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Engaging the Basis: An Overview

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The Uniting Church's Basis of Union has been variously described as a 'charter', 'manifesto', 'marching orders', 'marriage contract', 'launching pad', 'agreement' or 'legal covenant'. Some Presbyterian opponents to church union described it in less flattering terms as a 'blank cheque' or a 'dead cat', expecting it to fulfill a role more like the Scots Confession of Faith (1560) or the Westminster Confession (1647). The Basis of Union, however, is not a confession of faith, although it does have confessional standing because it is binding on the Church and its ministers. It is not a constitution setting down rules and regulations, but it does contain some material outlining the government of the Uniting Church which does have constitutional implications. Thus, the Basis serves two broad purposes. It is first of all the foundational or legal document upon which the Methodist Church of Australasia, the Congregational Church of Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia agreed to unite in 1977; secondly, it is a reforming 'stimulus' or 'manifesto' that continues to shape the present life and character of the Uniting Church.

The Basis does not seek to articulate distinctive Uniting Church doctrines and is generally cautious about doing so. Instead, it stresses many of the doctrines that were central to Luther, Calvin and the Protestant reformers. Indeed, the Basis has been described by the Reformation historian, George Yule, as 'A Creed for a Reforming Church'. It stresses the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the unique and essential regulating role of the Scriptures, the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, justification by grace through faith, and the ministry of all the members of the church. Throughout its pages the fingerprints of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Davis McCaughhey, Lesslie Newbigin and other twentieth-century Protestant theologians and New Testament scholars are clearly discernable.

It is in church polity or government, rather than doctrine, where the Basis of Union enshrines distinctive Uniting Church principles. Three important examples may suffice. Firstly, the Basis of Union is unequivocal in its recognition of women's gifts 'in all aspects of the life of the Uniting Church'. It clearly states that the Uniting Church will make provision for women to exercise those gifts, including those traditionally

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1 Ron Clark and Samuel McCafferty, Here We Stand: A positive viewpoint against the Proposed Basis of Union of the Congregational Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia, Brisbane, Study No. 2, [1971], p. 6.
associated with the ordained ministry (Paras 13, 14 and 15). Secondly, the Basis of Union encourages openness to contemporary thought, not only in theology and biblical studies but also to new insights in the sciences, technology, history, anthropology and literature. Finally, and most importantly, the Basis is committed to conciliarity—government by a series of five interrelated councils, each with 'its own tasks and responsibilities' and each expected to 'recognise the limits of its own authority and give heed to other councils'. The five councils are congregation, elders' or leaders' meeting (now called church council), presbytery (district council), synod (regional council), and Assembly (national council). These councils are not ordered in a hierarchical fashion. The Assembly, for example, is expected to consult on major issues with other councils. Twenty years after church union, McCaughey confessed that the framers of the Basis of Union:

may have overlooked the possibility that the governance of the Church by inter-related councils, and the place of the congregation and the participation of all the people in the worship of God would be misunderstood as an ecclesiastical expression of populist democracy. Put those together, the subjectivity or the exaltation of experience over the obedience which is of faith and the false egalitarianism which has little respect for (or belief in) authority—the authority of scripture and tradition, the authority of a reasoned faith over an emotional impulse—and you have a serious threat to the well-being of the Church.  

The Assembly's tenth president, Dean Drayton, on the other hand, was so convinced that the 'uniqueness' of the Uniting Church's identity was embedded in the notion of interrelated councils that he made it a distinguishing mark of his presidency.

The Basis of Union has attracted considerable scholarly interest. From the mid-1960s to the present day there have been numerous studies, commentaries, monographs, academic theses and journal articles devoted to all or part of it. Broadly, these studies may be grouped into five categories. The first group includes those studies that were produced prior to church union. They are essentially apologetical (or anti-apologetical) in nature; they usually align themselves with a position 'for' or 'against' church union. There are two subgroups of publications in this category: the first relates to the Joint Commission on Church Union's report, The Church—Its Nature, Function and Ordering and the proposed Basis of Union published with it in 1963, and the second relates to the 1970/71 Basis of Union. Those studies critical of the Commission's report and proposed Basis of Union concentrated mainly on the proposal to introduce bishops into the new Uniting Church. An anonymous (Presbyterian) booklet titled The Other Side (1964) described the introduction of bishops as '[t]he most disturbing feature of the proposed Basis of

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1 See 'Introduction to Why Does the Uniting Church Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?' in Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson, Sydney, Uniting Church Press, 2008, pp. 559-561.
Union' encourages new insights in this context, the Basis of Union, with its own authority and give heed to (all councils). These are not the councils, but the worship of the Church. Put those of faith—the authority of the impulse—and convince that the Councils of Union 60s to the present day. The first group, theologically apologetic (or against) church union. The Commission on the proposed Basis of Union made studies critical of the proposal to introduce the The Other Side of the proposed Basis of Union. The other side, p. 31.


11 The Other Side, p. 22.


15 The Methodist Church produced a Methodist Handbook on Church Union to assist its members to better understand the proposed Basis of Union and the report(s) that accompanied the proposal. Methodists prided themselves on being 'plain men'—an ecumenically-minded, 'missionary people' Their concerns were less theological than those of the Presbyterians though they, too, balked at the introduction of bishops into the Uniting Church at the time of union. The fears of Methodists
were more focussed on alcohol (mentioned nowhere in the proposed Basis of Union) and the manner in which ministers might be appointed; Methodists were inclined to think that their peculiar system which guaranteed every church a minister and every minister a place of service was the most sensible of all systems, and perhaps the most godly as well.  

The second sub-group related to the 1970/71 Basis of Union proper. Its publication produced a new generation of pamphleteers in an attempt to persuade members of the three churches to vote for or against church union. Again members of the Presbyterian Church were the most antagonistic. For example, Ron Clark and Samuel McCafferty's Here We Stand: A positive viewpoint against the Proposed Basis of Union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia strongly opposed the Basis of Union. They listed eight weaknesses in the Basis of Union: (i) an unsatisfactory doctrine of scripture, (ii) lack of emphasis on Christ’s work, (iii) universalism, (iv) weakened evangelism, (v) modern theological influence, (vi) irresponsible baptism, (vii) ineffective government, (viii) and councils replacing biblical authority. There was a strong appeal to Presbyterian traditions and not a little scare-mongering from Ron Clarke, minister at Cooroora in Brisbane: 'Indeed, I believe that if the Basis of Union is accepted, the Church, cutting itself off from the rule of Scripture as the Word of God, will go into an abyss of degeneration … If we walk across the bridge outlined in the Basis of Union, we will no longer be Presbyterian christians, but christians within a new denomination termed the Uniting Church of [sic] Australia. I would suggest that this is a very shaky bridge on which to set foot.'

Most booklets in favour of church union came from Methodist scholars. Norman Young, Professor of Theology at the Theological Hall in Melbourne, produced Introducing the Basis of Union, a simple document answering questions about church union that might be asked by Methodists. Young was quick to point out that the Basis of Union focussed on 'the mission of the church' and described it as a 'charter under which we agree to go on mission together.' He also explained to readers how the 1971 Basis of Union was different from the proposed Basis of 1963 and the way the Methodist Church would vote on church union. Ian Gillman and D’Arcy Wood’s, Towards An Informed Decision on The Basis of Union presented the Basis of Union as ‘essentially and evangelical document’: 'The Basis calls the Uniting Church to its essential task—evangelism'. They also explained how the ‘revised Basis’ would have a ‘continuing role’ after union took place by ‘point[ing] the Uniting Church to the sources of its faith and … remind[ing] it of the need for constant renewal under the word of God.” The new Basis, being shorter in length and more concise, was not only different in style, its content was significantly different. Gillman and Wood listed nine major revisions: (i) the proposal for bishops-in-presbytery was omitted; (ii) the proposal for deacons was left open instead of being ‘written in’ as part of the new

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19 Clark and McCafferty, Here We Stand., pp. 2-4.
20 Clark and McCafferty, Here We Stand, pp. 5, 6.
22 Young, Introducing The Basis of Union, pp. 7-11
Church; (iii) the Concordat with the Church of South India was omitted although the Uniting Church was still committed to seeking stronger relationships with Christians in Asia and the Pacific; (iv) the call to service was made clearer with every member of the Church responsibly exercising his or her gifts from God; (v) the name ‘minister’ replaced the name ‘presbytery’; (vi) the explanation of confirmation was omitted; (vii) the sequence of Church councils were reversed so that it went from ‘bottom to top’ (i.e. from local to national), instead of ‘top to bottom’; (viii) The local council was given important tasks; and (ix) the note of continuing renewal of faith and life was emphasised.  

The second group of studies on the Basis of Union was pedagogical in nature. By 1975 as voting on church union was drawing to a close, educational pamphlets on the new Uniting Church were beginning to replace the earlier apologetical literature. Donald Marks and David Merritt produced Forward Together: Ways and Means to Prepare for the Uniting Church in Australia and, not long after, Merritt, himself, published the immensely popular little pamphlet Understanding the Uniting Church in Australia; both of these drew heavily on the Basis of Union, indeed the main thrust of the latter work was to argue that ‘the key to the Uniting Church’s understanding of the faith and mission of the church’ was set out in the Basis of Union. The Basis of Union, according to Merritt, was not only the ‘platform’ on which the three denominations had united to form the Uniting Church in Australia, it also contained the ‘central affirmation of the Christian faith’ and, as such, was a ‘guide’ to what was central to the life of the Uniting Church. David Merritt and Ian Tanner edited a longer work called, What Does Our Church Say? Questions Uniting Church People Are Asking. Although this book is more like a catechism than a study guide or commentary, the answers to its twenty-eight questions drew heavily on the Basis of Union.

Will our church have faith? Issues for The Uniting Church as a Community of Faith was another study booklet based on the Basis of Union. It was produced in 1979 by the staff of the Board of Education in the Synod of New South Wales. In the Introduction to these studies, John Mavor argued that the Uniting Church was already developing distinctive characteristics that had been shaped by the vision spelt out in the Basis of Union. Some of the aspects he highlighted were—an Australianness; the use of a consultative model of decision making; the development of a system of inter-related Councils; and a commitment to evangelism, mission and caring for people.

Undoubtedly, the two most important books produced on the Basis of Union in the 1980s were the commentaries by Davis McCaughey and D’Arcy Wood. McCaughey was a member of the Joint Commission on Church Union and had a intimate knowledge of the story behind the drafting of the Basis. His Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia was written during his
time as First President of the Uniting Church and published in 1980. For McCaughy, the Basis of Union was intended as a call to renewal and a spur to mission.\textsuperscript{30} D'Arcy Wood's \textit{Building On A Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia} was published in 1986. Like McCaughy, he, too, emphasised that the Basis of Union was a 'launching pad', and 'a point of departure, not a point of arrival'.\textsuperscript{31} 'The Basis is ... not a retarding agent, designed to slow down new theological thinking.'\textsuperscript{32} Belonging also to this pedagogical group was Don Whebell and Duncan Harrison's study book, \textit{A hitchhiker's trip through the Basis of Union: Small group studies to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia}.\textsuperscript{33} The motive behind this series of studies was a concern to correct the notion held by some in the Uniting Church that the Basis of Union 'was of historical interest only and had no real role in the ongoing life and development of the church'.\textsuperscript{34}

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Don Whebell and Duncan Harrison's concerns were realised when it looked as though the Church's Constitution might trump the authority of the Basis of Union. At that time a third category of works on the Basis of Union emerged. They are mostly collections of essays with a judicial intention, enshrining the authority of the Basis of Union in the continuing life of the Uniting Church. Max Champion, editor of \textit{Forward Together: On What Basis? Essays on the Basis of Union in the Uniting Church}\textsuperscript{35} provides the background to the flurry of essays written during this period. Champion explains in the introduction to \textit{Forward Together} the circumstances that brought the matter to a head: Gordon Watson, a theologian from Trinity College in Brisbane, had requested a ruling that constitutional amendments relating to the question of ordination were invalid because they did not conform to the Basis of Union and the then president of the Assembly, D'Arcy Wood, ruled that was 'lawful for the Assembly from time to time 'notwithstanding anything ... in the Basis of Union ... to determine, declare or interpret matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline in the Uniting Church'' (Presidential Ruling No. 13, Part 4).\textsuperscript{36} All five contributors to \textit{Forward Together} (Max Champion, Davis McCaughy, Norman Young, Gordon Watson and George Yule) convey a passionate commitment to the Basis of Union as a confessional-like statement that must continue to have authority in the life of the Uniting Church.\textsuperscript{37} Considering the high regard in which the Basis of Union was and is regarded, it is difficult nowadays to appreciate the extent to which the Church found itself caught up in a conflict between those who framed the Basis of Union and those who worked on the Church's Constitution. When the editors of \textit{Marking Twenty Years} wrote to Davis McCaughy asking him to speak on the topic 'If I Had Known Then What I Know Now' at the twentieth anniversary of the Uniting Church, he

\textsuperscript{30} J Davis McCaughy, \textit{Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia}. Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1980, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{32} Wood, \textit{Building On A Solid Basis}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{33} Don Whebell and Duncan Harrison, \textit{A hitchhiker's trip through the Basis of Union: Small group studies to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia}. Brisbane, Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church, (1997), p. 1.
\textsuperscript{34} Whebell and Harrison, A hitchhiker's trip through the Basis of Union, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{36} Champion, \textit{Forward Together}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{37} Champion, \textit{Forward Together}, pp. 1–2.
wrote: 'I do not think that we could have expected to foresee the extraordinary confusion into which the church has thrown itself over the status of the Basis of Union.'

Michael Owen's Back to Basics: Studies on the Basis of Union provides some insight into the story behind the conflict by referring to personal discussions that he had with Harold Julian, a lawyer on the Joint Constitution Commission, who held the view that the Basis of Union was not, in fact, going to have any continuing constitutional significance in the church after union. For Owen and the contributors of Forward Together the alarm bells began to ring at that point. They were convinced that the attitude taken by Julian in the name of the Joint Constitution Commission was contrary to the intention of the three churches that entered into union and that the Basis of Union was 'fundamental to, and constitutive of' the Uniting Church and must have an unambiguous place in its life. Max Champion's assessment of the situation was typical of the prevailing view:

It defies belief that anyone in the Uniting Church would think, or want to think, that the authority of the Basis ended at the time of Inauguration on 22 June 1977. The fact that this is a strongly held view, and that nothing has yet been done to rectify the situation, is a matter of grave concern. It is hoped that a future Assembly will make good the deficiency.

The Eighth Assembly (1997) introduced reforms to rectify the situation following consideration of the discussion paper, The Status, Authority and Role of the Basis of Union within the Uniting Church in Australia. The Assembly amended the Constitution by adding a new clause affirming that the Uniting Church 'lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union.' Changes were also made to the ordination vows and to the questions in various commissioning services. Walter and Katherine Abetz's broad-ranging collection of short essays, Swimming between the Flags published in 2002 represented the triumph of the Basis of Union's position over the Constitution. After the 1997 Assembly the Constitution was changed so that it stated that the Uniting Church was 'guided' by the Basis of Union, meaning at the very least, in the eyes of James Haire who wrote the foreword to Swimming between the Flags, that the Uniting Church may not act, in any way which is overtly opposed to the contents of its Basis of Union. The thirty essays in Swimming between the Flags pointed to an increasing desire within the Church to shape the Basis of Union 'into one of the great confessions of faith of our times'.


Champion, Forward Together, p. 2.

For a fuller discussion of this matter, see Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson, Sydney, Uniting Church Press, 2008, p. 180.


Abetz, Swimming Between the Flags, p. viii, on the confessional nature of the Uniting Church, see James Haire, 'Confessional Theological Struggles in the Uniting Church, 1997/2003', Uniting Church Studies, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2009, pp. 1–19.
In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a fourth grouping of studies on the *Basis of Union* began to emerge. These were of an *analytical* nature, probing the content and context of the *Basis* for new meanings. Andrew Dutney’s *Manifesto for Renewal* published earlier in 1986 had already paved the way. In this book Dutney explicitly stated that his purpose was to help the reader ‘learn how to read the compass our parents made, their Basis of Union, so that we can take our bearings and move towards the promised end.’ Later in 2001 Dutney wrote the study book *Where did the joy come from? Revisiting the Basis of Union* which sought to uncover for the general reader the joy and the excitement of the early days of the Uniting Church in Australia. The writings of a new generation of theologians and biblical scholars belong to this category. I have already mentioned earlier the studies by Peter Walker which trace the theological influences on the *Basis of Union*. Vicky Balabanski scrutinizes the ‘biblical fabric’ of the all-important, Christological Paragraph 3 of the *Basis of Union* in this issue in a similar vein.

Finally, there is a group of writings on the *Basis of Union* that is only just beginning to emerge. These are essentially *constructive*, in the sense of constructing theological building blocks. Several of the papers given at the ‘Engaging the Basis’ Conference held in Melbourne in 2010 were of this nature. In the December 2010 issue of *Uniting Church Studies* we published two of these: Alexander Jensen’s ‘Learning from Secularism’ and Christian Mostert’s ‘Christology in the Uniting Church in Australia’. In this issue there are three articles that find their inspiration in the *Basis of Union*: Stephen Burns (and Graham Hughes before him) dealing with ordination, Geoff Thompson (in debate with Val Webb) on relativism and Ben Myers on Christian mission. Each of these articles are testimony to the enduring relevance of the *Basis of Union* and its capacity to inspire cutting-edge theology in the twenty-first century.

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