

Q & A's

for Unity Agreement 2008

This document was prepared to provide answers to questions asked by various brethren. As many of the questions were similar and pertain to the same issues, we have prepared this Q & A document in order to address them.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, unity efforts in North America have been clearly paralyzed by repeated analysis and the inability for Brethren to move forward in practical fellowship and goodwill together after determining that they believe the same essential doctrines. The mechanisms have become ponderous, complex and ineffective. We have allowed a “tradition” of separation to exist, and have been unable or unwilling to work harmoniously enough together to overcome the barriers and apply Biblical principles of unity to realize a united body.

As a consequence, Christadelphian families remain divided, ecclesias in the two communities co-exist without effective cooperation between them, our young people are challenged as they try to operate within a 100 year old division that makes no sense to them and weakens their ability to maintain valuable and much needed association with other Christadelphian young people in the “other” community.

For these reasons the current unity effort was organized to try to address this impasse. It is a serious and well-grounded initiative. The NASU document was developed over a 10 year period in consultation with 27 Ecclesias in three separate regions having a total membership of 1725 members. The referendum to test NASU as an acceptable basis for unity received over 88% support of Amended Ecclesias that voted on this matter. (88.4% of Ecclesias and 89.0% of members from those Ecclesias).

The issue before Ontario Ecclesias is not one of process, it is one of applying known information about the beliefs of two communities and moving forward in a Christ-like way - with understanding, patience and love toward one another. There is no need for further division. There is a dire need and responsibility for unity.

Questions and Answers “Q & A’s”

1. On what basis did the four Toronto Ecclesias implement the Unity Agreement 2008?

The Toronto Ecclesias developed the Unity Agreement 2008 as a response to a call for unity issued by the Greenaway Ecclesia in a declaration letter dated April 28th, 2008. Every Ecclesia in Ontario had the opportunity to respond to this letter and many did so individually. The response of the GTA ecclesias was made in an effort to advance the unity effort and was built on the widespread acceptance of NASU as an acceptable basis for unity.

The Greenaway letter was appreciated as a declaration, and was received as an invitation to respond. Each of the Toronto Ecclesias were eager to respond by way of an agreement that would be principle-based, adequately detailed and comprehensive.

The Ecclesial representatives developed the agreement in conjunction with their Ecclesias. Once it was in final form, the agreement was presented to each of the 4 Toronto Ecclesias for final approval. This ultimately resulted in the *Unity Agreement 2008**.

**Since the Unity Agreement 2008 was published, the Greenaway Ecclesia and those who signed in agreement with it have all declared that they agree to “accept, adopt and work within the specific parameters set out in the Unity Agreement 2008”.*

2. Why were the Toronto Ecclesias so confidential until the Unity Agreement 2008 was published?

This process took considerable time, as members of each Ecclesia had to independently review, study and approve the agreement. While the proposal was being developed and studied by each of the 4 Toronto ecclesias, it was considered confidential - confined to members of the four Ecclesias. This allowed each Ecclesia to work independently, without distraction to evaluate the agreement solely on the basis of its own merits and determine if it was a sound and Scriptural approach. Once each Ecclesia concluded it's internal study and vote process, it was agreed among the 4 Ecclesias to publish the *Unity Agreement 2008* as their individual and collective response to the Greenaway declaration letter.

3. Shouldn't other Ecclesias have been given an opportunity for input?

Most of this material has been in the possession of Ontario Ecclesias for over a year. The NASU document has been available since October 2003, and the *Unity Agreement 2008* is essentially the same as the Unity Agreement distributed in May 2007. The additional assurances in the *Unity Agreement 2008* were written in response to input already expressed to the delegates of the previous 6 Ecclesia process.

Every Ecclesia in Ontario was then sent *the Unity Agreement 2008* that is the result of the Toronto Ecclesias' work together.

4. The Unity Agreement 2008 says: *We respect and practice Ecclesially-based fellowship*. What is intended by this?

Ecclesially based fellowship, which is inherent in the *Unity Agreement 2008*, is an approach to fellowship that connects an individual believer to an Ecclesia. The Ecclesia to which the member belongs has scriptural responsibility for the basic integrity of the member's beliefs and behaviour. The phrase "a member in good standing" is an illustration of this. The home Ecclesia of individual believers attests to the standing of its members. This is how the ecclesial world in both communities operates. Ecclesias in both communities have responsibility for the application of a scriptural and consistent fellowship policy for their members.

On the Unity Agreement page this long practiced principle is incorporated. The operative statement in the Unity Agreement indicates that signatory Ecclesias "welcome in fellowship Brothers and Sisters from Ecclesias that accept this basis". (#4 on page iii).

5. If an individual from a signatory ecclesia says something that doesn't seem consistent with the *Unity Agreement 2008*, how is this to be taken?

At any time and on any issue, an individual Brother or Sister may make a statement that seems inconsistent with the position of their Ecclesia. It is the constant duty of every Ecclesia to work with its members to ensure a balance of personal views and appropriate Ecclesial order, as indicated in the *Ecclesial Guide* clause 13. Individual members of Ecclesias are ultimately subject to the order established within their Ecclesia. Again, as it pertains to the *Unity Agreement 2008* Ecclesias (not individuals) in both communities have responsibility for the application of a scriptural and consistent fellowship policy for their members.

6. What fellowship practice would be expected of Unamended Ecclesia that have accepted the *Unity Agreement 2008*, with regard to Unamended Ecclesias that have not?

As above, the operative statement in the Unity Agreement indicates that signatory Ecclesias "welcome in fellowship Brothers and Sisters from Ecclesias that accept this basis". (#4 on page iii).

Unamended Ecclesias that are signatories of the *Unity Agreement 2008* know the fellowship principles of this Agreement. The application of fellowship matters that are part of this Agreement are entrusted to Unamended Ecclesias to handle. We are

confident that they will, in the spirit of Christ, apply this policy in a manner that is consistent with the provisions of the Agreement.

7. How is fellowship going to be managed?

The *Unity Agreement 2008* is a principle-based agreement founded on trust and good faith. The clauses that deal with fellowship are found on page iii. Fellowship will be managed by applying the guiding operating principles of the Ecclesial Guide* and relying on the trust and good faith of the Ecclesias that are party to this agreement.

**Some pertinent clauses from the Ecclesial Guide are included at the end of this document.*

8. Does the *Unity Agreement 2008* risk further division?

The objective of the efforts of the four Toronto Ecclesias is to advance unity. We see no need or purpose for further division. As in all past unity throughout the world, there have been different opinions about how best to proceed. It is our prayer that after conducting a full Ecclesial review of the *Unity Agreement 2008* other Ecclesias will support it. This was the approach used in the Pacific Coast Reunion and worked very well to preserve unity even though some ecclesias were not prepared to support the unity effort at that time.

With respect to the impact of the agreement on fellowship among Amended Ecclesias, it is anticipated that not all Amended Ecclesias will feel able to support the Agreement initially. Some may support, some may defer their decision and others may stand aside. The Amended Ecclesias that accept the Unity Agreement intend to continue to extend fellowship with all Amended Ecclesias in any of these cases. As clause 5 on page iii says: The BASF continues as the basis of inter-Ecclesial fellowship within the Amended community worldwide.

9. Is there a precedent for extending fellowship on something more than the BASF?

Absolutely. The extension of fellowship achieved in both the UK unity agreement and the Australia unity agreement were based on the additional material connected to the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith. Furthermore, in both cases Ecclesias were allowed to maintain their unique statements of faith provided they were an adequate expression of the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures.

The fellowship position of the *Unity Agreement 2008* is also similar to that of the Pacific Coast Reunion and in the Australian Unity Agreement. These agreements recognize the BASF as the basis of worldwide fellowship for Amended Ecclesias, while in practice recognizing that there are other unity agreements to deal with regional matters.

Please see Appendix A at the end of the Q & A section for further detail on this answer.

10. What about Ecclesias that don't accept the *Unity Agreement 2008* and withdraw from those accepting it?

We are not aware of any Ecclesia considering such action and do not believe such an action is warranted. We believe it is unscriptural to withdraw fellowship from an Ecclesia (or group of ecclesias) that has not changed its stated beliefs. There is no example in the Bible of one Ecclesia cutting off fellowship with another ecclesia despite a number of serious issues.

11. Can the results from the November 2004 NASU Unity Proposal establish broad Amended support for NASU as an acceptable foundation on which to build a unity agreement?

Yes. The proposal itself clearly indicated that the vote to be taken was based on the specific conclusions that the NASU presented, i.e. that it presented acceptable expressions of understanding that are harmonious with scripture and that it provides a sound basis for unity and fellowship among (Amended and Unamended) Ecclesias in North America.

Ecclesias were asked to vote on the proposal that all North American Ecclesias extend fellowship to one another based on acceptance of these conclusions, understanding that upon preponderant acceptance, implementation would follow, pending approval of a follow-up phase dealing with implementation. The results clearly indicated support. Not only was there was an extremely high rate of participation, the results among participants indicated preponderant support, with 88.4% of Ecclesias voting in favour and 89% of the individuals within those ecclesias. (*The operative section of the NASU Unity Proposal is included for reference at the end of this document.*)

12. Did Ecclesias take the NASU and the NASU vote seriously?

Absolutely. The nature of the proposal clearly indicated that implementation of unity was at stake as a result of the vote. Ecclesias took this matter very seriously, assessing the soundness of the doctrinal basis presented in NASU. For an Ecclesia to not take it seriously would have been to abdicate its responsibility as a member of the body, which places such strong emphasis on the importance of the Truth.

13. What is your position regarding questions on the NASU?

Acknowledging that no man-made statement is perfect, the North American Statement of Understanding 2003 was accepted overwhelmingly throughout North America as a sound doctrinal foundation on which to build unity. Further, it has been available for scrutiny for many years. The Ecclesias accepting the *Unity Agreement 2008* accept the NASU, and believe that the time for further discussion about the NASU is now past. Accordingly, we will not be fielding further questions on the NASU document.

Appendix A to Q & A's, paragraph 9

Is there a precedent to the use of other Statements of Faith?

The Christadelphian, April 1881, pg.572 Notes

Your proposal for the simultaneous adoption of a common statement of faith by all the ecclesias is made with the best of objects; but it could not accomplish the end you seek . . . R.Roberts

The Christadelphian, March 1904, pg.113

“THE CHRISTADELPHIAN STATEMENT OF FAITH”

Brother R. W. asks us to countenance the movement at the antipodes to “give up the word ‘Birmingham’ and substitute ‘Christadelphian.’” Our answer must be as before: We have no authority so to do. Neither has anyone else. The Birmingham ecclesia can only speak for itself; and it is so with every other ecclesia. We entirely sympathise with every godly effort for unity on a pure basis; but it would be a mistake to issue a document under the above title, because it would imply the right of the issuers to speak for the whole household of faith, which right does not exist. The principle of ecclesial independence must be jealously guarded, and it is the beginnings of things that have to be watched. There is no desire on the part of the Birmingham ecclesia to impose its form of words on any ecclesia; but there can be no valid objection to any ecclesia adopting it if it sees fit. But to adopt this statement and give it a universal title that the Birmingham ecclesia conscientiously refrains from giving it, does not seem to be right at all . . . C.C.Walker

The Christadelphian, May 1927, pg.215

No ecclesia has authority to issue a document to be called ‘THE Statement of Faith’, though it has been done by at least one. The most that any ecclesia can rightly say is, This is *our* Constitution and Statement of Faith. Thus, as concerning The Birmingham Temperance Hall Ecclesia, the title runs: ‘The Constitution of the Birmingham Temperance Hall Ecclesia . . . in which is contained A Statement of the Faith forming their Basis of Fellowship’. It, or an equivalent with slight modifications, has been adopted by many ecclesias all over the world as a practical working basis. To this there can be no valid objection. On the other hand, many ecclesias will have nothing to do with it, preferring their own formulae. To this also there can be no valid objection, so long as we are agreed concerning apostolic faith and practice. C.C.Walker

The Christadelphian, November 1955, pg.424-425

...There is one matter on which considerable misunderstanding exists abroad. It concerns the proposed liberty for an ecclesia to retain its own Statement of Faith, while accepting the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith as a correct definition of the First Principles to be believed. The existence of different Statements has come as a surprise to some, but the history of the Truth’s revival makes it plain . . .

The majority of ecclesias thus use the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith and this in increasing proportion as new ecclesias adopt it. Some would insist on all ecclesias using the same Statement. There may be good arguments for this, but they are not conclusive. For one thing, we cannot maintain ecclesial autonomy and at the same time demand the adoption of a particular Statement. In any case, who has the right to demand it? Again and again in THE CHRISTADELPHIAN it has been pointed out that "The Christadelphian Statement" does not exist; there is no universal Statement. John Carter

The Christadelphian, June 1956, pg.232

A FINAL STATEMENT DEFINING THE BASIS FOR FUTURE CO-OPERATION BETWEEN CENTRAL AND SUFFOLK STREET FELLOWSHIPS

GENERAL BELIEFS

- (1) We agree that the doctrines to be believed and taught by us, without reservation, are the First Principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures, of which the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (with positive and negative clauses, and the Commandments of Christ) gives a true definition. It is agreed, however, that ecclesias in both fellowships may continue to use such statements as are current among them, supplementing them where necessary with the Clauses herein set out. John Carter

Unity in Australia, The Christadelphian, March 1958, pg.132

Basis of Fellowship

(1) GENERAL BELIEFS

(a) We agree that the doctrines to be believed and taught by us, without reservation, are the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures, of which the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (with positive and negative clauses and the Commandments of Christ) gives a true definition...

(b) Acceptance of this basis would not preclude the use of any other adequate Statement of Faith by an ecclesia, provided this is in harmony with the B.A.S.F . . .

Excerpts from personal correspondence, Sept.18, 2008 (by express permission)

I am not able to give you definitive figures of how many ecclesias use statements of faith that differ from the BASF, but I can confirm that there are ecclesias both in the UK and Australia that did not change their statement of faith when reunion occurred in 1957 & 1958. This means that some ecclesias are still using the BUSF, and some are using statements of their own creation.

There is another factor that is commonly overlooked in this discussion. We talk quite glibly of the BASF, forgetting that strictly speaking it is the statement of faith of the Birmingham ecclesia. Toronto West has its statement, and Shirley has its statement. In other words, we would be wrong to talk of THE Statement of Faith; what we have are Statements of Faith. While there is obviously a great value in using identical wording, the critical factor is that, "We believe the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the scriptures". If these first principles are adequately summarised in an ecclesia's statement of faith, we cannot insist on anything else. ...Michael Ashton

Below are some relevant clauses from the *Ecclesial Guide*

13. -- Rules and Modes.

In all communities, large or small, there must be order and mutual submission, in order to attain the objects of their existence.

In small bodies, few and simple rules will suffice. In large bodies, there will be more need for precise and definite regulations, having reference to what duties certain persons will attend to, how such are to be appointed, under what conditions their duties will be exercised, and so forth. Two things have to be secured in the conduct of an ecclesia, which are capable, in a wrong mode of working, of becoming inconsistent with one another, but which, with care, wisdom, and patience, can be so reconciled as to both have their full and effective place. The one is, ORDER, and the other, INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY. Both are essential to the healthy and harmonious life of an ecclesia. The danger is that one or other may be sacrificed, in the endeavour to secure either. Care should be taken that neither is secured at the expense of the other. Let not order quench individual liberty, and be sure that individual liberty is not allowed to destroy order. Both are to be secured by appropriate arrangements, such as are indicated in this *Guide*.

17. -- Exercise of Authority Out of the Question.

One principle ought to permeate all appointments in the house of Christ, and that is the one laid down by Christ, when speaking of the exercise of authority of one Gentile over another, he said, "IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU." "He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doeth serve." The appointment of brethren to certain offices is not the appointment of men to exercise authority, but of men to serve. For this reason, it is wise to speak of them all, in whatever capacity, as "serving brethren." For the same reason, it is inexpedient to employ any technical term around which ideas of personal importance are liable to gather, or which have a tendency to create a cold officialism and obscure the family relation to the truth. "The committee," for example, or "the executive," "registrar," &c., is an abstraction which is liable to do this. It is wise to attach the term "brother" or "brethren" to every office. It may sometimes seem uncouth or redundant; but this is more than compensated by its wholesome effect in helping to preserve the family unity of the body of Christ. It keeps in view the fact that official brethren are only brethren performing an office for the good of the rest, and to some extent shuts the door against the corruption which generated the apostacy, and developed the clerical usurpation.

18. -- Serving Brethren, not Rulers.

All official brethren are serving brethren; but there are necessarily different sorts of serving brethren, such as managing brethren, presiding brethren, doorkeeping brethren, &c., but *ALL are brethren*. It is important to keep this feature constantly in the front. Christ places it there: "One is your master, even Christ, and *all ye are brethren*." This feature, with many other beautiful features originally appertaining to the house of Christ, has disappeared from the religious systems around us, bearing the name of Christ. Having returned to it, let us hold on to it. There must be no authority, only service.

The spirit of the appointments involve this. The ecclesia does not appoint masters, but servants. In principle, the ecclesia is the doer of everything; but, as it is impossible, it can, in its collective capacity, do the things that are to be done, it delegates to individual members the duty of doing them in its behalf.

20. -- Ecclesial Control.

It is next important, in making this choice, that the right of the whole ecclesia to control proceedings should not be absolutely surrendered into the hands of those chosen. To do this would be to appoint masters and not servants, and lay a foundation for the evils that have come from clerical domination. While appointing special brethren to special offices,

the ecclesia ought to retain a power of regulation and control. This is done by making the proceedings of the arranging brethren subject to the periodical approbation of the general body. Let the arranging brethren report their acts once in three months to the general body, and if there is anything objectionable in those acts, it is in the power of the ecclesia to repudiate them. Yet, since the decisions of the arranging brethren must often refer to matters requiring immediate attention, it is necessary that their decisions should be valid, without the consent of the general body; and that such acts should not be subject to repudiation. The two necessities are met by giving the arranging brethren the power to carry out their decisions at once: and the general body the power of veto only as regards the future.

24. -- Arranging Meetings Open to All.

Their deliberative meetings should be open at all times to the rest of the brethren. Several advantages are secured by this. The growth of a gap between the arranging brethren and the general body is prevented; the prevalence of the brotherly family feeling among all is maintained. There being nothing secret, no envious curiosity can arise, while, the way being open for any brother to attend and speak (though not to vote), there is secured any advantage there may be in the general wisdom. Any brother to whom a good idea may occur having it in his power to attend and ventilate it, has the double advantage of securing any benefit there may be in the general body; or relieving the brother's mind by showing him that the advantage of his idea is not available. Thus murmurings and surmisings are prevented.

44. -- Fraternal Gatherings from Various Places.

These are beneficial when restricted to purely spiritual objects (i.e., let the brethren assemble anywhere from anywhere, and exhort, or worship, or have social intercourse together); but they become sources of evil if allowed to acquire a legislative character in the least degree. Ecclesial independence should be guarded with great jealousy, with the qualifications indicated in the foregoing sections. To form "unions" or "societies" of ecclesias, in which delegates should frame laws for the individual ecclesias, would be to lay the foundation of a collective despotism which would interfere with the free growth and the true objects of ecclesial life. Such collective machineries create fictitious importances, which tend to suffocate the truth. All ecclesiastical history illustrates this.

Below: The operative section of the NASU Unity Proposal

CONCLUSIONS RESULTING FROM THE NASU INITIATIVE

1. That the October 2003 NASU booklet (NASU) presents jointly developed and acceptable expressions of understanding which are harmonious with Scripture.
2. That the NASU provides a sound basis for unity among Christadelphian Ecclesias in North America (Amended and Unamended).
3. That based on the understanding set out in the NASU, members in good standing of all Christadelphian ecclesias should be recognized as brethren in fellowship with Christ and our Heavenly Father, and therefore with each other (1 John 1:3). *"...and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ"*

The Christadelphian NASU Steering Committee (CNSC) has set out the following Proposal as a means of implementing unity amongst Christadelphian brethren in North America.

NASU UNITY PROPOSAL

We Propose:

- That all North American Christadelphian Ecclesias extend fellowship to one another based on acceptance of the conclusions 1 to 3 above. All ecclesias will be part of this united community unless they choose to stand apart.
- That implementation of mutual fellowship will commence in Autumn 2005, dependent upon the acceptance of this NASU Unity Proposal and the recommendations in Phase 2 by the preponderant majority in Christadelphian Ecclesias in North America.