker, we find that it is presupposed in virtually every section but that it is not addressed formally except indirectly. 'It is worth noting as well that the classic Protestant marks of the church are that "the gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered

¹⁴ See 'Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church' [1994], *Theology for Pilgrims*, pp.328-399, 'Affirmations on Ordination' [1997], *Ibid.*, pp.409-21, 'The Church and its Ministry' [2004], *Ibid.*, pp.478-82, 'A Brief Statement on Ordination', ASC, November 2008.

¹⁵ See 'The Renewed Diaconate is a Sacramental Ministry' (1994), *Theology for Pilgrims*, pp.400-08, 'Lay Presidency at the Sacraments' (1995), *Ibid.*, pp.425-40.

¹⁶ Chris Walker, 'On Being an Apostolic Church'. Assembly Paper, June 2010, Section 34. This is the concluding sentence.

according to the gospel” (*Augsburg Confession*),¹⁷. It is this traditional Protestant emphasis upon the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments which shaped the understanding of ordained ministry that is affirmed in the Basis of Union. How are we to maintain the special importance of Word and Sacrament while also lifting up all the other forms of service in the life and mission of the church?

Another dimension of ongoing UCA discussion has been the issue of episcopal oversight. We have become clear that we are committed to a collective form of *episkope* or oversight. Our councils are accorded the formal authority that has been given to bishops in the polity of many of our partner churches. One of the central responsibilities of this episcopal authority has been the maintenance of orthodox Christian faith. ‘Also significant for upholding orthodoxy was the defining of the canon of scripture and the development of bishops as conveyers of the Christian tradition which later developed into the idea of the apostolic succession’.¹⁸ While our polity does not affirm an individual episcopal succession, we do assume that defence and promotion of the apostolic faith of the church is a central responsibility of our UCA councils and of our ministers, especially those who have taken vows to this effect. Rather than an unbroken succession of human transmission over time, we see continuity in the presence and power of God through the Word (the risen Christ), restoring our human lapses and bringing in fresh people through the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit.

We consider that it is timely to extend our affirmative account of the challenge and the calling of ordained ministry, which focuses upon what Ministers of the Word and Deacons have in common rather than upon what makes them distinct, to those who are also recognized as exercising ministries of word and sacraments. . The most central dimension of this is the importance for the spiritual health of the church of word and sacrament, which should extend to appropriate formation, education and recognition of those exercising these ministries. Another significant dimension that is not sufficiently noted within our UCA statements is the teaching of orthodox Christian faith.

Maintenance of Christian faith and participation in the sacramental life of the church are tasks of the whole people of God. Even so, we need to maintain our commitment to the formation, education and support of those ordained for leadership in these particular tasks. While it is

¹⁷ Ibid. Section 19.

¹⁸ Ibid. Section 22.

probably true that nobody is fully prepared for the challenges of Christian ministry, we need to develop the patterns of formation and support that we have put in place for all those who respond to the call to offer themselves for service in the work of the church.

In the absence of an ordained minister lay people may be authorised to preside at the sacraments. In 1995 guidelines for presbyteries to use in relation to Lay Presidency at the Sacraments were developed and approved by the Assembly Standing Committee. These guidelines, revised slightly in 2013, should be known and adhered to by every presbytery. They speak of suitably gifted lay people who have undertaken a course of study. People are authorised in the first instance for a 12 month period with the option of re-authorisation for a specified period of time. The presbytery conducts a service to recognise the authorisation for a lay person to preside at the sacraments. We note the desirability of having the same diversity among lay people as among those who are ordained in giving permission to preside at the sacrament(s) taking into account the context in which the authorisation is granted by the presbytery.

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