

CROSS

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a forum for theological dialogue

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CROSS Purposes

Welcome to the latest issue of *Cross Purposes*. Our *In Service* column makes a welcome return after a few issues in the wilderness. Kim Groot reflects on her experience as a school chaplain alongside parish ministry, noting the way that the two contexts inform one another, and the urgent need for apologetics in both schools and the wider community.

Nathan Nettleton's sermon on baptism draws on personal experience to consider the sacrament as a commitment "for better or worse". Baptism does not exempt our faith from times of dryness or discouragement, but it does join us in a covenant with God who is faithful through those times.

The *credo* series is continued by Joan Wright Howie, in a piece reflecting on the Holy Spirit via the language of spirituality. Describing the task of religion as "rebinding" creation with its source, Joan calls for a renewal of awareness and practice of Christian spirituality in a curious but often uninformed world.

This issue's *Areopagus* responds to the latest instalment in the Uniting Church's long-running discussion of membership and confirmation. The Assembly recently circulated a new Discussion Paper on this subject, proposing a redefinition of membership categories based on baptism and periodic recommitment (such as annual covenanting). We publish a summary of the paper (the full text can be found on our website), and two responses, from Anita Monro and Martin Wright. Anita argues in favour of corporate reaffirmation of faith taking the place of individual confirmation; Martin defends the distinctive place of the personal rite.

Happy reading!

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Editors:

Garry Deverell
Craig Thompson
Martin Wright

Letters to the Editor
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editors@
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or,

Cross Purposes
c/- 81 Oxley Road
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in service

Kim Groot

Priestly Apologetics

Over the years, friends have regularly suggested I consider working in school chaplaincy: I was a teacher before applying to candidate for the Ministry of the Word and taught more recently in the VCE Department of the Centre for Adult Education, alongside part-time parish ministry.

I was reluctant to try chaplaincy because it seemed that teaching and ministry asked such different things of me that I would find myself seriously divided; however, at the beginning of 2010, I found myself working in the Uniting Church's Hailybury College and in the Hampton congregation.

I was intrigued to discover from the outset that my fears about being torn in two were groundless. At no stage, did I feel the tension I was concerned about: I was a Minister of the Word, working in a school.

I know that other chaplains teach, but so far I am appreciating the freedom to move among teaching staff, students and admin personnel because I am not identified with any group in particular. While I am part of the school community, I relate to everyone from a different basis—a basis which overtly arises from my leadership in assembly and chapel services.

I speak briefly each week at Junior, Middle and Senior School assemblies. I follow the lectionary for the previous Sunday. Despite some ongoing tussles with those who would rather I chose readings which relate specifically to school events—such as sport and other competitions—I have persisted with readings from the church's calendar. As is the case in weekly preaching in a congregation, the discipline of the lectionary continually takes me by surprise by how “relevant” it is to the issues of the world and of the school! It seems to me that the rhythm of the church year is speaking more and more to the life of the school, but perhaps that only means that the Word speaks to me more and more within the life of the school—but that's no bad thing either.

I am conscious of myself as the representative hearer of the Word in the school; I must listen for the Word of God as it comes to me as I share life among the staff and students to whom I also listen. The sense of priestly presentation of the school to God and God to the school provides me with the meaning that sustains me in what can be a very strange position on occasion.

I am well aware that few in the school, if any, share that priestly view of my role. For most, I am a kind of

mascot. At key events in the school's life, I am required to embody the Christian tradition which the school was once much more familiar with. When I am frustrated, I suggest someone in a koala suit might be more useful. Then I try to remember that it doesn't matter—even if I am the only one who looks for the presence of God among us.

I believe in being an apologist or defender of the faith in what is a very secular context, for the most part. Even though students experience one chapel service per term and have the opportunity to hear words of scripture each week and to share in prayer for the school, the world and themselves, the overwhelming culture in which they move is profoundly secular—at school and in the community.

The fact that most people in Australia think that all religions are, by definition, irrational is a good reason for a revival in apologetics, in my view. I try to show that faith is not irrational and, in fact, contains a rationale or a logic essential to full human existence. I try to say what the Christian faith actually is about and what it has to offer the world.

I try to defend the Christian faith against objections and misrepresentations; I try to correct inaccurate views and fight in the church's corner against popular culture's representation of the church and its members. I draw attention to the attacks on faith that are often attacks on things the church doesn't believe. I try to debunk the clichés. I also try to shine a light onto popular culture and expose the emptiness and weakness

of the values that people mostly embrace unthinkingly.

Ultimately, this is what happens in any congregation: we all live in the world and we all stand under the Word which addresses the world. In the secular school environment, the advantage is that no-one denies the world's distance from God. In the church, we seldom see our alienation and therefore don't hear the cutting edge of the Word as it addresses us.

There is a rawness to the hearing of the gospel in the school that is often lost in Sunday worship in our congregations. I find it enormously helpful to have to try to communicate the faith in a context where "church language" is foreign; I have been moved by hearing familiar words anew as I have struggled to articulate what they might mean to people hearing them for the first time.

While the school stands within the Christian tradition, there are people of other faiths who are members of the school community; it is therefore necessary to speak in such a way that offence is not given in the process of attempting to convey the Christian faith, and that reality confronts me too.

While some express surprise and mild interest in the idea of faith, in the school there is no strong worshipping community to nurture a growth in faith. There are chaplains and people of faith among staff and students but there are lots of people who find the whole idea ludicrous. I am regularly told in one way or another that the church needs the school—its resources and its young

people—whereas the school needs nothing from the church! God is an optional extra—not really required.

If it were not for the Hampton congregation, I have no doubt that the loneliness of chaplaincy would overwhelm me. I see Sunday morning's worship as the cradle out of which come the mini sermons and prayers that occur in the school during the week. I understand myself to speak out of that worshipping community when I speak at school.

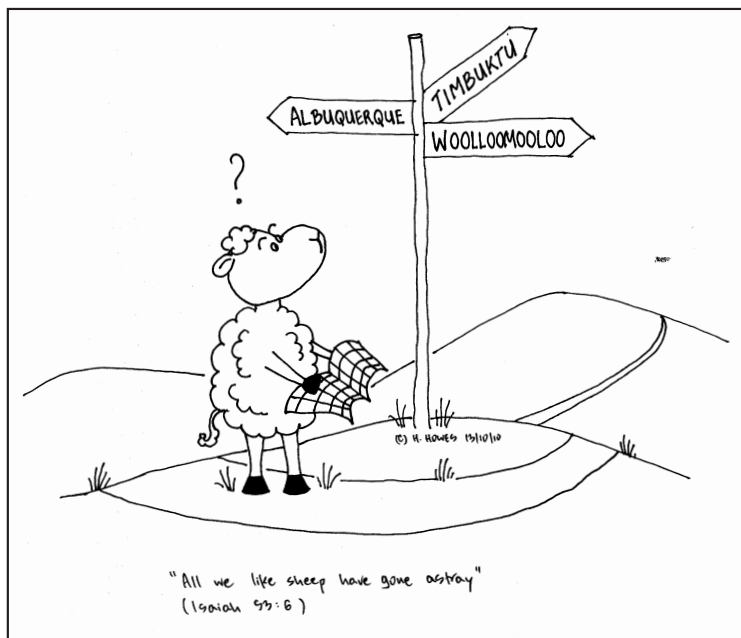
I also hear the call of the gospel upon the church far more sharply since working at Haileybury. I believe that the church stands accused by the world because of the church's failure to live the gospel in the world unmistakably. We have lost the respect of the surrounding culture—and not for the right reasons.

The faith is not rejected by people who have heard it clearly proclaimed but by people who have heard it watered down until it is silly and ineffectual.

My worship in the Hampton congregation is affected by my participation in the life of the Haileybury community; there is a conversation that takes place in the congregation that would not happen without the school experience. The Hampton people are very interested in what happens at school and there are many old links between them and the school that have nothing to do with me. So, despite my fears of being divided, I find myself enlivened by the opportunity to work in a school from within the context of the church.

KIM GROOT is a chaplain at Haileybury College and minister of Hampton UC.

double take



Hailey Howes

through a glass darkly

Nathan Nettleton

Baptized: For Better or Worse

a sermon on Matthew 3: 13-17 & Isaiah 42: 1-9

Message

In baptism we surrender to God's claim on us and enter a vowed relationship and life which will have its ups and its downs but in which God is forever faithful.

Sermon

The beginning of a new year is a time when many people try to do some kind of stocktake of their lives, evaluating what needs to change and making resolutions for the year ahead. Birthdays are another time for such things. It's my birthday today, and those of us whose birthdays come around new year get a double dose of life evaluation. Anniversaries can also be such a time. It might be the anniversary of starting your current job, or the anniversary of a major health scare or of arriving in this country or something. Some married couples do an annual evaluation of the state of their relationship at the time of their wedding anniversary. What about the anniversary of your baptism? I don't hear of people doing that very often at an individual level. People rarely mark the anniversary of their baptism.

Perhaps there is a good reason for this. Baptism, although it has

a personal dimension, is not an individual thing. Every baptism is an event for the whole church. Your baptism began a committed relationship between you and us, and so it is the anniversary of that relationship for all of us. So perhaps it makes sense for us to choose a date and all celebrate our baptisms together. We can be a bit like horses which are all deemed to have the same birthday, regardless of when they were born. And so, in fact, that is what we do in the church. Actually, not just once a year, but twice. The bigger one is at Pascha, or Easter. Every year in the Great Paschal Vigil, we recall and renew our baptismal vows, and the Lenten season that leads up to it is the time for the stocktake. The other one is today, the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord.

On the first ordinary Sunday after the Christmas season each year, we revisit and celebrate the baptism of Jesus at the hands of the prophet John in the Jordan river. And in an important sense, this *is* the anniversary of *our* baptism. The baptism into which we are baptized is the baptism of Jesus. We are joined to him and baptized with him. We say this at Pascha too, and the connection is also

important. At Pascha and at funerals, we remind ourselves that death is the completion of our baptism, the final immersion into the deep mysteries of the Spirit of God. Our baptism begins when we are immersed in water by the church in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and it is completed when with our final breath we place our spirits forever into the hands of God and are lowered into the earth in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there to await the final resurrection of the dead. So these two are not competing commemorations, but related. And today we contemplate the beginning of our baptismal life. But of course, as I've suggested with new year and birthdays and anniversaries, our remembrance of the beginning is an occasion of reflection on the present and ongoing journey. And for me, I've got the triple whammy!

Let me invite you into a little bit of where my reflection is going this year, in the hope that it might help cross-fertilize some of yours. My reflection on my baptismal identity this year is somewhat bound up with my reflection on my ordination as a pastor, which may not be very promising in terms of finding connections between my reflections and yours, but bear with me. In baptism we are all ordained to participate in the ministry of Christ. I've been further ordained to a specific role as a pastor, but all of us are called to live out our baptism by ministering the love and mercy of Christ in the various vocations and situations in which we find ourselves. Over the past year I've

been reconnecting with my calling and finding my feet again as a pastor after a few years of having partially lost my way. But right at the moment, with my triple whammy of life-stage reflections, I'm bumping into some feelings of loneliness and abandonment. This is not being caused by you people here. It's just that more and more of my pastoral peer group, pastors I was either ordained with or who are good friends and around my age, have been walking away from being pastors. It's an over-exaggerated feeling, but I'm starting to feel a bit like the last man standing. And when you feel like the last man standing, it's hard to avoid the feeling that maybe you're next. Maybe the bell is tolling for me too, and I'm just blocking my ears to it.

So far, most of them are still involved in churches at some level, but some have dropped out completely and no longer call themselves Christians. That's even more threatening. One who says he no longer believes the Christian story at all claims to be the happiest he's ever been in his life. And I think he really is. So there is a part of me that can't help responding to his enthusiasm by wondering whether maybe I'd be happier if I walked away too. And at that point, we are not talking about me as a pastor, but all of us as followers of Jesus. We are back with talking about our baptismal identity, and what it means to be true to it or to walk away from it. In baptism we committed ourselves to following the way of Jesus for life. But as we take stock at the beginning of a new year, how is that commitment holding up?

You've often heard me say that baptism is a bit like marriage: it is a vowed commitment to a lifetime partnership. And as I reflect on my current nagging feelings of abandonment, I realize that again it is a bit like marriage. Most married people are familiar with a similar set of feelings that comes if you are going through a period where a number of your friends walk away from their marriages. If a few of them happen within your circle of friends, you start wondering who's next, and could it be us but I just haven't seen the writing on the wall yet. Part of what makes marriage work is the shared value we put on it and the solidarity we have with others who are committed to it, and that helps us get through the inevitable rough times or flat times. But when that solidarity breaks down in your peer group, it suddenly gets harder. And then some of those friends start turning up to social gatherings with devastatingly attractive new partners on their arms, and the nagging questions are always there in the back of your head. Maybe the grass is greener on the other side? They seem happier than they've ever been; maybe it would work for me too? Is it really such a failure to walk away and start all over again?

These are tough questions, and when you go through a time when they come flooding at you, it can be a rocky time. But somehow for me, recognizing that my current niggling feelings about my baptism and ordination are really just the same sort of thing that happens from time to time in my marriage is quite helpful, quite reassuring. It tells

me that the feelings are normal and a bit cyclic. They just come around from time to time, and if I stay true, they pass again. It tells me not to take them too seriously and go running off and making impetuous plans. And it tells me that the difficult and doubting times are all part of the journey that leads to the life I really want to live. I know that when I got married, I pledged myself "for better or for worse", knowing that both would come, and that the better wouldn't be realized if I wasn't prepared to stick true through the worse. I know that the most thrilling depths of intimacy are only ever found by those who have the courage and faithfulness to persevere tenaciously through the obstacles and the flat patches and push on out into the depths together. There is no shortcut to that.

And so too it is with the baptized life, the life of discipleship. We may not have used quite the same words, but our baptismal vows were made for better or for worse too. Jesus knew this. If we read on from where we stopped at the story of his baptism before, we would have heard that the very next thing was that he was driven into the desert by the Spirit and there he was assailed by the devil for forty days. And when he got back from that, he heard that John who had baptized him had been dragged off by the security forces and was in jail, never to get out alive. Jesus made no promises that it would be any better for us. If you want to follow me, take up your own cross, he said. In other words, sign your own death warrant. Follow me and you will be lonely and persecuted and

disowned by your families. You will be denounced and ridiculed and locked up. You will receive all this and ten thousand blessings besides. But you can't pick and choose. It's a whole package. And just like the married life, the most exhilarating joys may only emerge after hanging tough through some dark days. I'm not saying everything good is in the future. Most married couples experienced lots of wonderful things together at the start. That's why they signed on to stay the distance. And most of us were similarly baptized because we fell in love with Jesus and it was wonderful. But like a good lover, Jesus knows that the initial glow of infatuation passes, and the lifetime journey will have both joys and sorrows, highs and lows, adventures and boring lulls. And he knows that the discipline of fidelity in those flat and discouraging times is what readies us to fully appreciate and embrace the good times when they come again. It is actually quite scary to take the next step into deep intimacy with God, and we develop the courage through our practice of tenacious faithfulness.

There is something of the wedding in the language and imagery of the baptism readings. We don't do crownings in our weddings, but in the eastern churches they do, and the image of the Spirit descending on Jesus as he emerges from the

water has a bit of that feel for me. He is being crowned, or anointed, chosen and claimed for life. And words of love and joy and commitment are spoken: This is my beloved, in whom I rejoice. Our Isaiah reading too spoke the language of covenant and we heard God saying to us, "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you." Is it a wedding? Is it a baptism? Is it both? Either way, the really really good news is that God is unfailingly faithful. You can rest more secure in God's love than in even the most perfect marriage. God will never fail you or forsake you or give up on you. Even if all my friends walk away and I am literally the last man standing, still God will not abandon me. Would I have the courage to stay true if that happened? I can't know. I'm not so strong or dependable or clairvoyant that I can predict with certainty whether I could stand alone. But I hope I would. And I'm praying that I would. And I'm praying that you would too and I hope you'll pray for me, because that solidarity is part of how we make it. But in the end, there is only one thing that matters: God is astonishingly loving, utterly faithful, and will never let us go.

NATHAN NETTLETON is pastor of South Yarra Community Baptist Church and teaches Christian Worship at Whitley College in Parkville.

credo

Joan Wright Howie

Popular Belief in Spirit and Christian Spirituality

The dawning of the 21st century heralds dramatic change in Christian churches across the western world. Church membership is rapidly declining. Congregations are ageing and younger generations are largely choosing not to participate in the life of the church. According to social commentators, however, exploring human spirituality is of growing interest both in church communities and contemporary culture.¹ It is vital therefore for the church to understand the nature of human spirituality, be equipped to accompany people in their unfolding spiritual journey and reclaim the gifts of Christian spirituality.

Spirituality is a difficult term to define and the exploration of spirituality plays out in many forms in popular culture. Where the term once referred to a devotional life of piety, *spirituality* is now used to describe dimensions of the inner life. People's interior lives reflect subtle dimensions of awareness and a sense of belonging beyond "the individual ego to a larger more valuable horizon of reality that impinges on all we are and do".² The inner life is

characterized by a deepening awareness of this horizon beyond the ego, which we might call the "sacred", the source of life. Spirituality, however, is more than just awareness of the sacred; it is about our relationship with the sacred. This relationship stirs our desire, shapes our longings, informs our self-understanding and becomes our frame of reference for the practice of spirituality.

Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our Eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others and the cosmic world.³

Rolheiser's definition implies that spirituality is not a commodity that we can choose to consume or discard. Our spirituality is a relationship with the life beyond our individuality that shapes who we are becoming. A Norwegian legend describes the human desire and searching for God: "Before a soul is put into the body

¹ David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003).

² Tinden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*

(New York: Paulist, 1980) 4.

³ Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988) 10f.

the soul is kissed by God and during all of its life on earth, the soul retains a dim, but powerful, memory of that kiss and relates everything to it”⁴ This story of receiving the kiss of God describes the restlessness human beings experience, which can lead people on a whole variety of different journeys in search of the sacred other. Hence there are many different expressions of spiritualities.

Margaret Guenther describes this spiritual searching as a deep inner question, which echoes that of the rich young man who asks Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Matt. 18:18). Jesus responds to this question, not by suggesting a task, but by inviting us on a journey of self-discovery,⁵ to let go of the possessions that weigh us down so that we are free to follow him.

We can only really describe rather than define spirituality as a distinctive ontological and biological human trait that concerns the journey toward self-identity in connection with an Ultimate Unity. This journey finds expression outwardly and inwardly in how we live, what we value and believe.

For the theistic believer, spirituality is life in and with God; for the Christian, it is life lived in companionship with Jesus Christ; for the non-theistic believer it is life lived to the full, with regard and deep respect for what can be described as the “other”.

A theology of Christian spirituality begins with God’s longing for us. God

seeks us and knows us, when we stand and when we sit (Ps. 139). God’s desire for us stirs in us a desire for God and our heart’s longing for God. This restlessness, this inner yearning is the beginning of our response to God longing for us, and the focus of Christian spirituality.

To know the truth, then, is to allow one’s self to be known ... only by letting ourselves be known to each other and our deepest selves, can we feel the assurance that we are indeed known to God.⁶

A primary goal of the church is reflected in the root meaning of the word *religion*. *Religio* means to *rebind* and religion seeks to rebind people to the source of life and heal any alienation.⁷ God, source of love and creator of all that is, is already bound to humanity in covenantal cords that cannot be broken. At the heart of the spiritual journey is a human quest to re-discover our identity and mission bound up in the love of God. For Christians, spirituality is about being fully human; it really works more as a verb rather than a noun because it is a *movement* always at work within our deepest self. It is there without our even asking for it or being aware of it. Essentially it is pure gift, but a gift that calls for ongoing nurturing and deepening.

Life presents profound ambiguities, which are intrinsic to contemporary political and moral life. Fundamental questions emerge about determining right and wrong, good and bad. What sense can be made of pain, death, beauty

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992) 54.

⁶ Ibid., 58f.

⁷ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 218.

and violence? These are spiritual questions grounded in the quest for personal and communal identity and questions about God emerge. Dominant Australian culture, however, fails to provide satisfactory responses to people's hunger for the intangible and the majority choosing not to align themselves with a communal or structured expression or exploration of spiritual life.

“People wonder, is there a source of life to which religion can serve as a rebinding agent?”

In Australian culture, the Christian church is not a primary reference point with regard to matters of the Spirit. The longing people express to sense being bound back to the source of life is reflected in the broad personal spirituality movement. David Ranson describes four expressions of spirituality in Australian culture.⁸ The first is a personal quest for answers to personal questions with no perceived need for a guru or god. The second revolves around seeking therapeutic strategies for balance and wholeness, wellbeing and restoration. The third is evident where people blindly or under coercion give up self-determination and hand over allegiance to a guru, religious societies or subcultures. Here people's

freedom is diminished and information denied. Spiritual practices are given as regulations to adhere to rather than freely chosen as a disciple in response to confession of faith. Finally Ranson advocates for a spirituality derived from a revisionist theology seeking to discover the presence of God in our place and our time. A revisionist theology invites people to become formed by a living relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through immersion in the Christian narrative and tradition, we discover tools to interpret and speak about our encounter with God. Our encounter with God, in turn, informs and shapes the expression of the tradition.

Where spirituality is explored in isolation from wider communities, the personal quest with no guide can leave people skipping from one nice idea to the next without any depth or substance. People remain isolated individuals at risk of creating gods in their own image. The therapeutic approach to spirituality plays on people's deep longings and tries to provide the solutions. The sacred, however, is not a commodity and there are no simple market-place solutions to our inner longings for relationship with the sacred. Equally problematic are religious societies and subcultures who use power and coercion to dictate to people what to believe and how to live their lives. In contrast, Ranson advocates a dialogue between two sources of theology: human experience and the Christian event—the questions of our time and the deep impulses of our tradition. Whilst always being deeply personal spirituality,

⁸ David Ranson, “Revisioning Spirituality”, *Conference 17.5* (May 2000).

human experience is communal and is not an individual concern. Attending to human experience and formation in tradition are not opposite poles with a clash of purpose. Rather, they need each other in dialogue as different sides of the same coin.

Spirituality without tradition becomes vague, self-serving and soloist. Spirituality without attentiveness to human experience becomes doctrinaire and isolated.⁹

It is clear that defining spirituality is not a simple task. William Johnston suggests that it is premature to codify a definition of spirituality. He calls spirituality a “cutting edge word of our time”.¹⁰

Human spirituality is the outworking of human collective desire at the heart of religion, to *rebind* with the source of life. For Christians, this desire is a response to God’s invitation to abide in loving trinitarian relationship at the heart of God in whom we live and move and have our being. Spirituality is reflected in the disciplines and habits people live by and will impact a sense of belonging and relatedness to other people, the cosmic world and to God. Human spirituality is not a commodity but rather the restless seeking of relationship and identity.¹¹

I encounter people unconnected with the church who describe an active

⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰ William Johnston, “The Spiritual Revolution and the Process of Reconfessionalisation in the West”, *Pacifica* 16.1 (Feb. 2003) 10.

¹¹ This restlessness is what Rahner describes as the supernatural existential. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) ch. 4.

spiritual life but do not have any language with which to name or describe their spirituality. They might be curious about Christianity but are not formed in the language and tradition Christian faith and therefore have minimal foundation in speaking about and exploring a spiritual life and encounter with God. I also meet active church members seeking to grow in their relationship with God, but finding little nourishment in their current worshiping community.

With the decline in church participation there are now several generations of largely biblically illiterate people who name an interest in spirituality, but not in institutional Christianity. Sadly, the church is also infected with the loss of meaning reflected in popular culture. Members of the church often appear to be suspicious themselves. The culture of spiritual seeking promotes uncertainty. This uncertainty can undermine the Christian conviction that we live in the presence of God and can discover God in the Christian language, liturgy and narrative. There is a loss of confidence in the divine presence beneath the language, stories and liturgical expressions of our faith. People wonder, is there a source of life to which religion can serve as a rebinding agent? Can anyone be certain that God is not simply a projection of human consciousness or a creation of our own culture?

Craig Dykstra describes this as a “nasty suspicion”,¹² which can take hold

¹² Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the life of Faith* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

in the church and result in a kind of practical atheism. Religious practices continue and institutions maintained, yet people are uncertain about their purpose. If there is no trust in the existence of the source of life, the goal of religion in enabling people to sense ourselves rebound with God is undermined. Christians wonder about the effect of prayer, the benefit of faith and no longer feel confident that the presence of God can be experienced or God's grace encountered in human living. In this paper, there is only space to flag the importance of a robust theology in support of the human spiritual life.

A fundamental challenge for the church is to recognize the spiritual hunger both in our church and culture. The church must be equipped to provide more than good ideas, structures and techniques. The church will only be able to resource the fundamental human desire for relationship with the source of life, when church communities rediscover the ancient Christian practices of attending to the presence of God already present in our liturgy, sacrament, scripture and common life. As Ranson advocates, this involves dialogue between human experience and the faith tradition.

There is a cry for Christian communities that are grounded in Christian spiritual practices and a living experience

of attending to God's grace. The Christian tradition offers a vast resource of spiritual practices to nurture the spiritual formation of faith communities. There is not space in this paper to explore the breadth of spiritual practices in the Christian tradition. Brian McLaren in a chapter describing the genesis of spiritual practice names seven ancient practices: fixed hour prayer, fasting, Sabbath, the sacred meal, pilgrimage, observance of sacred seasons and giving.¹³ There are manifold forms of expression of these practices in the Christian tradition to be relished, and wrestled with.

The experience of encountering God and discovering a primary identity as loved children of God shapes participation in the world as disciples of Jesus. Practising the presence of God in daily living paves the way for people to participate in the inbreaking of God's promised vision for the world. If a goal of Christian religion is rebinding and healing any alienation in relationship with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit, let's reclaim the focus of Christian spirituality in the fostering of relationship with God in Christ.

JOAN WRIGHT HOWIE is minister of Habitat Uniting Church (Canterbury & Hawthorn).

¹³ Brian McLaren, *Finding our Way Again* (Nashville: Nelson, 2008) 21-29.

on Areopagus Hill

Confirmation and Membership

The Assembly has recently circulated a new Discussion Paper on this much-discussed subject; what follows here is a summary only. The full paper can be read at cp.unitingchurch.org.au/assembly_membership.pdf. This includes a Q&A section and appendices. §§9 and 10, which form the substance of the Assembly's proposal, are retained here in full.

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: [that] Australian society has changed dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s. ... [and that] 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.

...there is good support for the notion that those who are members of the church are those who are baptized 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 emphasized as the sacrament that initiates people into the Christian life and the church.

4. ...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...

5. ...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.

7. How then can confirmation be freshly practised?

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. ... 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...

What Is the Assembly Proposing?

9. The Assembly proposes moving to a new understanding of confirmed membership. It will be characterized 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 recognized 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 baptized, 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 recognized 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) baptized people. ... The emphasis should be on baptism and discipleship...

12. Explanations would need to be provided leading up to the commitment service of the congregation ... In order to become recognized 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)...

13. Discipleship training courses should be offered as part of the congregation's preparation for a commitment service...

Why Not Reaffirm Confirmation?

Anita Monro

After many years of talking about the nature of baptism and discipleship, the United Church is looking at reaffirming confirmation, the reaffirmation of baptism, not as a single rite for each person, but as an annual rite for every congregation (every “embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”, *Basis of Union* §15). What’s the point? Theologically, in a Protestant context, it is difficult to argue the case for anything coming between baptism and full participation in the body of Christ in the context of the United Church’s theology of church and sacraments. Pragmatically, the United Church is struggling to define itself (and who belongs to it) in the face of the changing place of the Christian church in the world. Various calls for covenantal services to define the members of the body of Christ in its “embodiment in the one place” as the congregation reflect this struggle. It is the notion of “in the one place” with which our current discussion of church membership is wrestling. How do we define which of the baptized members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church belong to this particular “one place” at any one time?

I should make a few disclosures before I continue. Up until June 2010, I was a member of the Doctrine Working Group and participated in the discussion working towards the production of this paper. I was also the Theological Listener at the November 2010 Assembly Standing Committee which resolved to make

certain revisions to the paper and then distribute it for discussion.

Theological Foundations

For the United Church, “the church” is defined in good theological categories in the *Basis of Union*, e.g., “fellowship [communion] of the Holy Spirit” (§3), “Christ’s body” (§7). The United Church understands itself to be part of the “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” (§2); and clearly understands, in keeping with ecumenical agreement, that “Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism” (§7). The sacraments (of which for us there are only two) are where we find the theological boundaries of the body of Christ. Baptism incorporates us into Christ’s body and eucharist feeds us on the journey within it (§§6-8).

When, in the mid-1980s, the United Church affirmed that baptized children could not be denied the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, it affirmed the actual theological understanding of baptism that it holds—that all baptized people are members of the body of Christ and should be given access to the resources of that body, i.e. be fed by “Word and Sacraments” (*Basis* §3).

Our Christian identity is primarily a corporate identity: body of Christ; communion of the Spirit, people of God. The United Church’s definition of the congregation affirms that corporate and corporal identity:

The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and

Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members 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. (*Basis* §15)

In previous eras and Christian traditions, determining who belonged to the body “in the one place” was easy. If you lived in the parish and you were baptized (and generally you were), you belonged—it was geographical. But when there is no longer one congregation in the geographic area, but a multiplicity of choices of denominations, the question of “Who belongs?” is more complicated. The emphasis in the UC definition of a congregation is on engagement in community with the practices of the Christian life—worship, witness and service. However, judgements about active engagement in one place can never negate or replace foundational baptismal identity.

Confirmation

There is only one mention of confirmation in the *Basis of Union*:

The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptized 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 baptized. To this end the Uniting Church commits itself to undertake, with other Christians, to explore and develop the relation of baptism to confirmation and to participation in the Holy Communion. (§12).

“Confirmed members” are defined in the Constitution (§6) in three categories: “confirmed members in one of the

uniting churches”; “such baptized persons as affirm their faith in Jesus Christ, accept the responsibilities of membership and acknowledge the discipline of the Church and are confirmed in the manner prescribed”; and “those who having been confirmed members of another church are accepted on transfer from that church”. The second definition is of most interest to the present discussion.

Confirmation for us is reaffirmation of baptism. Reaffirmation of baptism can happen in any service of worship at any time and in any place. Theologically, it occurs every time we gather for worship as the body of Christ and especially when we gather to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. For many Korean congregations within the Uniting Church, it happens explicitly every Sunday when they recite the ecumenical baptismal creed, the Apostles' Creed, at the beginning of the service. For many other UC congregations, it happens explicitly at least every time a baptism occurs. For substantial portions of Christian history, the Easter Vigil service has been an explicit occasion for reaffirming baptism identity.

As a particular reaffirmation of baptism, confirmation has been regarded as specifically occurring upon profession of faith by someone of an age and developmental stage to be able to do so. In actuality, when confirmation is required as a specific rite prior to full participation in the body of Christ, baptism is treated as somehow “provisional” not definitive; and that position is not theologically sound in our Protestant context.

However, we are a conciliar church in which all members have the possibility of participating in the discernment processes of the councils of the church; and we are a reformed and evangelical church that has inherited the Enlightenment emphasis on individualized commitments, decisions and identity; and we have also inherited the Christendom practice of “indiscriminate” baptism. So the pragmatic issues of “Who is really allowed to vote?” apparently weigh heavily on us.

Reaffirming a congregational rite of confirmation is better than reaffirming an individualized right. It emphasizes the corporate identity of the worshipping, witnessing and serving body of Christ. Corporate identity is about being disciples in community, not individual believers on our own.

However, reaffirming confirmation of any kind will not take away the difficult issues of oversight that Church Councils already face in their responsibility for the rolls of the congregation. Reaffirming confirmation as an annual congregational rite will not take away the responsibility of the Council to work creatively and corporately with the congregation to foster and develop a Christian discipleship identity which regular reaffirmations of baptism will assist.

Concluding

And if that is the case, why bother reaffirming one particular form of baptismal reaffirmation, confirmation, at all? And pragmatically, why bother legislating another particular approach to recognizing active engagement? The UC already has

mechanisms for oversight of the congregation, including its rolls, which are overseen by Church Councils (including ministers and elders). An annual service is not going to protect us from facing the same decisions that we already face: When should we really remove someone from the roll? If they fail to attend the annual Covenant service once—probably not when they are regular attenders; but what does regular mean; and have they been suffering a long term illness that prevents them from participating; and so on, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Reaffirming confirmation also cannot replace baptism (as some conversation partners have erroneously assumed). It presumes baptism. What reaffirming a congregational rite of confirmation does not do, however, is give the sacrament of baptism its rightful place in our understanding of the church as the body of Christ into which we are plunged in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And yet, our baptismal identity is primary in understanding who we are and whose we are as the body of Christ.

So, instead of reaffirming a particular reaffirmation of baptism called confirmation, we could simply take baptism much more seriously than we do; and take more seriously too our communal responsibility to foster our corporate identity as the body of Christ—the baptized, worshipping, witnessing and serving people of God.

ANITA MONRO is minister of Armidale UC. She has served on the Assembly Doctrine and Worship WGs, but is taking a break from both to focus on congregational life & her own writing.

A Vital Rite

A review of membership in the Uniting Church is timely, and there is much to commend in the Assembly's recent Discussion Paper. It is a good move to recognize membership based on baptism and active participation in the church. Annual covenanting or recommitment services are equally welcome, as is the simplification of membership categories. To be part of an increasingly marginalized church requires an intentional personal choice, something that has been obscured in recent generations of widespread passive membership. In this respect, the DP offers an appropriate response to the changing place of the church in society. But its treatment of confirmation is ambiguous, and there is a danger that as this matter is deliberated, we will lose the baby along with the bathwater. This response argues for a clarification of what confirmation is, and a reaffirmation of its importance in the life of the Uniting Church.

Confusion about Confirmation

Confirmation has sometimes been called “a sacrament in search of a theology”, but its problem is really the diversity of theologies on offer. (Whether or not we call it a “sacrament” is a red herring in the current discussion.) Its history is confusing and it has meant different things in different times and places. In view of this, it is not surprising that modern churches don't know exactly what to do with it; this hesitancy is reflected in the Discussion Paper.

Martin Wright

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. (Discussion Paper §5)

To speak about “different ways” of celebrating confirmation begs the question—different from what? The DP is right to emphasize the centrality of baptism, but is this actually under threat in the Uniting Church? Is there really a widespread theology of confirmation in our church which is *not* “closely connected with baptism and discipleship”?

The DP is rightly responding to an outmoded view of church membership that is disconnected from participation. Holding a vote in the church, and being eligible for office, should indeed be connected with the ongoing practice and reaffirmation of faith within a local congregation. But does it follow that once-off personal confirmation has no enduring value as a “separate rite”? I am not so sure.¹

¹ In trying to clarify this question, it would help if we could replace the term “confirmed member” with “voting member” or similar. Presumably this has not been done because the Constitution refers to “confirmed membership”. But surely any revision to the Regulations could include a definitions clause to cover this. “Full membership” would be misleading since all baptized people are fully members of the church.

Why Bother with Confirmation?

The simplest way to clear all this up, and a proposal that is bound to arise in response to the DP, is to do away with confirmation altogether as a distinct rite, and replace it with the periodic reaffirmation which will be required of all members. When someone baptized as an infant is ready, they will participate in this reaffirmation along with everybody else, and so become “confirmed”. That would certainly simplify things, but I believe it would be a great loss.

A lot of the suspicion that hedges around confirmation in Protestant churches arises from its ambiguous history. As the DP points out in its brief historical overview, the separation of confirmation as a different rite from baptism only came about because it was felt that the bishop should “confirm” every initiation, and he couldn’t attend every baptism in person.² It was only subsequently that knotty theological problems began to arise over exactly when the Holy Spirit was given to the new Christian. Those Reformers who retained confirmation (or something like it) made it clear that the Spirit was fully given in baptism, a sacrament complete in itself. The emphasis in confirmation

² It should be pointed out that this separation never took place in the Eastern churches, which still practise a single unified rite of initiation, even for infants. This includes baptism, eucharist, and one or both of chrismation (anointing) and the laying on of hands. The whole is performed by the local priest, but the chrism (oil) is previously consecrated by the bishop.

shifted to catechesis, personal profession of faith, or admission to communion.

So it will be argued: “The Uniting Church recognizes baptism as a complete sacrament, does not have bishops nor believe that baptism needs to be ‘ratified’ from outside, does not associate confirmation with admission to communion, and will now attend to catechesis and personal profession of faith continually, rather than once off. Confirmation was a historical accident and is now obsolete—get rid of it!”

The problem with this is that although confirmation *was* a historical accident, that doesn’t mean it wasn’t providential. I would argue that it is a gift from God that has enriched the church. True, the church has often enough been preoccupied with the awkward questions it raises, but on closer inspection, those questions turn out to be much less problematic than they seem.

In Defence of Confirmation

“In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13)—for Paul at least, it is clear that the Spirit is the truly active party in baptism. The Reformers were right to insist that baptism is a complete sacrament in itself, in which the Spirit incorporates a person into the body of Christ. But it does not follow that the baptized person has no further capacity to receive the Spirit! The Spirit is not a property but a dynamic person of God, who is continually renewing each Christian throughout their life.

The church participates in this in various ways, most obviously through

the eucharist, but also though other rites that have historically been regarded as sacraments, e.g. ordination, anointing for illness, absolution, as well as different sorts of commissioning and blessing rites. Confirmation is another case in point. In each of these activities, the Spirit has some special, distinctive grace to confer; each epiclesis addresses a particular need of the Christian or the church.

What then is the particular grace of confirmation? It has been helpfully described as an “evangelical” rite (by Martin Bucer, one of the more neglected Reformers). In confirmation, a baptized person and the church together profess the faith of their baptism, and so are renewed in it. The baptism of infants, though unproblematic in itself, creates the need for another rite: a single, decisive, personal act of identification with the faith a Christian received when they “did not know it”. Confirmation, rather than marking the delayed entry of the Spirit into a Christian’s life, confers the particular gift of the Spirit for the purpose of such personal appropriation.

If confirmation is wholly elided into the corporate reaffirmation of faith, the personal distinctiveness of this spiritual gift is lost. Of course we learn our faith, and *how* to affirm and practise our faith, within a worshipping community. But corporate and personal reaffirmation are not alternatives. God deals personally with every member of the body, and the grace to declare one’s adherence to the body is itself a personal gift. It needs its corresponding liturgy.

We could speak of confirmation as a rite of “personal choice” or “free will”, so long as we were prepared to use those terms ironically. Confirmation *is* an act of will, but only as surrender to the will of Christ, the act whereby the will can truly be said to become “free”. It *is* a choice, but “a choice not to choose”—to profess not my own faith, but the faith of the church. And so, at confirmation, the creed is recited by the congregation together with the candidates to whom it has passed on this faith.

In the laying on of hands and the epiclesis, the Spirit through the church transforms candidates into what they already are; what they were made in their baptism, and what they have been becoming in the church. The promises candidates make after the rite are to carry out their baptismal ministry; that is, to continue becoming what they are.

In the sacraments, the eschatological reign of God breaks into our present, and we participate in a more true order of time and reality. We can speak of “becoming who we are”; alternatively, we could say that our “eschatological identity”, the person we are to become, takes hold of us. That person is the one into whom we were baptized, Jesus Christ. He is the “last Adam”, the “heavenly man” into whose image we are being continually transformed.

In baptism, we share in Christ’s death and arise as part of his body. That remains ontological fact, whether we are baptized as unknowing infants or professing adults. But in the former case, when we eventually come to be

confirmed, it is our baptismal, eschatological identity which is there newly revealed.

So it is fitting to describe confirmation as a rite of “personal appropriation”, with the same provision for irony. The moment at which we decisively “appropriate” the faith to ourselves is in fact the moment—or rather one particular, distinctive moment—at which Christ appropriates us to himself, and gives us a glimpse of who we are elected to become.

Some Implications

The “choice” made in confirmation is constantly renewed throughout the Christian life, not least in regular eucharistic celebration and periodic acts of recommitment. So is it possible to do without confirmation? Certainly, but that does not mean we should. Although it is not essential, it should be *normal* for those baptized as infants, and wanting to continue in the church, to receive this rite.

In the case of adult baptism, no separate confirmation is necessary. *Uniting in Worship* is right to emphasize the unity of the ceremony. It is arbitrary to say that an adult is “both baptized and confirmed”—it is a single rite of complete Christian initiation. The need

for a separate confirmation only arises in the case of infant baptism.

Of course, the Uniting Church is right to admit all baptized persons to the eucharist, irrespective of confirmation. But it seems to me right to associate eligibility to vote and hold office in the church with a member’s decisive personal profession of faith, whether that be in adult baptism or confirmation.

Although confirmation is especially appropriate at Easter or Pentecost, it could also dovetail with a congregational service of recommitment, whenever that is conducted. This would emphasize that a once-off personal act of appropriation, and the periodic acts of congregational reaffirmation, are complementary rather than alternatives. The congregation’s profession of faith takes on a deeper significance when it becomes the context for the decisive acceptance of this faith by individual candidates.

The review of membership in the Uniting Church creates the opportunity to clarify what we mean by confirmation, and to renew the vitality of this rite in our churches. The opportunity should be embraced.

MARTIN WRIGHT is minister of Deakin-Campaspe UC Parish in northern Victoria, and an editor of *Cross Purposes*.



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