

Back to the beginning – we are together as one

Genesis 1:1-2:4; Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 NRSV; The DNA of the UCA revised 2023

Rev J Shannon

Here we are at Trinity Sunday. And I have the freedom to say I actually don't care whether you are a 3 in one or a one in three kind of person. That's our church. Given that our reading was Genesis, I want to go back to the beginning. Not that far back – I mean the beginning of the Uniting Church in Australia. I want to talk about what it means to be together as a church, as a community and within ourselves with our God. I want to talk about what motivates me and what constrains me. What is it that makes the Uniting Church different?

The Uniting Church will be 46 years old this month. It was formed in June 1977 when the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian churches came together after 75 years of conversations. I'll say that again, 75 years of listening to each other. At first, they tried to blend the rules and regulations from all three churches – and they failed – and they tried to pick and choose - failed again, and again. But then, they decided to throw out the rule committees and start with conversations including everyone about what we actually believe. What were the fundamental principles of our faith – and this is where the commonalities were obvious. They decided they would write a document that held the fundamentals of our faith and then from that, the rules would be obvious. That is the Basis of Union.

This church is based on listening respectfully, on conversation and consensus. We don't avoid the difficult conversations and instead of opinions, we do wait for the spirit to help us discern which way forward. The Spirit is written into our manual for meetings. We will talk as long as it takes to understand each others' positions and find a way forward. It assumes intelligent engagement and that people, when supplied with information, can overcome their prejudices and preferences.¹

In coming together, every word was considered carefully. As you know – the 'ing' in Uniting is important because the job is not done. We are a pilgrim people. We are also IN Australia not 'of' Australia because we do not pretend to represent everyone or the THE church of Australia. Yes, we are a uniquely Australian church but we are a denomination amongst many.

In this marriage, we made certain promises and these are enshrined in our Basis of Union and Constitution. It is important that everyone who walks through our doors has an opportunity to understand what makes THIS church Uniting.

¹ I have always referred to it as "The thinking persons' church"

I am a child of Uniting. I do not bring with me the assumptions and practices of the faith traditions that preceded this church and yet we are a combination of all those faiths. Our traditions are drawn from them but we have a unique DNA. My beliefs, my practices, my expectations are all shaped by the church as it exists today – not from my childhood memories. I do not expect this church to look like any other. My colleagues at the seminary were mostly born in the 70s so they have no other picture than of the church as it is today.

You know me. I will not tell you what to think or what to believe but I will put before you challenging Bible studies; contextual and historical information, alternative views and new ideas. (even some I don't agree with) It is your conversation with God that will help you discern how or what you put into action. I will not tell you how to vote or what to do but I will lay bare theological and moral perspectives that may help you in your decisions.

I think some of you have worried that I might sail too close to 'the political'. I try really hard not to² but as we explore the Basis of Union together today, you will see that one of the central founding ideals of this church is justice because that was Jesus' overriding mission. He put justice above worship; above rules and above security. It is a fine line to walk, talk justice and not sail too close to political – because it is our political masters who make the decisions that rule over justice. Jesus also carefully walked the same fine line but in the end, that was not enough to save him.

Article 8 of the Basis of Union commits The Uniting Church to advocating for justice for all. The word "Justice" appears some 13 times in the Basis of Union and that's before we list how many times "injustice" appears in our statements. I am obligated by our faith to name injustice and even, at times, make us uncomfortable.

I listen to our people and I hear enormous love and support and also questions about why do we do things this way? why do I wear a robe? why do we have to have sermons like these? And why are we so formal in our structure?

This is a good time to centre those things in our church polity. In other words, the rules and regulations that surround Uniting Churches in Australia. That's why I have compulsory ministry ethics training twice a year. The Presbytery has the responsibility to make sure I am familiar with the rules and the code of conduct. Churches who forget to whom they belong quickly go off the rails. I know this because I sit on the Pastoral Relations Committee and that's a little like being a Pharisee. It is the body

² But I confess I use political decisions and statements from Australia and overseas to demonstrate some points. It is an effort to put our beliefs and bible studies into today's context. We don't live in a vacuum.

that oversees the call of candidates; the call of congregations for a minister and oversight in some ways of the good order of the church.

When a person becomes a member of the Uniting Church, they are signing up for the belief system outlined in the Basis of Union, the Constitution and the regulations. Lay leaders and ministers must stick to the code of conduct. We are an ordered and structured church even though we do not have a hierarchy. I think some people are confused and surprised by that. The committees of the church are equal. They advise each other and each has a specific job to do but they do not 'outrank' each other.

I had the opportunity to see an old mentor of mine in Canberra last week. She has offered to come down as a guest leader. When I was a young minister, she said to me, "beware of men to only wear a stole and never an alb because the stole is the sign of authority (vested on us by the church) and the robe is the symbol of the servant."

I wear a robe not to high note myself but to humble myself. Have you noticed that the Uniting robes are intentionally plain³. This is not a priestly presence. I have a strong commitment that when I invite people to the communion table, it is not my table – I am the servant. Jesus is the host. So, I'd be happy to robe or not robe for ordinary Sundays – makes no difference to me but for important church days or communion, I would feel very uncomfortable having 'centre' stage. I would prefer to be Casper the friendly ghost – slightly invisible.

There is a practical side to robes – they have a pocket for the microphone and a tissue...and no one is judging you on what you wear.⁴

With or without a robe, it is important to remember we are a church which values the ministry of ALL the people of God. Our Basis of Union affirms that every member of the church is engaged to confess Christ crucified, and every person is gifted by the Spirit to engage in ministry in their own particular way. Lay and ordained are responsible, valued and equal to preach the word and lead.

When it comes to the liturgy – the Uniting Church has what we all 'ordered liberty'. That is, we do not have a book like the Anglicans that sets out exactly the contents of the service. It is based on the idea that worship is what we do – not a set canon of specific words. We have a recommended structure and the freedom to draw on many resources as we like. We can stray from the structure for different worship occasions and different groups.

³ No lace, gold, colour, trim - nada

⁴ (the most common complaint I hear from my unrobed colleagues)

We do have a liturgical resource book, *Uniting in Worship 2*⁵. This book lays out what is seen as the ‘essential’ elements not that they are compulsory but are the essence of a Uniting service. We have great freedom exercised within a broad framework but there are parts that need to be included to be seen as a ‘full diet’ of worship.⁶ Sure, there are times when we go ‘diet light’ – for example in an aged care service⁷.

With ordered liberty, there is both consistency and diversity in Uniting services.⁸ Ordered liberty reminds us that the Church is the body of Christ – it mitigates against individualism and cult leadership. We have a shared experience. You know that our sister church in Strathmore is following a liturgy very much like ours. It does not stop us from having messy church or song fests; discussion based liturgies or other creative worship forms but it gives us a framework that is Uniting.

The book provides samples and prayers that can be used hollis bollis. Not everyone is gifted with liturgical writing skills and not every Minister or lay leader has the time. On the other hand, I have been a writer all my life. What you may not know is that liturgical writing **IS** my worship time. On Sunday, I’m leading. But on Tuesday I am reading and praying and discussing scripture with my colleagues. On Wednesday, I am alone with God. It is a spiritual practice for me. It feeds me and I delight in sharing it.

At my ordination, I swore before God that would embrace the faith and unity of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, work within the Uniting Church, guided by its Basis of Union. I would submit myself to the Church’s discipline and preach the gospel.

The most frightening part was when they said, “God gives you grace and authority for this ministry.” You’d think they had set me free but it is the opposite. I am not free to stand here and be moved to speak off the cuff or as God moves me but rather that I am obliged to present a learned, exploring, extrapolation of the Gospel that in some way has meaning and currency in our time.

It would be much easier to say ‘God told me this’ or ‘Paul said that so take it literally’.

We are a Trinitarian church – we believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy spirit as they come together in our world. The Trinity is expressed in many ways and what I

⁵ Often referred to as the green book

⁶ *Uniting in Worship 2*, p13

⁷ With all this freedom there are still things that must included especially in ordination; commissioning; communion, baptisms and marriage. Without these words, we do not meet the requirements of the Uniting Church; our obligations to the World Council of Churches and our brotherhood with other denominations and in some cases, our legal responsibilities.

⁸ I attended a church on the Central Coast that was so Baptist in its worship style that I didn’t recognise it as Uniting. There was no structure – nearly all music and birthday wishes. Later I became aware that the Minister was indeed a Baptist Minister, who knew little about the Uniting Church but had ‘fallen’ into the role as Pastor when they didn’t have a minister and remained there for many years.

hope you will do as you read the booklets in front of you, is realise that you are not separate... but as community you build the church... that is God's presence in this world. The Celtic symbol that Tony put on the Pew sheet this week – not only represents the intertwine-ness of the Spiritual Trinity but also the conjunction and essentiality of you, the church fabric and God.

Today we are praying at the same time, in the same way as our brothers and sisters in Strathmore, Victoria. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine them praying for you.⁹ (silence)

*Loving God – as we can feel our brothers and sisters in Christ, may we also know that you feel us. My fervent prayer is that in the coming debates, we will have the patience and grace to listen to each other with an open mind and call on you for discernment.
amen*

⁹ "Sue, do you know what entrainment is?" she asked. I shook my head. "It's the phenomenon of two rhythmic beings gradually altering their movements until they're moving together in the same rhythm. Pendulums hanging on the same wall do it; crickets do it when they chirp; even people do it when they talk. The point is we tend to align ourselves with the rhythm" (from "When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions (Plus)" by Sue Monk Kidd)