

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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ABOUT UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

Living Traditions in the Uniting Church

Robert Gribben

The Uniting Church drew attention to itself from the first moment of its birth by its title. It chose the word ‘Uniting’ rather than (as in Canada, India, and the UK) ‘United’. Behind it lay a modest claim: that the union of churches takes time, and a generous offer: that other churches might be inspired by its example to join it in the quest for Christian unity. Grammarians frowned at the gerund (‘-ing’). But having ventured on its uniting journey, with few parallel bodies, it has sometimes been challenged to explain its relationship to older denominations and historic names. Who are the Uniting Church? What has its *Basis of Union* committed them to be?

It was Dr Harold Wood, in a booklet for congregations anticipating the union, who offered ‘Uniting’, which he wrote ‘implies that the three denominations have come together and other denominations may be included’. Other names under consideration were ‘United Church of Australia’, ‘The Reformed Church of Australia’ or ‘The Evangelical Church of Australia’ or a combination of these.¹ He comments that ‘the use of these words, for the union we propose in Australia, carries the inference that other Churches may not be Reformed or Evangelical’. In the long run to 1977, we opted for ‘the Uniting Church in Australia’, widening our horizon beyond our shores.

How the Uniting Church understands itself

This paper explores the issues in searching for the Uniting Church’s identity as a church among other churches in Australia and beyond. It will examine the background and implications of a number of possibilities as right descriptions of the Uniting Church. We will note how these terms have been understood in recent ecumenical dialogue, and especially since our formation in 1977. I hope to illuminate our self-understanding and our relationships some forty years on.

In his commentary on the *Basis of Union*, paragraph 1, the inaugural President of the UCA, Dr J. D. McCaughey, wrote:

We were Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, but that was not the most important thing about us. The most important thing was and is that we belong to the Church of God. What we did and do is ‘in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic’.²

¹ A. Harold Wood, *The Uniting Church of Australia: Presbyterian Congregational Methodist*, Melbourne, Melbourne Publishing House, 1961, p. 39.

² J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1980, p. 7.

He points out that in the *Basis*, the expression ‘the Church’ ‘refers to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, the company of God’s people through history and throughout the world’.³ That is the context of our worship, mission and service. The UCA acknowledges that it is related to other churches, and together with them it desires ‘to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia’ (*Basis*, para. 2).

Looking back and looking out

This is not the place to discuss fully how faithful we have been to our original vision. Since 1977—though a mere blink of the eye in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ⁴—no other church has accepted the invitation implied in our title ‘Uniting’. In fact, the ecumenical understanding of what ‘unity’ means has been defined in a number of different ways since.⁵ The hard work of maintaining unity within the Uniting Church has been recognised through a number of crises, and rather like the ancient Israelites with Moses in the middle of the desert, sometimes the Uniting Church has looked back to the golden past of denominational life and ‘murmured’.

The UCA’s primary commitment to work in relation to the Churches of Asia and the Pacific, the significant growth due to migration of shared premises with so-called ‘ethnic’ churches, and the special relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, is a reminder, as Dr D’Arcy Wood wrote in his *Building on a Solid Basis*, that the UCA ‘is not a sect, sufficient unto itself, content in its grasp of the gospel and enjoying its own Anglo-Saxon-Celtic identity’.⁶ The Uniting Church is not the church it was in 1977, and that is a good sign!

It is worth noting that at union, the UCA also committed itself to continue to work with the global ecumenical movement (especially through the World Council of Churches) and the ‘world confessional families’, namely (what is now) the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council. Necessarily, only a few can be actively involved in such work, and ways of sharing the wisdom and experience are limited. It is important for the Uniting Church to be at such ‘listening posts’, for the three denominations face the same issues as the Uniting Church does in Australia, in some cases with vastly greater resources in mission, scholarship and communication, than the Uniting Church has. One observation from these connections is that the whole Christian Church has changed from that which was familiar prior to union, with the western ‘historic Protestant Churches’ diminishing in size and influence, and ‘new churches’, which are ‘reformed and evangelical’ with no direct roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation or the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival, are increasing at an astonishing rate, especially in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia and the Pacific. As the Uniting

³ McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, p. 9. He notes the exception in para. 15 where it describes the Uniting Church alone.

⁴ Remembering that moves in Australasia which resulted in the Uniting Church began as far back as 1901!

⁵ ‘Organic union’ such as the UCA’s, or that in India, seems to have fallen out of favour; some have spoken of ‘conciliar unity’; various covenants and agreements between churches have been proposed and acted on. In terms of images, that of koinonia, fellowship in costly communion, is the most persistent. See WCC Faith & Order paper 214, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), paras 1–8.

⁶ D’Arcy Wood, *Building on a Solid Basis, A Guide to the Basis of Union*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1986, p. 10.

Churches faces the challenges of being a national church, it needs constantly to learn from responses to this global change.

In the first days of the new entity, many faithful members felt the loss of familiar ways of being church, of speaking of the faith, of prayer and worship and of governance. Some looked for guarantees that the treasures of each tradition be preserved in the Uniting Church in some recognisable form. One example is the use of ‘congregation, presbytery synod, assembly’, familiar in a former church as the names for various councils. The (then) Liturgy Commission worked hard to keep valued distinctive customs while re-ordering the Church’s worship patterns in the light of ecumenical scholarship and practice. There was inevitable change and renewal, and it continues. Traditions esteemed in 1977 look different now.

In this context, the first President remarked ‘the only identity we need to focus on is that of the church catholic, reformed and evangelical’.⁷

A Uniting Church

The first sentence of the *Basis of Union* declares the Church’s intention to ‘enter into union’, with ‘the whole Church Catholic’ to form ‘the Uniting Church in Australia’, and it uses the term ‘Uniting Church’ for everything affirmed throughout its eighteen paragraphs. But from the beginning, it has also been aware that it is a different kind of church, and its choice of the word ‘Uniting’ is a sign of this: three churches working together to become a Church, and a Church which is dedicated from the start to work ‘within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (#2)⁸ and in special relationship with ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches and parallel national and regional bodies in Asia and the Pacific.

Of course, other bodies which call themselves ‘Church’ are ‘different’ too, or rather, while claiming also to be, or to be part of, the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, they acknowledge a separate existence based chiefly on their standing for particular positions on theological and ecclesial issues—the subject, for instance, of the first ecumenical ‘convergence document’ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). Sometimes it is obvious that politics, ethnicity, nationalism and culture have played their part, and the story of the modern ecumenical movement is of a change in attitude to an openness to divine truth beyond our own community, expressed most recently in the notion of ‘receptive ecumenism’ where churches are encouraged, in relationship to each other, to move from defensiveness to appreciation of gifts kept by other traditions which have been lost or obscured in one’s own. That was the method which in part brought the Uniting Church into being.

So the Uniting Church may speak of our distinctiveness,⁹ but it also seeks fruitful relationships. The

⁷ Witnessed by Professor C. Mostert. Email to author, 31 May 2014.

⁸ References to the paragraphs of the *Basis of Union* are so indicated (#).

⁹ We may wish, for instance, to claim the Uniting Church’s inter-conciliar structures and its commitment to the ordination of both women and men as among our distinctives.

primary claims the Uniting Church makes for itself are in the context of the full scope of the global Christian Church.¹⁰ It means that the fragile connections it has of formal representation at the two denominational world bodies, the World Methodist Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, may need to be strengthened if it is to be both distinctive and part of the Church universal.

With the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

The claim to belong to the *Una Sancta* (an old and briefer tag for the whole title) anchors it in the one Christian enterprise of all time and space. It may be limited geographically, but it is not nationalistic; it may have distinctive theological and other emphases, but it is not sectarian. If Uniting Church people travel outside Australia, they will be aware that there is no Uniting Church in Australia to attend wherever they stay. In Canada, India, the UK, USA and parts of Europe there is a variety of churches which consists of several uniting denominations, but they are not all the same, and they may well find ourselves seeking to worship in a denomination which is largely absent from Australia and not part of the UCA. Wherever they choose to worship, they are sustained by the fact that the Church exists everywhere.

Discerning that Church, deciding where members of the UCA can recognise the faith which belongs to us all, can be thought-provoking and challenging, but also maturing. We need to rejoice in difference and variety, but be aware that some differences are church-dividing and that they matter.¹¹ Our judgements are made within the faith of the *Una Sancta*.

And a Catholic, Evangelical and Reformed Church

At the local level, in conversation at an inter-church council or ecumenical event, who do we say we are? A widely recognised vocabulary has grown up, but needs challenging because some words carry freight

¹⁰ See *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), para 9–10 and the commentary which follows.

¹¹ In the last thirty years of national and international dialogues, in Australia, for instance, with the Anglican Church, *For the Sake of the Gospel*, 2001; with the Lutheran Church, *Declaration of Mutual Recognition*, 1999; with the Roman Catholic Church, *Inter-Church Marriages*, 1999; with the Greek Orthodox Church, several communiqués on mutual understandings 1994–2002, all of which may be read in Raymond K. Williamson (ed.), *Stages on The Way, Documents from the Bilateral Conversations between Churches in Australia, 1994–2007*, Strathfield, NSW, St Pauls Publications, 2007 (he also edited an earlier volume covering the period up to 1994, with UCA dialogues with the Churches of Christ, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches). Internationally, and multi-lateral, the 'Lima Document', *Baptism, Eucharist Ministry* (1982), and its companion 'convergence document', *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013); and bilaterally, through the World Methodist Council, with the Anglican communion – *Sharing in the Apostolic Communion* (1996), and *Into All the World* (2014); with the Salvation Army, *Working Together in Mission* (2011); with the Roman Catholic Church, *Synthesis: Together to Holiness* (2011) (an overview of 40 years of this dialogue), and major reports every five years since; the World Methodist Council is also a co-signatory of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (1999), and contributed an essay on its own understanding of justification and sanctification (2006). There are earlier reports of dialogues between World Methodists and Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Through the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its predecessor, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, dialogue has been held with the Roman Catholic Church, with both families of the Orthodox; with Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Mennonites, Disciples of Christ, Pentecostal, Adventist, African Instituted and some multi-lateral combinations; see the full list and references, on <http://www.reformiert-online.net/t/eng/rwb/tdbilate.jsp>

the Uniting Church rejects. Take the word 'Protestant'. It dates from 1529 when five European princes 'protested' against a decision that the religion of a ruler determined the religion of their subjects.¹² They asserted the right of each individual to give an account of their faith. The word carries a negative sense, but was in fact a stand for freedom of faith. Protesting against abuses in the Roman Church (remember it was virtually the only western church at the time) both pre-dates and follows the Reformation,¹³ but the Reformers were particularly concerned with importations into the church's doctrine and ritual of extraneous beliefs and superstitions. Contemporary advocates of Humanism also protested at the time, but the particular measuring-stick of the Protestant reformers was the Scriptures themselves to which scholarship was bringing fresh insights. Summarising the result of this in a phrase used in common by the Reformers and by the Wesleys was 'justification by grace through faith'.

How then do we see the title 'Protestant' after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council? Ministerial candidates for the last half-century have been taught by scholars of diverse Christian traditions, and Roman Catholic (and other) biblical scholarship is consulted with benefit, only subject to a conscientious and critical reading of all sources. Critical Protestants may yet be (despite an astonishing amount of well-examined agreement in dialogues) of certain doctrines and practices of other churches, but 'protest' does not sufficiently describe their attitude.¹⁴ It is also true that the way in which the tag *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) was used in the heat of the sixteenth-century controversies is not adequate in the light of informed critical scholarship of our own day.

An Evangelical Church

Some insist on the 'evangelical' nature of the Uniting Church, an even more complicated descriptor. The word does not appear in the *Basis of Union*. In Europe, an Evangelical Church means an historic Protestant Church: in Germany, Lutheran; and elsewhere, Reformed. The root word, *evangel*, means, as everyone knows, the Good News, and evangelism is the activity of proclaiming it. 'Luther used the term for all Christians who accepted the doctrine of *sola gratia*, which he saw as the heart of the evangel, or gospel',¹⁵ but in the English-speaking world it has gained a further nuance.

In Britain, the groups arising in the 'Evangelical Revival' from about 1750, of which Methodism was one part, increasingly became marked by a life-changing personal experience of redemption, 'deep moral earnestness, commitment to strict personal piety, faithfulness in private and corporate devotion,

¹² 1529 is the date of the second Diet of Speyer in which the princes and several free cities 'protested' against an earlier decision under this principle, in its Latin formula *cuius regio, eius religio*. Lutheranism was given legal recognition alongside the Roman Catholic Church in the Peace of Augsburg, 1555.

¹³ Five centuries after their founding, the Waldensian Church wrote to Calvin and asked if they could join his movement. They now form a 'double synod' with the Methodist Church of Italy.

¹⁴ See the entry 'Protestantism' in Nicholas Lossky and others, (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC and Eerdmans, 1991.

¹⁵ See the entry 'Evangelicals' in Lossky, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 393.

and vigorous philanthropic enterprise'.¹⁶ For many Protestants around the world, the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 provided a set of doctrinal tests for confessional orthodoxy, which were later known as the Fundamentals.¹⁷ A doctrine which became characteristic was that of 'penal substitutionary atonement'¹⁸ which other Protestants rejected because the New Testament offers several alternative 'theories' which Christians are also free to choose. Many of the fundamentals have been controversial (biblical inerrancy, creation and evolution) and many have been modified by our time and among those who claim the name Evangelical across the world. An important point to note is that, during the whole period of their development, followers of Calvin or Wesley or the various revivals have differed in their interpretation. There has been a sad history of Christian controversy and division, even between 'evangelicals' and 'ecumenicals'. However, among the many rapidly growing churches in the world are many which use the word 'evangelical' in their title with little or no reference to the 16th century debate which informs historic Protestant churches.

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization has arisen in recent times, re-invigorating the 'Evangelical' stream, and one of the newest and most vigorous of Pontifical Councils of the Roman Catholic Church is that of New Evangelization, created by Pope John Paul II, particularly to reclaim Christian faith in secularised Europe. The word 'evangelization' was used in Vatican II documents¹⁹ to describe the Church's mission of preparing the ground for the Holy Spirit to bring the seeds to harvest; some feel that the word 'evangelize' has come to focus on the human activity.

In our own current debates, we need to avoid the popular confusion between 'evangelism' and 'proselytism'. Both words are used to refer to illegitimate, coercive ways of proclaiming Christ, but there is a clear difference. 'For Christians, it is a privilege and a joy to give an accounting for the hope that is within them, and to do so with gentleness and respect (cf 1 Pet. 3:15)'.²⁰ Proselytism specifically refers to the conversion of people from one religion to another, or from one denomination to another, through compulsion of various kinds, and has left a legacy of division and hurt (hence its nickname 'sheep-stealing'). The now wide use of the variation 'evangelization' reminds us that 'conversion is

¹⁶ Lossky, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 393.

¹⁷ Note the terms in which the foundational resolutions were framed: 'we propose no new creed; but, taking broad, historical, and evangelical catholic ground, we solemnly reaffirm and profess our faith in all the doctrines of the inspired Word of God, and the consensus of doctrines as held by all true Christians from the beginning.' See Proceedings [of the first meeting of the EA in London 1846], Preamble, and the Nine Articles, at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.v.viii.html> accessed 28 August 2014.

¹⁸ This view holds that Jesus by his voluntary sacrifice of himself, was punished (penalised) in the place of sinners (substitution), thus satisfying the demands of justice, so that God can justly forgive our sins. Its particular emphasis is on Christ's death as substitutionary punishment; all such theories arise from the idea that divine forgiveness must satisfy divine justice.

¹⁹ For example, *Ad Gentes (On Missions)*, 1965, para. 6, which also mentions the need to re-evangelise the secular West; it opposed unworthy methods of conversion and commends cooperation between churches at mission.

²⁰ *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World, Recommendations for Conduct*, World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and World Evangelical Alliance, 2011, A Basis for Christian Witness #1. See <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>. One might also note St Paul's contention over evangelical methods with the 'pseudo-apostles', see 2 Cor. 10 and 11 – in short, true evangelism expresses the spirit of Christ in the manner it proclaims him.

ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit'.²¹ These issues point to the care with which we need to claim the title 'evangelical'.

There is no one way of being an 'evangelical', but the whole Church is called to evangelise, a call on which the Uniting Church needs to think and act in fresh ways.

A Reformed Church

The *Basis of Union* makes explicit reference to the 'Reformation Witnesses' as the heading to its paragraph 10 puts it. It points to the teaching 'of the Holy Scriptures in the obedience and freedom of faith, and in the power of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit' in the Reformers, and names several significant documents: the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the Savoy Declaration (1658), as standing for the traditions of the Presbyterian/Reformed and Congregational/Independent streams within the Uniting Church.²² In the Charge at Ordination of Ministers of the Word and Deacons, these witnesses are summarised by these declarations:

You will receive the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as safeguarding and witnessing to the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and use them in worship and instruction.

Learning from the Confessional Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, you will diligently teach Christ's people, reminding them of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the grace which justifies them through faith.

Reformed ecumenism

In 2014, the most recent of dialogue reports between Lutheran and Reformed Churches worldwide, *Communion: On Being the Church*, was published.²³ These two churches represent one of the major divisions within Protestant history, and the writers are aware of the 500th anniversary of the European Reformation (which divided them) in 2017. Here we encounter a familiar theme:

Because of our shared Reformation history, we can affirm that Christian life is life in the church. Our understandings of the church are similar. The sixteenth-century Reformers did not leave the church. We confess with the church of all times and all places that the church

²¹ See *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World, A Basis, #7*, which also cites Jn 16:7–9, Acts 10: 44–47. The Global Christian Forum has launched (2014–15) a worldwide study of 'Discrimination, Mission and Proselytism', representing WCC, Roman Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal leadership.

²² See Michael Owen (ed.), *Witness of Faith, Historic Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1984.

²³ Report of the Lutheran–Reformed Joint Commission between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2006–2012, http://wcr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Communion-On_Being_the_Church.pdf accessed 27/06/14.

is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We believe that Christian discipleship can only be lived in the community of Christ's body. At the same time, we recognize that faithful church life may be lived out in various ways. We recognize the church of Jesus Christ there where the gospel is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered, and have a particular understanding of the church that emphasizes both its indispensability for faithful Christian life and its human frailty (and thus its need for reform—*semper reformanda*).²⁴

Here the faith of the whole Church, with reformed accents, is succinctly summarised, and the Uniting Church affirms them in the same broad context. But in particular, two predecessor uniting churches came from the Reformed tradition, and represent two of the various ways of ordering the church, that is, Presbyterian and Congregational. (Note: a third way, which also exists among Reformed churches, is episcopal. Methodism's form of governance arose *ad hoc* from a society *within* a church.)

The Lutheran-Reformed report also reviews in detail the many creeds and confessions produced in these two traditions, and states 'the above mentioned Lutheran and Reformed confessional writings today exist in dogmatically reconciled, hence legitimate, diversity' (#151). On that basis, they declare 'Lutherans and Reformed are united in confessing the Gospel of Jesus Christ' (#154). This short statement has global ramifications which are then spelled out (#155). This Report stands as a contemporary summary of the churches which developed from the sixteenth century.

The particular heritage which acknowledges the name 'Reformed' includes a strong doctrine of the Church, but not a narrow or exclusive one. By no means is the church a mere sociological option (see the *Basis*, #2-4). It is, however, an organic entity under constant reform, but again, not according to influences external to it. Rather, it is reformed by reference primarily and normatively to the Scriptures (see the *Basis*, #5, 11). It is 'by the Word of God' by which 'its [the Uniting Church's] faith and obedience are nourished and regulated' (#5). This paragraph is built on the previous two, which remind readers of who it is who speaks through Scripture: 'Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist' (#4). In this context, the Reformation tag *Sola scriptura* ('Scripture alone') needs nuancing.²⁵

The paragraph (#11) which welcomes 'the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry' links these directly with 'the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith'. The purpose of this 'contact with contemporary thought' is 'to sharpen [the UCA's] understanding of the will and purpose of God'. It is 'to help it to understand its own nature and mission' under God. The Church's law, which is part of our human responsibility, is also 'subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel' (#17). All these rich possibilities are the gift of God, but serve God's mission

²⁴ See its first paragraph.

²⁵ For a recent discussion of this in the context of John Wesley's use of scripture see Glen O'Brien, John Wesley, the Uniting Church, and the authority of Scripture' in *Pacifica*, 2014, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 170–183.

in and with God's Church. All is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, who 'will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its [the Uniting Church's] life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord' (#18). These are Reformed notes in the Uniting Church's life.

Another characteristic of Reformed language is the 'Confession'. These are documents which clarify and set forth church doctrine in particular circumstances, hence the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* (1934) in the face of the rise of German nationalism, and the more recent *Belhar Confession* (1986) which arose during the controversy and church division over apartheid in South Africa, but has been since adopted by a number of Reformed Churches. Several earlier examples are acknowledged above and in the *Basis of Union*, though the *Basis* itself is not of the same character. The Uniting Church is not a 'confessional church' in this historic sense. Moreover, the confessional documents listed in the *Basis* are not the only source for Uniting Church learning.

The Methodist movement

It has been thought by some that the title 'Reformed' in the Uniting Church refers to the Presbyterian and Congregational streams, and 'Evangelical' to the Methodist. As we have seen, these distinctions do not stand. Both words apply to the past and the present. One source of the occasional use of the word 'movement' to describe the Uniting Church in less institutional terms may well be its Methodist heritage.

Historically, the Methodists were a movement for spiritual growth within the Church of England in the eighteenth century.²⁶ The Church of England was the outcome of political circumstances, but also of Reformed theological influences across Europe in the 16th Century.²⁷ As a world communion, Anglicanism has 'reformed' itself several times since, maintaining both a Puritan evangelical tradition and a 'Catholic' episcopal tradition, expressed significantly in its books of *Common Prayer*. In the same historical 'inadvertency' which the above report traces in the formation of different Reformation traditions, the originally Anglican Methodist movement became, after the death of John Wesley, a separate Church. Inadvertently too, the *Basis of Union's* reference to that fresh church tradition may be judged insufficient some decades later:

In like manner [to the Reformed Confessions] the Uniting Church will listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1793) (#10).

It may be observed that while 'the People called Methodist' emerged in the ministry of John Wesley,

²⁶ It may strike the reader that I am about to write more about Methodism than I have about the Reformed traditions. I will explain that the Wesleyan heritage has undergone a major re-evaluation precisely since the UCA was formed, and we need to review it in the light of our commitment to study our received traditions (Basis #10). Reformed theology, on the other hand, is better known through its distinguished proponents and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and is regularly taught in our theological faculties. Methodism, or more precisely the Wesleyan tradition (of both brothers), is largely not.

²⁷ The Church of Ireland was also part of this, and it retains a stronger legacy of 'evangelical' Christianity to this day.

Methodism as it was known in Australia in 1977 had already changed in significant ways from its origin. That church held to doctrinal standards which included *Wesley's Sermons*,²⁸ which he deliberately published as a theological guide to the burgeoning movement, but also to his *Notes on the New Testament* (1755), a compilation of commentaries provided for his (lay) preachers. He also edited the (sixteenth century Reformed) *Articles of Religion* of the Church of England as a similar guide, reducing them from 39 to 24 for later use in America. He valued the hymns written by his brother Charles as an expression of the meaning of the Gospel, and added a number of his own; as someone has said, the Methodists 'sang their creed'.

So the heritage of Methodism was a very great deal larger than the *Sermons*.²⁹ It did not include any special commitment to its structures, which were appropriate to a tightly-run religious society, dedicated to the promotion of Christian holiness—both personal and social—and indeed national (Wesley's account of the Methodist calling was 'not to form a new sect, but to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land').³⁰ The structures served this one primary end, and it is notable that, while the word 'holy' qualifies several nouns in the *Basis*, it is never used in relation to Christian life.³¹

'Holiness' is perhaps the most important word in the Methodist tradition. In Christian use, it refers to two things: the holiness of God in the sense that God is 'Other', not 'one of us', and the unique subject of glory and praise; the other is a moral sense, of purity, of Christ-enabled 'conquered sin' (Charles Wesley).³² It is the key to the Methodist attitude to evangelisation. In international dialogue with Roman Catholics, the joint report with Methodists said:

Holiness became the decisive mark of the Church in Methodist understanding, enabling Methodists to recognise others as belonging to the universal Church irrespective of their

²⁸ In 1763, Wesley issued the 'Model Deed' to guide decisions about who could preach in Methodist houses; it referred to the 'four volumes of sermons'. At that point, they contained 43 sermons by John and one by Charles, making 44. This set the British tradition which Australian Methodism inherited. Methodists in North America published *Wesley's Works* in the 1770s, adding nine further sermons to serve as a doctrinal norm. The date of 1793 in the *Basis* is after Wesley's death. Curiously, when Dr E. H. Sugden published his widely used annotated edition in 1921, from his study at Queen's College, Melbourne, he used the 53 – but candidates in the 1960s and 70s were using a British edition of the 44. Further, neither all Wesley's best sermons, nor all his characteristic texts appear in the 53. Five appear in Michael Owen's *Witnesses of Faith* (see footnote 14).

²⁹ The international dialogue between Reformed and Methodist world bodies in 1987, *Together in God's Grace*, recognised the *Sermons*, the *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and the *Articles* as the doctrinal bases of Methodism. It added 'In worship, a large part has been played by the Wesleyan hymns which, along with the adaptation of the Book of Common Prayer, have directed and nourished the faith of the people.' (in the section titled 'Tradition and traditions'). http://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1987_meth_warc_together_gods_grace.pdf accessed 28/11/14.

³⁰ In 'Minutes of Several Conversations', ('The Large Minutes', 1763), Q.3, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 8; ed. T. Jackson, Baker, 1978, p. 299.

³¹ 'Holy' is, of course, a credal description of the Church itself, and appears three times referring to that definition. 'Holy' appears in relation to the Trinity once, Communion twice, the Scriptures ten times, and the Spirit thirteen. The word 'holiness' does not appear.

³² Neither Wesley believed the Pelagian doctrine that perfection is possible through our own moral effort. This question is too large to be dealt with here, but see, for instance, William J. Abraham, 'Christian Perfection', in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. W. J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, ch. 34..

particular ecclesial allegiance. Thus the unity of the Church was viewed primarily in terms of unity in holiness and only secondarily in terms of structural relations. Holiness was the sign and criterion of catholicity, and the apostolicity of the Church was constituted by continuity in the apostolic mission to win people for Christ.³³

It is also a mark of the Christian life and is associated with beauty in worship.³⁴

It is a fact that a complete reassessment of the Methodist tradition, theologically and historically, was launched among international scholars just at the time the Uniting Church was forming. In 1975 began a completely revised and critical edition of John Wesley's works, both published and in manuscript (sermons; journals, including decoded private ones; letters; tracts), the fruit of a new generation of Methodist scholars, chiefly in the UK and the USA.³⁵ Apart from these primary materials, there is a vast library of individual studies by particular scholars. Then, add new studies of Charles Wesley, now revealed as a theologian distinct from his brother,³⁶ and of many of the first generation of Methodists—and beyond. It was too early for this re-orientation of Methodist studies to have made an impact on the about-to-be-born Uniting Church, and in the event, it made little or no impact in subsequent decades when world Methodism was reaping the benefits.³⁷ The memory of Methodism in Australia was thus a shadow of both its original mission and its contemporary rediscovery. If the Uniting Church is to respect this heritage—if it is true that current theology from Reformed sources is better known—then we need to invite candidates and theological colleges to pay attention to this lacuna in the witness from which we draw inspiration. It should also be understood that on this part of our tradition is the basis for theological dialogue with a renewed Anglican tradition, a conversation illuminated by understanding how episcopacy functions in various parts of world Methodism.³⁸ Holiness has also been a central—and connecting—focus in three reports of global Catholic–Methodist theological dialogue.³⁹

³³ *The Grace Given You in Christ, Catholics and Methodists reflect further on the Church*, the report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, Seoul, Korea, 2006, #17.

³⁴ Psalm 29:2 and 96:9 and the ubiquitous call to sanctification in the New Testament. I Chronicles 16, 'Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness'.

³⁵ Oxford University Press published the initial volumes, but the 'Bicentennial Edition' is now in the hands of Abingdon Press, Nashville TN. Twenty-seven volumes have been published, and seven more in preparation. Of the new wave of studies, see e.g. those by Frank Baker (1970ff), Ole Borgon (1972), Ted A. Campbell (1984ff), Richard Heitzenrater, (1989ff), David Hempton (2005), Randy Maddox (1990ff), John Newton (2002), Albert Outler, Henry Rack (2002), Gordon Rupp (1986), Martin Schmidt (1963, 1973), Karen Westerfield Tucker (2001), John Wigger (2012) and Gordan Hammond (2014), to name only the Methodists.

³⁶ A fresh study of his eucharistic hymns would be fruitful both in theological and spiritual terms.

³⁷ Australia's own Colin Williams made a continuing theological impact in his ground-breaking *John Wesley's Theology Today*, Nashville: Abingdon 1960.

³⁸ See the report of the Anglican–Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission ('AMICUM'), *Into All The World*, 2014.

³⁹ The report quoted above, *The Grace Given You in Christ, Catholics and Methodists reflect further on the Church*, the report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council, 2006 (Seoul, Korea); *Synthesis, Together in Holiness, 40 years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue*, (Durban, South Africa, 2011), and the current round of dialogue. See also Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits, Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London: Continuum, 2009, *passim*.

What then are some of the other notes of Methodism? One of the older contentions between Methodism and Reformed theology, namely over God's sovereignty in grace in the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination and Wesley's 'Evangelical Arminianism' doctrine of free grace, is sufficiently resolved in international dialogue.⁴⁰ The discussion may be reviewed there.⁴¹ The report shows that both traditions can use language characteristic of Wesley, of God's grace as prevenient, as justifying, as sanctifying, as sustaining, and as glorifying.⁴²

Methodists from the period before union were fond of quoting a number of tags from John Wesley, all of which were taken partly out of context, but which may still serve to summarise some key marks of Methodism. For instance, *My heart was strangely warmed* is part of Wesley's account of his 'evangelical conversion' at a meeting on 24 May 1738 in Aldersgate Street in London. Many now believe that the more appropriate description in our time is a word Wesley used on the same page, 'assurance', as more fitting to one who was a devout and articulate Christian from childhood. The 'strangely warmed' reference has led to an assumption that Methodist gives special attention to emotions, but within a paragraph, he records his struggle with coldness of heart, or lack of joy, and explicitly concludes that 'transports of joy' are sometimes given by God, and sometimes withheld. He was very disturbed by such 'transports' when they were exhibited at Methodist meetings!⁴³ Wesley gave a significant place to 'reason' in his articulation of Christian faith and experience. This is not to deny that warmth is frequently part of Methodist experience.⁴⁴

It is also true that Wesley once claimed *the world is my parish*. But he was defending his right to preach beyond parish and diocesan boundaries, as defined by the State Church, on the grounds that an Oxford don was free to preach wherever invited. And this is not to deny that Wesley's theology led him to recognise no boundaries to his and his followers' preaching the gospel.

⁴⁰ The latter arises from a Wesleyan and Methodist 'optimism of grace', based on God's desire that all people may be saved, and that Christ died for all humankind. Methodist scholar Ted A. Campbell writes, '...the historic Methodist teaching insisted on an optimism of divine grace (not of human effort)' which means that all human beings have the possibility of following God's will as a result of grace. The good that human beings do are signs of God's grace working in them, and that human beings may respond to this grace. The Dutch Protestant Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) held such a view, along with the broad Eastern Orthodox tradition and, among Catholics, the Jesuits – hence 'Arminianism'; 'Evangelical' because it opened the way for universal preaching of the Gospel. See Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, 55–56. Calvin writes about 'eternal election' in Book 3 of the *Institutes*; recent important studies have come from Barth and Pannenberg.

⁴² A similar consensus was the result of the initial dialogue between Methodists and Lutherans in 1977–1984 and its report *The Church: Community of Grace*. This has led to the World Methodist Church co-signing the significant Joint Document on the Doctrine of Justification of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation (1999) in 2006, and ecumenical work on the scriptural basis of the doctrine, to which Reformed scholars also contributed; see *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification, An Ecumenical Follow-Up to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* [by a task force of biblical scholars...], Geneva, July 2011. Further, in Europe, the Methodist Churches are now part of the Leuenberg Agreement which brings together Lutheran and Reformed Churches since 2003 in the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

⁴³ It might be noted that there is a trajectory from this experience and some of Wesley's theology to modern Pentecostalism.

⁴⁴ Behind the exaggeration of Wesley's 'Aldersgate experience' lie the twin influences, especially in the nineteenth century, of the rise of Anglo-Catholicism after the Oxford Movement, and the popularity of revivalism.

Wesley may be found to advise the Methodists to *sing* [hymns] *lustily*, but the next two points of his advice begin ‘sing modestly’ and ‘above all sing spiritually’. In providing, after the example of the Congregationalist Isaac Watts, such a wealth of the innovation of hymns to be sung in church, both Wesleys were concerned that the singers pay attention to the words and their meaning, and internalise them as part of their growth in Christian understanding. Methodist hymns were not intended to be sung ‘to lift the roof’—though there are occasions when they may, and should.

Put positively, the Methodist tradition insists on a response to grace by the whole human being: heart and soul, mind and body. The whole of life was to be directed in becoming holy as Jesus urged (Matthew 5:48), using an expression open to misunderstanding, *Christian perfection*. This was not gained by human effort, but by openness to the Spirit working within an obedient soul, until all lesser loves were set aside by the love of God.⁴⁵ This spiritual journey was supported by the small groups which were part of the Methodist society, ‘classes’ and ‘bands’, a network of (largely lay) spiritual direction. Under this lies a strong doctrine of the church, of community. Wesley retained a primary commitment to the reclaiming of ‘primitive Christianity’ (i.e., following the teaching and pattern of the earliest Church) throughout his life.⁴⁶

Another of its core doctrines, *Christian assurance*, builds on St Paul’s ‘the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God’ (Rom 8:16), so we may know it. Regular witness to this is offered by ‘the means of grace’, which include the reading and study of the Scriptures, regular (for Wesley, at least weekly) Holy Communion, regular prayer, regular fasting, as well as, from in his student days, the visiting of prisons, the provision of schooling for ‘ragged children’ (street kids), and the free availability of medicines for the poor, because of their concern for bodily health. Fighting against social ills by public advocacy (e.g., against smuggling, the gin traffic, and slavery) was also an essential outcome of Methodist pursuit of holiness of life; for them, holiness was not only for their own personal sanctification.

The recent re-examinations of the Wesleys illuminate the way in which Methodism grew during John Wesley’s life, and how it developed into a church in its own right (and in local forms: ‘connexional’ in Britain and episcopal in the USA),⁴⁷ dispelling many myths on the way. One could claim that its time has come in an era when the churches seem out of touch with what is happening in western society and culture and many are calling for a renewed evangelisation and a renewed Christian spirituality. We may need to examine even our recently received ways of being Church. A recent international dialogue

⁴⁵ The doctrine is linked with the Orthodox understanding of theosis, which might be defined as ‘God became one of us in Christ, so that we, in Christ, might become one with God’.

⁴⁶ Geordan Hammond’s *John Wesley in America, Restoring Primitive Christianity*, (Oxford 2014) provides a major new study of this theme in Wesley’s earliest ministry in Savannah, Georgia.

⁴⁷ The idea of ‘Connexion’ arose from the link of his Methodist societies with John Wesley himself, who exercised personal episcopate over them. After his death, the Conference’s strong central organization exercised that role as a ‘corporate episcopate’. In the USA, the independent Methodist churches after 1784 organised themselves under an episcopal system and follow a modified form of ‘connectionalism’ through its bishops. This is by contrast with Congregationalism, where authority resides in the local congregation.

report again places the question of a renewed episcopate on the Uniting Church's agenda.⁴⁸

Historic witnesses for the future

The tenth paragraph in the *Basis* which has been a major concern in this essay, commits its ministers to study all of these historic sources, and itself witnesses to an even more ancient foundation:

so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture (#10).

This summary again may be read as narrowly Reformed, but rather it points above all to the Christ to whom the Scriptures bear witness through all history until today. Paragraph 10 must be taken in the context of the whole *Basis*: it acknowledges the particular traditions out of which the Uniting Church grew, its sixteenth- and eighteenth-century background. Throughout, however, its accent is on the Church catholic, a church beyond historically-derived divisions, denominations and disputes, a church which looks to its end in Christ. In this light we should understand names like 'Protestant', 'Reformed', and 'Evangelical' as relativised by reference to the *Una Sancta*.

In fact, for the Uniting Church, all twenty centuries of Christian history, not to forget the sacred stories of Israel, are open to it from which to learn, not simply two particular centuries in Europe. It has claimed its obedience in the geographical regions in which it finds itself in the twenty-first century. It has claimed its place in the universal Church, ready to stand on that apostolic foundation, open to such reform as fits servants of the *missio Dei* (God's mission) in our own time and for such future as it can see. It is a 'post-denominational' church in that perspective, but it has not ceased to be a true church, with the structures and disciplines that demands. The Uniting Church has the freedom to change, or rather, to re-order its life, by sole reference to the eternal gospel. Where will such a commitment, eloquently set forth in the *Basis of Union*, lead it? How do we recognise the faithfulness of other churches, other systems, other understandings and practices of ministry, and other theological insights? This is the heart of the ecumenical question of reception. How might the Uniting Church respond to the question of 'receptive ecumenism',⁴⁹ that is, no longer asking what partner churches need to change in order to be acceptable, but asking what gifts in a partner church, which we may have lost along the way, might be received by us now? What is the Spirit saying to the churches?

⁴⁸ *Into All the World*, a report to the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Methodist Council by the Anglican–Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission (AMICUM) 2014. In 2015 this will be available both online and in hard copy.

⁴⁹ A helpful overview of this notion may be read in Fr Gerard Kelly's address to the National Council of Churches in Australia, at http://www.ncca.org.au/files/Forum/7th/Documents/Ecumenical_Address.pdf



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