

A section from the

On the Way Together Report

September 2009

Section 2



inquire

imagine innovate
implement



On the Way Together **Report on a Spirited journey towards the future**

On the Way to Together is a special project of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. This project has been developed in response to a requirement of the Synod meeting 2007 that the General Secretary provide to the Synod meeting of 2008 a Synod strategic plan.

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Understanding life giving themes and theme descriptions

This booklet sets out the five themes arising from the first stage of the *On the Way Together* project. Each theme brings together information received through the *Spirited conversations*. Five life-giving themes emerged. Themes are life giving because they speak of God's presence. They have the capacity to lift us above the limitations of our human condition and the mundaneness of every day life. Themes can inspire, keeping us alert to God's calling to be, know, act, and relate enthused by God's Spirit. And as such, these themes will shape the next steps of the pilgrimage.

Theme descriptions

Theme descriptions provide the link between the many *Spirited conversations* and the theme itself. The descriptions connect our past and present with our possible futures. The descriptions help us recall our values, traditions and practices. The themes and descriptions help us imagine what the church might be like if the best that we have discovered through the conversations was to become the norm. They give us a way to express the hopes we hold for the church on the journey to the promised goal.

Themes do not list everyday detail about the church's life. They focus on our experiences of the church at its most whole, when it has best demonstrated its purpose and calling. Themes also name hopes that the *Spirited conversations* have identified. This is an ongoing exploration. There is more to discover.

To these themes, we must bring our knowledge of the context and cultures within which the church witnesses, serves and worships. We also bring to our explorations study of the scriptures and

the Christian traditions that have formed us. This study is vital to being *On the Way Together* with God and our neighbours.

Using themes and theme descriptions

Themes and descriptions can help generate provocative propositions. These propositions can become proposals about our future. But we are not limited to our experiences of those times when the Uniting Church has been at its best, or indeed our hopes for the church.

The church is called to

- represent the reign of God, to be a people sent, to act faithfully in the public sphere
- be the apostle to the world, bearing a distinctively Christian worldview into an alien landscape
- cultivate communities of the Holy Spirit whose members live out Christian values and a commitment to the reign of God.

In addition to the themes and descriptions, we need to listen to the context in which each of the bodies that comprise the UCA Synod of Victoria and Tasmania finds itself. We must listen to the cultures and sub-cultures to which each part of the church senses God's call. Such listening is critical if we are to be a missional church.

We might also continue to ask questions such as "*whose voices have we not yet heard?*" and "*which voice have we heard but not yet heeded?*" or "*where and when is a positive discrimination warranted by the call of God?*"

To assist us in such listening, *On the Way Together* includes two vital chapters. Randall Prior reminds us of the Uniting Church being a missional church. Ruth Powell discusses some of sociological aspects of our church.

Later, on the *On the Way Together* section of the Synod website an additional chapter will reflect on the socio-political context within which our church is called to act. See the following sections of this report. Refer www.victas.uca.org.au

Themes and descriptions can also assist parts of the church to reflect on and evaluate their worship, witness and service. Once the next planning steps have been taken, the themes can be used to generate criteria to guide reflection, develop evaluation questions and explore ways to discern our vocations.

What next?

Should the September 2008 synod meeting adopt the themes and their descriptions, together with some recommended further steps, *On the Way Together* will provide further practical help. Materials for the next stages of the journey will be available from the website by early October. The materials will be suitable for use by various councils, congregations, agencies and other Uniting Church bodies. They will provide a process for the development of plans that reflect the church's identity and purpose.

The following pages set out each theme together with its corresponding description in full.



Encountering Christ in Community

Theme descriptors

Dot point sentences, picking up the descriptors for this theme arising from the data collected.

- The church is the body of Christ.
- Christians are initiated into the body of Christ at baptism and commissioned to ministry in the name of Christ. We value the theology and traditions associated with joining the church, and the Uniting Church in particular. We value the opportunities belonging to the church brings for
 - worship and sacramental practice
 - nurturing Christian spirituality
 - fellowship and community life
 - being formed in the mind and ministries of Christ
 - being sent out as God’s agents of good news of extravagant compassion, reconciliation and freedom.
- Sent communities of Christians continue the work of Christ in the world. Thus churches can embody the continuing incarnation of God.
- We value our history of being one church. We enjoy our theological diversity. This is the body of Christ.
- We have a particular tradition of being parallel communities to those of our local cultures and contexts. We have found ways to express God’s good news through distinctive communities. When we have done so, we have bridged gaps and enabled growth in the Christian faith.
- We value the fellowship of other Christian communities. We realise that Christian fellowship is one of the benefits of working together in ministry. We value the ecumenical traditions we have inherited. We know that the skills developed in sharing in Christ’s work contributes to fellowship amongst us.
- We value the connections forged between UCA communities and the wider communities in which we serve as ‘resident aliens’. We want to develop these connections further. We want to explore more diverse ways to respond to the opportunities such connections offer to meet people’s needs.
- We value our history of having offered diverse services to many communities in Victoria and Tasmania. Our congregations and agencies have often been at the forefront of providing new services. Sometimes this has been a response to specific needs in distinct neighbourhoods or groups. Other services have endured many adaptations to changing contexts.
- Uniting Churches have provided intersections between the church and the wider community for many people. Our church is often at its best when our buildings and programs have the reputation of being safe, inclusive spaces for our neighbours.
- It is the Spirit of God who calls us into connection with our neighbourhoods and communities. We are learning to recognise the ways in which the Spirit helps us see where God is at work. And to glimpse the Christ in others. This is what makes our approach to engaging with our neighbours distinctive. It is the motivation of the Spirit of God to love, to be gracious and to be faithful. We have learned to be in relationships of solidarity with our neighbours and the communities with whom we are connected. Through these relationships we empower ourselves and others.

- The UCA in Victoria and Tasmania enjoys a history of supporting and developing communities in both states. Sometimes we have contributed through partnerships with government bodies. Sometimes it has been through alliances with non-government, community based organisations. These partnerships have provided innovative ways for the church to engage, often beyond the resources of a particular congregation or agency. We have benefited from these partnerships and alliances. They have expanded and extended our influence in the community.
- We understand our church as called to participate in community life. Sometimes this is public, sometimes less overtly. Often we have found particular and persuasive resonance with the needs of the community. At other times we have struggled to establish relevance. Yet we have found that sustained relationships can transcend relevance, be life affirming and open new opportunities for witness and service. When this happens, we have sometimes discovered alternative ways to live and to serve. We enjoy and benefit from such Spirited surprises. So while we hold to the gospel and our church's ethos we also hold ourselves accountable to be open to change and adaptation. Thus will we hear Christ's calling and respond gladly.
- As a community grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we hold ourselves accountable to biblical teachings and our theological foundations. We value highly the polity of the UCA. Especially we value the leadership roles and functions that derive from being composed of interrelated councils. We acknowledge the benefits many people have derived from their leadership of the church through these roles.
- When we establish connections with other communities we do so from a clearly enunciated position of faith. We seek justice for all, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, age or social standing. We advocate for and with those who have difficulty speaking for themselves. We stand with those who resist social policy or commercial activity that threatens human rights or the environment.
- We persistently seek to understand and interpret God's good news as declared by Jesus of Nazareth. We look for fresh insight, contextual awareness and sensitivity to culture. We seek to model publicly the message of the Gospel through cutting edge ministry. We value the role of theological discussion in the public sphere.
- We value Australia's cultural and ethnic mix. We look for ways to respond to God's call to engage with people of various cultures, sub-cultures, generations, genders and social standing. In so doing we reap great benefit.
- We are aware of the advent of technology, in particular information technology. Through this we are exploring innovative ways to extend the church's gifts and strengths to the community.
- As a UCA Synod we have entered into a covenant with the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). This relationship has developed over time as we and the UAICC explore the implications of covenant. We realise that our connection calls us to address past injustices. It also calls us to journey into an ever deepening relationship as children of God. We listen now as the UAICC in Victoria and Tasmania invites theological, practical and a polity based reflection on this relationship.

Living God's transforming story

Theme descriptors

Dot point sentences, picking up the descriptors for this theme arising from the data collected.

- We value the reality that we are Jesus' disciples.
- We value the practices that nurture our Christian spirituality, such as :
 - worship, including liturgy, music and creativity through fine arts
 - personal devotion
 - prayer – public, personal and communal
 - Bible study
 - education in the traditions of Christian thought and practice
 - theological discussion, reflection and conversation
 - listening to and telling stories of faith
 - advocacy and resistance
 - struggling to understand our cultures, so we might bring the gospel to them with relevance.

We value all practices which taken together form our Christian life. They are the ways we know God's presence and companionship.

- We understand that Christ's call to discipleship is to be God's agents in our neighbourhoods, our regions, our state and nation and globally. As such, we understand that our calling is to join with God's mission wherever God is working to bring healing and wholeness. We listen attentively for the Holy Spirit's call. So our discipleship relates to our specific contexts and cultures.

- We understand that God's good news finds its expression in our daily lives. At all times, in all places and in all relationships we are called to walk worthily of the One who calls us. For this reason we take seriously the vocation to which Christ calls us – to be his disciples – in everyday living.
- Whenever and wherever we meet, we have learned the value of practicing the presence of Christ. Bible study, theological reflection, prayer and other practices that nurture the life of faith are vital. These are all part of attending to our personal spiritual wellbeing.
- We value the ways in which our meeting agendas and business are guided by faith practices. This is one way in which we move from being committees and councils to being active Christian communities.
- We understand and value the gospel of Jesus Christ as radically reorienting our world view and way of life. We recognise that we have been enthused and empowered when we have studied deeply. This journey requires studying the scriptures and theological scholarship together.
- We value the theological roots of the Uniting Church. These are critical to our identity. We value the foundation that these roots give us. We value also the flexibility they offer as we struggle to engage our culture in a lively, meaningful conversation.
- We value the commitment to life-long learning our church has embraced. We recognise that some learning is the result of formal courses. We also understand that much arises from reflection on our life journey and especially our experiences of being the church.

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- We value the persistent interaction with biblical scholarship and our theological foundations. This helps us witness to the gospel and serve God's mission in our diverse contexts.
- We value and respect the traditions of Christian spirituality we have inherited, as well as those crafted since union. These have contributed to our Christian identity and practice. They have shaped the ways in which we grow in faith. However, we also value continued exploration of how we might be formed and equipped to live in the future. We value remaining open to discoveries about God, the relationship between God and ourselves and our vocations. We realise that over time our diversity will increase as the groups that comprise the Uniting Church include new and different people.
- We value the investment of energy, giftedness and resources required to experiment with different forms of church. We understand that these add to our diversity and challenge our capacities to communicate across differences. They recognise that 'emergent churches' might also challenge us to be more open to changing traditional ideas about Uniting Church polity. New forms of church are evidence of the gospel interacting with other cultures, generations and groups. These are often absent from our more established congregations. We listen for the re-traditioning work of the Spirit.
- We value unity highly. Being one, embracing our diversity yet celebrating our unity, finds its reality in our conciliar relations. We value the roles and functions that each of the UCA councils play. We listen to the councils. We join in conversations that hold us as a whole church in dialogue with the Spirit of God. In this way we have come to value the oversight of ministry as a liberating and enabling practice.
- We are a church of many cultures. We value our multi-cultural composition and heritage. Our history includes many stories and actions about including cultures and ethnicities outside the three church traditions which joined at union. We value the perspectives, insights and experiences that have enriched our understanding and practice of being the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania.



Spirited Listening, giving voice

Theme descriptors

Dot point sentences, picking up the descriptors for this theme arising from the data collected.

- We value listening to the stories and perspectives of others. Listening has been an essential trait of our church. It has contributed to our understanding and enabled us to identify our prophetic voice in response. We are excited at the diversity of stories we hear. These have often been about the ways people have experienced God or discovered God in our neighbours' lives. As we have listened to the stories, we have learned to discern the Holy Spirit's guidance. Through this prayerful listening we have sometimes received unexpected answers which we have discerned to be God's call.
- We value 'giving voice' as an essential character trait of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. Giving voice has often been associated with:
 - theological perspective or reflection
 - worship as a Christian practice that occurs in public spaces and places
 - sharing stories of faith as witness or testimony
 - those aspects of evangelism usually associated with telling the story of new life through Jesus Christ
 - the church's advocacy for those who struggle to express their own concerns, or to have their voice heard among the many more powerful voices
- solidarity with people or groups who are treated unjustly, marginalised, oppressed, held in poverty or who experience personalised or structural injustice
- the church's critique of social policy, or government performance in relation to its policies and international commitments
- injustices embedded in structures that diminish people or the environment
- adding the church's voice to those of other organisations publicly advocating on matters of mutual concern
- networks committed to exploring personal or social transformation
- finding consensus in our various councils' meetings.
- The church stands in a long tradition of Christian vocation. Jesus is the model for this tradition. We have learned that the way of Christ is to stand with those who suffer. It is to offer extravagant compassion and unconditional welcome, to include and liberate the oppressed and live justly. In fulfilling this calling we find our own freedom in Christ.
- Prophetic listening and giving voice are partners in the church's witness and service. We value this connectedness. In its practical outworking we have experienced service, justice and the integrity of creation as profoundly theological and spiritual practices. Faith and life are intimately tied together. Word and deed are held in creative tension. We value highly this aspect of our Uniting Church tradition and ethos.

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- The relationship between word and deed in our Christian tradition is profoundly spiritual. We experience the freedom of Christ when we embrace risks, and when we are intentionally countercultural in response to the gospel's call.
- We value highly the agencies of the Uniting Church. These agencies make a valuable and distinctive contribution to neighbourhoods, communities and the Victorian and Tasmanian societies. Agencies carry the ethos and commitments of the Uniting Church in very public ways and into very public places.
- We value the ways in which the church communicates gospel values in public life. This happens through discourse, responsible actions, protest and positions taken on social issues.
- Our church has worked to renew the tradition of offering Christian hospitality. This extends to people of other cultures and sub-cultures, refugees and asylum seekers. It also reaches people in need, those who are disadvantaged, the marginalized and oppressed. This is sometimes highly specialised work requiring dedicated agencies. But we recognise that we are all called to hospitality and generosity.
- We value our reputation as a risk-taking church. Taking risks has been associated with innovation and flexibility. We recognise in our history stories of risky experimentation and exploration. Often these stories reveal that the risks were worth taking. On the other hand, we learn by experimentation and can respond to the learning in more innovative ways.
- We value our learning from prophetic listening and giving voice, recognising how this has added to our understanding of the gospel and the mission of God. We have appreciated education and training. These have helped us understand and become more skilled in prophetic listening and giving voice. Sometimes training has focused on our Christian spiritual formation. At other times it has developed knowledge and skills for ministry. Formation, education and training have assisted the people and bodies of the Uniting Church to be more credible witnesses and servants. Such activity has also helped sustain our church's commitments to service and justice ministries. Education and training has also helped members of the Uniting Church to participate in leadership in the wider community in activities of service and justice.
- We value the covenant between the Uniting Church and the UAICC, through which we have explored reconciliation as well as aspects of our identity. We are aware that much more remains to be done to bring this relationship to its full promise.
- We value the practice of theological reflection by which we have learnt to bring our life experiences to the gospel. When we listen in this way, we hear again the call of God's Spirit to join in God's mission.



Engaging diversity

Theme descriptors

Dot point sentences, picking up the descriptors for this theme arising from the data collected.

- We value the multicultural and cross cultural dimensions to the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We recognise the depth and breadth of life this has brought. Our church is the richer for the vigour, diversity and vibrancy that results from our multicultural life. We value in particular the diversity of heritage and Christian spiritualities that result from our multicultural nature. This has contributed significantly to our worship and service. It has also changed the way we see ourselves before God.
- We are a church comprising many diverse demographics. We include faith communities and congregations in remote, rural, sub-urban and urban contexts. Our communities range in size from fewer than 10 people to more than several hundred. Our resources are held within a concept of a commonwealth. But they are distributed and allocated with significant diversity. Some congregations have access to placed, ordained persons. Others have access to a 'resource service' by ordained persons. An increasing number do not have regular, frequent access to either.
- We value the reality that engaging diversity implies taking risks, grappling with the gospel and identity.
- We realise that as Australia changes its ethnicity, so must the church reflect these changes. We are thankful for our heritage. But we realise we must respond to and be involved with the present and future realities of Australia. We realise we have a responsibility to form new people and cultures into the story of the Uniting Church. But we must do so in ways that are inclusive. This calls for our identity to be somewhat fluid, as well as grounded in a broad foundation. For this reason we value learning about, reflecting on, and re-traditioning our identity and ethos. We can respect and honour the past but not be tied to or limited by it.
- We value the church's commitment to young families, children and young people. We recognise the focus the church has traditionally placed on these generations in its ministry. We understand that our faith is dynamic. People of different ages can grow in faith in Christ as well as in the practices of the Christian church.
- We appreciate the many and diverse ways in which people and expressions of the Uniting Church connect with neighbourhoods and communities. We see reflected in this diversity the struggle to be appropriate to different sub-cultures and cultures. Each of these connections provides an opportunity to explore ways to share the love and faith that motivates us and the grace that empowers us.
- We value the commitment of the church to making disciples and to lives marked by discipleship. This is particularly so in forming young people as Christ's disciples. We recognise that any one generation of disciples will be different from both the previous and the next generations. Yet the call to make disciples, to send the church into the neighbourhood and wider world remains strong across the church.

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- We long to be inclusive of all ages, sub-cultures and cultures and recognise the struggle to be so. Yet, we celebrate our inclusivity. At these times we most closely resemble the Kingdom of God.
- In every school, congregation, agency and council we tell the stories of Christian faith. In these diverse settings we learn the way of Christ in response to particular contexts and sub-cultures. We embrace our neighbours, respecting difference yet finding ways to share the gospel across them.
- We recognise that engaging diversity requires innovation and initiative. This will result in changes to who we are and how we are as the people of God. So we value highly a commitment of justice, faith in action, inclusivity and celebration that holds us all together.
- We seek respectful relationships with people of all ages, generations, sub-cultures and cultures. We recognize that we have learnt much about being in respectful relationships. We are especially aware of the need to see the grace of God in the other with whom we seek relationship.
- We value 'having a go', experimenting and trying new ways to engage with our neighbours. We have worked hard to develop and ensure that we provide safe places, relationships and programs for encountering people of faith as well as for exploring faith.
- We are a church that includes a diversity of theologies and theological positions. This reflects our roots in the evangelical and reformed traditions, our commitment to scholarship and the reality that people from a great variety of Christian traditions have found their home in the Uniting Church.
- We value an open, welcoming and inclusive approach. This enables conversation and an open sharing of ideas, views and positions. We uphold the consensus approach to decision making in all Councils of the church. This ensures that we engage with the diversity in our midst.
- We participate with numerous groups, associations and organisations that share a common interest with the priorities of the Uniting Church. In doing so, we recognise our commitment to engaging with diversity.
- We have a long and honourable tradition of participation in ecumenical matters, as well as interfaith matters. This, too, is evidence of our appreciation of and engagement with diversity reflected in our Australian and global contexts.



Liberating Stewardship

Theme descriptors

Dot point sentences, picking up the descriptors for this theme arising from the data collected.

- The resources of the church are for the call of the whole church. They are not for just one expression or part of the church. This 'commonwealth for common good' understanding enables the church's creativity.
- We value developing new and reshaped priorities for the funds and other assets of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania.
- We are inspired by using our resources to greater effect in achieving the purposes of the church. Especially so when these resources assist the church to be about God's mission in neighbourhoods.
- We value careful discernment of the uses of church properties. We will retain some and relinquish others. We will build some and convert others to new or innovative uses. We realise that when the church imagines new priorities, resources are needed to bring them to reality. So, we value flexible policies that enable our missional church to fulfil its vocations.
- We value attention to high ethical standards in investment and management of the church's assets.
- We welcome creativity and innovation, applying our church assets and funds in new ways and directions. This enables the church to participate in God's mission in the world.
- We also value prudent management of the church's finances and assets. We recognize that the church's assets must be used effectively and renewed.
- We aim to use the UCA's resources to trigger the release of other resources into a total dynamic of resourcing. This will enable greater engagement in the mission of God.
- We value the links the church has established in tapping into government funds. We value also our access to non-government, corporate and philanthropic sources.
- We value the generosity of past generations. But we see the need for people today to lead in stewardship. This will continue the tradition of imagination, innovation and initiatives into the future.
- We value the gifts and strengths of the people who comprise the congregations, faith communities, councils, agencies and other bodies of the Uniting Church.
- We value the Uniting Church as a missional church. We see its financial and human resources as enabling the mission of God. Therefore, capacity, creativity, imagination, dreaming, energy and passion are essential in managing our resources.
- We value sharing the resources with our neighbours and the wider communities of which we are part. We have developed multiple use buildings in the past. We have formed resourcing alliances or partnerships with other community organisations. These serve to extend the mission of God to people within these groups or communities.
- We value theological reflection on the development and application of the church's resources. We recognise the importance in theological reflection of ensuring that diverse voices are heard.

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- We recognise the need for structures to develop and distribute the church's resources. In particular, we note the significance of structures being simplified, interconciliar and discerning of the needs and capacities of the church.
- We value travelling lightly with respect to resources. Thus we can respond quickly and effectively to new needs and opportunities. In this respect we understand that our stewardship of the church's resources – financial and other – is always in relation to the church's vocation as guided by the Spirit of God.



Encountering Christ in Community