

CROSS
Purposes

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Issue 6
Post-Assembly Special

*Through a
Glass Darkly*

*Reflecting
on the
Assembly*

*Responds
to Geoff
Thompson*

and more

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Purposes

Issue 5
May 2006

A forum for theological dialogue

THE UNITING CHURCH is in an "Assembly year", and the gathering of the National Assembly in July is keenly anticipated (or dreaded) by many. This edition of CP seeks to make a contribution to some of the conversations to take place at the Assembly with a series of articles commenting on some of the major issues.

Rob Bos explores the meaning of baptism and its part in forming Christian identity. In a world (and a church) which thirsts for life, he asserts that, contrary to our usual treatment of it, the symbol of baptism is potent with the possibility of a rediscovery of life for ourselves, in Christ.

Rod Horsfield's article responds to a recent Assembly discussion paper on the relationship between the different specified ministries in the UCA. Given that it is Christ's ministry we exercise, shared with other denominations, Rod

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reminds us we cannot act without attention to our ecumenical partners.

Geoff Thompson's article does not reflect on any particular matter the Assembly will be addressing this year. Instead, he seeks to penetrate more deeply to the source of the difficulty the UCA has, not in having debates about this or that thing, but in having the kind of debate we all agree actually matters. Given that "the Assembly has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine" (UCA Constitution), it is important to understand just how we tend to experience the concepts of doctrine and common truth today, and therefore to understand how we might be given to respond to questions which are said to be "doctrinal" in character.

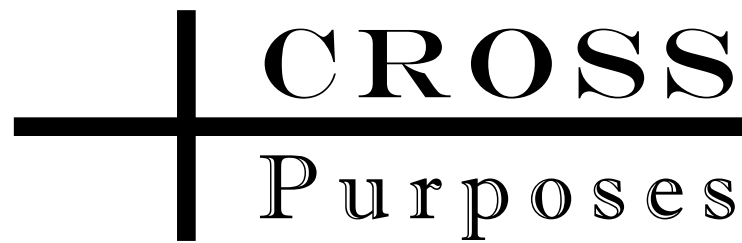
Lynnette Dungan, again not addressing Assembly questions directly,

nevertheless touches on what confronts the church in its meeting together with her meditation on the meaning of "transformation" as a dimension of Christian existence.

Finally, still loosely under the Assembly theme, Terence Corkin reflects on the meaning of ordained ministry, and the way in which this ministry can be exercised even in the heady heights of the Assembly office.

We encourage feedback through correspondence—especially in engagement with one of our contributors! Our next edition will be an Assembly retrospective. We'd like to thank those who've chosen to subscribe for hard copies of CP. So far we've about 60 subscribers, in addition to many who access the material online.

We hope you find this issue of CP an engaging read!



CROSS Purposes

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- The church must educate, ordain and discipline those whom it expects publicly to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and defend the rationality and integrity of the faith. Normally, people who are presiding at the celebration of the sacraments within a particular congregation or group of congregations should be ordained. This will require appropriate new guidelines and procedures.

- We believe that it should be part of the discipline of all ordained ministers to study and to seek supportive pastoral supervision and – where needed – mentoring. Ongoing formation and study should be required of locally licensed ministers by the Presbytery, in particular to help them better proclaim the truth of the gospel and the catholicity of the church.
- Such an approach would be consonant with our church's understanding that the norm for presiding at the celebration of the sacraments is ordination. If a presbytery presumed a person was appropriate to be approved for this kind of ongoing leadership in a congregation, they would proceed to ordain them in the expectation that their "licensing" would be limited.

These matters, particularly the understanding of the meaning of ordination, are in need of more thorough consideration by the leadership of our church in congrega-

tions, presbyteries and synods as well as the Assembly. In seeking a practical way in which the church can order its specified lay ministries the Uniting Church must be willing to assume the apostolic authority which Christ gives the church through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of individuals and the whole church.

RODNEY HORSFIELD is Minister at Christ Church Kensington, an Anglican/Uniting Church congregation, and Chairperson of the Assembly Christian Unity Working Group.

Notes

- The Report of the Specified Ministries Task Group is available on the Assembly website, nat.uca.org.au.
- The Specified Ministries Task Group has considered all the responses and their final report will be considered at the Eleventh Assembly in Brisbane in July this year.

¹World Council of Churches: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

²This point is argued more fully in "The Church and its Ministry: A Statement made for the Uniting Church in Australia by the Working Groups on Doctrine and Christian Unity" and approved by the Assembly Standing Committee in July 2004. It is available on the Assembly website.

5. *The Ordained Ministries of the Word and Deacon.* The CUWG strongly affirms the UCA's recognition of two forms of ministerial office, the Ministry of the Word

“ It is important not to obscure the authority of the Lordship of Christ in the life of the church by replacing Christ's gift of ministry to the church with solely pragmatic solutions. ”

and the Ministry of Deacon, and the fact that we exercise conciliar episcopal ministry through the Presbytery. We believe it is ecumenically important to retain this ordering of the church's ordained ministries, including the spiritual commitment to a life-long focus on serving Christ within the discipline of the Church.

Other points that we believe are important as the church rethinks its ministry in the contemporary setting are:

- The fundamental importance of the Ministry of the Word. The public office of the Minister of the Word has as its chief responsibility, *to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.*¹

- The Ministry of the Word holds together word, sacrament and pastoral care. As a public focus for the unity of the whole church, it is essential that Ministers of the Word preside at the eucharist, the sacrament of unity. Ministers of the Word do not stand in a privileged relation to Christ in a hierarchical sense. Our basic relationship to God is given in baptism, not ordination. But, by the Holy Spirit, ministers are placed in a new relation to the church, within it and yet beyond it.²

- The ordained ministry of Deacon represents to the church the diaconal ministry of Christ inviting the baptized to fulfil their ministry as witnesses and servants of those whom Christ loves and serves.

- We consider it proper to recognize forms of preparation for ordination through appropriate life experience and prior education. We note the urgent need of the church for ordained ministry in certain regions, particularly rural areas. We conclude that the call for a more flexible approach to the ordination of mature-age people in local situations can be justified theologically. Several sister churches use the language of licensing as an indication that a person is authorized to exercise, in a specific place and circumstance, the ministry to which they have been ordained.

Building up the Body of Christ

Terence Corkin

AS I BEGIN this short reflection I am reminded of a conversation that I had, now some years ago, as I was preparing to begin this ministry. A person asked me whether I would have a congregation where I would regularly preach. When I replied, “No, there will not be enough time left over for that kind of regular commitment”, she said “So you won't be a minister anymore?” Her comments got me thinking about what makes a role appropriate for a minister of the Word? What scope is there for the exercise of my primary calling as a minister of Jesus Christ when serving in what many describe (a little too narrowly I might say) as a functionary in an office?

There are certainly plenty of people who think you cannot be a minister unless you are preaching every week and have a pastoral relationship with a congregation. To such people the idea of being a minister without a pastoral charge is like trying to be a baker without getting flour on your hands. No doubt the practice of ministry experienced by many is found in preaching, teaching and pastoral care.

Nevertheless I want to advocate that the role of General Secretary is a valid context in which to exercise the role of minister of the Word, and not to see it as limited to being a generic “ministry”. In order to support this claim, and to lay the foundation for some comments on how I exercise my ministry, some discussion on the role of ministers is required.

Where does one begin to find the description of what constitutes the role of a minister? So as not to disappoint anyone by moving away from a stereotype—let me begin with the Regulations of the Uniting Church. Regulation 2.4.2 describes the duties of a minister. There are twelve clauses in this regulation and they cover everything from preaching and presiding at the sacraments to careful attention to administrative responsibilities and observance of the discipline of the church. At this point I want to draw back from these detailed prescriptions to note



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that the preamble to these clauses says, “Within the ministry of the whole Church, Jesus Christ calls men and women to proclamation of the gospel in word and deed through the ministry of Word and the ministry of Deacon”. The heart of being a minister of the Word is to have a primary responsibility to proclaim the gospel—in words and deeds. The twelve clauses that follow are ways of giving expression to this primary calling—they are never ends in themselves, and arguably they are not the only ways in which the gospel may be proclaimed in word and deed.

As is to be expected, the Regulations give more detailed expression to the sentiments and vision of the Basis of Union. Paragraph 14 says:

Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word. These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church.

What is present in the Basis of Union but not so obvious in the regula-

tion 2.4.2 is the purpose that lies behind, the reason for, having ministers of the Word—“so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church”. Clause (d) of 2.4.2 speaks of “witnessing in the community to the gospel of Jesus Christ” and clause (e) speaks of “equipping (members) for their ministry in the community”. However in the regulation these tasks come across as the means through which ministry of the Word is exercised rather than the purpose for which it is exercised. In conclusion, then, the Basis of Union takes the view that the purpose of ordained ministry is to enhance the ministry of the whole church through right proclamation and the encouragement of the ministries of all members, and thus to maintain the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church. These understandings are consistent with various New Testament perspectives, e.g. Ephesians 4:11-13 and aspects of Timothy.

Being a minister of the Word is not to be a one-person band. As evidenced above, it is to be a person who by faithful proclamation – in word and deed – equips the saints for service and maintains the apostolic witness of the church. Therefore for me the first way in which I exercise my ministry is to encourage others. If this is going to happen

tries, that of Minister of the Word (licensed generally or locally) and that of Deacon. We do not favour the term “local ordination” and suggested “locally licensed” to describe a person ordained to exercise that ministry exclusively in a localized setting. (See diagram, below.)

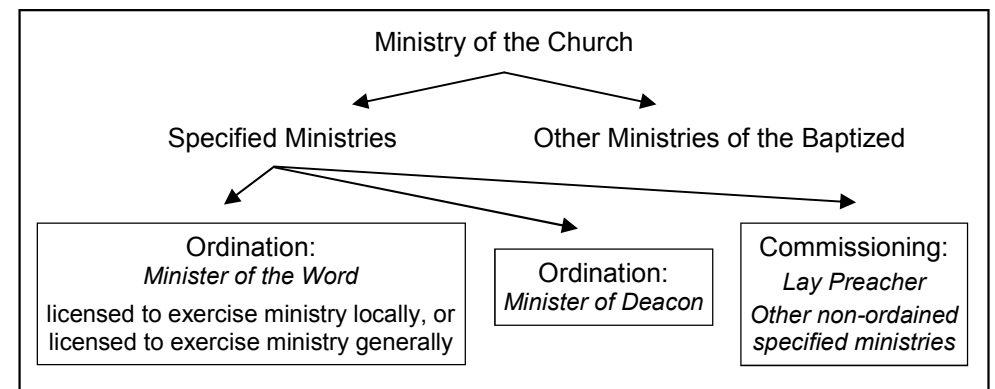
3. *Christian Ministry*. The confusion surrounding our understanding and organization of ministry within the Uniting Church partly stems from a failure to distinguish properly between strands of meaning in the term “ministry”. The church receives its calling to ministry from the risen Christ. It also receives, recognizes and confirms the forms of ministry into which Christ calls specific individuals. We believe that it will be helpful for the church to distinguish more carefully between:

- the ministry of the baptized (the ministry of witness to Jesus Christ),
- the ministry of those set apart by ordination as Ministers of the Word and as Deacons, and

- the ministry of those commissioned to other specified ministries of the church.

In the church’s thinking about these issues it is important, in our view, not to obscure the authority of the Lordship of Christ in the life of the church by replacing Christ’s gift of ministry to the church with solely pragmatic solutions.

4. *The Ministry of the Baptized*. The ecumenical church has rightly understood the importance of the ministry of baptized people as crucial to an understanding of the ordering of ministry in the church. We welcome the commissioning of people for specific forms of service within the life of the church and suggest that comparable pastoral attention be given to the recognition in congregations of those members whose Christian vocation is exercised beyond the congregation. Lay ministry is primarily oriented towards service and witness in the world.



Reordering the Church's Specified Ministries

Rodney Horsfield

THE ASSEMBLY Standing Committee (*ASC Minute 03.45.04*) appointed the Specified Ministries Task Group following the presentation of several proposals to the Tenth Assembly dealing with various issues concerning specified ministries. Those issues included the ministries of Youth Worker, Lay Pastor and Community Minister; the future of ministry in the Uniting Church in relation to the shortage of ordained ministers and Lay Presidency at the sacraments and its ecumenical implications.

The Assembly Christian Unity Working Group (CUWG) responded to the Task Group's discussion paper acknowledging (as does the Basis of Union in paragraph 14) that changing social situations and missional imperatives may require new strategies in ministry. Our response

sought to clarify the nature of ministry in the church and to point out the ecumenical implications of some of the proposals. This paper sets out some of the points made in that response.

1. *Ecumenical Commitments.*

Our first concern was to maintain our ecumenical commitment to the threefold ordering of ministry. The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church commits us to being part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We do not order our life to please other churches but we do pay attention to the testimony of their life and practice in making decisions about our own practices. While we are committed to continually evaluating the character of these ministries, we should not seek to create new orders of ministry.

As a 'uniting' church, our decisions must facilitate our ability to cooperate in ministry with other churches, not least in rural areas where the need for ordained ministry is greatest.

2. *Preferred Option.* For those familiar with the Task Group's Discussion Paper, we proposed a modification of Option 2. There would continue to be two ordained minis-

in an effective way then a minister must cultivate a temperament of humility and a deep gratitude for the gifts that God has bestowed upon others.

Ministry also requires that a person know in a very real sense the capacities and limitations of the people with whom they minister. A minister who does not get around and meet the team at a variety of levels is unable to equip these saints for service. Just what aspects of the gospel proclamation will be needed in order to develop and enhance the ministry of others will vary from person to person, and time to time. It may be to remind someone of the faithfulness of God, or to remind them that they are not God, or to encourage confession and offer the assurance of pardon, it may be to help to hold before the person the hope to which we are called and for which we strive. In this the exercise of ministry as a General Secretary is no different to any other ministry of the Word. In order to be exercised it requires a deep reflection on the hope we have in Christ and a regular study of the Scriptures and the tradition in order to be fed and resourced for this ministry.

One of the temptations of the church is to be seduced by the dominant culture. Within the environment of an office with its necessary awareness of good governance, management theory, health and

safety issues and employment practice it is easy to be drawn into the ways of the world. The wider society has definite views on where authority rests, what it means to be a boss (although Jack Welch and

“ A minister must cultivate a temperament of humility and a deep gratitude for the gifts that God has bestowed on others.”

Warren Buffet may have different approaches), the importance of institutional self-protection and how the interests of the business or system are more important than the people who are affected by it. The antidote to the church's temptation to uncritically adopt the practices of the contemporary business community is to be found in a well developed theology of the church, a biblically founded understanding of the nature of discipleship, the source and hope of our salvation—all of which stands in a strong dialogical (and at times judging) relationship with the secular world view.

It is in these theological disciplines that ministers of the Word have been trained and formed and so provide the resources that enable a constructive critique of contemporary worldviews. The exercise of ministry as General Secretary of the Assembly requires that I engage in

Note. Randall Prior has also written a paper on this issue called “Ordering Christ's Ministry in a Changed World”. We have published it on the Cross Purposes website at cp.unitingchurch.org.au/ordering_christs_ministry.pdf. Both Randall's and Rod's papers predate the Task Group's final report, which is available at assembly.uca.org.au/11thassembly/reports/B24-TaskGrouponSpecifiedMinistries.pdf.

ongoing theological education and the nurture of my discipleship, for only then will it be possible to recognize when the church moves away from the apostolic witness to Christ and then to have a word of life and judgement to bring to the situation.

The broad brush approach of being a minister of the Word mentioned above, i.e. equipping the saints for service and holding before the organization the apostolic witness to Christ, needs, as regulation 2.4.2 makes clear, to be supported by particular practices in the course of one's ministry. There are a surprising number of the clauses in regulation 2.4.2 that are appropriate for a minister of the Word exercising the ministry of General Secretary. For example: witnessing in the community; guiding and instructing members and equipping them for their ministry; providing pastoral oversight and counsel; attention to administration; observing the discipline of the church; enhancing one's own gifts for ministry; and pioneering new expressions of the gospel and encouraging effective ways of fulfilling the mission of the church.

It could be argued that others could do all of these things and these are insufficient to see the role as the exercise of a ministry of the Word. Yet the role of ministers to preach the Word, to preside at the

sacraments and to arrange for others to preach and lead worship (clauses 1-3) are also part of the ministry of the General Secretary and they are all the more powerful because they are exercised outside of a conventional setting. I ensure that we hold worship every Tuesday morning for the Assembly staff and that at key times during the year we celebrate Holy Communion. Our meetings regularly commence with prayer and within our discussions theology and the scriptures are as welcome for their insights as good business practice.

When asked to provide a reflection on my ministry as General Secretary, my first thought turned to all the tasks and responsibilities that are captured in my position description. However on further thought it I have appreciated the opportunity to think at length on what it means to be called by Christ, formed for this ministry and trusted by the Councils of the church to be a minister of the Word in this place. I am grateful for the continuities with my other ministry placements and for the opportunity to continue to be drawn into a dependence upon the scriptures, tradition and the ministrations of the local congregation that this ministry as General Secretary requires.

TERENCE CORKIN is General Secretary of the Uniting Church's national Assembly.

⁶Thomas Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 222.

⁷Tacey, *Re-enchantment*, 204. Tacey's axiomatic privileging of experience over doctrine is actually reinforced even when he is very mildly distancing himself from William James. In the context of criticizing James' rejection of tradition and accusing him of too crude a division between the external and internal features of religion, Tacey insists that "religion [read institutions, doctrines, beliefs] is 'secondary' in logic" to spirituality which remains the "primordial thing" (Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 140f).

⁸There are of course many different kinds of appeal to experience and many definitions of experience in Christianity. Obviously, I am limiting myself to that definition and appeal to experience which I believe most directly impacts upon our presenting issues. For a penetrating analysis of the variety of appeals to experience in twentieth century Christian theology see George P. Schner, "The Appeal to Experience" in Eugene Rogers (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 23-41. An additional point to note in passing is that the contrast between experience and doctrine has equally problematic parallels in the contrasts drawn between "tradition and context" and "tradition and identity". In these contrasts, vis à vis the contrast between doc-

trine and experience, *tradition* occupies the same logical space as *doctrine*, and *context* and *identity* occupy the same logical space as *experience*. In these cases the contrasts are drawn in order to claim certain theological privileges for *context* and *identity* (both of which also tend to enter theological discourse no less ideologically constructed than *experience*).

⁹James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, "Introduction: A Catholic and Evangelical Theology?" in James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 1-20, 16f.

¹⁰Buckley and Yeago, "Introduction" 9.

¹¹Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 3. Indeed, Hütter makes the even stronger claim that Hütter claims that "church doctrine...is itself to be understood as the poiesis of the *Creator Spiritus* and thus as one aspect of God's actualized salvific activity" (116).

¹²Lash, *The Beginning and End of 'Religion'*, 110.

¹³I am here broadly following Alister McGrath's account of the functions of doctrine in his *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 37-80.

distinctions between dogmas, doctrines and confessions would seem to have their origin in the church's discernment of the weight that different doctrines are required to bear and the particular functions that they are required to fulfill.

Present realities in the UCA are such that the interpretation of the regulation that "the Assembly has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine" is being skewed to a narrow and potentially unhelpful preoccupation with how the Assembly makes "doctrinal decisions". If, however, doctrinal work fulfils the various functions as outlined above, "responsibility in matters of doctrine" is a far more differentiated responsibility than the making of doctrinal decisions. In the light of this more complex responsibility, the first task may well be to address (far more intentionally than has so far been the case) the wider decline of doctrinal reflection and teaching. Assembly's responsibility might, therefore, be more comprehensively exercised by facilitating a long-term church-wide re-engagement with the doctrinal tradition and a rigorous scholarly analysis of the coherence and justification of the prejudices to which it has been subjected.

GEOFF THOMPSON is Director of Studies in Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College, Brisbane.

Notes

¹Report of the Three Presidents, as cited in the Report of the Task Group on the Use and Understanding of the Bible.

²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Random House, 1902) 73.

³What resistance there is tends to come from the pseudo-orthodox fundamentalism which despite appearing to be doctrinally serious has actually bought into modernity's reductionist accounts of Christianity to a far greater degree than it appears capable of recognizing.

⁴Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 93.

⁵For the privileging of the category of myth as the means of interpreting Christianity against its own doctrinal claims see John Carrol, *The Western Dreaming: The Western World is Dying for Want of A Story* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001). On the marginalization of cognition from spirituality see David Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2000) and *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003). For the classic statement of the marginalization of doctrine from "religion" see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1989).

God, in your grace, transform your world

Lynette Dungan

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Rom. 12:1-2

"TRANSFORMATION" is a gospel imperative. It is to be changed, moulded or reshaped from one "state" or "form" into another. It is both an initiative of God and an act of "the will" in response to the baptismal journey of "dying to the old and rising to the new". It is interesting to note that the Greek word used in Romans 12:1 – "be transformed"¹ by the renewing of your minds" – is linked in its derivation to the anglicized word "metamorphosis". The meaning of "metamorphosis" explores this

concept of a change of "form" which is characterized by a radical "new form", with natural examples, including the change of a tadpole to a frog, or a pupa to an insect. This change of form corresponds with the borrowed symbol of Easter, "the butterfly", in its radical newness, being used as a vibrant symbol/metaphor of the resurrection's connotations of new life beyond the previous limits of tomblike enclosure.

Yet to be transformed is to enter into a previous stage or stages of instability, and in the case of butterflies and moths, the cocoon phase is a radical withdrawal into a mysterious inner life where changing shape, and "transmogrification" occurs, with gaining wings and the capacity for flight and freer movement. It is an engagement and re-birthing of the "self" that is like a "death", which can produce "abundant life". The tadpole too, finds a strange growth pattern occurs in the losing of a tail, and the growing of legs, with the preparedness to live on land as well as underwater. These mysterious patterns of inner and outer growth for these living creatures, as they are transformed into more than their infant stages could imagine, is an invitation to those who call themselves "Christian" to imagine and participate in the continuous patterns of "maturing into



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Christ” that will involve a letting go of the old to embrace and become the new.

When we are called to be transformed it seems that we too must enter periods of instability, liminal places and spaces, often uncomfortable and threatening. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and contemplative scholar, asserts that, “All transformation takes place in liminal space...it’s like we’ve left one room and we haven’t yet entered another”.² In these threshold spaces we are called to “face up to ourselves”,³ often instigated by facing a “crisis”, or recognizing “a wound”. He talks of the correlation biblically with the notion of a *skandalon*, the fac-

“ Transformation is always linked with conversion, and with the imperative to offer oneself as a ‘living sacrifice’ which is our ‘spiritual worship’.”

ing of a “stumbling block” through which one cannot logically move. In this liminal space, a major focus or task is to “deal” with our pain. Rohr sees that “God’s work is to keep you in that liminal place until you’ve learnt to hold your pain”.⁴

Transformation therefore can be described as a process of struggle

and learning to “hold one’s pain”, and perhaps gain a sense of connection with the pain of others and the “world”. Joan Chittister rightly says that, “struggle changes us, it grows us up”.⁵ This is not the simple action of changing one’s mind, as inferred in the English translation in the passage (Rom 12:2), but rather it is to seek the mind or “will of God” as we face our own world (including our limitations), where struggle is real and conversion is a process of enacting the call to “discipleship”. It is letting go and following a new, unknown, path. It is “to let go and let God”, with a prayer and passionate engagement and a new praxis that incarnates the paschal mystery.

We speak here of transformation as a totalizing commitment where we cannot remain the same. It is always linked with conversion and, here in Romans 12:1, with the imperative to offer oneself as a “living sacrifice” which is our “spiritual worship”. It is, as previously stated, both the work of God, who calls us to “worship in Spirit and in truth”,⁶ and our response to be authentic agents and icons of transformation for and towards others.

Transformation is the echoing resonance of our baptism and a call towards spiritual and authentic maturity. It is the continuous call to repentance – to turn around

community is not bound merely to itself, and that doctrine does more than help bind a community. To develop this point, I again quote Nicholas Lash who offers the following interesting twist on the appeal to experience:

If...Christianity has an experiential “root” or “core”, then it is to be found not in “fleeting” or “puzzling” transient states of private consciousness, but in the experience of Jesus in Gethsemane and on Calvary, and in the experience of his followers—at first dismayed and disoriented, later refashioned in rediscovery and worked out in courageous opposition to authorities and in painful conflict with their fellow Jews.¹²

What Christianity is, therefore, is communal, bodily and therefore linguistic from the outset. To the extent that the Christian experience of God represents our own incorporation into this “experience”, such experience of God is accessible in the first instance through the community’s reading, proclamation, and liturgical enactment of the literary texts which narrate it. Doctrinal work emerges precisely as the church reads, proclaims and enacts this narrative, discovering as it does so that it is confronted with various tasks.¹³ First it is called upon to address (but by no means necessarily resolve) tensions

within the narrative (including the multi-faceted tensions it has with the Jewish narratives which come before it). Secondly, it must demonstrate its coherence as a meta-narrative. Thirdly, it will need to distinguish its truth claims from variant or competing truth-claiming narratives. Finally it will find itself needing to order the life of the believing community in accordance with the message which has called it into being. As such Christian doctrine is much more than an instance of a generic nexus of language, ordered thought and truth; it is indeed such a nexus but one which is constantly driven by the community’s need to bind itself and to enter more deeply into all that flows from the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers.

“ Christian doctrine is constantly driven by the community’s need to bind itself and to enter more deeply into all that flows from the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers.”

An awareness of the various functions of doctrine leads, in turn, to an awareness that the doctrines so produced will be weighted differently, even if different doctrines might serve more than one function. The conventional (if somewhat arbitrary)

ing action than others. I would suggest, however, that early Christian reflections on the relationship between Incarnation and Salvation offer a point of important resistance to such a view. At issue here is the point classically expressed in Gregory of Nazianzus' dictum: "What has not been assumed, has not been healed". If this is so, then it is axiomatic for Christianity that there is no dimension of human experience through which God's saving work is more or less reliably accessible than any other dimension.

When this axiomatic belief is abandoned, the losses are significant. For instance, when the "inner world of the private self has been identified as the locus of authentic contact with transcendence, [then] bodily disciplines, ritual forms and outward practices seem always to attract the adjective 'mere' to mark their lower significance for the life of the spirit".⁹ Such practices are, however, intrinsic to the Christian experience of God; the knowledge of God is "embedded in communal practice and just so must be the kind of...knowledge that can be shared, not only a 'deep', wordless (and just so inalienably private) affection of the inner life".¹⁰ Doctrine – as that nexus of language, ordered thought and truth – is, therefore, one of the practices of the church which makes the knowledge of God and the experience of salvation genuinely communal. Indeed, as

Reinhard Hütter has argued at great length, when doctrine is marginalized from the church's life and subordinated to experience, "the church as a genuine 'public' is lost".¹¹

Indeed, it is against the background of just such concerns that I am never entirely convinced by the claim that that "we do not find our unity in doctrinal agreement but in Christ". At one level it is indisputably true, but the nature of the claim needs careful attention if it is not to be reduced to a lazy platitude. In the first instance, it is itself a doctrinal claim which seeks the assent of those in dispute about other doctrinal matters. Secondly, the claim that Christ is the source (and not just a focus) of unity depends for its coherence on further claims about Christ, i.e. that he is the one Son of the one God whose life, death and resurrection constitutes the inauguration of one new humanity—and only on this basis can he be the source of unity. (To make claims about our unity in Christ which depend on lesser claims for Christ can only be claims for a lesser unity.) So, far from obviously avoiding doctrinal disagreements, it might only temporarily obscure other significant disagreements.

The Functions of Doctrine

Noting the community-forming role of doctrine is critical. But equally critical is the need to note that the

and face a new direction – and to be part of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the unfolding future salvation history of God and God's new creation. It is as Mahatma Gandhi challenged, "to be the change you want to see in the world".⁷ It is to let the Spirit of God renew the containers, and change the "forms", so that they can hold and pour the "new wine",⁸ or feed or quench the thirst of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and the living God.

The quest to be transformed as agents of God's transforming activity, is to enter into the quest towards integration of the inner and outer aspects of ourselves. In authentic spiritual transforming there is the call to "pay attention". To attend to the wounded or nascent parts of ourselves that are part of our offering to God of our whole selves may enable a "ripple-effect". This ripple effect is an expanding process (not unlike aspects of "chaos theory" where mysterious connections with a small initial action may level have global effects),⁹ which can affect other changes, for as we are transforming agents it may affect our communities, our world and "the beyond" that we cannot fathom. For only transformed people can transform others. This is the Spirit of God and the Trinity's mysterious effectiveness in the

life of the believer, but it is not tame or confined, but moves in revelatory glimpses and beholdings that unfold to an ultimate rhythm and beauty, not fully recognized. Yet to live and breathe this transforming life of God is to face up to death and dying. It is not to avoid the tombs of struggle, mortal woundedness, decay and impotency, but to face and enter and engage with their limitations in order to find God is active here also. For the *basileia*, the kingdom of God to come, the other kingdoms must be let go of.

We must return as Paul Ricoeur invites us towards, "a second naïveté", a kind of return to innocence, a new way of seeing and being. This is extremely difficult, if not impossible, without the activity of grace and the *dynamis* of God. For far from being a mere a change of mindset, it requires a conversion of perception, worldview and inner attitude; a definitive letting go of the comfort of the known way.

Theologian Mary Grey sees the character of transformation as always moving outward to shape not just ourselves, but also the wider society, and forms of "church" we live in. She says, in a chapter entitled "Transforming":

Transforming – the complete changing shape of society is the goal – a complete revolution of

consciousness – no less – is what is aimed for. *Authentic ecclesia* has in her very being, the *language* of urgency, the *energy* to sustain action, the *passion* for justice, praxis and transformation of inner and outer selves, the *authority* to change the pattern through which we relate.¹⁰

I conclude with a prayer:

God, in your grace, transform your world, and let us be transformed by the renewing of our minds, our will, our selves as living sacrifices, which is our spiritual worship. And may our spiritual worship include the uncomfortable liminal experiences of being in-between, unstable, unknowing—the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic*. Yet in your grace let us not shun the descent before ascent, as we seek to live the pain and passion of our true identity, our becoming, our dying towards our true selves. Let us embrace the authenticity of the “new creation” of our calling and hear your living word in recurring power. “For if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Amen.

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Notes

¹An approximate anglicized *Koine: metamorphousthete*.

²Richard Rohr, from the Spiritual Directors International Conference, *Everything Belongs* (Miami: 2004).

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Joan Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle; Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 83.

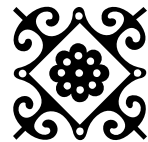
⁶John 4:24.

⁷Cited in various leadership websites on the internet.

⁸My analogy draws on the symbolism referred to in the discussion of how the old container or wineskin is no longer adequate for the new wine; Luke 6:37-8.

⁹In “chaos theory”, it is theorized that the movement of butterflies’ wings can be said to affect a rainforest the other side of the world.

¹⁰Mary Grey, *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church* (London: Cassell, 1997) 99.



or spiritual gloss to an otherwise secular world view. Critical discussion of such minimalist truth claims is likely to be conducted through categories of “myth”, “spirituality” and “religion”, all of which by definition treat, in true Jamesian fashion, cognition and the discourse which corresponds to it as an inferior and always potentially misleading means of knowledge.⁵

Of course doctrine functions as more than truth claim and Christianity bears witness to the truth in ways other than doctrine. Nevertheless, the particular nexus of language, ordered thought and truth which is intrinsic to Christianity’s doctrinal work is the object of considerable prejudice in our culture, a prejudice which has spilled over into the church itself. Although the suspicion of doctrine has precedents (and contemporary parallels!) in protestant pietism, and although a James-type approach to doctrine was more or less the default understanding of doctrine in the mainstream protestant churches in the latter half of the twentieth century, perhaps the most potent form of the prejudice as it has spilled over into the churches is seen where doctrine is explicitly pitted against and clearly subordinated to the construct which has come to be designated as “experience”. For instance, according to Tom Bandy, “Authentic religion is not about information. It is about experience”.⁶

David Tacey, championed by many in the church, has charted a view of spirituality which trades at every step on a sharp and negative contrast “between a doctrinal faith that we profess and a personal spirituality that we experience”.⁷ Bandy and Tacey would each offer distinct definitions of “experience”. But the point is precisely that that doesn’t matter! Contemporary appeals to experience in popular Christian discourse succeed regardless of how the term is defined because such appeals work at the level of rhetoric. The apparently self-evident priority of experience has been so successfully established in popular discourse about Christianity that however imprecise and ill-defined (and even incoherent) any given definition of experience might be, it will always trump appeals to doctrine and even to the more general cognitive dimensions of Christianity.

Integrating Salvation and Doctrine

What precisely is wrong with this privileging of experience?⁸ After all, Christianity is clearly distorted both when it is confined to “information” and when it is reduced to mere “profession”. The problem is that this particular appeal to experience divides the human experience of salvation in such a way that a particular dimension of human life is deemed to be a more secure locus of God’s sav-

sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas. The unreasoned and the immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow.²

This passage from William James' classic text on modern religion does not actually mention the word doc-

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trine, but the minimizing and relativizing of the nexus of language, ordered thought and truth of which Christian doctrinal work consists is paradigmatic for modernity’s negative assessment of the nature and status of Christian doctrine. James’ rhetoric is unrelenting: that which is “impulsive”, “unreasoned”, “deep” and “instinctive” are all to be trusted. But that which reasoned or verbalized is merely a “showy translation” and a “surface exhibition”. James’ comments are, of course, part of a much larger cultural story which has in-

involved the deliberate marginalization of Christianity’s verbalized and articulated truth claims (and, indeed, the truth claims of other religions) from public discourse. It is this cultural story – dependent as it is on reductionist and suspicious accounts of orthodox Christianity – which has shaped how our culture at large thinks about the status and nature of Christianity’s truth claims. Moreover, the currently academically-dominant discourses of sociology, cultural studies, gender studies and literary theory have all by and large absorbed these reductionist and suspicious accounts of Christianity into their own genealogies of modernity and into their interpretations of contemporary culture. Consequently, such accounts of Christianity meet very little sophisticated resistance either in academia or public discourse more generally.³ The flow-on effect of this is well summarized by Nicholas Lash:

Religion, like art and music, is, in our culture, allowed to be about the Beautiful: sometimes it is even allowed to be about the Good. What is excluded by the dominant ideology, is any suggestion that the business of religion, no less than that of science, is Truth.⁴

Or at least, if any truth is conceded to Christianity, it is only in the fairly minimalist sense that it is illustrative of some deeper generic truth whose cultural function is to give a religious

The Death and Rebirth of Baptism

Robert Bos

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Cor. 5:17

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Rom. 12:2

I OFFER a simple proposition: In a time when, thank God, Christianity is no longer the unofficially “established” religion of Australia, and identifying oneself with that faith is, thank God, no longer the mark of an upright and respectable citizen, baptism itself needs to be baptized.

To be sure, we still live in the afterglow of Christendom. Awkwardly overdressed strangers still present babies to be baptized on occasional Sunday mornings. We do our best to tell them how we understand baptism. We make the effort to welcome them. But it leaves the regularly-present congregation with a confused tangle of feelings. It is a sweet moment; the cute baby, perhaps in a freshly dry-cleaned heirloom “christening” dress, the proud, smiling family, the comforting, familiar words of the Service of Baptism. These

all leave us with a warm glow.

But then there is the somewhat desperate hope that the young family will join the ageing congregation, but also a sober realism of bitter experience that this will probably be the only time we see them. Beneath all that, is the unspoken gnawing question, “What on God’s earth have we done? How can we possibly keep the solemn vow we have just made to help the newly baptized child ‘grow to maturity in Christ’?”

Let me be clear, I am not arguing that we must refuse to baptize babies. What I am saying is that we need to claim the significance of the sacrament within our current socio-cultural context and allow that to pervade our talk and practice. The renewal of the faith in the post-Christendom era, I submit, is inextricably bound up with the renewal of baptismal theology and practice. If Christianity is to have any integrity, if the Christian life is to have any semblance of the purposes of its founder, if it is to find any resonances with life as experienced by twenty-first century Australians, then baptism needs itself to undergo the experience of death and life which in itself it so graphically symbolizes.

Our continent has a desert at its heart. It is a stark and forbidding landscape—scorching hot in summer and layered with frosts on winter mornings. Water is sparse. Without the lifelines of long strips of bitumen, airstrips and radio, few people would

survive. The desert at the heart of our national geography mirrors the desert in our national life and within our own barren souls.

Empty, lifeless faces crowd shopping centres, seeking the latest gadget which the ubiquitous advertising has convinced us we must have. We worry about our appearance and what others think when, in fact, does anyone really give a fig? Packed into railway carriages and buses for long, twice-daily commuter trips, travellers studiously avoid all forms of human interaction, protecting their isolation. We cram our “leisure” time with artificial entertainments, fearing being overwhelmed by the inner vacuum if we paused a while for solitude and quiet.

We despair about, but fatalistically accept, senseless government policy which pursues economic growth at all costs, even treating this delicate and beautiful planet, on which the whole economy ironically depends, itself as an expendable commodity. People who have cared for this fragile continent for thousands of generations, and have a wealth of knowledge and wisdom about its stewardship, are marginalized and forgotten. We legislate to give more power to employers, so that disadvantaged employees are left to negotiate their own workplace agreement with little support and few checks and balances. In their innocence, desperate refugees risk their lives and the lives of their children seeking asylum and the chance of

half-decent lives, and we imprison them without trial behind razor wire—their hopes dashed, and their trust in us betrayed. Year by year we ease the taxes on the rich and make life a little harder for the poor.

Is it any wonder that the young to whom we bequeath this legacy sink into the slow, relentless suicide of mind- and body-destroying drugs, symbolizing in their own wilful destruction of person what society does to their minds and souls? Their suppressed anger at the sheer futility of it all breaks out periodically in wanton destruction and seething rage.

Understandably, we do what we can to deny this reality. Our shallow public festivals, the false optimism of politicians, our cheery superficial social interactions and a hundred forms of addiction (from computer games to sex and overeating), all attempt vainly to mask this insanity. Even our ghetto churches sometimes serve as insulated escapes.

And yet, it is into this very futility and hollowness that God comes. The uniqueness of the Christian faith rests in this—God loves us passionately, and wants nothing more than to be with God’s beloved creation. God comes in the way we understand best. God reveals Godself through a real-live flesh and blood human person, one of us, who is at the same time the Immanuel, God with us.

God enters our meaninglessness and hopelessness and embraces it.

Modernity, Doctrine and the Church

Geoff Thompson

RECENT DEBATES in the Uniting Church have provoked much-needed and long-neglected reflection on the Assembly’s role in doctrinal matters. Such reflection will, I fear, achieve little unless we also address the prior issue of the marginalization of doctrine from the life of the church more generally. In their report to the Assembly Standing Committee following the 1997 Assembly, the “three Presidents” commented that “Part of the problem is the decline in systematic teaching about our life in Christ, as a central ministry in each congre-

gation’s life”.¹ Of course, the “systematic teaching about our life in Christ” is hardly an exhaustive definition of doctrine. Nevertheless, if that practice has “declined as a central ministry in each congregation’s life” then we may well find that deliberations about the Assembly’s role in matters of doctrine will be speaking to a context more determined by political contingencies than a broad-based knowledge of the doctrinal tradition and its functions.

What follows in this brief paper, therefore, is an attempt to set the marginalization of doctrine from the life of the church within a wider cultural story about the marginalization of the truth claims of Christianity. Only then will I address what I believe are doctrine’s various functions and what the Assembly’s responsibilities might be.

Modern Religion, Doctrine and Experience

The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere particular reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together, and great world-ruling systems, like that of the Buddhist or of the Catholic philosophy, may grow up. Our impulsive belief is here always what

On Areopagus Hill



ing. How else will people be able to hold on to the counter-cultural story at the heart of the Christian faith and live consistently according to the values of God's reign in our midst?

In the post-Christendom era, congregations which avoid the slow, painful death of an ageing membership, declining resources, property they cannot maintain and the stipend they can no longer afford, will devote a major part of their energies and resources to walking with people as they grow into the life of discipleship. We patiently hear their life stories, explore their questions, honour their doubts, pray with them and for them, pass on the central message of the faith, mentor them, and help them to discover and be equipped for their ministry. A central focus of congregational life will be to initiate people into the Christian life; to make disciples. This will culminate in baptism (if they have not been previously baptized) or confirmation (if they have previously been baptized), as Christ's powerful, life-transforming symbol of the new life they are finding. Where children are brought for baptism, the parents, or others who will have the major responsibility for rearing the child, can be expected to engage in extensive preparation, so that they have some chance of fulfilling the vows we require them to make. The Uniting Church's Becoming Disciples process, an adaptation of the ancient catechumenate, resources congregations for this.¹

The desert at the heart of our continent is a harsh and forbidding place. It is also a place of stunning beauty and life. The waters of baptism, God's gift to the church, point us to the water of life in the midst of our sterile culture and our barren souls.

In the resurrected life of baptism, washed clean of the empty values, shallow preoccupations and destructive addictions of our former way of life, we can, under the guidance of the Spirit and in company with brothers and sisters in Christ, begin to forge a life of simple sufficiency, in fellowship with God's non-human creatures. No longer needing to grasp greedily, or fear the outsider, we are enabled to live a life of humble gratitude and gracious generosity, and so find a measure of joy.

After all, what is more ordinary, more common than water—two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. It is the most common substance on the face of the planet and makes up most of our bodies. All of life depends on it.

As we touch our foreheads and affirm daily, "I am baptized!" we are graced by a moment of sanity and re-discover afresh the Christ who is the one stable point around whom our lives now revolve. That, I suggest, is what it could mean for us to live baptismally.

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¹See assembly.uca.org.au/TD/disciples.

Jesus of Nazareth, God's representative to humans and our representative before God, takes on himself the squalor and inanity of it all, agonizes in Gethsemane and experiences abandonment, dereliction and utter God-forsakenness on the cross.

In our baptism, we too, find the courage to embrace our inner emptiness, confront our addictions, and embrace the futility. The early church ordered people to strip naked before they entered the baptismal water. They came with nothing, alone, empty-handed, without possessions, finery, credit cards or status symbols. As they entered the font and the waters of baptism covered them, they were symbolically dead and buried. Only because their old lifestyle was drowned in the waters of baptism could they rise to new life. Then, as the water caressed their skin and the oil was lavished on their bodies, they felt overwhelmed and transformed by the sheer graciousness of love.

We, the baptized, dare to hope that the barren desert in the heart of our personal lives and the often squalid affluence of our social lives may live again.

Christ's own baptism was followed by his temptation in the wilderness. He too, like us, was beset with the temptation to find our life's meaning in consuming and the accumulation of wealth (turn these stones into loaves of bread), in the adulation of others (jump off the pinnacle of the

temple), in the quest for power (all these nations I will give you). But Christ knew that this was to worship the forces of death and destruction. He chose to live by, and offer to others, the joyful freedom from these death-dealing values. He came to bring life.

As we prepare for the Eleventh Assembly, we return to two unresolved issues in the life of the church; the issue of membership and the issue of ministry. Our regulations still say that a member of the church (and

“Christian life is about being so utterly transformed by the Spirit that nothing less than death and rebirth is an adequate symbol...half a dozen ‘membership classes’, are woefully inadequate.”

therefore one who can participate in decision making and leadership within the Christian community) is one who was once confirmed. We then find ourselves caught in the travesty that those who once participated in the Christendom teenage ritual of confirmation, but may no longer be actively involved in the life of the church and do not live the Christian life, have voting rights, and those who are currently deeply involved in the worship, witness and service of the congregation, but may not be confirmed, are not eligible to vote or hold office.

Double Take

by Hilary Howes



Again, I am not arguing that confirmation should be abandoned. On the contrary, confirmation (the reaffirmation of baptism) should be taken much more seriously. I will return to this shortly.

Turning to the issue of the specified ministries, we currently have six (Community Minister, Lay Pastor, Lay Preacher, Ministry of Deacon, Ministry of the Word and Youth Worker). Whatever we decide about these, it needs to be clear that the basis of all ministry, whether “specified” or not, is baptism. Unless the person has died and risen with Christ, and demonstrates this in their lifestyle, they have little or nothing to offer others by way of Christian leadership. Baptism is the primary call to ministry.

How, then, do we prepare people for baptism? As we have seen, the Christian life is about being so utterly transformed by the Spirit that nothing less than death and rebirth is an adequate symbol for it. A brief interview with the Minister, or half a dozen “membership classes” are woefully inadequate. We are confronted with a population which largely knows little of the central story of the Christian faith or, at best, has very distorted understandings of it. How can we support and nurture people as the Spirit deconstructs their lives and reconstructs them around the new centre, Jesus the Christ? It takes time to gestate, birth and nurture any new be-