Unity and mission are both very good words, and together they make a good theme for a conference like this one. Unity is one of the classical notes or characteristics of the church, in fact the first of the characteristics: we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. The Basis of Union speaks of a ‘uniting’ church, a church in process of becoming one.

And it’s a truism to say the church is constituted in mission. That is, the church doesn’t have a mission; the church is mission. The church is that group of people called together by God to be sent into the world, to go into the world with a task, a com-mission.

The unity of the church finds its foundation and its rationale in the unity of God; the sending of the church its basis in the sendings of God, in which God the Father sends the Spirit and the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit. This is all very fine and good.

But there’s a problem.

Unity and mission can seem at odds: you’re either an ‘ecumaniac’ (interested in unity) or you’re out to convert the world (and then you’re seen as a missionary). It depends a bit whether your favourite text is from John 17 (which seems to emphasize unity) or from Matthew 28 (which seems to emphasize mission). And much of the time these two ecclesiastical types don’t seem to have too much in common.

The practical problem here is that our unity looks at times like wish-fulfilment, and our mission, our going out into the world to bring others to Christ, looks like imperialism, and both seem to be faltering. Despite our fine words about unity and mission, what we see on the ground are divided and ageing congregations, in other words a lack of unity and a failure of mission.

But the problem is not just practical. If it were practical, then we might be able to redouble our effort and do more of the same but better and stronger and smarter (as contemporary manager-speak has it), and we could reasonably expect to start seeing growth in our numbers and growth in unity. That’s what makes me cautious about using words we’ve all heard before, words like unity and mission.
There is also a theoretical problem with these words. To our postmodern ears, unity can sound like uniformity, the homogenisation of all difference. This is very much out of fashion. We don’t want uniformity – we want diversity, and the valuing of difference. We don’t actually want everyone else to be just like us. I grew up in a part of Melbourne where about a third of the kids at primary school were Jewish; I now live in a part of Melbourne where probably every third of fourth person I see at the local shops is Muslim – and that’s just religious diversity, not even to mention ethnic or cultural or linguistic diversities. And I actually quite like living amid this sort of diversity. I suspect I’d find anything more homogeneous a bit boring.

In the same way, mission can sound like imperialism – changing other people so they become more like us, think more like us, worship more like we do, believe like we do. And we’re no longer sure this is a legitimate activity, this business of making people more like ourselves. We have histories of past missions that might have gone out with the best of intentions, but whose effects have been very far from ideal. We know that missions were involved in the stolen generations. And even when the effects were good (I’m told you can tell where the old Presbyterian missions were in the outback even today because people actually read books in those places), we know there were also some less desirable consequences. People also lost a thriving oral culture. We don’t want new Christians to be photocopies of ourselves, and in our heart of hearts we’re no longer sure we want everyone to be Christians, perhaps. We want diversity not conformity – and so the problem becomes one of the limits of acceptable diversity.

There’s a deeper problem of mission. Max Weber described the departure from the ‘enchanted garden’ of mediaeval Catholicism, a world made sacred by ready access to God’s grace through means of a system of sacraments and intercessions of saints, holy people and holy places. Weber saw this as replaced in Protestantism by the notion of the church as a voluntary association with a disciplinary role for its members, making possible a lay askesis, a discipline. There’s a very clear example of this in my own Anglican tradition, where two of the old seven-fold monastic offices were modernised, translated into the vernacular and published as the services of morning and evening prayer – so now lay people, in their own homes and workplaces, could participate in this monastic discipline. It was a democratisation of the religious life, and you see parallels to this askesis in all the Protestant traditions. The problem is, as Weber saw very clearly that once this ‘spirit’ of Protestantism departs, as it inevitably must
in due course, we are left with an overwhelming individualism – the old sense of community is gone – and we are left trapped in an ‘iron cage’ as Weber called it, of ever increasing expectations and accountabilities, i.e. the new *askesis* of capitalism (and in our own times, of capitalism in its economic rationalist variant). We cannot return from the global city to the mediaeval village, nor can we return to the enchanted garden any more than Adam and Eve could return to their enchanted garden, but the gathered, self-disciplined community also no longer has power to attract and hold. It becomes inward looking and self-justifying. And that’s the problem. Where to from here? Dietrich Bonhoeffer proposed a communion of saints that needed only a narrow space in the world, but the narrow space becomes an ever-narrower space in the world, an edging out of the world as surely as Christ was edged out of the world, in Bonhoeffer’s terms, onto a cross.

So we find ourselves confronted by practical and theoretical problems when we try to articulate even a good goal of unity and mission. I want to use the less familiar word as a way around our impasse, a word that may seem passive and unexciting. Reception. Or perhaps it can suggest an open-ended receptivity to the world.

I want to propose and unpack three theses:
1. That our present unity as church consists in our being received into the church as body of Christ;
2. That our mission as church consists in receiving the world into the church;
3. That our ultimate unity, and the unity of the world, consists in our being received into triune life of God.

**Reception – into church (thesis 1)**

Let me propose that the church is constituted not by doing or even by being, but by receiving. Jesus says, in one Pentecost story: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. It is at this point that the disciples in the upper room become church. They are given their unity, and their mission. Their unity is in the words that frame this receiving: Peace, and then forgive – if you forgive, they are forgiven. (Jn 20: 21-23). Peace – a peace that has forgiveness at its foundation – is the outward expression of unity here. And there’s mission: as the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Our sending has its basis in God’s Trinitarian sending. Jesus was sent, we are sent in the same way. But at the heart of this unity and this sending is a receiving: receive the Holy Spirit. Nothing at all can happen without this receiving.
And then there’s the other Pentecost story. In Acts 2, again the church is constituted by receiving the Holy Spirit, an act in which unity – a unity of hearing and understanding in this case – is given. “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2: 7, 11). Then Peter preaches, explaining what all this means, and those who receive his word are baptised (Acts 2: 41), ‘and that day about three thousand persons were there were added’ – that is, received into the company of the apostles. So these new believers receive and are received – receive Spirit and are received into the Church.

One of the reasons I think infant baptism is important is that in my experience we receive and are received long before we understand what any of this means, and then by God’s grace we grow in understanding. That’s how the church is constituted – by God surrounding us by God’s grace, incarnated in grace-filled people, and receiving us into the grace-filled community. Our community, and our unity are things we receive in baptism, and our commission and our mission are also things we receive in baptism. So that’s point 1 – reception into the church.

Reception – of the world into the church (thesis 2)

The church receives people. We don’t just decide to become Christians. Rather, our experience is that God names us and claims us and calls us to Godself. We are invited – God wants to receive us. Of course we can decide not to be received; we can resist the invitation. If we do, we’re on our own – we have no unity, either with God or with other people. There may be counterfeit unities with other people, but these always sooner or later (and usually sooner in our fissiparous society) turn out to be unsatisfying. They turn out to be unsatisfying because generally these counterfeit unities are based on likeness, on similarity of some sort – family, tribe, nation, similar tastes, similar political views, whatever – but we actually get bored with people who are too much like ourselves. Like is actually not attracted to like, but to otherness. And if we are thrown together with people who are like ourselves, we sooner or later find ourselves constructing differences within our own little group. This is our natural tendency – and we see it in local congregations everywhere.

Our unity is found to the extent that we share in the one who is our source – and this is a source who creates and loves diversity, calling it into
a differentiated unity. On the day of Pentecost, according to Acts, there were a variety of languages converging into a common understanding and more importantly, a comm-unity in which incompletenesses in understanding, even failures in understanding, were accepted and received.

Like the disciples in the upper room in John chapter 20 or the hearers on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, we become church by receiving and by being received. And our unity as church consists in our having been received into the church as the body of Christ. And our mission as church consists in receiving the world into the church. This is what I’m proposing.

What does it mean to take receiving, or reception (rather than doing) as the model for mission? For a start it is not necessarily less active, because to receive something means to be changed by what we receive – as the apostles in the book of Acts soon discovered. Act 2 – the reception of all sorts of people – leads directly to Acts 15 – where the disciple community has to do some real soul-searching as to exactly who or what it may or may not legitimately receive into itself. I’ll come back to this.

But first, people are received into the church. Things are also received into the church. As with people, this involves a willingness to receive the Spirit, to receive Christ. He came to his own domains, his own things (John 1: 11) but his own people did not receive him. The world needs to receive Christ if it is to be received into Christ’s body.

The church receives other things as well - revelation from God, that is, new insights or new awarenesses of the way the world is, as a grace-filled world. And the church also receives things that God has created but do not come directly as it were from God, but from God by way of creation. The church receives, for example cultural practices and cultural artifacts. The church receives worldviews and frames of reference by which the world is understood and inhabited. This is where we need to exercise caution as to what the church can receive – just as the church did in Acts 15. And we need to exercise caution in at least three ways.

First, the church receives everyone, but not everything. There are some artifacts or cultural practices that the church is not free to receive, but the guidelines as to how to identify these are fuzzy. They can only be decided on a case by case basis, and what the church may regard as an acceptable practice for Christians in one time or place may be considered inappropriate at another. Slavery once acceptable for Christians, has become unacceptable. Usury, once unacceptable, has – perhaps
unfortunately - become acceptable. In the Anglican Church at present we have this problem about sexual ethics – not an unknown problem in other churches I think. For a great many Anglo-Saxon Anglicans, homosexuality is quite acceptable and receivable into the church, but quite unacceptable for many (though not all) African Anglicans (and most Anglicans are in fact African). On the other hand, polygamy seems to be acceptable and receivable into the church to some (though by no means all) African Anglicans, but is quite unacceptable to most Anglo-Saxon Anglicans (Though perhaps we now have our own ‘acceptable’ version of polygamy!)

I’m not going to try and solve this particular problem here, but just make the point that there are and will be debates about what may or may not be received. What cannot be debated is the question who may be received – because everyone is called. The question becomes what may we bring with us – what cultural artifacts and customs, what household gods may we bring with us in our saddle-bags when we’re received into the church. And who’s to judge – because if we’re honest we’ll admit we all have our own household gods, and modern secular individualists like the majority of Australians arguably have the biggest collection. Let me refer to Max Weber again, or at least one of his interpreters: ‘As the Greeks sacrificed in turn to Aphrodite, Apollo and the gods of the city, we attempt to serve peace, justice, truth, etc. If we select any (one) of these values, even temporarily, we might offend and vex the rest. But this modern polytheism of values is really an expression of the primacy of one value: the value of the individual who chooses among these different gods’ (Andreas Buss, p 22). So we had best look discerningly at what we bring – our own cultural practices and artifacts – before presuming to advise others.

So there has to be discernment as to what may be received. Not all things may be received – but Christians will inevitably disagree about what things. I don’t think we have to compromise what we believe in this area – we will say this is unacceptable; that we do receive. But this must always be distinguished from who may be received – because there is no basis for excluding a person, even the person with whom we fundamentally disagree. All persons are called and invited, and may be received. Rather it is the receptiveness of hospitality – *philoxenia* – like the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah to those strange visitors under the oak trees.

The second word of caution about this reception of the world into the church is we need to understand this readiness to receive not in a consumerist or acquisitive sense – the church is not seeking to assimilate to itself, swallow up, or homogenize other people’s cultures. The church is still, in the words of the BCP, militant here in earth. In other words it’s still
engaged in struggle – not against flesh and blood but again the
centralities and powers of the present age. It has to be athletic – to use
the image from Hebrews chapter 12 – stripped down to run a race, and
this necessarily limits what it can receive into itself. To this extent
Bonhoeffer’s characterization is absolutely correct. The church occupies a
narrow space – it has to be a lean organization, in terms of today’s
management-speak, and discipleship requires a costly commitment. Just
because not all things may be received, this shouldn’t be taken to suggest
that some things are outside of God’s concern. All things in creation are of
central concern to God, and all things are capable of being transformed and
redeemed in God’s reign.

Third, the church is and will be transformed by what it receives. It must
therefore be aware of what it receives and discerning in what it is
prepared to receive. But this shouldn’t make us afraid of the world.
Adolph von Harnack, writing 100 years ago, thought the church had sold
out to Hellenistic culture, especially by becoming the official church of the
Roman empire, in other words by being prepared to receive too much
that was foreign into itself. And certainly it was transformed by this
receptivity – but in the end I can’t agree with von Harnack’s assessment.
Rather, I would say the church seized an opportunity to show hospitality,
*philoxenia* to gentiles and their culture, and in doing so eventually
converted Hellenistic culture, by drawing Hellenistic culture into itself and
permeating it with the gospel message. Certainly this also transformed the
church so it could speak appropriately to those people. The genius of
Christianity is to convert by adaptation, by translation. In contrast we
could look at Islam whose genius it is to transform culture so thoroughly
that it becomes a far more homogenous Islamic culture. I’m generalizing
of course, but there’s no homogenous Christian culture in the same way as there’s an identifiable Islamic culture, because as Christians we translate
our scriptures and our prayer life and even our social customs to adapt to
local conditions. We don’t say: you can only read the scriptures or pray to
God in this particular language. There’s certainly a strength in that cultural
homogeneity that we see in Islam, but it happens not to be the Christian
way, and it never has been the Christian way. The Christian way opens out
to the diversity of all creation – speaking to it and welcoming it in its own
varied languages.

So this is point 2: the reception of the world into the church, its problems
and its joys.

**Reception – of ourselves and our world into God (thesis 3)**
Our unity as Christians is not an undifferentiated unity. And that’s because God’s unity is not an undifferentiated unity, but a triune unity, that is to say one that permits otherness, difference, and therefore relationship. God’s unity is not a homogenous unity. One of our primary missionary texts is: ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you (John 20: 21).’ Too often we jump straight into the second part of this statement, and that leads to an unreflective activism. We’re sent – so let’s get on with it. But no - let’s pause and ask ourselves about the first clause: ‘As the father has sent me’. This reflects a differentiation in God: a being sent by God and a sending of God, of God incarnate in this case. A God who was simply one (emphasis on the simply) could perhaps send Godself, and couldn’t be sent by God. So we have to start by reflecting on this give and take within Godself, this willingness to send and be sent. Karl Barth used the parable of the lost son to explicate this idea: God goes out into the far country, away from Godself.

The journey of the Son into the far country and the return of the Son. On the return he brings us with him, insofar as we are participants in Christ, and we have a share in him. Where does the Son return? To where he went out – that is to the God he calls Abba, father. And just as the Son is received by the Father – Barth is thinking of the prodigal son or lost son parable – so we are also received by the father. Our salvation is effected by virtue of our union with Christ (our putting on the mind of Christ).

God wants to adopt us as children – give us the same status as that which belongs to Christ as only Son. This return is eschatological, future-oriented. In participating in Christ we become what we are called and destined to be. We don’t become who we truly are – as Nietzsche thought we should – but who we truly will be. How do we do this: surprising as it may seem, we do it be going to church. Because there we are practicing ahead of time the life of God’s reign.

We are received into the life of the triune God. Our salvation can be understood as living a life of participation in Christ, and through Christ, in the triune God. Our salvation, and the salvation of the world, consists in being received into the triune life of God.

As you abide in me and I in you, so may they be one. Our personhood is not erased in this participation, but because we are participating in the source of our personhood, or selfhood, we become the persons we are truly meant to become. This then is the third thesis: our completion. Our wholeness, or to put it in more traditional terms, our salvation, consists in being received into Christ – along with the whole creation of which we are parts.
Now very briefly I want to pose a question: What are the implication of these three theses for the church’s unity and the church’s mission?

Reception as a model for church’s unity and mission?

What can God receive from us? This might sound a shocking question, for is there anything we could give to God? Ourselves!

What can churches receive from one another - without imposition, or swallowing up? The answer we give to this will tell us about our unity.

What can church receive from the world? The answer we give to this will tell us about our mission.

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