

Discussion on Becoming Disciples

1. APPRECIATION

We were delighted with the number of responses to the paper (280 responses, representing 732 pages of submissions). The fact that numerous groups and individuals around the nation took time to read and reflect carefully, and then prepare thoughtful responses, was very gratifying. Clearly, these are issues in which members of the church have a great deal of interest.

Many responses were warmly appreciative. Others offered helpful, constructive suggestions. A few were dismissive, or hostile. All of them helped us to clarify our thinking. The responses also provide us with an interesting cross-section of the UCA's thinking.

We were disappointed that a few of our respondents had not read the document. It seems that some Presbyteries and Congregations circulated just the wording of the proposals, even though we specifically asked that the document be kept intact. Where this happened, it led to a great deal of misunderstanding, confusion and distortion.

2. WHAT THE RESPONSES TOLD US

2.1 Overview

The general tone of the first 200 responses may be tabled as follows:

	Generally to strongly supportive (some with friendly suggestions)	Reservations	Opposed / hostile	Unclear (e.g. posed questions or made suggestions)	Total
Cong'n or Church Council or group	56 (67%)	8 (10%)	6 (7%)	14 (16%)	84
Presbytery or Pres gp	13 (68%)	5 (26%)	0	1 (5%)	19
Synod or Synod gp	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	0	0	8
Assembly group	2 (100%)	0	0	0	2
MoW, MoD, Pastor, Cand	25 (61%)	2 (5%)	7 (17%)	7 (17%)	41
Other individual	13 (28%)	7 (16%)	10 (22%)	16 (35%)	46
Total	113 (56.5%)	26 (13%)	23 (11.5%)	38 (19%)	200

(The remaining responses, some of which arrived after the closing date, were subsequently also considered carefully.)

A number of people appreciated that the document was clearly written and presented, although one or two made comments that it "should be written in more every-day language".

Unfortunately, we did not have the resources to have the document translated into the languages of our migrant-ethnic Congregations, which then limited the opportunity for them to participate. We regret this.

Sadly, a number of responses showed a degree of cynicism about the Assembly in general, which affected people's reactions to the discussion document.

2.2 Membership (Proposals 1, 2, 3)

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). Beyond that, however, there was a wide diversity of responses.

The term “affiliation” was seen by many as inadequate for expressing the bond between the individual and the Congregation. The Committee was conscious of this, but has not fixed on a better term.

We are aware, of course, that the nature and extent of people’s opportunity to participate actively in the life of a Congregation depends on personal circumstances, age or ability.

A number of groups asked that, should the Assembly agree to the suggested changes, clear guidelines be prepared as to how the proposals could best be implemented.

The responses show that people have very different convictions about such issues as:

- the meaning and place of Baptism in the Christian life;
- the connection between Baptism and membership in the body of Christ, the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia;
- infant Baptism;
- the value of the *Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child*;
- rebaptism;
- how much weight we give to the views of our ecumenical partners.

We recognise that the Uniting Church has clear positions on some of these and it was not part of our brief to revisit these, although some would like the Assembly to do so.

There is also a considerable difference of opinion about whether we still need the categories of “members-in-association” and “adherent”.

Some see the *Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child* as useful. A number commented that they see primarily Christian parents opting for it. Others have misunderstood what we mean by “alternative to” in proposal 3. There is also little agreement about what we should expect of parents bringing their children. Many Congregations see the Baptism of infants as a pastoral/outreach opportunity, which may be lost if we steered people towards the *Service of Thanksgiving and Blessing*. There was widespread acknowledgement that Congregations do not fulfil their vows in Baptism well.

We believe that the diversity of views reflects the diversity of theological positions in the Uniting Church, some of which may not be consistent with the Basis of Union, the traditions of the uniting

churches or the Uniting Church’s reflection on the biblical witness as understood in statements we have adopted in the past.

This is then complicated by both our changed social context and the pastoral problems people have experienced in their local settings.

As a Church, we want to hold together two things. On the one hand we want to be open, hospitable and welcoming. We would like to give people the opportunity to explore faith by participation in a Christian community. This then presumes that the boundaries between church and world are fluid and open. On the other hand, we want to be sure that, for Christians, their loyalty to Christ comes first. In response to grace, we “go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church.” At times, this will mean standing out from the wider society and living by different commitments and values.

Both the discussion paper *Becoming Disciples* and the responses we received reflect a struggle to hold these two in tension.

2.3 Reaffirmation of Baptism or Covenant Service (Proposal 4)

Many thanked us for this suggestion. Some indicated that this is already being done and find it helpful. Others feared that we wanted to make this a mandatory requirement which was never our intention.

Many thought that Easter would be an appropriate time, but a number noted that many families are away on Easter Sunday. Easter is, however, a season of seven weeks (eight if we include Pentecost) and a Sunday in Easter other than Easter Day may well be suitable to most Congregations.

2.4 Participation in the Lord’s Supper (Proposal 5)

Most responses indicated that the table should be open to all, including those not baptised. Reasons cited included reference to Jesus’ hospitality and the possibility that some might be hurt or offended by any process of pastoral discernment. Some indicated that the table should be only for those baptised which, historically and ecumenically, has been the most common view.

We do not wish to bring a recommendation to Assembly, but believe that the relationship between Baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist) needs further consideration.

2.5 The Becoming Disciples Process (Proposal 6)

There was good support for this. Concerns are mainly about the manner of implementation. Some assumed, wrongly, that we wanted to make this a matter of Regulation.

2.6 Church governance (Proposal 7)

The proposal was about who was eligible for election; not about who would actually participate in the Councils of the church, apart from Congregational meetings. Clearly careful discernment still needs to be exercised about people's suitability once we are clear who is eligible. Many made suggestions about an appropriate age and length of participation before being eligible. Some also suggested that people should be familiar with the *Basis of Union* and agree to adhere to it. We believe, however that this cannot be resolved until issues of membership are cleared up.

3. SOME CLARIFYING POINTS

The responses highlighted points which some people did not find clear.

3.1 Grace

We presumed that the UCA readily acknowledged that the Christian life is dependent on God's grace. The fact that this was articulated in just a few places meant that some people wrongly assumed that we did not recognise this. Some also thought that where the paper spoke about the human response to grace, this amounted to a denial of God's grace. We do not see it this way.

3.2 Faith communities

Many people were confused by the term "Faith Communities" and seemed unaware that Faith Communities are mentioned in the Regulations (3.1.32).

The paper treats Faith Communities in the similar way to Congregations. There is in fact no requirement that Faith Communities engage in "worship, witness and service" (although some do). We thank those who pointed this out.

3.3 Changes to Regulations

We recognised from the start that, if there was good support, we would be bringing proposals about categories of membership which would require a change in the Constitution and Regulations. This was our brief. We also recognised that there were other closely related issues, and that it

would be helpful to the Church to consider them together. We did not intend to suggest changes to Regulations other than those relating to membership and participation in the Councils of the Church. The proposals regarding the use of certain orders of service and the Becoming Disciples Process were by way of commendation to Congregations.

3.4 Pastoral issues and matters of discipline

Many people want the Church to pass resolutions in an attempt to solve a host of pastoral issues. We do not believe this is helpful. Whilst we recognise that Regulations and resolutions can make pastoral issues easier or more difficult, pastoral matters are generally best dealt with using prayerful wisdom and common sense and sometimes courage, not by Regulation. Attempting to resolve pastoral and relational issues by Regulation sometimes creates new ones. Many commented that Church Councils and Presbyteries often do not handle these well.

Some of the sixteenth century Reformers saw "godly discipline" as one of the marks of the church. Again, there was some recognition in the responses that we engage in little discipline in Congregations or Presbyteries, except when there are accusations of sexual misconduct.

3.5 Baptism and confession of faith

Quite a number of responses indicated that people believed that church membership should not be connected to Baptism at all, but rather connected to expressed faith in Jesus Christ. We would point out that in the service of *Baptism and the Reaffirmation of Baptism Called Confirmation*, people are asked among other things: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, your Saviour and Lord?" Furthermore, in Baptism we acknowledge the prior grace of God, and Baptism is in the name of the Triune God. Baptism includes confessing Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but is also much more than that.

We agree, however, that as the proposals in the document stand, it is possible for a person to be baptised as an infant and participate in a local church without necessarily affirming their own faith or Baptism, although proposal 4, which commends to Congregations a regular (annual) rite of commitment, may go some way to alleviating these concerns.

3.6 Confirmation

A few read the paper as either abandoning the practice of Confirmation or down-

grading its importance. We want to restore Confirmation as a step in faith formation, rather than seeing it as a matter of participation in the Councils of the Church. We see this as a recovery of the meaning of Confirmation, rather than lessening its importance.

3.7 Smaller and rural Congregations

Some thought we did not adequately take into account smaller and rural Congregations, which often have considerable numbers of people who come from other denominational traditions. Often these people bring a different understanding of Baptism (e.g. denying the validity of infant Baptism or not practising Baptism at all). Do we accord them full membership because they now participate in the life of a Uniting Church Congregation, even though they cannot adhere to the *Basis of Union*? And if we do, do we then deny full membership to those who come from a non-baptising tradition?

3.8 Six months before becoming a member?

Some read the paper as saying that people could not become members until they had participated for at least six months. The paper did not say this. The paper envisaged that people could be accepted as members at any time, but needed to have time to get to know the ethos, goals and priorities of the Congregation before being eligible for participation in decision making and leadership.

3.9 Infant Baptism

Some people fear that we want to do away with infant Baptism. This is not the case. Others would like us to recommend to the Assembly that we have only believer's Baptism. For theological reasons, we are unable to do so. The Uniting Church has made clear statements on Baptism. We see no reason to recommend departing from these.

3.10 The Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child

Some people read the document as suggesting that the service of *Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child* was of a similar status as the sacrament of Baptism. We do not hold such a view.

3.11 Rebaptism

Some have called on us to recommend that the Uniting Church change its position

on the inadmissibility of rebaptism. We are unable to do so.

3.12 The Becoming Disciples Process

We acknowledge that proposal 6 could be read that all Congregations be *required* to adopt the process. That was not our intention. We are commending the process and asking Congregations to adopt the process; we are not asking the Assembly to make it mandatory.

Many commented that the Becoming Disciples Process requires lots of time and energy. We acknowledge that, but also hope that many Congregations will make it a high priority. Some Congregations may not take it up. Others may pool resources and combine with other Congregations in their Presbytery to offer it. Still others may work jointly with Congregations of other denominations. Each Congregation will need to think carefully about the needs of the persons who may undertake it and the people who are available for mentoring and other roles. Flexibility is the key. We remain convinced, however, that it is an excellent way of forming people in the faith.

We were not suggesting that people go on a 40 day retreat! We wanted people to spend time in reflection and prayer during Lent as they prepared for Baptism or Confirmation. Obviously this has to be woven around other responsibilities. We do urge, however, that prayer, reflection, self-examination and repentance are part of the preparation process, particularly in the weeks leading up to Baptism or Confirmation.

We need to say again that the process is not simply another educational program. While it does include Christian Education for most, it is a whole-of-life approach, which includes participation in the Congregation, mentoring, and practice in living the Christian life – as well as learning.

We offer a diagram by way of further explanation at Appendix A.

As indicated in the discussion paper, resources need to be prepared. Many questions will be answered as the detail becomes available. Meanwhile, we ask people to keep an open mind and not assume things about the detail which are yet not stated.

3.13 Terminology

We were a little taken aback that many people quickly rejected the terms "catechumenate" and "catechumen". We

recognise that these terms have not been in wide use in the Uniting Church. But then the Uniting Church has not had a holistic process like Becoming Disciples before! They are useful words in current use in the English language, and appear in most dictionaries, with fairly precise meanings. It is essential to know these terms if we are doing further reading, wanting to access material on the Internet, or talk with people in other denominations. Our suggestion was and is that we call the process the "Becoming Disciples Process". In Congregations, we may prefer to refer to persons preparing for Baptism or Confirmation as "candidates for Baptism/Confirmation", "people undertaking the Becoming Disciples Process," "catechumens", or another term. We do, however, want to use the more formal and precise terms in footnotes so that people become aware of them, even though some may resist them for every day usage.

3.14 Theological basis

The comments we received highlight that we presumed too much about the shared understandings in the Church, particularly about the sacraments. We believe it would be helpful to articulate this afresh.

4. A SUGGESTED WAY AHEAD

4.1 The Becoming Disciples Process (catechumenate)

There was very good support for this, and many Congregations asked for resources to implement this. We recommend that the Assembly direct Theology and Discipleship, in conjunction with Uniting Education and other Assembly agencies to prepare resources, and invite participation from Synods and Synod agencies.

4.2 The Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child

We also ask that the Assembly draw the attention of Congregations to the availability of the *Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child*. This, of course, does not change the previously stated position of the Uniting Church on Baptism.

4.3 Annual rite of commitment

We ask the Assembly to commend to Congregations and Faith Communities the use of an annual rite of commitment. This may be *A Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism* or *The Covenant Service*. Faith Communities are deliberately included here.

4.4 Membership and the sacraments

We ask the Assembly to give approval in principle to the simplification of membership categories and endorsing the principle that Confirmation is better seen as primarily a step in faith development, rather than making someone eligible for participation in the Councils of the Church.

Given the wide diversity of views in the Uniting Church on important matters, however, we ask the Assembly to call the church to prayerful study of issues of membership and the sacraments before any changes to the Constitution and Regulation are made. Such issues may include:

- How do we live with the tension of being an open, hospitable, welcoming community and having a committed, covenanted membership whose sole loyalty is to Jesus Christ?
- The place of Baptism in the Christian life, including:
 - ◆ Baptism as a gift of God's grace and the place Baptism in the Christian life.
 - ◆ The relationship between Baptism and being in covenant community.
 - ◆ The relationship between Baptism and the Lord's Supper including the issue of what we mean by "an open table".
 - ◆ The desirability, or otherwise, of parents who bring children for Baptism affirming their faith and/or reaffirming their own Baptism.
 - ◆ The possibility of people transferring from non-sacramental churches being accepted as members of the UCA.
 - ◆ The desirability or non-desirability of dual membership, either in two UCA Congregations, or in a UCA Congregation and in a Congregation of another Christian church.

In doing so, we would, of course, take serious note of position papers which the Uniting Church has adopted previously.

- Can we find a more adequate term for the individual person's relationship with the Congregation than "affiliation"?
- To what extent is our own identity as the UCA important in the light of (a) our "post-denominational" context, and (b) our commitments to ecumenical partners?
- In small rural Congregations, where people from many backgrounds worship in the UCA, to what extent should the unique

ethos and contribution of the UCA be emphasised?

5. PROPOSALS

That the Assembly:

1. Receive the report.
- 2a. Commend the Becoming Disciples Process (the catechumenate) to Congregations and, where relevant, Faith Communities.
- 2b. Direct Theology and Discipleship to take initiatives to co-operate with Uniting Education, Presbyteries, Synods and their agencies and other Assembly agencies in preparing resource materials and training programs to assist Congregations to implement the Becoming Disciples Process.
- 2c. Declare the resourcing of Congregations for implementing the Becoming Disciples Process to be a priority for the next triennium.
3. Commend to Congregations and Faith Communities an annual service of commitment such as *A Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism* or *The Covenant Service*.
- 4a. Affirm the general direction of moving towards a category or categories of membership which are based more on Baptism and actual participation in the worship, witness and service of a Congregation, rather than on once having been confirmed.
- 4b. Ask Congregations, Presbyteries to engage in serious theological reflection on issues of membership and the sacraments, including the issues highlighted in section 4 of this report.
- 4c. Direct Theology and Discipleship to prepare a resource document to assist the Church to reflect deeply on the meaning of membership and the sacraments; this document to consider biblical and theological foundations in the light of the current context and to be presented in a style which allows as many people as possible to engage in reflection and discussion.
- 4d. Request Theology and Discipleship to bring a detailed report on the issue of membership and, in particular, its relationship to the sacraments, to the Assembly Standing Committee and authorise the ASC to make a decision regarding any changes to the Constitution and Regulations, recognising that, if

Constitutional changes are envisaged, then s. 72 of the Constitution will be invoked, and declaring that if Constitutional changes are not envisaged, then s. 39 of the Constitution is to be invoked.

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