

# Uniting Church in Australia

*The Assembly Standing Committee resolved in November 2010 to issue this discussion paper to all Presbyteries, requesting responses by 31 August 2011. Presbyteries are invited to respond using the attached Response Form.*

## **DISCUSSION PAPER ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

November, 2010

### **The Question of Church Membership**

1. This paper seeks to deal with the related questions of church membership, baptism and confirmation.
2. The Assembly's consideration about church membership dates back to 1998. Two main factors are driving the Assembly's consideration:
  - Australian society has changed dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s. The church is no longer the centre of the local community. Far fewer Australians live their whole lifetime in one locality. Loyalty to and participation in longstanding institutions such as churches, trades unions and political parties have significantly diminished. For younger Christians, denominational affiliation counts for little. So the notion of lifetime membership of one congregation or even of one Christian denomination is passing. The church's concept of membership needs to be responsive to these changes.
  - The Assembly's work in the 1990s on baptism and the catechumenate brought a recognition that our definitions, categories and procedures relating to church membership are complex. Currently we recognise baptised members, confirmed members, members-in-association, plus adherents. The church requires the keeping of baptism registers and rolls for all three categories of membership and for adherents, plus an annual review of all rolls, certificates of transfer, and even lists of absent members. (See Regulations chapter 1.)

Following a process of national consultation that brought 280 responses in 2002, the Assembly agency Theology and Discipleship reported to the 2003 Assembly that "there is good support for the notion that those who are members of the church are those who are baptised and actually participating in the Congregation's worship, witness and service, rather than those who were once confirmed (and may no longer participate, but still claim the right to be involved in decision-making)."

3. Baptism is rightly emphasised as the sacrament that initiates people into the Christian life and the church. Yet baptism, particularly infant baptism, has not been seen by many as necessarily leading to a life of discipleship.
4. Confirmation can be traced back to a ceremony concluding baptism in the early church. Later it became separated from baptism and came to be regarded as one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. It was retained in Protestant churches as an affirmation of one's baptism and acceptance of adult responsibility in the life of the congregation. In recent times young people appear to be less interested in becoming confirmed because it is seen primarily as joining the institution of the church. See Appendix 2 for further material on the history and practice of confirmation.
5. Baptism is the sacrament for identifying with Jesus Christ and being incorporated into his body the church. This opens up possibilities for confirmation to be conducted in different ways. Rather than it being understood as a separate rite, confirmation could become more closely connected with baptism and discipleship.
6. The Basis of Union encourages such new developments. Paragraph 12 provides: "The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptised may have confirmed to them the promises of God, and be led to deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptised. To this end the Uniting Church commits itself to undertake, with other Christians, to explore and develop the relation of baptism to confirmation" (Basis of Union para 12).

7. How then can confirmation be freshly practised and understood so that it is linked to discipleship and responsible membership of the community of faith?
8. Many congregations find they have confirmed members who rarely participate in the life of the congregation yet retain their voting rights according to the Regulations. They can even appeal if their names are taken off the membership roll (Regulation 7.2.4). On the other hand, others come to participate in the life of the congregation and may be regarded as faithful members, but have not formally become confirmed members or members-in-association or have not transferred their membership from another congregation. Strictly speaking these active participants currently cannot vote in meetings of the congregation. Adherents may attend and speak at meetings of the congregation but also cannot vote. They can be appointed as members of committees, but are not members of the congregation (Regulation 1.1.23).

## **What is the Assembly proposing?**

9. The Assembly proposes moving to a new understanding of confirmed membership. It will be characterised by active discipleship and involvement in the life of a congregation rather than by a single Service of Confirmation which grants lifelong, confirmed membership of the Uniting Church. Confirmed membership will involve a regular and repeatable (normally yearly) recommitment to the Christian faith and to the congregation. This commitment may be recognised by the Church Council in a variety of ways, but primarily through participation in a form of congregational worship that reaffirms baptism and calls for people to promise to serve Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord as part of the body of Christ, the church. Not only the service called *The Sacrament of Baptism and the Reaffirmation of Baptism Called Confirmation* but also the other reaffirmation of baptism services, namely *A Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism* and *A Personal Reaffirmation of Baptism*, and *The Covenant Service* may be used in this way if people are given appropriate notice and preparation. A covenant statement or statement of commitment could be incorporated into an ordinary Service of Worship. See Appendix 1 for a draft statement for such use, and see Appendix 3 for further material on the understanding of the congregation as a covenant community.
10. It is proposed that the current membership categories also be simplified. A record of baptisms conducted at or through the local church is important. There should also be a roll of confirmed members - that is, a current list of those who, having been baptised, and by their participation in a commitment service or by a personal statement of commitment, have been included by the Church Council in the roll of confirmed members for the following twelve months or other agreed period of time. A pastoral list should also be maintained. This list would comprise people associated with the congregation who are not confirmed members, including those previously known as adherents. Members-in-association is an unnecessary category. They can simply become recognised as confirmed members. They are not required to give up their membership elsewhere.
11. These proposed changes will mean that those able to participate in the decision-making life of the congregation will be active (confirmed) baptised people. Adherents should be encouraged to become baptised and to participate in the commitment service of the congregation if they wish to participate fully in the life of the congregation. The emphasis should be on baptism and discipleship - understood as following Jesus and actively participating in the life of the local community of faith, not simply gaining voting rights or joining an institution.
12. Explanations would need to be provided leading up to the commitment service of the congregation. Both individual participants and the congregation as a whole would need to be appropriately prepared. In order to become recognised as confirmed members, people would need to indicate ahead of the service that they desire to do so. Church Councils then need to look at the names and be satisfied of the person's suitability as a confirmed member (see Regulation 1.1.7). If a pastoral issue arises from the request to be recognised as a confirmed member, then Church Council would need to address the issue before the commitment service.
13. Discipleship training courses should be offered as part of the congregation's preparation for a commitment service. Such a course would encourage participants to continue growing in faith, understanding and service as baptised members of the church. It would emphasise that discipleship involves lifelong learning and growth in faith. It should help participants understand and employ a range of core Christian practices, giving particular attention to the two sacraments and their use as a means of grace, and foster an understanding of the Uniting Church. Each

congregation should be explicit about its particular grasp of the vision, values and mission of the church so that the discipleship training course can make clear what active membership means in this congregation.

## Questions and Answers

14. *Is baptism necessary for those who want to follow Jesus Christ and participate in the life of the congregation?*

People can be followers of Jesus and share in the life of the congregation without being baptised. But a person cannot become a confirmed member of the Uniting Church without being baptised. Baptism is the recognized means of grace by which people are initiated into the life of faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian community (see Basis of Union para 12). Preparing for baptism can be an opportunity to learn more about the Christian faith and is a powerful symbol of God's grace and our response. So, whether it is for infants or adults, baptism should be taken seriously by both those involved and the church.

15. *How does a person become a confirmed member of a Uniting Church congregation?*

There are three ways:

- By being baptised on profession of the Christian faith and being actively involved in the life of the congregation.
- By being baptised as an infant or child, personally professing the Christian faith in confirmation and being actively involved in the life of the congregation.
- Having been baptised as an infant, child or adult, having moved from another Uniting Church congregation or from a congregation of a Christian denomination recognised by the Uniting Church, and being actively involved in the life of the congregation.

In each case it is the Church Council that formally recognises a person as a confirmed member of the congregation for the next 12 months or other agreed period. And in each case the person participates in the annual commitment service or, if unable to be present, signs the annual covenant or commitment statement.

16. *Is confirmation just about voting rights?*

Confirmation is much more than simply obtaining voting rights in the church. While it should not be regarded like another sacrament, it is an opportunity to reaffirm baptism and growth in discipleship including the importance of actively participating in the life of the congregation.

17. *Is there still a place for confirmation classes?*

Yes, although referring to them as discipleship training courses is preferable. All those considering becoming confirmed members of the church for the first time should participate in a discipleship training course. The annual commitment service can include the sacrament of baptism for those not previously baptised as infants or children and a confirmation service for those previously baptised. Note that participation in a discipleship training course is not a one-off experience but is expected to be a regular part of growing in faith and discipleship.

18. *Why an annual commitment service?*

Most congregations and people function on an annual basis. This would enable congregations to consciously include newer people, plan discipleship training courses, invite people to renew their commitment to Jesus Christ and the church, and be more intentional about their record-keeping. However, an annual service may not be warranted in every congregation. The Church Council will determine the period of time between the special commitment services, with 12 months regarded as the norm.

19. *When would the commitment service be held?*

It would be up to congregations to decide the best time of the year to do this: possibilities include early in the calendar year in February, following Easter, at Pentecost, around the time of the anniversary of the Uniting Church in June, or near the beginning of the Christian year in November.

20. *What if people are unable to attend the commitment service?*

People can be contacted pastorally and invited to sign the covenant or commitment statement as an indication of their desire to be confirmed members of the congregation. The intention is not to exclude people but does call people to take seriously their discipleship and membership of the congregation.

21. *Why bother changing the Regulations concerning church membership and emphasising active participation as the basis for voting rights?*

While it is difficult and time consuming to change the Uniting Church Constitution, it would be helpful to simplify the Regulations and make the changes suggested. This would reduce the rolls congregations need to keep. Under our proposals congregations will have a baptism register, a roll of confirmed members and a pastoral list. No change is proposed to the right of appeal against the removal of a name from membership (Regulation 7.2.4).

22. *Who is recognised as a confirmed member of the congregation?*

All those who are recognised by the Church Council as confirmed members, as in question 15 above, and who have signed the covenant or commitment statement. See also question 24.

23. *Are people other than confirmed members able to participate in the life of the congregation?*

Emphatically yes! While not being eligible for election as Elders or Church Councillors, people associated with the congregation who are not confirmed members are eligible to take part in the life of the congregation and to serve on committees or task groups of the congregation.

24. *Will the proposed new arrangements apply to all confirmed members of the Uniting Church?*

Yes, but with these understandings:

- under Constitution clause 6(a) the Uniting Church is committed to recognising as confirmed members all those “who were confirmed members in one of the uniting churches” - that is, a confirmed member prior to June 1977 in one of the three churches that formed the Uniting Church. If a Church Council believes it should no longer recognise a person as a confirmed member under the proposed new arrangements, and that person was a confirmed member of one of the uniting churches and wishes to continue to be recognised as a confirmed member, then the Church Council shall continue to recognise that person as a confirmed member;
- some confirmed members of congregations live in remote areas of Australia or overseas and are thus unable to be actively involved in the life of the congregation in which they hold their membership; where such persons wish to retain their confirmed membership of the church, the Church Council of their “home” congregation will continue to recognise them as confirmed members;
- some confirmed members of congregations are unable to continue with active involvement in the life of their congregation due to ongoing ill-health or advanced age; Church Councils will continue to recognise such persons as confirmed members unless a person asks not to be so recognised.

Note, however, that the current provisions for removal of a person’s name from the congregational rolls (Regulation 1.1.15) will continue to apply to all members, including those referred to in this question.

25. *What about those who are confirmed members in a faith community?*

Under Regulation 3.1.32(b) confirmed members in a faith community may hold their membership with a congregation or with the Presbytery. The proposed new arrangements will apply in each case. Where membership is held in a congregation, the Church Council will consider active involvement in a faith community as fulfilling the requirement of active involvement in the congregation. Where membership is recorded with the Presbytery, the Presbytery will review the list of confirmed members annually, and active involvement in the faith community will be a requirement for continued recognition as a confirmed member. Faith communities will also be encouraged to hold an annual commitment service.

-----

## **Appendix 1. Draft Covenant or Commitment Statement**

Leader

Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). He also said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Paul affirmed, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). He also wrote: "As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

As baptised members of the one holy catholic and apostolic church and as members of this congregation of the Uniting Church in Australia;

### **We promise to:**

Confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour as led by the Holy Spirit

Worship and participate in the Lord's Supper on a regular basis;

Witness to Jesus Christ by word and deed looking for opportunities to do so;

Seek to live according to God's reign of love, justice and peace;

Serve Jesus our Lord in our daily lives in our families, in all our relationships, in the world and through the church;

Participate in the fellowship of the Christian community building one another up in faith, hope and love;

Continue to trust God and grow in discipleship.

### **We promise also to:**

Use our time in God's service in the world and in the church;

Offer our talents to be guided by God in the world and in the church;

Contribute our gifts, as we are able, to enable the work of God in the world and through the church.

(People may give specific indications of how they intend to carry out these promises.)

Name

Signature

Date

## **Appendix 2. Confirmation**

### **Historical background**

1. Confirmation can be traced back to a ceremony concluding baptism consisting of a prayer said by the bishop with hands extended over the candidates, the anointing of the candidates on the forehead, the imposition of the hand on the head of each and the sign of the cross on the forehead. The earliest attestations of this are Tertullian's treatise *De Baptism* (AD 198) and Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* (AD 215).
2. Originally no distinction was made between infants and adults in the use of this post-baptismal ceremony. When infants were baptised they were also anointed and hands were laid on them. But when the requirement developed that anointing and imposition of the hand be reserved to the bishop, the result was a separation of these actions for infants and adults alike. When bishops were no longer able to preside over all baptisms the post-baptismal ceremony was inevitably delayed until the candidate could appear before a bishop. (In some areas however a simple post-baptismal anointing of the forehead was performed by the priest who baptised with oil which had been consecrated by the bishop.) This separation between baptism and confirmation which arose out of practical necessity came to be normal practice. It led to the situation in which baptism was thought to be appropriate to infancy and confirmation to later years.
3. A major change in the life of the church came when the Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity (in AD 312). As Christendom developed infant baptism became the norm for those born in the region of the empire now held to be Christian. Confirmation became a rite for those who were older and came to be regarded as a separate sacrament.

4. According to the Council of Trent of the Roman Catholic Church (AD 1545 - 1563) confirmation is one of seven sacraments. A distinction is commonly made between the grace of baptism and that of confirmation. In baptism the Holy Spirit is given for pardon and new birth and in confirmation for strength to preach the gospel and live the adult Christian life. Such a distinction seems to be a rationalisation stemming from the Middle Ages when baptism was administered in infancy and confirmation in later years.
5. Ablutionary customs of the ancient world called for the use of oil as well as water in bathing, and therefore it has been suggested that confirmation may have originated out of the use of oil commonly used after the baptismal bath.
6. The common interpretation that confirmation confirms baptismal vows dates only from the Reformation of the sixteenth century and does not take into account the earlier practice of being confirmed by the bishop. The word 'confirmation' began to be used of the post-baptismal anointing or hand laying in the early fifth century in the sense that the bishop then ratified or completed what had been begun in baptism. The idea of strengthening later became associated with confirmation.
7. We are now in a post-Christendom era yet with social attitudes still influenced by previous customs. These include seeing infant baptism as an appropriate social rite and confirmation as a separate rite of passage. Congregations have difficulty dealing with the changed context and people's expectations. Baptism is the sacrament that joins people to Jesus Christ and incorporates them into the life of the church. When infant baptism is conducted the baptismal promises need to be taken seriously by parents and guardians as well as members of the congregation. In an individualistic and consumer age there is the need to emphasize the importance and value of communal involvement in the life of the church. So congregations need to uphold the integrity of baptism and foster growing in discipleship among their people. Discipleship training is important. Becoming a confirmed member of a congregation needs to be seen to be both a privilege and a responsibility. It involves affirming one's baptism and promising to continue to grow as a disciple and be active in the life of the local congregation.

#### **Uniting Church practice**

8. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Christian life and the church. In keeping with the practice of the early church, the Uniting Church in Uniting in Worship 2 has the service called *The Sacrament of Baptism and the Reaffirmation of Baptism Called Confirmation*. The candidates are baptised with water "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". The minister marks the sign of the cross on the person's forehead. Olive oil may be used for this purpose. The minister then says, "N, from this day on, the sign of the cross is upon you". The newly baptised person is then presented to the congregation saying, "N is now received into the one holy catholic and apostolic Church according to Christ's command".
9. Those who have been baptised previously come forward after those baptised and are also signed with the cross by the minister who says, "N, always remember you are baptised, and be thankful". Prayer and hands are laid on those persons newly baptised or being confirmed.
10. The responses include promising with God's help to continue in the community of faith, to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, and God is asked to keep people steadfast in the faith of Christ. The Christian community promises with God's help to live out their baptism "as a loving community in Christ: nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer, and encouraging one another in service, until Christ comes".
11. It is evident then that as a Reformed and Evangelical Church without bishops the Uniting Church holds to baptism as one of the two sacraments. The Basis of Union says, "The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper" (BU par 6). The Uniting Church regards confirmation as closely linked to baptism. The use of oil is optional but those coming for confirmation are signed with the cross by the minister who asks God to "strengthen these your servants and set their hearts on fire with love for you".
12. The Regulations of the Uniting Church say that confirmation shall be according to an order which meets the requirements of the Assembly and make provision for the person to declare: "acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, determination to follow him in daily

life, intention to participate actively in the fellowship of the Church and to support its work, and resolution to seek the extension of the reign of God in human society" (Reg.1.1.9).

13. Confirmation then has to do with affirming one's baptism and seeking to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It involves doing so publicly in the presence of the congregation who also promise to live out their baptism and commit themselves to living the way of Jesus as part of the community of faith. The church calls on God to provide the Holy Spirit to enable people to follow Jesus in their lives and through the Christian community.

### **Appendix 3. The congregation as a covenant community**

#### **Historical background**

1. The idea of covenant is an important biblical and Christian one. It stems from the covenant with Abraham in which God made promises to the patriarch with the expectation that he and his family would follow God's leading (Genesis 15:18). The most prominent use of the term covenant in the Old Testament is to describe the relationship between God and Israel instituted by Moses. In this relationship God promised to be their God and they would be God's people and observe the demands of the Ten Commandments as the conditions of the covenant (Exodus 20).
2. Given the history of ancient Israel in which they repeatedly broke the covenant, the hope that God would make a new covenant inscribed in the hearts of his people was expressed by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The early Christian church believed that this new order had been established by God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. People joined the covenant people, the descendants of Abraham, through faith in Christ (Galatians 3:6-9). The new covenant is celebrated in the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20, I Corinthians 11: 25). In the sacrament we are reminded of all God has done for us and renewed at the table go out to live the way of Christ.
3. In the early church people became part of God's covenant community by baptism whatever their race, social status or gender (Galatians 3:27-29). In baptism we are plunged into the faith of Jesus Christ and incorporated into his body, the church. We are claimed as God's own and given the Holy Spirit that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ, share in his ministry and with others grow to maturity.
4. The NRSV of the Bible has the title for the New Testament, "The New Covenant commonly called the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ".
5. The Protestant tradition made use of the covenant concept, especially the Reformed branch. The Puritans made extensive use of ideas of covenant as did Scottish Covenanters. As a Reformed and Evangelical church the Uniting Church affirms that it continues to learn from the witness of the Reformers expressed in various ways (BU par 10).

#### **The Uniting Church**

6. So the notion of covenant is one that sits well with the Uniting Church as it comes from scripture and its particular heritage. We affirm God's covenant with Israel and with us through Jesus Christ. In baptism we join the covenant community through faith in Jesus Christ. The congregation as a covenant community means that there is an agreement that members of the congregation will "meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world" (BU par 15a).
7. Being a member of a local congregation therefore involves a covenantal understanding that people will be involved in the life of discipleship through the congregation and that the congregation will enable community life to take place with Jesus Christ as the head of the church.
8. It is appropriate then that this covenantal understanding of the character of the local congregation be expressed and people invited to commit themselves to Christ and the church in public ways through a commitment service. This especially relates to participation in government and leadership in the Uniting Church.

Uniting Church in Australia

**RESPONSE FORM FOR**  
**DISCUSSION PAPER ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

*Presbyteries are invited to submit their responses to the Discussion Paper using this form. If more space is needed either ask the Assembly Secretariat for an electronic version of the Response Form, or feel free to attach another page or two of comment. Please return your response to the Assembly General Secretary no later than 31 August 2011.*

**Presbytery:**

**Date of response:**

**Name and position of person responding on behalf of Presbytery:**

1. Does the Presbytery agree or disagree with the proposed new understanding of confirmed membership, as outlined in paragraph 9 of the Discussion Paper?
2. Does the Presbytery have any comment about the proposed new understanding of confirmed membership as outlined in paragraph 9 of the Discussion Paper?
3. Does the Presbytery agree or disagree with the proposed simplification of membership categories as outlined in paragraph 10 of the Discussion Paper?
4. Does the Presbytery have any comment about the proposed simplification of membership categories as outlined in paragraph 10 of the Discussion Paper?
5. Does the Presbytery have any other comment or suggestion to make in response to the Discussion Paper?