

Session one – A faithful church

Many people in contemporary Britain have no idea what the United Reformed Church is or what we stand for. Our title is often mis-spelt and misunderstood and, no doubt, there are many who assume we are some kind of ‘sect’ – the Unification Church? But it is possible to explain who we are! This is what the Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order does.

The Statement begins by saying loud and clear that we are part of the whole Christian Church, and we are glad to say that. We don’t believe we are the only true Church or that we are the ones who have got it right above all others. We’re part of the whole Church – we are not the whole Church ourselves. Saying that alone makes us different from some other Christian churches.

We also say that we believe the Christian faith as it is proclaimed by the whole Church. Of course there are differences of opinion about some things between different churches (and between different Christians!), but it remains true to say that whatever our differences from some other Christians on some secondary matters, we believe and proclaim in the United Reformed Church the Christian faith, the faith that the Apostles proclaimed. We might have to find new ways of saying it in our times, but it is very important to us that we stand in faithful continuity with the whole Church.

This is what we mean when we say that we believe in one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In what we call the doctrine of the Trinity, we try to put into words what cannot be adequately conveyed in language, the mystery and wonder of God. You could describe the Trinity as one way of talking about the Christian faith as a kind of story. From the creation of all things by God who is the source of all that is made, to Jesus who was God’s Son and who taught us all that God is our loving Father, to the hope and promise of the Holy Spirit who is present and active in the world today and in the days to come – in this story of our faith we believe that we have encountered and still encounter the reality of God who reaches out to us in love. The Trinity is also a beautiful way of expressing what Christians believe; that at the very heart of the truth and reality of God is a loving, personal relationship, – the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit are a picture of the perfect love of God which reaches out towards us too and which invites us to join in. We believe that the Trinity is the primary way Christians have been given to talk about the mystery of God’s presence with us and purpose for us. And this we share with the whole Church.

The second part of the Statement describes the important things about our life together as Christian people. We believe that we are called to this life by the Holy Spirit and that it is a joy and gift. 'Calling' is an important word in our tradition, because we believe that God is not an abstract idea or a distant force, but a living presence with whom we can enter into a close relationship. We believe that God lovingly calls us, each one, into the community of the church; that there's something personal and very special about this. But being a Christian is not only about this personal and individual relationship. It is also about being part of God's community in the Church and none of us can live well apart from the community of faith. We are like a vine which thrives on connection and which withers when cut. We all benefit from the corporate life of the Church, as we hear the Bible read and interpreted, as we receive God's gifts to us through the sacraments (of Baptism and the Lord's Supper) and as we share life together. This means that being a Christian in the United Reformed Church will involve being part of a local church where these things can happen and where we can learn from other Christians and help one another grow in faith and understanding. Notice that this part of the Statement says nothing about the necessity for there to be bishops, priests or even ministers! The Church benefits greatly from being well led by our ministers (servants of the Church!), but their role is to enable the Church to be what it needs to be. Notice too the simplicity of this section – the Church needs just a few things to 'be church'. This is an important witness of our tradition.

Questions for discussion

- How would you describe the core of the Christian faith? Try writing 'the Gospel in fifty words'. (Compare your answers!)
- What do you say to those who find 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' too male?
- Imagine that you have landed on a desert island. What are the essential things about practising the Christian faith that you will want to find a way to do as soon as possible?
- Think further about the image of the vine. How does it help you understand belonging to a Christian community? What other biblical metaphors open up the corporate life of the Church and why?
- Which do you think is the most important part of a Sunday service?
- Which things about the Christian faith do you think need restating for today?