

## Introduction to the Revised Edition, 2016

### What this book is about

On completing the prescribed course of training for the ministry of the Word I was directed into “secular employment”. That was the church’s way of saying, “You’re dropped”. It wasn’t that I had performed poorly as a candidate for ministry. On the contrary. But I had ended up in deep conflict with the Synod Settlements Committee as it tried to work out what to do with me during an awkward nine month hiatus before I took up a place at St Andrew’s University in Scotland to do a Postgraduate Diploma in Ecumenical Studies. The details don’t really matter here, but the affect it had on me does.

It was 1980. Little more than three years since the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia. I was twenty two and devastated. How could I have been so wrong about my sense of call to the ministry? How could the church be so wrongheaded in its management of my vocation? What is “ministry” anyway beyond this stupid, pointless, soul-destroying system? I was very hurt and very angry.

In the course of that final year at theological college my anger and frustration at the settlements process turned me into a difficult person to deal with and I became progressively more alienated from the church’s systems and practices. By the time the letter arrived, officially advising me to “get a job”, I was already working as a clerk in a legal firm. I was happy. Regular hours. Regular income. Regular people my own age. And the prospect of a career in the sensible field of Law – *after* I returned from Scotland having completed the Diploma. That adventure had already been planned and saved for and Heather and I were going ahead with it. Three terms of study followed by a few months backpacking around Europe. We were young after all. Plenty of time to get started on the new career when we came back.

But that’s not how things unfolded. It turned out that, away from the distractions and commitments of our life in Brisbane and with no other duty to fulfil than to attend my classes, write my essays and sit my exams, I was quite good at academic theology. My examiners recommended that I be encouraged to go on to doctoral research and I was invited to continue at St Andrews working on a PhD. That appealed to us. We were very happy in Scotland and were beginning to wonder if there might be a way that we could make our life there – far away from the painful associations that Australia held for us.

Having worked out how to finance an extended stay in Scotland with support from our families and part-time and casual work for each of us, the only question remaining was what I would research. That was easy. I was still angry and hurt about what had happened to me as a candidate for the ministry in the UCA. I wanted to expose the stupidity and duplicity of this new church and the way it approached ministry. And I wanted to do a root and branch job of it, starting with the negotiations for church union and uncovering the compromises and mistakes behind the system that had derailed my life and undermined my faith. Staying motivated is half the race in completing a PhD, and my supervisor thought that the thirst for revenge would be a reliable ally in getting me to the finish line. So it was agreed. I would research “The development of the understanding of ministry in the Australia church union negotiations 1957-1971” – and then watch them squirm.

But once again, that's not how things unfolded. Within a few months my attitude had been completely transformed. As I investigated the long history of the church union movement in Australia, and especially what made the work of the Joint Commission on Church Union so distinctive, I became increasingly convinced that I was dealing with an authentically Spirit-led process – one that challenged the tired denominationalism and unimaginative institutionalism that I despised. And when I eventually got to a close study of the final version of the Basis of Union I was simply captivated. The vision crystalized within its eighteen short paragraphs was what I had been looking for – a vision that could guide me as a disciple and servant of Jesus and renew the community that gathered around him. All I wanted to do was to share what I'd discovered with my peers – my own generation; the first generation of the Uniting Church in Australia. I didn't know it then, but I had found my life's work.

I completed that PhD thesis towards the end of 1984. In the years since then I have written many articles and several books on different aspects of the Basis of Union. I teach courses on the history, theology and polity of the Uniting Church and regularly make presentations on the ethos of the Uniting Church to the boards and staff of UCA agencies. As I've gone about revising this book, my first, I can still hear my younger self wrestling with a call to ministry, desperately trying to understand what "ministry" even is, and discovering against all expectations a compelling vision for ministry in the foundation statement of his own church – the one that had let him down so badly. As one who now works closely with ordination candidates and listens carefully to ministers in diverse placements across the life of the church, I know that these are still live issues. It is my hope that the publication of this thirtieth anniversary revised edition of *Manifesto for Renewal* will be an encouragement to my sisters and brothers, ordained and lay, in ministry and leadership in the Uniting Church today.

### **A note on language, history and reading the Basis of Union**

In revising this book I have been confronted again by the unreflectively, exclusively masculine language used by the Joint Commission on Church Union in their Reports and in the final revision of the Basis of Union. It jars. It offends. It hurts some readers. In 1992 a new edition of the Basis of Union was published using gender-inclusive language in the hope that the removal of exclusive language would encourage the wider use of the document in the church. In recent years I've discussed the possibility of developing a Plain English version of the Basis for much the same reason; recognising that the theological subtleties and technicalities of the beautiful English in which it is written are easily lost on the increasing number of ministers and members of the Uniting Church for whom English is a second, third or fourth language.

And so when I began revising this book I initially tried to minimize the difficulty and offense of the language of the Joint Commission from which I needed to quote so extensively. In the end, however, I came to the conclusion that I was losing something important to this story by creating the impression that the Joint Commission spoke the same dialect as today's church. I recalled something I wrote in the Preface to one of my other little books on the Basis of Union,<sup>1</sup> and I went back and restored the offense of the Commission's language. It has to do with the nature of historical research, the reason we would want to read the Basis of Union today, and the particular legacy put there for us by the Joint Commission on Church Union...

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<sup>1</sup> A. Dutney, *Where Did the Joy Come From? Revisiting the Basis of Union*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2001.

By the end of the first day I was just about jumping out of my skin with excitement. I had been working through the archives of the Joint Commission on Church Union which, between 1957 and 1971, led the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches through the process that produced the Basis of Union – the foundational statement of the Uniting Church. This had been a focus of research for me for many years already but I had mostly had to rely on published material – reports, journal articles, pamphlets, memoirs etc. I had never before had access to the personal files of members of the Joint Commission. But here they were – the letters, memos, agendas, meeting papers and scribbled notes that told the thousand small stories that fleshed out the one big story that had been my passion for so long. I was in research heaven.

It was only on the way back to my friend's place that evening, calmed by the sea air and the easy rocking of the Manly ferry, that I became conscious that something did not feel quite right. And it was not until the next day, as I opened the first of the boxes brought up from storage for me by the librarian, that I realised what was wrong. Something was missing. Where were the women?

No women were ever appointed to the Joint Commission. No women were among the consultants who assisted the Commission or among the observers from other denominations. I knew that already, but I had only now begun to “experience” it. Time spent in research on the papers of the Joint Commission on Church Union is time spent in the company of men. It's reading minutes of meetings in which men talked to men about things that mattered to them. It's reading letters written by men to men, aerograms and telegrams from one man to another. It's manly banter and bombast. It's mates trusting each other, saying what they really think and hinting at what they really feel. It's masculine intimacies nourishing a very male spirituality.

As I reached into those boxes, drawing out files of dusty, yellowing papers I had been encountering a spiritual life that was completely new to me, one that could only flourish in a world where theology and church order was men's business – where women were excluded. It's another world, foreign and exotic when you visit it from today's Australia and today's church. Not just their experiences and assumptions but their spirituality. Their relationship to God and to each another was one that belonged in the nineteen fifties and sixties. And so does the Basis of Union that they were constructing.

There are two things I want to say about this. First, revisiting the Basis of Union involves time travel. It takes an exercise in imagination to go from our world to theirs. But it's a journey that we have to take if we want to catch a glimpse of what they saw – a vision that led them into union with a trust, courage and joy that we seek again in our generation.

Second, we don't revisit the Basis of Union looking for a “golden age” of faith and insight. There was no “golden age”. That generation was as flawed as any. For example, I have no desire to do theology or to be part of the church's decision making except in partnership with the men *and* women whom God has called together to be the church in this time and place. They didn't see things that way in the fifties and sixties – and I think they were wrong. But the Basis of Union doesn't stand or fall on whether that generation got everything right. Davis McCaughey, a leading member of Joint Commission wrote in the mid-sixties,

...ours is unlikely to be the generation (if any is) which will articulate the faith again in its fullness... What we can hope to do in common is to point men [sic] to the means and places

of renewed faith, and supremely through it all to Him who is the ground and means of faith, its author and finisher.<sup>2</sup>

The humility of the Joint Commission has turned out to be one of their greatest legacies. They did not try to bind us to themselves and their day, but to guide us to Christ and the promised day. In so far as there is a “golden age” it doesn’t lie behind us. It lies ahead, promised in Christ as the end in view for the whole creation. We revisit the Basis of Union just so as to be pointed ahead again to that promised end.

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<sup>2</sup> J Davis McCaughey “Confession of Faith in Union Negotiations” *Mid-Stream* Vol.6, No.3, 1967, pp.23-46, at pp.33-34.