

# AN ORDERED MINISTRY FOR AN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

UCA CONFERENCE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY  
MELBOURNE, 19 OCTOBER 2007

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## [A] Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia has commissioned a number of significant statements on ordination in the course of the three decades of its existence. There is a fine, orthodox statement on the ordination of ministers of the Word (which includes the ministry of the Sacraments) in the *Basis of Union* (§14). In 1982 the Assembly Doctrine Commission provided a solid statement of what ordination is, *viz.* the incorporation of a person in the fellowship and succession of ministers of Word and sacrament. Ordination to this ministry carries with it the authority to exercise this ministry. Although the language of an *order* is not used explicitly, it lies close to the surface of this statement.

In 1991, on the basis of the report, *Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia*, the Assembly established a renewed diaconate for the Uniting Church. By this time, a range of quite disparate views on ordination is reported (p. 36). The Assembly was persuaded to adopt a practice of ‘ordination to the ordained ministry’, together with an accreditation of ministers as either deacons or ministers of the Word. This anomalous and eccentric situation was overturned by the 1994 Assembly, on the basis of a new report, *Ordination and Ministry in the Uniting Church*. Here ordination is understood in very close relation to baptism, which is itself described among other things as a general kind of commissioning for Christian service and discipleship (increasingly referred to as a person’s *ministry*). The solemn, even quasi-sacramental act of ordination is seen as a particularisation of the baptismal call to discipleship. Men and women are ordained to one or other of the Uniting Church’s two forms of ordered ministry, the presbyterate and the diaconate, ministries held to be of enduring importance in the church catholic.

For the last several decades, however, in part due to the renewed emphasis on the ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*, service) of every Christian (*Basis of Union*, §13), there has been a loss of confidence in the meaning – even the justification – of the practice of ordination in the church. In part, this is the result of a one-sidedly functional view of ordination: if lay members of the church can exercise every *function* of an ordained minister, is there really any need for an ordained ministry in the church? Ordination is attacked as being about privilege. This line of thought is an example of the pragmatic thinking that has become a substitute for theology in the Uniting Church in recent years. Some people want to be in ‘ministry’ without being ordained. But what kind of ministry, and by what authority?

The matter of ordination has assumed a prominent place in the official dialogues in which the Uniting Church is engaged with the Anglican and Lutheran Churches in Australia. Several aspects of our practice, together with the widespread (and abused) practice of what is widely referred to as ‘lay presidency’ at the eucharist, are matters of considerable concern to these other Australian churches. Because of my much greater familiarity with the Joint Working Group of the Anglican and Uniting Churches, in what follows I refer mainly to this dialogue.

## [B] Issues in the three-way dialogue in Australia (Anglican–Lutheran–Uniting)

The UCA has been in official national dialogue with the Anglican and Lutheran churches for a very long time. The Lutheran–Uniting dialogue has yielded an impressive number of theological statements on which theologians from both churches could agree. The Anglican–Uniting Church has produced fewer statements, only one of which, the Agreed Statement on Baptism, was ever adopted by the national body of both churches. A Lutheran–Uniting *Declaration of Mutual Recognition* (1999) was approved by the UCA but not presented to the Lutheran Church on the grounds that it was unlikely to succeed in the wake of UCA decisions on sexuality. The Anglican–Uniting statement *For the Sake of The Gospel* (2001) was received by the national body of both churches, but in such a way that further dialogue stalled for the next four or five years, resuming only in 2007.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001 the then Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, the Most Rev Dr Peter Carnley, wrote a paper which was sharply critical of *For the Sake of the Gospel*. It was a paper described as ‘influential but not authoritative’. Nevertheless, it set the agenda for future dialogue between the two churches. In particular, Carnley drew attention to three major problems: lay presidency at Holy Communion, the participation of lay people in the laying on of hands at ordinations, and the relation between the ministries of the baptised and those ministries for which the church ordains people. In respect of the latter, Carnley saw the ordained ministry not as an extension of the ministry of the baptised but as ‘belong[ing] to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit.’<sup>2</sup>

Because the issue of the episcopate and the Anglican requirement of episcopal ordination were common to the three dialogues between these three churches in question, the Christian Unity Working Group of the (UCA) Assembly convened a meeting of representatives of these churches to test the possibility of their meeting for a time as a trilateral group. In the event, representatives of the Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Churches met on a number of occasions between 2002–06 to consider matters of common interest. The discussions were always stimulating and purposeful.

In November 2003 Chris Mostert presented a paper to the trilateral meeting, entitled ‘Church, Ministry and Ordination: What Relation?’<sup>3</sup> The paper was a comparative study of a number of issues concerning the ministry and ordination. It found that the Anglican and Lutheran Churches in Australia were in many respects considerably closer to each other than each was to the Uniting Church. The paper argued that ministerial office is not simply derived from the church, that there is a difference in kind between ministerial office and the general priesthood of the baptised, and that the former is divinely instituted. The paper suggests that a divergent (and, in the eyes of the other two churches, problematic) practice in the UCA’s rite of ordination is the consequence of a divergent *theology* of ordination. The paper was widely discussed and responses – to a greater or lesser degree official – were received from each of the participating churches.

As the three-way conversation came to its end, the following seven points, quoted in full below, summarised the extent of theological agreement between the representatives of the three churches. On one major point the divergence of the Uniting Church from the other two churches was particularly clear, but the amount of convergence should not be underestimated.

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<sup>1</sup> These statements may be found in Raymond K. Williamson (ed), *Stages on the Way*, Vol. 2 (Strathfield: St Pauls Publications, 2007). Earlier statements of agreement may be found in the first volume of *Stages on the Way* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1994). In introducing *For the Sake of the Gospel* in Vol. 2, Williamson identifies ordination as a major point of difference. (76f.)

<sup>2</sup> ARCIC I, ‘Ministry and Ordination’, Canterbury 1973, §13.

<sup>3</sup> A slightly modified version of this paper, addressed principally to the Uniting Church, was published in *Uniting Church Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2004, 16-35.

### **1. The church is a divine and human reality**

‘The church is both a divine and a human reality.’<sup>4</sup> The church is called into being and sustained in being by God, the Father, through the work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The church does not create itself; it is the creature of the Gospel. It is the communion of faithful people with their Lord, a communion which is his gift. The Spirit incorporates people into Christ through baptism and faith and forms them as the body of Christ. The church, confessed as the ‘one holy catholic and apostolic church’, instantiates itself in a broken and divided world as communities of faith, sadly divided, but gathering around the Word and the sacraments and sent into the world to proclaim the Gospel and to serve the world in its diverse needs.

### **2. The Spirit gives gifts to the church**

The Holy Spirit gives gifts to the church so that it may be built up in faith, hope and love and be equipped for ministry to the world. ‘The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world.’<sup>5</sup> It is every Christian’s baptismal vocation to engage in such service (*diakonia*). To call such service ‘ministry’ has created some confusion in the church, not least concerning the place of an ordained ministry in the church. However, insofar as each Christian is called to exercise a ‘ministry’, its locus is the world, of which the church is a part. All Christians are called to live out their baptism in daily life, not in ‘church’ work alone. For some it may include liturgical and pastoral responsibilities in their congregation.

### **3. Jesus Christ gives his Church an apostolic ministry**

In calling his church into being and appointing some to be apostles, Jesus Christ ‘laid foundations for the ongoing proclamation of the Kingdom and the service of the community of his disciples.’<sup>6</sup> Building on this apostolic foundation, the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has from earliest times called and ordained people to a ministry that stands in continuity with (though not on a par with) that of the apostles. Through this ordering of the life and ministry of the church, Christ constantly recalls it to its fundamental dependence on him and exercises his authority over it. He calls men and women to ministerial office ‘to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.’<sup>7</sup> Authority for this ministry is from Christ himself and ministers are accountable to him, through the church’s structures of *episkopé*. They do not exercise their ministry apart from the church. The church and its ordained ministry are reciprocally related, each being the creation of the Gospel.

### **4. The ministry of Word and sacrament is distinctive**

The relation between the ‘ministry’ of every Christian and the ministry for which the church has from ancient times ordained people is difficult to express with unanimity. It is unsatisfactory to regard the latter as an extension or intensification of the former or as being delegated to it by the community. But clearly, they are related: each is part of the ministry of Christ, each is the expression of the Spirit’s gift, and each is directed to the building up of the church. The common *diakonia* of the church lays claim to every Christian’s gifts and resources. However, the ministry of Word and sacrament, without which the church cannot fully be what it is, has its basis in a divine institution and gift. For this reason the church takes a particular care over the discernment of those who have a call to, and the necessary gifts for, this ministry. Although all ministries in the church are complementary, the ministry of Word and sacrament is different in kind from others. Through it Christ establishes his rule over the church by speaking his word and declaring his forgiveness and his promise of new life.

<sup>4</sup> *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), §13.

<sup>5</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith & Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), M§5.

<sup>6</sup> *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §86.

<sup>7</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§13.

### **5. Authority is conferred for this ministry in ordination**

Ministerial office in the church is not something which people take upon themselves; they are given authority for it and appointed to it by others, who do so on behalf of the church as a whole. In principle, people are ordained to the apostolic ministry of the *whole* church, even though in practice such ordination is recognised only in that part of the church in whose name juridical authority is exercised. Nevertheless, just as baptism is, in principle, into the one holy catholic and apostolic church, so ordination is, in principle, to the ministry of an undivided church. Ordination is the ‘setting apart’ of a person for the office and work of the ministry. More particularly, it is the orderly transmission of ministerial authority and the setting of a person in a ministerial office or (as some churches describe it) ‘holy orders’. In the culture of postmodernity there is suspicion about any claim to authority; consequently, its exercise demands the utmost sensitivity and care. But any notion of ordination that excludes the idea of authorisation for—and accountability in—ministry is seriously truncated.

### **6. Ordination is an ecclesial act**

Ordination is an ecclesial act. It takes place within a service of worship, in which the Scriptures are read, the Gospel is proclaimed and the eucharist is celebrated. The consent of the gathered community is sought and the act of ordination is related to the one holy catholic and apostolic church. The church ordains by means of a ‘performative’ word, accompanied by prayer and the laying on of hands. Acknowledging that ‘it is the risen Lord who is the true ordainer’,<sup>8</sup> the act of ordination is also ‘invocative’, requesting divine ratification of what is done in the name of the Holy Trinity and seeking the gifts of the Spirit to empower the ordinand’s ministry. The church ordains people in the confidence that ordination is a sign of the faithfulness of God.

### **7. Ordination is a ministerial act**

Ordination is an act of the church carried out through the instrumentality of those who exercise authority and *episkopé* in the church. Typically, these are persons who have themselves received ordination and who now associate others with them in the commission they have received from Christ. Such succession in ministry is ‘a means of serving the apostolic continuity of the Church’.<sup>9</sup> This is the practice of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches and was the practice of several of the churches which united to form the Uniting Church. In these churches lay people do not participate in the laying on of hands. The practice of the Uniting Church is at variance with this: the Presbytery corporately exercises its *episkopé* in the act of ordination. Since the Presbytery comprises both ordained and lay people, both participate in the act of ordination. (At least two ministers and two lay people must take part in the laying on of hands.) The service of ordination is presided over by the chairperson of the Presbytery, who may be a minister or a lay person. This practice is regarded as irregular by the Anglican and Lutheran churches and appears to them to suggest a different view of ministry. On this last point we have so far been unable to reach agreement.

In response to the paper by Mostert referred to above, representatives of the Working Groups on Christian Unity and Doctrine met in Sydney early in 2004 to draft a short Uniting Church statement on ordination. This statement was adopted by the Assembly Standing Committee in July 2004.<sup>10</sup> It was subsequently sent out with a accompanying pastoral letter to all Presbyteries.

Drawing substantially on the *Basis of Union* and the WCC report, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, the statement, especially paragraphs 5–12, makes a number of important points.

- An ordered ministry is part of what God provides for the church. Its chief responsibility is to assemble and build up the body of Christ. [§5]
- All ministries in the church are complementary and are the instruments of Christ. [§6]

<sup>8</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§39.

<sup>9</sup> *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §89.

<sup>10</sup> A copy of this statement is attached to this document as an appendix.

- The ministry of the Word and the diaconate are related to, but not simply an extension of, the ministry of every Christian. They differ in authority and accountability. [§7]
- Ordination is the transmission of ministerial authority; it places ministers in a new relation to others in the church, though not in a hierarchical way. [§8]
- Ordination is an act of the church, in which the church is the instrument of Christ. It is carried out by people who have oversight over the church's ministries. [§9]
- In the UCA it is the Presbytery that exercises its *episcopé* in the act of ordination. [§10]
- In the UCA at least two ministers and two lay members of the Presbytery must participate in the laying on of hands in ordination. [§11]
- In other churches (with which the UCA is in dialogue) only those who have been ordained take part in the laying on of hands in ordination. [§12]

In this statement the Uniting Church shows itself to be in substantial agreement with the Anglican and Lutheran Churches (in Australia) on the theology of ordination. Only its practice of having lay people participate in the laying on of hands – and even preside at a service of ordination – raises concerns in our two dialogue partners. The Lutheran Church, for example, asks the following questions of the Uniting Church:

- Since the UCA Assembly has now declared that lay ministries are different in kind and not just degree from the ordained ministry, what changes would the UCA have to make to its polity in order to consistently reflect this change in its practice?
- Since the ecumenical consensus that the ministry of word and sacrament is the responsibility of the ordained ministry, could the UCA go the next step and rule that lay presidency at the Eucharist is an irregularity?
- Since *episcopé* in the UCA is largely exercised corporately through its presbyteries rather than personally, how far can the UCA go in the matter of exercising personal *episcopé* through its ordained ministers?
- Would the UCA be willing to change its constitution so that the chair of presbytery, the moderator, and the president are always ordained ministers and that consequently the leading role in ordination services would always be taken by an ordained minister?

It would be reassuring to both these dialogue partners if the UCA could answer the last three questions in the affirmative, but it cannot be thought likely that the national Assembly — which has determining responsibility in matters of doctrine — would do so in the foreseeable future. There is perhaps a slightly greater chance that it would do so for the sake of a union with either of these churches, but even here one would hesitate to be confident.

### **[C] An Apostolic Church and an Apostolic Ministry**

It is a matter of concern to many that in the last several decades there has been an increasingly pragmatic approach to ministry in the Uniting church. We have a one-sidedly *functional* view of ministry: anything that 'works', with little concern for anything else, is held to be acceptable. The temptation to think about ministry this way is real, of course, in a situation of smaller, more scattered congregations, especially in rural and regional areas. However, what is left out of such a view of ministry is the sense that there is a ministry that is God's gift to the church, for the sake of the Gospel. There is little sense that an ordered ministry – in the UCA the ministry of the Word and the ministry of Deacon – belongs to the *esse* (the very being) or *bene esse* (the wellbeing) of the church.

Coupled with this is the dominance of the paradigm of resourcing: ministry viewed only in terms of resourcing people for mission. This is undeniably important but it cannot be regarded as sufficient. The ministry of the church has a wider range of responsibilities than this. There is a reluctance to speak of *the* ministry and a telling preference to speak simply of *ministry* in general.

Before considering what else matters in ministry, one particular difficulty has to be noted, though it cannot be solved. This is a problem of perception. If one defends the practice of an ordained ministry in the church *as an ordained minister*, it will risk being dismissed as merely an exercise in hanging on to power and privilege. (Let us leave aside how much power and privilege is at issue here for most ministers in contemporary Australian society.) There is little one can do to address this problem, except to argue that it is not for the sake of the *ministry* that a case such as the following is made, but for the sake of the *church*, and ultimately for the sake of the *Gospel*. It is not for nothing that the Collect in the UCA service of ordination, immediately before the service of the Word, praises God ‘that in every generation [God has] given ordained ministers to [God’s] church that [God’s] people may be nourished in faith and equipped for service.’<sup>11</sup> The ministry is for the church, not the other way around.

The church needs a ministry, an ordered ministry, for the sake of its apostolicity. To begin with the nature and mission of God, we understand God to be a *sending* God. It is unusual to use the adjective ‘apostolic’ of God – more usual to say this about the church – but there is a sense in which it may quite properly be used of God: God is a *sending* God. The Father sends the Son into the world; the Father, through the Son, has sent the Spirit into the world.<sup>12</sup> This is a very common theme in the fourth Gospel and in the letters of the Apostle Paul. In the economy of salvation the Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world; in this way God embraces the cosmos, expresses the divine solidarity with it and love for it, and brings it into reconciliation with Godself. Just as the Father has sent the Son, so the Son sends the disciples, and breathes on them the Holy Spirit (John 20:21). In a similar way, the Matthean Jesus also sends the eleven disciples into the world: to make disciples, to baptise them, and to teach them what Jesus has said and commanded (Matt 28:16-20).

Already in his own ministry Jesus has sent out the twelve (Mark 3:14ff) – or the seventy (Luke 10:1) – to do what he himself has done: proclaim the message of Jesus, and cast out demons and heal. Mark says that Jesus named the twelve *apostles* (3:14); Luke uses the word *apostles* more (17:5, 22:14, 24:10). In Acts the term *apostle* is used quite commonly. It was early Christian practice to call the disciples *apostles*, on the basis of their post-resurrection commissioning. Paul uses the term *apostle* with reference to himself, though he was never a disciple of Jesus as others were. On the basis of having seen the risen Lord and having received a direct commissioning from the risen Christ himself, Paul regards himself as an *apostle*; in fact, he defends his apostleship in the face of critics (1 Cor 9:1-12, 2 Cor 11:5). In Gal 1:1 he calls himself an *apostle*, ‘sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father’.

In the commission of the disciples, the *apostles*, the church sees the basis of its own sending. This remains the case, even though the age of the apostles passed. The Catholic Church does not regard bishops as *apostles* but as *successors* of the apostles. They continue, as it were, the apostolic ministry of the apostles. The ministry of later leaders of the church is also *apostolic* inasmuch as it is built on the foundation of the apostles. Indeed, this is something that should be said of the whole church, for the whole church is built on the foundation of the apostles. The faith of the church is apostolic inasmuch as it stands in continuity with the faith of the apostles.

<sup>11</sup> See *Uniting in Worship, Leader’s Book* (Melbourne: Uniting church Press, 1988), 504.

<sup>12</sup> This is not the place to address the question of the *Filioque* in the Western form of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

*Apostolicity* relates to the content and the quality of the faith. The church continually asks itself whether in its particular time, place and circumstances it remains in the faith of the apostles. Apostolic succession is not primarily about the succession of ministers (bishops in particular), but about the identity of the whole church. Edward Schillebeeckx, a contemporary Catholic theologian, describes *apostolicity* as ‘a richly variegated term that in no sense can simply be reduced to any one of [its] four dimensions’.<sup>13</sup> He sees these dimensions of the term as denoting the building of the church on the foundation of the apostles, the apostolic content of the tradition (that which is handed down), the content of the faith and praxis of Christian communities, and the succession of the church’s ministries. At its core, what is at stake is the continuity of the church in the apostolic faith and mission and its continuity in an apostolic ministry. The question is whether the church believes and lives by the Gospel and whether its proclamation and its doctrine are grounded in the Gospel. We briefly consider each of these complementary aspects of apostolicity.

### **(1) Continuity in apostolic faith and mission**

At any time, sometimes in the background, sometimes very explicitly, the church must consider the question whether it is faithful to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, to the Gospel, to the apostolic proclamation. As history makes all too clear, this is not an easy matter for the church in practice. Even to state what the Gospel is presents difficulties: it can be stated so generally that it includes everything and therefore says nothing; or it can be stated so narrowly that important elements are left out. The question about fidelity to, and continuity in, the apostolic faith is therefore as demanding as it is necessary. However, it remains an imperative in every theological, missiological, moral (and even bureaucratic) decision the church makes, to ask itself whether it is *faithful* to the apostolic faith or whether it is at risk of departing from it. To fail to be concerned with the question is to put the apostolic faith at risk. There is, of course, also an opposite danger: to see fidelity to the church’s apostolic beginnings in archaeological terms, displacing respect for apostolic tradition by *traditionalism*.

### **(2) Continuity in an apostolic ministry**

The *Basis of Union* states that the church ‘lives by the power of the Word’ (§14a). The Church is indeed the ‘creature’ of the Word (*creatura Verbi*). Moreover, the church lives in the assurance that God will ‘call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word.’<sup>14</sup> By broad ecumenical agreement, the chief responsibility of ordained ministry is ‘to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.’<sup>15</sup> Ordained ministers preside over the liturgical and sacramental life, as well as the missional and diaconal life, of congregations (and the church’s various agencies). Ministers, in the name of Christ, gather the church, call it to worship, teach its members and proclaim the Gospel both within and beyond the ‘walls’. In the midst of a multiplicity of gifts for service and interpretations of the faith, they provide a focus of unity in the church. Most important, ordained ministers are responsible for publicly and continually reminding the church of ‘its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ.’<sup>16</sup>

An ordained ministry has also the responsibility of guarding the apostolic faith, helping to discern for and with a congregation (or agency) what truly belongs to the Gospel and what does not, ensuring as far as possible that the church is *directed* by the Gospel. Of course, this is a task shared with others in the councils of the church, but ordained ministers have a special responsibility, authority and accountability for this. There is much to be said about the form (and style) in which such a ministry is

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<sup>13</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 116.

<sup>14</sup> At the time of union, the (renewed) diaconate was in view only as a possibility. It was not established in its present form till 1991.

<sup>15</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§13.

<sup>16</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, M§8.

exercised; humility and a consultative manner are indispensable elements in any such ministry. The shape of Jesus' own ministry provides the paradigm for all those whom the church ordains. The United Church is particularly clear that spiritual oversight is shared, not the responsibility of one person alone.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in continuity with the church's apostolic ministry, ordained ministers have an important ministry of leadership in the spiritual oversight (*episkopé*) of congregations, other communities of faith and agencies. Irrespective of profound and widespread social change, continuity in the church's apostolic ministry is indispensable for the holy, catholic and apostolic church.

On our way to the promised goal, Christ himself, having all authority, has assured us of his presence and of the Spirit's guidance and strengthening. The question for all churches and their leaders is: how can we, who are inescapably fallible and whose judgments are at best provisional, bring to expression the rule of Christ in his church, hear and articulate what the Spirit is saying to the church (Rev 2:7), and echo more truly in our communal liturgy, life and mission the life of the triune God? This requires us to speak about the authority of the Word.

A recent World Council of Churches statement on the church says:

The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-21; Rom 8:18-25). Through its worship (*leitourgia*); service, which includes the stewardship of creation (*diakonia*); and proclamation (*kerygma*) the church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church testifies to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.<sup>18</sup>

The church can only speak of what it has heard and enact what it has seen, in faithfulness to what it has received, principally in the words of Holy Scripture, brought to life in the church by the life-giving Spirit, and in the clarifying witness of creeds and confessions. To speak of the authority of the Word, however, we must also consider the *ministry* of the Word. The New Testament, notably the Pastoral Epistles, already knows a rudimentary form of ministerial office and ordination. From early times, those who have held such office have had the responsibility of caring for the faith-community, ensuring its continuity in the apostolic faith, guarding it against threats from within and without, and appointing successors in this office. To think of 'ministry' only in terms of some *functions* in the community's liturgical, diaconal or pastoral life, which can be delegated to anyone, and not also to think in terms of a ministerial *office*, into which a person is solemnly and prayerfully set, implies a failure to take the authority of the Word seriously.

Ordination to such ministerial office includes the *authority* to exercise it: to preach the Gospel and to teach the faith, to reflect on challenges to the faith from within and without, and to guide the church in its discernment of missional tasks. It is the authority of an apostolic ministry, the authority, finally, to guide and lead the church in its understanding of the Gospel, to say, under Christ, what the Gospel *is* and *is not*. It is the authority to say, whether it is welcome or not, what is coherent with the Gospel and what is consistent with the apostolic faith. This is by no means to overlook the conciliar responsibility for such matters, the responsibilities of Presbyteries, Synods and Assemblies. Their responsibilities are clear and uncompromised. The wisdom and insight of many lay members of the church, sometimes less welcomed by the church than it should have been, is also part of the Spirit's gift to the church and therefore to be gratefully received. On a larger scale, however, it has become questionable in our own time whether these councils of the church, especially the local and regional ones, have the resources and understanding for such responsibilities.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Basis of Union*, §14a; UCA Regulations 3.1.10-13.

<sup>18</sup> *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §36.

The authority described above, without which ordinarily no-one should seek to minister in the church, includes the responsibility to preside at the sacraments of the church: to baptise people and to preside at celebrations of Holy Communion. The church actualises its communion with Christ principally in the eucharist (which necessarily includes the ministry of the Word). Here Christ seals his presence with his church and feeds his people on their way. Those who are appointed to a ministerial office instituted to speak and act in the name of Christ and his Gospel are the appropriate persons to represent him at his table. Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson offers, as usual, a perceptive word:

Ordained ministers are authorised by Christ to maintain his authority in the church. The gospel is not the ‘Christian tradition’ but the message about Christ; the sacraments are not our ritual expression but his gifts. In that the ordained are at once servants of Christ and servants of the congregation, it is their pastoral role to make these ownerships plain; even, if need be, to defend the authenticity of the gospel and its sacraments against wishes or fears of the congregation.<sup>19</sup>

What has been argued for in this paper is that the church must regain a more robust view of ministerial office and the authority inherent in it. When viewed properly, this in no way threatens the discipleship of all Christians, the proper ‘ministry’ (diakonia) of all the baptised. More careful and differentiated work is needed on the relation between the church’s *ordered* ministry and the *gifted* ministries (services) of all other members of the church. Whatever may at times be the benefits of pragmatism, it is a quite insufficient approach to the ministry of a church that is serious about its continuity in the apostolic faith and the apostolic ministry. It fails to do justice to the nature of the church and the implications of the Gospel. It would be a great benefit to the Uniting Church, not least in its relations with other churches, if we were to learn again how to take the church’s *apostolic* character, and therefore the apostolic character of the church’s ministry, seriously.

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This paper was substantially revised in March 2008.  
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<sup>19</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 58.

## APPENDIX

# THE CHURCH AND ITS MINISTRY: A STATEMENT MADE FOR THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA BY THE WORKING GROUPS ON DOCTRINE AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

### Preamble

The following statement was written by representatives of the Doctrine Working Group (including the Chairperson of the Worship Working Group) and the Christian Unity Working Group to address a specific need. This need arose from the inter-church dialogues with the Anglican and Lutheran Churches. The immediate occasion for it was the tri-lateral meeting between representatives of all three churches in November 2003, which identified questions of importance to the Anglican and Lutheran Churches about the understanding and practice of ministerial ordination in the Uniting Church in Australia. It will be noted that the statement does not aim to cover every aspect of the topic. This is signalled by the somewhat abrupt ending.

The aim is to clarify the specific relationships which the church believes to exist between itself, its Lord and its ordained ministry, consistent with the Basis of Union and previous statements of the Assembly on this topic. The statement is naturally written to address the specific concerns of our Anglican and Lutheran dialogue partners as we understand those concerns, but for it to have integrity, it must express the genuine conviction and desired practice of the UCA. Those of us who have been associated with its formulation believe that it does this, and we offer it to the Assembly Standing Committee for affirmation as an official statement of the UCA. We also believe that there is need for a Pastoral Letter to Presbyteries [from e.g. The President or General Secretary] (draft attached) which will draw attention to some misunderstandings about ordination which seem to be revealed in some aspects of the current practice of ordination in our church.

### The Statement:

1. The foundation for the church and its ministry is the mission of the triune God in the world. The church has no other mission than this. The centre of this mission is the 'economy' of salvation, the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world, so that it may have life in all its fullness (John 14:26; 10:10). The salvation of the world has its ground in the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the living head of the church, and in the renewing work of the Holy Spirit (Basis of Union, 3).
2. The church is called into being to serve and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be a sign and instrument of the reign of God which has come among us in the ministry of Jesus and which will come in its fullness at the end of the age. The church's witness to the Gospel is hindered by the divisions between the churches and they are called to work and pray ceaselessly for the unity that is both Christ's will for the church and his gift to it (John 17:22-23).
3. 'Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith ...' (Basis of Union, 4). He is present in the church's preaching, in its celebration of the sacraments, in the fellowship of the community and in its care for those who are needy and marginalised. Through the Holy Spirit, he nourishes sustains and guides the church, in order that it may bear faithful witness to his ministry ('... in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews [people] as his Church' (Basis of Union, 4).
4. Jesus Christ calls people to follow him and to be his disciples. In baptism they are made one with him in his death and resurrection. They are made 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9). In their baptism, they are commissioned for Christ's continuing ministry in the world. Every Christian has been endowed with gifts by the Holy Spirit, and 'there is no gift without its corresponding service; all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ' (Basis of Union, 13).
5. Among the many services to which God calls those who have heard the Gospel, some are called to the servant-leadership of ministerial office, through which God provides for the church and equips it for its mission. In the Uniting Church there are two forms of ministerial office: the ministry of the Word and the

ministry of deacon, ministries for which the church ordains some among its members. The presence of ordained ministers reminds the church of its dependence on Jesus Christ (BEM, M.12)<sup>20</sup>. The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by presiding at the celebration of the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry (BEM, M.13; Basis of Union, 14).

6. All ministries in the church are the instruments of Christ in his ministry in the world. Through them he expresses his lordship over the world. These ministries, including the ministry of the Word and the diaconate, are related and complementary.
7. Ministerial office (the ministry of the Word and the diaconate) exists in and for the church; it has no existence apart from the church. However, it is not simply an extension of the ministry (or 'priesthood') of all Christians. While related to other ministries in the church, it is different in kind, and its authority and accountability differ from, that of other ministries. Its shape is determined by the character of the church itself: 'It is the nature of the Church rather than a perceived need which determines the nature and form of ordained ministry'.<sup>21</sup> While juridically (i.e., in the church's law-cf. Basis of Union, 17) the authority of ordained persons comes from the church, spiritually it comes from Christ, who also, through the church, ordains them for their office and work, for life. Their commissioning, known as ordination, comes from Christ. Both the church and ministerial office are the creation of the Gospel. Their relation to each other is reciprocal; each is given in and with the other.
8. In ordination the church recognises Christ's call and setting apart of a person to be his minister (Basis of Union, 14). This is not a setting apart from the body of Christ, but a setting apart within the church for their ministry. Ordination is the transmission of ministerial authority to those called by Christ and the church to ministerial office. This places them in a new relation to others in the church, not in any hierarchical sense but in the acknowledgement of their theological, liturgical and pastoral leadership in the church and on account of new trust invested in them and new expectations held of them.
9. Those who are called to ministerial office are ordained to such office by the church in the name of Jesus Christ. In ordaining them, the church acknowledges that they have been called to their ministry and given gifts for it by God, and that they have been educated theologically and in the practice of ministry, and formed spiritually by the church. The ordination of ministers is an act of the church in which the church is also the instrument of Christ's own act. It is carried out by those who have oversight (episcopate) over the ministries of the church.
10. In the Uniting Church it is the presbytery that exercises its episcopate in the act of ordination. It ordains 'by prayer and the laying on of hands in the presence of a worshipping congregation' (Basis of Union, 14(a)). The whole church, represented by the gathered congregation, is asked to confirm the judgement of the presbytery that the person to be ordained is 'worthy' (cf. the Uniting Church service of ordination) of this office. Their assent is signified by applause.
11. The service of ordination is presided over by the chairperson of presbytery (or by the chairperson's nominee), and at least two ministers and two lay people must take part in the act of ordination-by prayer and the laying on of hands (Reg. 2.3.4). Only members of the presbytery (or members of other presbyteries associated for the purpose) should participate in the laying on of hands. The Uniting Church includes lay members of presbytery in the laying on of hands because the council of oversight is the presbytery, and because this oversight is exercised jointly by ordained and lay members of presbytery.
12. Other churches, in which only those who have themselves been ordained participate in the laying on of hands, do so because they hold that succession in ministry is especially the responsibility of those holding ministerial office, though not apart from the authority of the church. The Anglican Church of Australia and the Lutheran Church of Australia, with both of which the Uniting Church is exploring the possibility of the mutual recognition of (ordained) ministries, follow this latter practice.

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<sup>20</sup> BEM refers to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, published by the **Faith and Order Commission** of the World Council of Churches in 1982. The text of BEM is a milestone in ecumenical conversations concerning these three core issues in church relationships. 'M.12' etc. refer to numbered paragraphs in the Ministry section.

<sup>21</sup> Sven-Erik Brodd, 'An Escalating Phenomenon: The Diaconate from an Ecumenical Perspective', in Gunnell Borgegård and Christine Hall (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon* 1. Anglican-Lutheran Perspectives, Uppsala: Nordic Ecumenical Council, 1999, p. 39.

