

Appendix 3 of the Report of the Doctrine Working Group to the Ninth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, Adelaide, July 2000:

ECCLESIOLOGY: ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

The 1997 Assembly agreed to the following proposal:

- a to note the increased discussion in the Uniting Church of questions about alternative communities of faith and the celebration of the sacraments in communities other than established congregations;
- b to request the Commission on Doctrine to study these and related questions and after consulting with appropriate Assembly and synod agencies and individuals already participating in alternative communities of faith, to report to the Ninth Assembly.

Having consulted widely, as requested, the Working Group on Doctrine submits the following report.

1. The Early Church

We need to note at the outset that what we now call ‘alternative communities of faith’ were the norm for at least the first two centuries of the Christian era. With the coming of the Constantinian era AD 306-337 the church moved from the small group house format to the format of large congregations meeting in specially constructed buildings. This change was brought about by numerous factors which had more to do with the socio-political context than theological considerations. While some people have romantic notions about the superiority of original forms and expressions of Christianity, we must avoid jumping to the conclusion that just because the small group house church was the earliest form of faith community, it must be the best one for every age. Equally, of course, we should not cling to the model of a congregation meeting in a special building just because that has been the dominant pattern for hundreds of years. We need to examine both patterns of church life again in the light of the context, the church’s accumulated experience and our theology of the church.

2. Context

Christian communities have always shaped their corporate life to some extent in response to their physical, social, political and cultural context. In contexts where Christians have been small in numbers and living in hostile environments, small groups of Christians meeting in houses provided the most appropriate form for the corporate expression of the faith. We see this not only in the early church

within the Roman Empire, but also in the Soviet Union, in Maoist China and in some Muslim countries.

Once Christianity became a legal religion under Constantine, and later the established religion of the Empire, the rapid influx of members required that worship be conducted in large buildings. There were gains and losses in this change, and through the centuries there have been many attempts to regain the advantages of small group life. Notable were the small groups of the Moravians and the 'class meetings' of early Methodism. The dominant model has, however, remained the congregation with its own building.

Today we have a changing context in Australia. There has been a very significant decline in church membership. In some places the number of Christians desiring to worship together does not warrant a special building and the expense that entails. If worshipping communities are to continue in some areas of the city and in much of the country, it may only be possible by meeting in small groups in homes and without the assistance of ordained ministers. Even where large congregations exist there is often a significant number of people who do not feel comfortable in them. They find that these congregations do not meet their needs, nor do they give them the opportunities they seek for covenant relationships and strong commitment to one another.

For many years now the nature of community in our large cities has been undergoing change. Whereas once, even in cities, community was largely locality based, this is so no longer. To take a Melbourne example, one only has to think how important the locality once was for a football club like Collingwood, and vice versa, and yet how little of that link remains today. There are many reasons for the change, including the anonymity of high density housing, the mobility of the population, the development of commuter and special interest communities that are more accessible than the community based on housing locality. Developments in communication technology are developing cyber communities *You've Got Mail*. Some people feel isolated from any community whatsoever.

Today there is also a widespread reaction against bureaucratic rules and structures. Many people are 'turned off' denominational churches because they regard them as bureaucratic. Some are looking for communities in which members are free to determine the structure and rules of their communal life. Some have left the church because it did not offer the option of belonging to a suitable 'alternative community of faith'. Many who belong to such communities would have left the church had they not found what they were looking for in a small faith community. One member of such a community has written as follows:

“We tend to be refugees that find the mainline church inaccessible. A refugee is concerned with survival. So the advantage of the alternative faith community is that we are still surviving, and we grieve for those who have not found a home within the life of the church, particularly those who are still motivated by the love of Jesus in their daily vocations.”

There are still factors favouring large congregations meeting in special buildings. Charismatic worship seems to work best with large congregations. Liturgical worship making use of music from the classical repertoire of church music, also requires a suitable ecclesiastical setting and a large community of people to provide the resources it requires. While some people enjoy belonging to small groups with their intimacy and commitment to one another, others prefer to keep their faith more private and seek the relative anonymity of large congregations.

2a. Experience of Alternative Communities of Faith

Drawing on experience in the church across the ages as well as in our own time, it is possible to list some of the advantages and weaknesses of these so called ‘alternative communities of faith’. Without expanding on them we can list them as follows:

Advantages:

- do not require costly buildings
- members are free of the burden of paying off large debts
- fellowship can be more intimate and “real”
- pastoral and physical care for one another can be more effective
- families can be together in them
- can unite people from many church traditions in ecumenical fellowship
- can be a place for people alienated from their own church who are still committed to the Christian faith
- can minister to people with particular spiritualities and liturgical preferences
- can be a good means for incorporating seekers.

Weaknesses:

- lack of visibility and openness
- may be self selecting and therefore exclusionist, open only to people of one race, class or social orientation
- can become heretical through the dominance of a strong personality or a narrow and unbalanced focus on one aspect of faith and doctrine
- may lack accountability structures such as those provided to congregations by Presbytery, Synod and Assembly
- may have little concern for Christian unity and little sense of standing within the “one holy catholic and apostolic church”
- may become quite inward looking and lack commitment to mission or the vision for mission beyond their own borders
- when conflict does arise it may blow the community to pieces.

In summary it can be said that the evidence neither confirms that ‘alternative communities of faith’ are superior to congregations nor condemns them as inherently worse. Since, like congregations, the membership is made up of people who though redeemed, are at the same time sinners, ‘alternative communities of faith’ can no more guarantee authentic Christian corporate life than can congregations. In certain circumstances alternative ways of being church deserve consideration. Later we shall look at what conditions would need to be fulfilled if such communities are to fit under the Uniting Church umbrella.

2b. Theology

The word ‘church’ *ekklesia* is found in Matthew, Acts, the epistles of St. Paul and Revelation, and church is often referred to in Scripture in other ways where the word is not mentioned. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures the Hebrew word for the ‘assembly’ of Israel was often translated by the word *ekklesia*, though it could also be translated by *synagogue*. That word, of course, was not available for Christian use because of its use within Judaism. In New Testament times *ekklesia* was a non religious term, but its use by Christians suggests that they may have thought of the church as the assembly of the New Israel – a people without national identity, territorial boundaries or even a common language. The word could be used in both the singular and the plural. So Paul could refer to the churches of God in Jesus Christ which are in Judea 1 Thessalonians 2:14 but in Matthew 16:18 Jesus is reported as saying “on this rock I will build my church”.

With the root meaning of 'called out', *ekklesia* suggests that the church is God's creation, brought into being as God has called people "out of darkness into his marvellous light" 1 Peter 2:9 . This is reflected in the Basis of Union at a number of points, but particularly in Paragraph 4, which concludes as follows:

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.

The New Testament does not provide us with a doctrine of church but it does provide many resources with which the theologian can work. Particularly significant are the many images for the church which Scripture uses. The New Testament scholar, Paul Minear, lists 96 different images or metaphors. Amongst these there are three or four major clusters. They are "the people of God", "the body of Christ" and "fellowship" or "community", which might be thought of as a community of faith or love, but more typically the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit". These images may give the impression that the church was regarded as something quite supernatural, but there is plenty of evidence that the New Testament writers knew well how worldly and imperfect the church was.

Since the New Testament has so much to say about the church, it is surprising to find that the theology of the church was a late developer. The patristic period early centuries of the church focussed on developing the understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, salvation and the doctrine of the Triune God. There was little attention given to the doctrine of the church. Augustine AD354 430 did take up the issue of ecclesiology and his writings influenced the 16th century Reformers. Even the Reformers did not really address the fundamental issues about the nature of the church. For them the main question was which, or where, is the true church, and so ecclesiology was discussed mainly in terms of the distinguishing "marks of the church".

The Roman Catholic Church emphasised, as the marks of the church, those qualities mentioned in the Nicene creed as amended at Constantinople, namely unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The Reformers did not reject these as marks of the true church but regarded them as inadequate. So to these they added further marks which they saw as necessary to distinguish the true church from the church they were seeking to reform. Two additional marks common to the chief reformers were the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution. Sometimes the

exercise of godly discipline was added. To these marks one or two theologians “ahead of their time”, like Martin Bucer would probably have wanted to add also the service of the poor, a mark which 20th century liberation theologians would thoroughly endorse.

Both Luther and Calvin revived Augustine’s distinction between the visible and invisible church. Luther acknowledged that the true church of Christ is not identical with the church which all can see; rather it is hidden within it. Calvin believed that when Holy Scripture speaks of the church it may be in either of two ways. “Sometimes by the term ‘church’ it means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption ... This church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name ‘church’ designates the whole multitude of men and women spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ ... In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.”

In making a distinction between the true church and the church as it appeared in the world, the Reformers were admitting that there is a discrepancy between the church as we see it and the church as we might expect it to be if it really is a divine institution. It was clear to them, as it must be to everyone, that there is a difference between the church in history and the church as it is described in the Scriptures. This has been a troublesome problem for many people from the beginning of the church’s history.

In the period of the Enlightenment in the 17th 18th centuries this discrepancy was resolved by understanding the church as just another voluntary association of people like any other. It was understood in totally nonsupernaturalist terms. The problem with this view is that it simply disregards the use of the church in the New Testament and for that reason has never seemed adequate to the majority of Christians.

In the 20th century there has been renewed interest in the doctrine of church. There were many factors that contributed to this development. There was first of all the birth of the ecumenical movement, which might be traced back to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. As mission bodies and churches began to talk and act together they were forced to address the question of the essential nature of church. Closely associated with that was the emergence of new churches from what had once been the mission fields of the older churches in Europe and America. As they began to draft their own constitutions and

confessions, they were forced to ask questions about the nature of church. Thirdly, there were a number of church unions, such as the one which brought the Uniting Church in Australia into being. These required the churches uniting to struggle together to define the nature of church. A further factor was the Second Vatican Council, which seriously addressed the doctrine of church, and enabled a new and open inter church debate by easing tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches. Instead of debating the doctrine of church polemically, the churches were set free to discuss more fundamental issues in ecclesiology in a non polemical way.

A factor of quite a different kind has been the rise of sociology and the application of its tools to churches. When churches came under the searching scrutiny of the sociologists, they did not appear to be anything extraordinary but seemed to conform quite well to the patterns of other voluntary organisations. Nothing supernatural about them was revealed by this research. The conclusions reached by the thinkers of the Enlightenment were reaffirmed. Again the church was challenged to show how the fine words about the church in the Scriptures and in the writings of the theologians could be squared with the findings of the sociologists.

Numerous suggestions have been made about how the church might respond to the challenge of the Enlightenment and modern sociology, including a recycling of the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. That distinction, however, does not get us out of our bind. The problem with the church is not just that the hypocrites within it prevent it from manifesting its true nature as the people of God, the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; it is also the sin of those who, by grace, truly belong to the church. If the true members of the church are at the same time righteous and sinners, the church itself will inevitably be sinful also. We are bound to acknowledge therefore that just as the Christian is both righteous and a sinner, so the church is both what the New Testament says of it and what the sociologists say of it. It is by grace alone that it is the body of Christ. The fact that it is the body of Christ may well be hidden from the eyes of an onlooker and visible only to the eyes of faith. Indeed this was the case with respect to Jesus also. Many people only saw in him a peasant from Nazareth and a troublemaker. Only the eyes of faith recognised in the son of Mary the Christ of God.

That is not to say that the church can simply rest comfortably in the inevitability of this “both ... and ...” At every moment in its life it is to be true to the essential being which has been given to it by Christ. That is why the church is to be always reforming *semper reformanda* .

i. The Classical Marks of the Church

The more cordial relationships between the churches which developed in the last third of the 20th century has permitted a greater concentration on the classical marks of the church derived from the Nicene Creed, namely unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. But here too, the discrepancy between the marks of the church, and the church as it really is calls for explanation.

Unity. Probably the most obvious thing to be observed about the church today is its lack of unity. It is splintered into thousands of different groups, many of which claim to be the only true church, and anathematise all others. Of course unity does not exclude diversity, but it is incompatible with separation, competitiveness and hostility. The unity of the church is required by the fact that Christ is one. We are called into unity with Him, and therefore into unity with each other. It is sin that divides us, but in the end all divisions must be abolished and our unity must become real and clear. The unity of the church lies, therefore, both with its origin and its end, and both exert their power in the church to promote unity in the present.

Holiness. No less obvious is the church's lack of empirical holiness. Its life is all too frequently marked by selfishness, authoritarian use of power, hostility and even sexual abuse. Of course, mixed with these things are also many good works, but the church is certainly not holy because of its good deeds. It is holy only because of the grace of God, who through Christ continually redeems the church, calls it to new life and indwells it as God the Holy Spirit. Holiness is also the end to which the church looks in hope and therefore it seeks to exemplify as much of that holiness in its life now as it can.

Catholicity. Perhaps the outsider may not press the charge of lack of catholicity since even the church is not perfectly clear about what catholicity involves. It has been variously used to distinguish the whole church of God from local assemblies, to distinguish the 'mainstream' church from heretical sects and schismatic bodies, and to distinguish the Roman church from Eastern Orthodoxy and the churches of the Reformation. It has also been used to express the hope that in the end the whole of humanity will be converted to Christianity and gathered into one world encompassing church. None of these things do, in fact, constitute the catholicity of the church. As with the other marks of the church, the church's catholicity is derived from the catholicity of its Lord, who accepted death on the cross for the salvation of the whole world and to whom all authority has been given in heaven and earth so that people of all nations may be gathered into the kingdom of God.

As E. Schlink has said, “The church is catholic on the strength of the catholicity of her Lord, which is imputed to her.”

Moltmann locates two foci of the church’s catholicity. On the one hand, “the church is catholic to the extent in which it partakes of the coming kingdom.” This makes catholicity eschatological and excludes all ecclesiastical imperialism. Nevertheless, partaking of the coming kingdom requires the church’s participation now in the mission of the kingdom. On the other hand, Moltmann also says that ‘qualitatively, its catholicity means the church’s inner wholeness, compared with the splitting off of individual elements of truth, which are then given an absolute validity of their own.’

Apostolicity. In the past apostolicity has been understood in terms of the derivation of the church’s ministry, in an unbroken line of succession from the apostles. Closely associated with this idea was a mandatory form of ministry that was episcopal and hierarchical. It has been increasingly realised of late that this understanding of apostolicity cannot be substantiated on either historical or theological grounds. Moltmann relates the term apostolic to both the church’s foundation and its commission. It is apostolic because “its gospel and its doctrine are founded on the testimony of the apostles, the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ.” *It is also apostolic because it is charged with the mission of continuing the apostolic proclamation. He sees this as the only one of the classical marks that is not eschatological, though it is related to the eschaton since its proclamation is for the sake of the eschatological kingdom.*

ii. The Reformers’ Marks of the Church

As mentioned earlier, the Reformers did not reject the Nicene marks, but they felt they needed to be complemented by further marks. The two on which Lutheran and Reformed theologians agreed were “the Word of God purely preached and heard” and “the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution”. These marks were necessary to counter both the schismatics of the radical reform movement and the Roman church, which claimed that the Nicene marks were already fulfilled within its life and hence reform was unnecessary.

The Reformers’ marks are non eschatological and more concrete and empirical than the Nicene marks. They made it easier for the Reformers to point out the shortcomings in the Roman church. With the lessening of polemic between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in the past half century, the Reformers’ marks have moved out of the spotlight. They are not, however, to be neglected. Though it is not always easy to determine when the Word of God is being purely preached and heard, it remains a central concern of the church to ensure that this

is happening. Bonhoeffer was convinced that this was not happening amongst the German Christians in the 1930s and pleaded with the ecumenical movement of his time to declare the non confessing German church heretical. Some of those who had learnt from Bonhoeffer believed that parts of the church in apartheid South Africa should have been declared heretical on the same grounds.

The Uniting Church takes the task of rightly preaching and hearing the Word of God very seriously. Paragraphs 5 and 11 of the Basis of Union make this clear. In addition it undertakes the work of theological education and the oversight of it very conscientiously and it tests candidates for ordination rigorously. It requires that to be recognised as a lay preacher a person must successfully undertake an approved course of study. It would be important that a Presbytery, in recognising a Faith Community, should ensure that there is provision for this mark of the church to be upheld in its gathered life too.

There is a tendency in some parts of the Uniting Church to regard the administration of the sacraments very lightly. This is in marked contrast to the emphasis that the Reformers placed on the sacraments. The danger is not simply that the liturgy will be done very badly, the sacrament neglected or that new ones will be invented. In addition to these concerns there is the question of the context in which the sacraments are celebrated. The sacraments are constitutive of the life of the church and by the context of their celebration they can become heretical and schismatic, or even a scandal as they were at Corinth, or they can be a witness to the truth of the gospel and unifying in every respect. It is important, therefore, that a faith community under the oversight of a Presbytery should accept the sacramental discipline of the Church.

iii. The Question of the Adequacy of the Marks

It might be thought that these six marks of the church are more than adequate for our needs, but other marks have, from time to time, been suggested, and though none of them have achieved the recognition accorded to those already mentioned, at least one deserves further consideration. As mentioned earlier, the Strasbourg Reformer, Martin Bucer probably would have argued for the inclusion of “the service of the poor” as a further mark, and liberation theologians would probably agree. Daniel Migliore makes a similar point when he writes as follows:

Since the New Testament, it has been a principle of ecclesiology that where Christ is, there is the church. But where is Christ? The answers to this question in the history of doctrine are familiar: Christ is where the bishop is; Christ is in the eucharist; Christ is where the gospel is preached and heard; Christ is where the gifts of the Spirit are manifest. While there is an element of truth in all these

responses, none of them implicitly includes the response given in Matthew 25:31ff: Christ is present among the poor, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned.... The true church is not only the church of the ear where the gospel is rightly preached and heard, and not only the church of the eye where the sacraments are enacted for the faithful to see and experience; it is also the church of the outstretched helping hand.

The church can hardly be the church of Jesus Christ unless it is a servant of the captives, the poor and the needy, and unless it is a church in which these people are welcome and to which they delight to come. The Base Christian Communities of Latin America are especially for the poor and powerless. In our society, faith communities can very easily be for the well educated and the well to do. A place where the poor and less educated feel out of place.

iv. The Mission of the Church

If the church is apostolic, its mission is of fundamental importance. Indeed it is impossible to understand the church without attending to its mission. The church is not an end in itself. It has been called into being for a purpose, and that purpose is to participate in God's mission of salvation for the world. The New Testament speaks of this mission in many places. It is prefigured in the ministry of Jesus. It is represented in the sending out of the 12 and the 70. Missionary commissions are given to the disciples in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, and in the Acts of the Apostles. Where the letter of Peter speaks about God's call, the reason given for that call is "that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you" 1 Peter 2:9. The Basis of Union speaks repeatedly of this as the purpose for the Church's existence. Uniting Church theologian, Andrew Dutney observes that mission is the only reason consistently given for the three denominations' decision to unite and he quotes senior Uniting Church theologian Norman Young as describing the Basis of Union as "the charter under which we agree to go on mission together".

Not everything the church does is mission, but mission encompasses many things. In the first place, the church's mission is to proclaim the gospel of God's love for the world expressed in the sacrifice of the Son, Jesus Christ. In the second place, mission involves the humble service of the poor, care for the needy and support for those who are oppressed. Beyond that still, mission calls for action for justice to free the oppressed and restore human rights to all. It might even be said that worship is part of the church's mission, because it is one of the things that it has been called to do and is inextricably bound up with the proclaiming of the gospel.

v. The 'Being' of the Church

While participation in mission is extremely important both for understanding the church and for the being of the church, it can be over emphasised to the point where other important aspects of the church's being are lost entirely. For example, it has been said, "the church is the only organisation that exists for the sake of those who are not its members". Christians also need the church. We are not able to make it as Christians alone. No one ever emphasised justification by grace more than Luther, but he always balanced that with the reminder that we are sinners still. In his *Lectures on Romans* he wrote, "This is a life of cure from sin; it is not a life of sinlessness, as if the cure were finished and health had been recovered. The church is an inn and an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents. Heaven ... is the palace where the whole and righteous live." The church is not an army of fit and healthy soldiers waiting to be dispatched on a mission. It is a hospital for sick and convalescents who are called to care for each other while they are being healed by the Great Physician, and as they have the strength, care also for each other and those who still need to be admitted.

It is all too common to hear 'ministry' denigrated in comparison with 'mission'. This is regrettable. Without ministry none of us will be fit for mission, and those who receive new life through the mission will wither and die unless they receive ministry from their fellow Christians and also minister to them.

Too strong an emphasis on mission leads us to think of the church entirely in terms of doing, as if it had no being apart from doing. The impression may even be given that the church must justify itself by what it does rather than being justified by grace. Even from the perspective of mission, the church's own being is vitally important. Why would anyone want to listen to the church's preaching of the kingdom of God if the church's own life is in disarray and exhibits no signs of the inbreaking of the kingdom?

When we think about the being of the church we are immediately reminded that fundamentally the church is a *koinonia* a fellowship, a community. The people of God are not just a bunch of individuals who all just happen to be called of God. That call relates us to one another. We are a people, a holy nation, and therefore a community. The metaphor of the body of Christ does not mean, as often interpreted, that the church is Christ's instrumentality, but that Christians are inter related and interdependent like the limbs and organs of a body. As the fellowship of the Holy Spirit the church is a community of those who share in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This community is characterised by a number of distinctive features. It is a community in which distinctions of race, class and gender are rendered void. It is non hierarchical, multi ethnic, egalitarian and committed to gender equality. In it love expresses itself in compassion for one another. It is tolerant in the sense that in it people accept one another as Christ has accepted them and forgive one another as they have been forgiven. Since it lives by the gospel it is a community noted for the enlargement of life liberty , joy and hope.

While the church seeks to manifest this godly form of social life, at present it only manages to do so in fleeting and fragmentary ways, but it looks forward to the full expression of this life in the kingdom of God. It lives, therefore, in hope, but this is not a passive waiting. This is a real hope, therefore, the church continually seeks to bring as much of this hope into its present life as it possibly can and become a sign of the kingdom in the world already.

2c. The Church and Alternative Faith Communities

The term 'alternative' calls for some careful consideration. As mentioned earlier, what are now considered 'alternative communities of faith' were, in the first couple of centuries of Christianity, the norm. In recent centuries the large gathered congregation standing within a Christian denomination has become the norm. Nevertheless, the small faith community may not regard itself as an 'alternative' and may not welcome that designation. The group may regard itself rather as a parachurch, supplementing the life of the congregation, or a faith community on the way to becoming a congregation. It is to be noted that the regulations of the Uniting Church do not use the word 'alternative'.

On the other hand there are faith communities that do see themselves as alternatives to the church and, for that matter, to any other religious organisation. They may be quite critical of Christianity and unashamedly syncretistic, endeavouring to evolve a new type of spirituality. It would be pointless to try to apply a Christian ecclesiology to such groups. They may be of interest to the church, but they cannot be brought under the umbrella of the church, nor would they want that.

Other faith communities would see themselves as alternative ways of being the church. There may be a number of established congregations in their vicinity but their members do not feel at ease within any of them. They may have carefully chosen a style of being church with which their members can be comfortable. This may involve simplicity and flexibility of structure, minimal rules, no property ties, different patterns of worship, totally lay leadership, and freedom from the constraints of any denominational church.

Some of these features are not necessarily alternative ways of being church. They may well be characteristic of some worshipping communities in remote areas and other places, that still see themselves as part of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' as it is expressed through the Uniting Church. In the Uniting Church there is a good deal of flexibility about how any congregation arranges and expresses its communal life and worship. Where faith communities exist in an area where there are church congregations, yet choose to exist alongside but totally separate from these congregations, they do, however, constitute an alternative way of being church whether or not they choose that designation.

We want to ask such communities, what is your theology of church? How, for example, does your community exhibit the marks of the church? How do you express your concern for the unity, which is Christ's will? Is your community marked by the catholicity of openness to people of all races and classes, and the catholicity of doctrinal wholeness? Are you engaged in the mission of continuing the apostolic proclamation and example?

Such questions cannot be asked from any position of superiority. In any of its forms the church has a constant struggle with these issues and can only ask these questions in the knowledge that it is constantly falling short. The church must always be open to learn from others. In particular, 'alternative communities of faith' have a contribution to make to the Uniting Church in helping us to strike the right balance between 'doing' and 'being', mission and community.

It could be said that the Basis of Union sought to move the church away from an 'institutional' model to a 'servant' model. In conformity with the Basis of Union the UCA has subordinated the attraction of institutionalism to the demands of mission to the world and has tried to devise ways to avoid hierarchy and promote mutual service. In the process it has developed a bias towards what some have called 'mission monism' by which is meant the reduction of everything about the church to its mission so that being church has in practice received inadequate attention. By moving away from 'institution' model primarily towards a 'communion' model rather than a 'mission' model, 'alternative communities of faith' can help us to redress the imbalance.

2d. Alternative Faith Communities and The Uniting Church

Omitting those communities mentioned above, which have rejected the church and even Christianity, the Uniting Church is presented with three different relationship possibilities.

i. No links with the Uniting Church

Some of these relate to other communions. For example, there are many such communities that have close connections with the Roman Catholic Church. There are others that are deliberately inter denominational and choose to stand at arm's length from every denomination, though they are not out of sympathy with the churches. With some communities in this category the Uniting Church can have friendly, if not close relationships. It is of note that a Uniting Church deacon in NSW is working with small faith communities associated with the Roman Catholic Church. In that way these communities are benefiting from the Uniting Church and in turn may be able to enrich our understanding of small group life helping us to see how small communities can be held in effective interaction with congregations and the communion as a whole.

ii. Minimal links with the Uniting Church

There are those that make use of Uniting Church buildings. Some members of these may hold membership in the Uniting Church and sometimes worship in Uniting Churches, but there are no close or formal links with the Uniting Church. One such group is the TOLLS community that uses the Ovingham UCA church in South Australia. In the beginning it received some 'seed funding' from the UCA, but its membership is very ecumenical and it has no formal links with any denomination. The community is open to receive help and encouragement from the Church and would have something to offer to the Church in return. A relationship that offers mutual respect and support, without any demand that the community meets certain Church criteria, is worth fostering, just as we already support inter church dialogue and cooperation.

iii. Closer relationship with the Uniting Church

Examples would be the Pymont congregation in Sydney, which is not formally a congregation of the Uniting Church but has grown out of Uniting Church sponsorship and is quite dependent on Uniting Church leadership. It may become officially a congregation of the Church at some time, but many of its members might feel uncomfortable about that at this stage. There are many faith

communities in the Uniting Church, which are on the way to becoming congregations.

There is also a group that gathers mid week at the Prahran mission in Melbourne, though there is no longer a recognised Uniting Church congregation at the Mission or within the municipality. A deacon who works within the Mission leads it, and the group is known to the Presbytery of Nepean and is under its pastoral oversight. It operates outside the structures and regulations which would apply to a Uniting Church congregation. There are many similar faith communities existing in places where there may never be enough members to fulfil all that is required of a congregation.

A third example, is *The Branches* in Adelaide. A small team of people was commissioned from a Uniting Church congregation in 1992 to form a new Christian fellowship to extend the message of Christ's salvation in fresh ways. It has a carefully crafted philosophy and practical ministry plan. It celebrates Holy Communion every Sunday with one or more of its own leaders presiding. In this respect it seems not to follow Church regulations with respect to sacramental discipline. A number of other communities have since sprung from the original *Branches* community.

iv. Comments

Towards communities of this type the Uniting Church has a duty of care and oversight, exercised not heavy handedly but sensitively and encouragingly. The Church might hope that in return for its sponsorship these communities would willingly accept certain conditions, such as the following:

- Respect the Basis of Union and seek to live and work within the faith and unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as that is interpreted in the Basis of Union.
- Open communities welcoming people irrespective of gender, class or ethnicity.
- Known to the presbytery within which they meet and be open to the oversight of the Church.
- Accept sacramental authorisation from the Church. This does not necessarily mean that only an ordained minister can preside at the sacraments. A leader or leaders within the community may be authorised for this purpose by the Presbytery.

Faith communities would find benefits in accepting such conditions. It would, for example, provide structures of accountability, which would be useful in helping the community to avoid various forms of heresy and disorder in worship and discipline. It might also challenge the community to broaden its understanding of mission and engagement in it, while helping the church to understand better the nature of community.

Proposals

As an outcome of this study, the Working Group on Doctrine makes the following proposals:

1. That where Synod agencies establish communities of faith as a means of outreach into new areas, care be taken to have the community recognised by the Presbytery within whose bounds it exists.
2. That the Uniting Church, through Synod Boards of Mission study the nature and role of small communities of faith in the Roman Catholic Church, and the way in which these relate to congregations and the church as a whole, to determine how we might develop similar groups in the UCA.
3. That the UCA encourage existing communities of faith sponsored by it to accept a set of guidelines similar to those proposed in this paper and to observe Regulation 3.1.32.
4. That the UCA relate to alternative communities of faith that do not wish to accept such guidelines as it relates to other churches in Christian fellowship and charity, and working in co operation wherever that is possible.
5. That the Assembly encourage presbyteries, congregations and faith communities recognised by presbyteries to make use of this report for study and discussion.