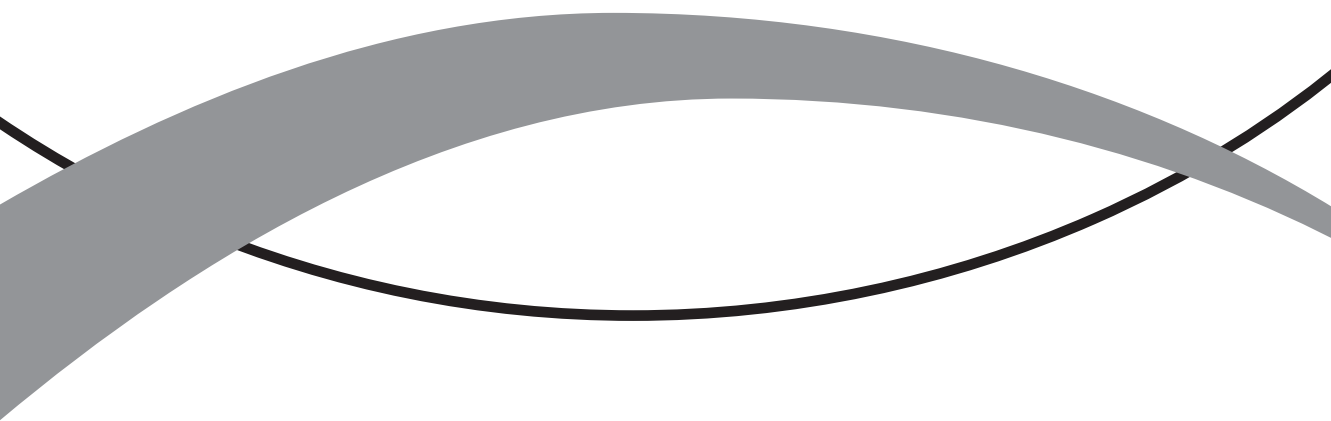


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# Imagining Creedal Authority in the Changed Ecumenical Landscape of the 21st Century

*Katalina Tahaafe-Williams*

## Abstract

This article queries the Creeds' continuing significance as a means of unity with the whole church, whether in the UCA, its ecumenical partners, or the WCC and the ecumenical movement. By tracking through credal history and contemporary utility, the paper reflects on the Creeds' capacity as a uniting influence amidst twenty-first century challenges and realities. The point is made that the God-centred nature of the classical creeds is a significant and powerful challenge to the pervasive anthropocentricity of the contemporary landscape.

Its Basis of Union states that the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) receives the two classic ecumenical creeds, i.e. the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, and as a means of unity with the whole church.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the UCA's founding document recognises credal authority, and the creeds' significance as an ecumenical instrument for church unity. A unity that speaks both to the function of the creeds as the common ecumenical formulation summarising the essential elements of the Faith, as well as the biblical and Christological imperative for oneness.

## The Creeds and Unity

Undeniably, the Christian imperative for unity permeates the apostolic writings and articulated as a fundamental characteristic of the nature and mission of the church. Of course, there was at the time no conscious and intentional effort at formalising a systematic ecclesiology, given that Christ's church was a socio-communal reality before any formal doctrine of the church.

Grounded in the unity of the Holy Trinity: One God, One Lord, One Holy Spirit and One Communion among them, the credal call to church unity was thus a God-given gift that was essentially a presupposed reality grafted on to the Christian DNA, while simultaneously a goal yet to be realised in history and therefore aspirational.

It is aspirational for, while, as Christians we confess in the Nicene Creed that the church is 'one holy catholic and apostolic', throughout the church's 2000 years history there has been this perpetual tension between the church's commitment to oneness as articulated in the creed, and the historical reality of the church's

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<sup>1</sup> BOU #9.

tendency to schisms. Indeed, from the closing of the apostolic age and throughout the patristic period, the process for formulating credal statements exposed credal differences that significantly contributed to those church divisions.

Church historians largely acknowledge that the Apostles' Creed is both the best known and the least known of the two classic ecumenical creeds. This is because while it is the most widely utilised creed by Christians, especially in regular worship for many denominations and specifically at baptisms, its origins remain a mystery to this day. A most captivating story had apparently circulated in the early church that after the Spirit descended on the disciples at Pentecost, Peter said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty" and Andrew added, "and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." And so, they went around the 12 disciples in that upper room, uttering a dozen sentences that formed the Apostles' Creed! What a lovely story if it was true! What is true, however, is that the apostolic teachings are embedded in its threefold structure and within its 12 brief statements.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the origins of the Nicene Creed (325 CE)<sup>3</sup>, and its successor, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE)<sup>4</sup>, are widely documented. Both are explicitly Trinitarian in structure and conceptuality, and both contain several of the lines found in the Apostles' Creed, but they are longer and more detailed. Having superseded the 325 Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 (now commonly known as the Nicene Creed) is generally held to be the most widely confessed statement about the Triune God in the Christian church.

## From Credal Unity to Disunity

As mentioned above, the development of the creeds was crucial in the move toward achieving a doctrinal consensus within the early church, but it was also the cause of deep theological disagreements between factions in the Greek-speaking eastern church and the Latin-speaking western church. This even extended to lifelong struggles for specific individual patristic figures, Athanasius being one famous example, for to arrive at a common affirmation also meant excluding anything judged to be outside the bounds (i.e. heretical) of the apostolic faith.

Athanasius' fight was a stupendous effort described by one writer as "60 years of theological wrangling over not just a word but a letter"<sup>5</sup> in which he maintained that Christ is *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father against the Arian view of Christ being *homoiosios* (of similar substance) with the Father.<sup>6</sup> Athanasius' tenacity, including multiple forced exiles, finally led to a consensus at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council in Constantinople 381CE, to condemn Arius and formally and permanently put Arianism out of the church.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> ESV Bible with Creeds, "Creeds and Confessions 101," adapted., *Crossway*, 8 Feb 2020, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/creeds-and-confessions-101>

<sup>3</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

<sup>4</sup> Due to significant additions made at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381 CE.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, "The Nicene Creed and the Importance of a Single Letter" in *For us and For our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church*, adapted., *Crossway*, 16 May 2016, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-nicene-creed-and-the-importance-of-a-single-letter/>

<sup>6</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Volume I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 283.

<sup>7</sup> Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 293.

Cyprian of Carthage (modern Algeria) is another early father who looms large in the historic narrative, for his absolute commitment to church unity. Known as the leading figure and prominent theologian in the church in 3<sup>rd</sup> century western north Africa, Cyprian rejected any kind of church schism as ever justifiable under any circumstances. Practically this meant that schismatic ministers and bishops were deemed as lapsed and therefore unsuitable and disqualified from continuing to carry out their office and administering the sacraments.

Under circumstances of persecution bishops who succumbed to the pressure were considered *traditores* (traitors)<sup>8</sup> for submitting their copies of the Scriptures, and some even giving up the faith altogether. But the status of the church was radically transformed with the advent of the Emperor Constantine, under whose reign the church was no longer persecuted in the Roman empire. This meant that the *traditores* bishops who repented assumed their former positions and roles.

To the native African church leader Donatus (hence the *Donatist* controversy) and his largely native African followers this was unacceptable. For them such leaders were tainted and only those who remained steadfast under persecution should be in church leadership positions. The Donatists' opposition, who were mainly from the Roman settler-colonial membership of the African church, argued that since these bishops had repented and were restored to grace, they should therefore be allowed to carry out their office.

Inevitably Donatus was compelled to lead a breakaway group from the African church. According to historical accounts, the breakaway native church grew rapidly and became far bigger than the original colonial church from which it broke away. This was the situation faced by Augustine when he was consecrated as Bishop of Hippo in 395CE.

Like Cyprian, Augustine was equally committed to church unity and as passionate in condemning church schisms. He ultimately resolved the Donatist controversy within Cyprian's terms by judging that while *lapsed church leaders* and *church schism* were both sinful, schism was by far the more serious sin. The Donatists' position was thus deemed heretical on the basis that they committed the sin of church schism. The irony of course was that the Donatist schism was a violation of a Cyprian principle for the sake of upholding another Cyprian principle.

Interestingly, each of these two early controversies, which contributed greatly to church disunity, emerged out of the eastern and the western churches respectively. This, albeit inadvertently, foreshadowed the growing tension and increasing alienation between the church in the East, based at Constantinople (modern Istanbul), and the church in the West based at Rome.

In addition to the above controversies were several political and theological reasons which accounted for this growing division, including the escalating power and dominance of the Roman See, and the deep disagreement over the *filioque* clause being added to the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. Basically, the western church insisted on referring to the Holy Spirit as proceeding from both the Father and the Son, much to the alarm of the eastern church, concerned about the theological implications of the clause and about interference with what was supposed to be the inviolable creed.

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<sup>8</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 395.

Indeed, while periodically ecumenical councils such as Nicaea (325 CE), Constantinople (381 CE), Ephesus (431 CE) and Chalcedon (451, CE) (plus three more within the next three centuries) were convened to settle these significant differences, unresolved debates such as the *filioque* disagreement (which has remained fundamentally unresolved to date) eventually culminated in the great schism of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, no ecumenical council of the ‘undivided church’ has ever convened.

## **From the European Reformation to the Modern Ecumenical Movement**

Martin Luther’s challenge against the Roman Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century led to the seismic disruption known as the European (Protestant) Reformation. A key point of dispute between Luther and the other Reformers on the one hand, and the Roman Catholics on the other, was the interpretation of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. Luther’s Catholic opponents accused him of fostering disruption to the unity of the church and therefore of being a schismatic which Augustine also condemned.

Here we see again the irony reminiscent of the Donatist experience, with Luther facing the dilemma of either upholding Augustine’s doctrine of grace or upholding Augustine’s doctrine of the church. It was one or the other, but he could not have both. How ironic that we are, here at this conference, literally discussing the Reformers’ choice as members of a particular church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reflecting on credal authority and church unity. It is equally ironic to imagine the improbability of the UCA had the reformers chosen unity with, rather than schism from, the church in Rome.

Recognising that a divided church/Christianity is counter-witness not only to the credal confession to be one, but also to Christ’s will and prayer that his church may be one (John17:21) had led to the birth of the modern ecumenical movement at the 1910 global mission conference in Edinburgh. With the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a leading instrument, this modern movement seeks to transform a church history of division to a movement towards unity.

Integral to the development of the modern ecumenical movement is the evolution of the meaning and understanding of ecumenism over these 1700 years of credal history. When ecumenical councils gathered during the patristic period as representative bodies of the yet undivided eastern and western churches, ecumenism was understood as a consensus of the *oikumene*, of the universal church, of what was assumed to be the known world then.

Since the Reformation however, ecumenism has come to be understood as the movement concerned with the pursuit of church and Christian unity. This understanding was affirmed by the WCC Central Committee in the lead up to the integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the WCC in 1961<sup>9</sup> and has informed and guided WCC’s work and programmes ever since.

As an ecumenical council the WCC Basis states that:

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Integration’ that meant mutual responsibility between the commitment to the visible unity of the church and the mission of the church

the WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek together to fulfil their calling to the glory of the one God Father Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

There is obviously credal commitment embedded in the WCC's Basis, but there is also no mistaking the plurality of churches as seen in the existence of a multitude of denominations active in the global ecumenical movement. These include the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Orthodox among the membership of the WCC, excepting the Roman Catholics<sup>11</sup>. The burning query at this point is what church unity means when the church is so clearly disunited at the institutional level. And that is before we even mention the cascading fragmentation within such breakaway bodies, characterised as liberal, radical, conservative, evangelical, pentecostal and charismatics, let alone the various ideological differences between the *neos*, the *posts* and the *isms*.

To be sure, since its inauguration in 1948 the WCC has led to more ecumenical convergence, collaborations, agreements, and joint initiatives across denominational and other boundaries. Further, the Roman Catholic's official entry to the ecumenical movement after Vatican II, has also contributed to more ecumenical collaborations. Notably, under the leadership of Pope Francis close collaborations between the WCC and the Vatican have become especially strong and visible. Additionally, the inauguration of the Global Christian Forum in 2007, an initiative of the WCC, had brought together representatives from almost all Christian traditions. This has been a very encouraging ecumenical development which greatly contributed to the wider participation of world Christianity at the 2010 Edinburgh centenary celebration than would have been conceivable a century earlier.

Unfortunately, however, the division in Christ's church still runs painfully and deeply. While groups such as the *Lausanne Movement*<sup>12</sup> seems to be growing more open to collaboration with the WCC and other liberal ecumenical and mission agencies, the vision of organic unity is ever more remote.

Given that the classic credal vision of 'one church' seem unable to hold sway in institutional terms and faced with the stark reality of the disconnect between a theoretical belief in 'one church' and rampant church splits, contemporary ecumenists and missiologists have had to develop approaches to church unity which can speak to this situation authentically.

This involved recovering the true basis of the unity and oneness of the church that was pervasive in the apostolic period – that being the Lord Jesus Christ himself. As was famously declared by Ignatius of Antioch in the first century, "where Christ is there is also the catholic church" (*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*). Put another way, the oneness of the church is grounded not in any organisation or institution but in a common commitment to Jesus Christ and his good news.

<sup>10</sup> Adopted at its Inaugural Assembly in Amsterdam 1948 and amended at the 1961 Delhi Assembly

<sup>11</sup> To be clear, the ecumenical movement is distinct from the WCC and the WCC is not the ecumenical movement but an instrument of it. They are not to be used interchangeably. While the Roman Catholics are active in the ecumenical movement, as a denomination it has yet to join the WCC as a member church.

<sup>12</sup> Formed by conservative evangelical mission bodies in objection to the integration of the IMC and the WCC in 1961

## Unity and the Credal Marks of the Church

Affirming this understanding and approach to church unity and oneness the WCC Faith and Order Commission has restated the Nicene classical marks of the church (i.e. one, holy, catholic and apostolic) as attributes that not only flow from but also illustrate the church's dependence on God.<sup>13</sup>

To say that the church is *one* is a statement of the unity of the church in the one creator redeemer God “who binds the church to himself by Word and Spirit and makes it a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all creation.”<sup>14</sup> The ecumenical movement's understanding and active commitment to church/Christian unity embedded in its conception of *oikoumene* as the household of God and of the WCC as *koinonia* or fellowship of churches, presuppose the gathering of Christians of different confessions, nations, races, ethnicities, political, social and economic backgrounds. That is, the ecumenical assumption is that churches do bring their differences with them to the movement and the commitment to oneness and the pursuit of unity are not based on an illusion that differences can be overcome by pretending they do not exist. Indeed, from its inception at Pentecost, Christ's Church was a model of unity in diversity. It is notable also that the Patristic Fathers at the frontlines of formulating the Catholic Faith's credal statements were from diverse backgrounds.

A God-centred reframing of church unity, therefore, is not a mandate for uniformity and sameness but rather presupposes a diversity of ecclesial formations where “specific languages, histories, customs, and traditions need not be denied” but affirmed.<sup>15</sup> In short, being one in Christ is a “lavish celebration of the communion of the different” rooted in the love of God.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of this understanding of oneness then, not even rampant denominationalism can compromise the unity of the church.

Further, implicit in the ecumenical vision of church unity embedded in its conception of *oikoumene* as the household of God, with its etymological connections to ecology (i.e. the underlying logic of household) and economy (i.e. the rules for housekeeping), is the commitment to ensuring and promoting the well-being of the environment. This commitment has informed ecumenical discourse and actions since the 1960s and is captured most powerfully in the ecumenical call for ‘Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation’ adopted at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly. Integral to this ecumenical call and formula (which has shaped WCC programmes in successive decades) is the concern to address relational dynamics at the interface of economic inequalities, human violence in its various forms, the inevitable ideological tensions around human subjectivities, and the associated environmental damages and injustices.

The WCC's New Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism adopted at the 2013 Busan Assembly articulates this commitment as a call to move beyond narrow human-centric approaches to mission and unity and instead prioritise efforts that reflect our interconnections to all created life.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> WCC Faith & Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Paper 198 (Geneva: WCC, 2005), A.12.

<sup>14</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, A12.

<sup>15</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 411.

<sup>16</sup> D. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004), 270.

<sup>17</sup> WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, *Together Towards Life, TTL 19* (Geneva: WCC Publications), 9.

Recent Pacific theological engagements with *oikumene* as household, such as Upolu Vaai's notion of eco-relational *aiga* (*kainga* in Tongan meaning extended family/ relatives), firmly position the *oikos* triplets of ecology, economy and *oikoumene* as equal and mutual members of the *aiga* extended household.<sup>18</sup> Promoting this pervasive Pacific Indigenous worldview in which the interconnectedness of all life is normative, *aiga oikoumene* resists the Euro-centric tendency to separate the *oikos* triplets, asserting that one without the other is meaningless. Fundamentally, a God-centred reframing of oneness resists any form of church unity that lacks serious commitment to the integrity of **all** creation.

To say that the church is *holy* is a statement about the holiness of the God who calls the church into being.<sup>19</sup> As such the church is a community set apart from the norms of the world to bear witness to the saving love of God in Christ. This means that the church reflects its holy character most meaningfully when it stands courageously for God's justice, working to transform systematic social injustices, and caring for the poor and marginalized.

The *catholicity* of the church was widely understood during the Reformation, in the words of fifth century writer Vincent Lérins, as "that which is believed everywhere, at all times, and by all people." In recent years the New Testament notion of catholicity which emphasised local ecclesial forms as embodying the universal church has reemerged. In contemporary ecumenical circles there is consensus that the church reflects its catholicity when it is a community "in which, in all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the believers participants in Christ's life and salvation, regardless of their sex, race or social location."<sup>20</sup>

In this God-centred unity, there is no confusing the church catholic with Roman Catholic, with orthodoxy, or even less with a type of Swiss political neutrality. Indeed, the church reflects its catholicity most profoundly when it is boldly and "paradoxically partisan" for the sake of affirming "the universality of the lordship of Christ."<sup>21</sup>

To say that the church is *apostolic* is to say that it is "a faithful community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and life throughout the ages."<sup>22</sup> The ecumenical emphasis on the apostolicity of the church prioritises faithfulness to the gospel and continuing Christ's ministry in the world. In other words, the church reflects its apostolic character best when it is not, in the words of Bonhoeffer, in "cloistered isolation" but, rather, when it is being Christ's sent community.<sup>23</sup>

## The Changed Ecumenical Landscape

Over its 77 year history the WCC through 11 General Assemblies has produced statements that revolve around this understanding of, and commitment to, church unity. At the same time, the WCC recognises that it lives and witnesses in a changed 21<sup>st</sup> century ecumenical landscape.

<sup>18</sup> Upolu Vaai, "Faith and Culture" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross, Todd M Johnson and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 236.

<sup>19</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, A12.

<sup>20</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, A12.

<sup>21</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 272.

<sup>22</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, A12.

<sup>23</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 118.



A global ecumenical landscape where Christianity has shifted demographically to the global south, Europe can no longer claim to be the centre of the 'Faith', the notion of the 'Christian West' is fundamentally disputed as it is already well in the process of ex-culturation as opposed to inculturation, and advancing secularism is the normative mark of western culture wherever it finds a foothold.<sup>24</sup>

A changed ecumenical landscape where declining membership and resources in historical mainline churches have lasting impacts on maintaining ecumenical dialogues and relations, and the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic religiosity is reshaping the global Christian landscape;<sup>25</sup> where a genocide and ethnic cleansing are allowed to go unchecked right in front of our eyes; where so-called progress and economic development decimate God's beautiful creation, and the cost of climate change are unjustly borne by the most vulnerable and those with the least carbon footprints; where the so-called 'free market' is a euphemism for the economic hegemony of the oligarchy and billionaire class, including the big tech company owners; where the world seems to be sleepwalking right into the AI universe in which human de-skilling is normative even encouraged, in which AI development is devoid of any democratic processes and invasive control of people's personal data go unchecked. As if these issues were not concerning enough, AI requires unlimited essential resources such as water and land for its monolithic data centres, thus adding resource depletion to the list. In his 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis' concerns about this technology highlights its paradoxical capacity to provide multiple forms of pleasure and yet is incapable of engendering joy.<sup>26</sup>

In this changed ecumenical landscape, it is one thing for the WCC to produce statements on the global stage, but it is another to put such statements into practice on the ground.

## The UCA and Credal Possibilities

This brings us to ecumenism and the call to church unity at the national and local levels. The UCA has, from the outset, taken seriously the call to unity enshrined in her Basis of Union. Being called 'uniting' as opposed to 'united' speaks to the UCA's commitment to a journey toward some form of organic unity. However, the UCA faces the same ecumenical challenges as her ecumenical partners, domestically and globally. Most domestic ecumenical instruments such as state ecumenical councils and national councils of churches are barely surviving. In addition to the changes already mentioned are diminishing volunteerism, the consequences of historical church abuse and failures, and burdensome legal compliance and health and safety requirements.

Currently, the UCA is in dialogue with the Lutherans, a dialogue that has been going for two decades. This has been quite helpful in sharing ministry ideas and other forms of collaboration, but organic unity is not on the agenda. Committed to the Basis of Union's call to continuing witness (BOU, #10) the UCA Assembly

<sup>24</sup> Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, "Christianity in Oceania" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross et al., Todd M Williams and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, "The Future of Christianity in Oceania" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity: Christianity in Oceania*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross, Todd M Williams and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 367.

<sup>26</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, §7.

recently adopted the Belhar Confession, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, and *Laudato Si* in that regard.<sup>27</sup> The ecumenical significance of this adoption remains to be seen.

Under these challenging realities and circumstances, it is still fair to say that the UCA's commitment to the call to unity enshrined in the creeds and her Basis of Union is not in question. Indeed, that commitment is evident throughout the global ecumenical movement and in the work and programmes of the WCC. Evidently, deep respect for apostolic traditions and credal authority are key drivers in the continuing ecumenical efforts at all levels to be faithful to Christ's call to unity regardless of this changed ecumenical landscape. Moreover, belief in the credal attributes of the church is still strong after 1700 years.

During a 2024 WCC conference at Bossey, Geneva, in preparation for the 2025 Nicaea 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, the WCC European Regional President Rev Dr Susan Durber said this:

The deep concern at Nicaea to be faithful to the unity of God and to the unifying love of God is still a powerful and inspiring witness. Their grappling for language to speak of a unity that is rooted in the unity of God and of God's actions can still inspire us to deepen our own visions and recalibrate our own ecumenism.<sup>28</sup>

Amidst 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and realities much noise has been made about the failures and flaws of the credal statements, the gaps and holes, the assumptions and exclusions, the biases and the silenced voices, and questions about justice, power, empire, colonialism, relevance and redundancy. The validity of these concerns is not in question, but while there is no space here to address them adequately, whether they constitute sufficient reasons for rewriting or reconstructing the classic creeds is another matter.

Certainly, in the face of all these concerns, and amidst these 21<sup>st</sup> century realities and changed ecumenical landscapes, it is entirely reasonable to ask of the creeds: who is the 'I' who says, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," and who is the 'we' who confess, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth"?

Similarly, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Confessions specific to a particular denomination give us hopeful pause. For there are no obstacles preventing concerned voices from articulating through the specific confessions what is seen as missing or gaps that need filling. Any contextual concerns and socio-political worries should be appropriately addressed through denominational confessions and affirmations of faith.

Still, there is something to be said about our unsustainable level of anthropocentricity that is reflected in every concern articulated and which permeates every 21<sup>st</sup> century reality and changed landscape outlined above. In a recent online discussion between a Baptist and Presbyterian on the topics of subjectivity and individualism, the term "expressive individualism" was used in reference to this overpowering human

<sup>27</sup> See "Continuing Witness," Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, <https://uniting.church/continuing-witness-resources/>

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Stephen G. Brown, "Towards Nicaea 2025: Exploring the Council's Ecumenical Significance Today," World Council of Churches, News, 8 Nov 2024, accessed 20 Aug 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/international-conference-examines-significance-of-the-council-of-nicaea-for-the-ecumenical-movement-today>

anthropocentric bent. The term basically encompasses the human tendency to think we are the centre of the universe and that our individual feelings are authoritative, and therefore, all institutions and all realities need to reconfigure around that.<sup>29</sup>

With the exception of Indigenous peoples, there is a general human inability to be mindful of all of God's creation, to understand or accept the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life in God's creation. This means that humans characteristically lack any conception of our place in relation to God, to one another, and to all other living things. It is not a stretch to then put forward the point that it is our intense preoccupation with the human "self," that it is our super level of anthropocentricity, that is at the root of all the concerning realities and divisions highlighted above.

The point is made that there is an urgent need for humans to reconfigure our notion of "self" and our relationship with God in the light of this.<sup>30</sup> Put another way, we need to find the ways that help us not to think less of ourselves, but to start thinking of ourselves less in order that we may find the space to learn our place in relation to God and find our place in relation to all other creatures.

It is suggested that our classic ecumenical creeds can help us. That is to say, as the creeds are preoccupied with God, first and foremost, they can teach us and show us a way of thinking about God and ourselves where everything flows, first of all, from who God is. That the creeds tilt us towards really focusing our minds upon the external that is God who ultimately determines who we are.<sup>31</sup>

We have already discussed the necessity of recovering our oneness in Christ as the true foundation of church unity and reframing our ecumenical aspirations in God-centred terms. It may be difficult to imagine the creeds carrying the weight of all that the church needs doctrinally amidst the contextual realities in which we find ourselves, but it is not impossible to imagine credal authority as a significant uniting influence and a means of unity with the whole church, if we take seriously the creeds' God-centred message.

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<sup>29</sup> Albert Mohler, "Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness: A Conversation with Carl Trueman," Thinking in Public @albertmohler.com, 7 Feb 2024, accessed 20 August 2025, <https://albertmohler.com/2024/02/07/carl-trueman-3/>

<sup>30</sup> Mohler, "Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness."

<sup>31</sup> Mohler, "Creeds and the Crisis of Christian Faithfulness."

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*Uniting Church Studies* is a fully-refereed, multi-disciplinary, open access journal focused on a specific subject – the Uniting Church in Australia. The journal aims to promote scholarly reflection and understanding. It does so by means of a dialogue: between the academic and the practitioner; between the church and society in Australia, and between the Uniting Church in Australia and other Uniting and United Churches throughout the World.

Contributions and books for review should be sent to the Book Review Editor at the above address. Manuscripts submitted for consideration should normally be of 4,000–6,000 words, typed 1.5-spaced in 12-point font and submitted by email as an attachment. A style sheet for *Uniting Church Studies* is available from the Editor or on our website.

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## Abbreviations

### Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

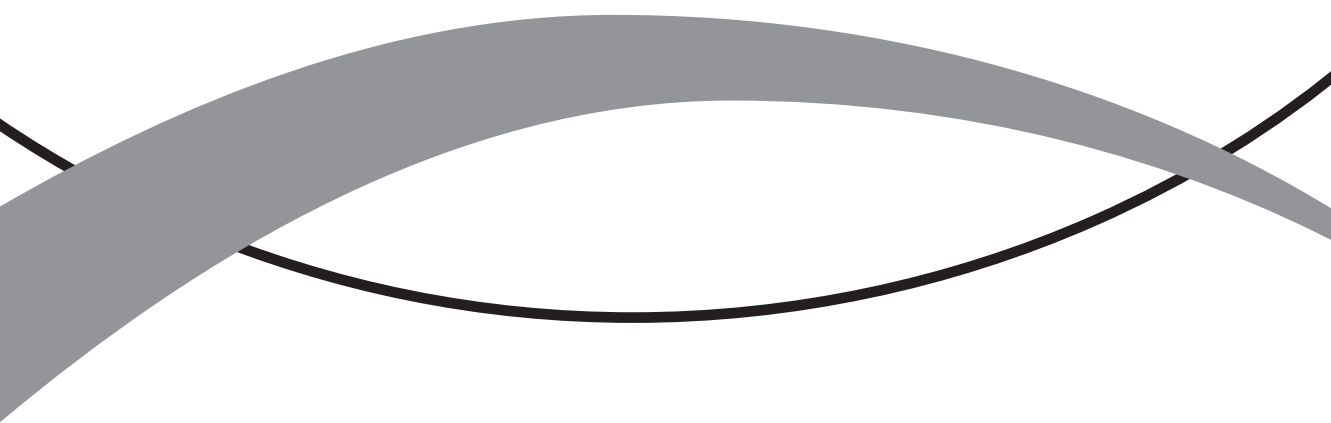
### Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

### This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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