



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA
Presbytery of Tasmania

Presbytery meeting 1 June 2019

Rohan's reflection / sermon

Readings: Scripture, Basis of Union

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 ([The Message](#))

⁴⁻¹¹God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God[']s own] self is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

- wise counsel
- clear understanding
- simple trust
- healing the sick
- miraculous acts
- proclamation
- distinguishing between spirits
- tongues and the interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. [God] decides who gets what, and when.

Basis of Union par. 13. GIFTS AND MINISTRIES

The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. The Uniting Church, at the time of union, will recognise and accept the ministries of those who have been called to any task or responsibility in the uniting Churches. The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission.

Introducing the Uniting Church in Tasmania

In some ways, it's hard to believe I have been here for more than a year already. During this past week the national network of Directors of Mission for Uniting

community service agencies gathered in Hobart, and I was invited to introduce them to the Uniting Church in Tasmania.

After a year in this role, working with the three Presbytery committees and the other Presbytery leaders including the Presbytery Ministers and staff, and visiting some but not yet all of the churches and faith communities around Tasmania, it was interesting to reflect on what I have noticed and am still noticing. I have certainly seen many people using their gifts for ministry and mission, and I have also noticed a lot of weariness, uncertainty and even confusion. Many people wonder if the Uniting Church has any future at all.

I am confident, and hopeful, and curious to see what God may yet call from us, together.

In the past three generations the role of the Church in society has fundamentally changed – at least, that is the perception of those of us who were involved then and still are. Younger generations have insights to share about what is now normal, and we need to hear their voices here. The major shifts in church and society now require discipline and focus from the Church in order to grasp anew our responsibilities and opportunities as disciples of Jesus Christ at mission in the world today.

The strategy of the Uniting Church Presbytery of Tasmania is to **grow healthy communities of faith** and to **form leaders for a missional church**, focussing the resources and personnel of the Presbytery to these ends (see *Strategic Directions for 2016-2018*, Presbytery of Tasmania, 2016).

These strategic directions build on previous presbytery work which identified a focus on **imagining in order to create** rather than **planning to control** (see *Where to now, Discerning Direction*, Presbytery of Tasmania, 2010).

Uniting Church congregations and members, faith communities and leaders, agencies and schools, ministers and community partners are all invited to contribute to this strategy as an expression of their discipleship of Jesus Christ, and their love of God and neighbour.

The work and responsibilities of the Presbytery staff and Presbytery committees are aligned with this strategy: local communities of faith and presbytery-wide networks are supported by the Presbytery in these priority areas of focus. The team of

Presbytery Ministers collaborate with the Presbytery Chairperson and the three Presbytery committees in leading the Presbytery. The resources of the Uniting Church including people, funds and property are directed, invested or divested in order to enable in this strategy.

At least, that is the missional theory or goal...

Some key measurements of the Uniting Church in Tasmania

- About 1500 UCA members & regular attenders:
 - rough estimate; relies on annual survey returns, Heather A will speak later
 - compare to: King Island, 4x Carrick, the size of an NCYC, or the size of one service in a big church with a loud band?
 - about 1 UCA for every 500 Tasmanian people
- About 40 UCA congregations & faith communities, including
 - at Currie on King Island,
 - Hobart Cheil, our Korean-speaking cong at Sandy Bay
 - the rural & remote ministry supported by Frontier Services,
 - the Leprena indigenous community & community centre in Glenorchy
- About 15 ordained ministers in placement & another 6 lay people in ministry placements, about 33 permanently retired ministers, 2 candidates for ordained ministry (regional formation), others learning leadership in various ways
- About 33 Lay Preachers, another 6 in training, many lay leaders of worship
- Over 40 church sites/buildings, many historic on the Tasmanian Heritage Register
- About 40 cemeteries; legislation changes mean we can no longer sell, raffle or even give away if we wanted to – which we don't!

As I mentioned before, I notice a lot of uncertainty about the future, and confusion about the Church.

So what is the purpose or mission of the Uniting Church, in our time and place?

I find the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia a very helpful continuing guide to our life together. I was seven years old when the Uniting Church was

inaugurated in 1977, at that time a member of a charismatic Methodist Church in Canberra, a child who inherited experience of people being slain in the spirit in Lausanne, as well as experience of people being silent and still in contemplative communities, or singing rousing old hymns together in little bush churches.

As a young adult my personal spirituality resonated deeply with the Taize style of worship as well as with the huge worship services at National Christian Youth Conventions, NCYC. For a time I lived within an intentional Christian community of young adults and a minister's family, until egos and spiritual abuse got in the way of radical discipleship. Ched Myers, a biblical theologian of the radical discipleship movement in the USA, illuminated for me the essence of community; a group of people who share a common history and share a **common interpretation** of that history.

The Basis of Union helps us to share the common history and foundational structures of the Uniting Church, but more importantly it helps us share – again and again – a **common interpretation** of the purpose and mission and commitments of the Uniting Church, and by doing that it guides us into the future, together.

The Basis of Union isn't complete – it overlooks the very important commitments of the Uniting Church to both the indigenous heart and the cultural diversity that are each so important to the Uniting Church. We have had to re-discover these commitments since the key statements on covenanting and multicultural diversity were approved in 1985.

But I continue to find the Basis of Union very helpful in reminding us of the ways

- that the UCA is a Christian church but not always in all the same ways as other churches,
- that the UCA is centred on Jesus the Christ but not always in the same ways as other churches, (Par 3-4)
- that the UCA is a deeply biblical church but not always in the same ways as other churches, (Par 5)
- that the UCA is a strongly Trinitarian Church but not only and not always in the same ways as other churches,

- that the UCA is a missional church, an ecumenical church, an evangelical church, a reformed church, and a uniting church, but not always in the same ways as other churches.

It is this vision of the Uniting Church as a pilgrim people, seeking unity, faithfully at mission in the world – not competing with other Christian churches, but recognising that in our different ways we all serve the one end – that inspires me still.

John 17 passage gives us a timeless prayer for Christian unity, based on the intimate unity and self-giving love of Jesus and the Father: “that they may all be one”.

That is why the Basis of Union commits us to ongoing dialogue, to continuing discernment, and to openness to the world as well as to other churches, in order to better discern God’s continuing call to us in the Uniting Church as we share God’s good news and God’s justice with the whole world.

Paragraph 13 of the Basis of Union, clearly drawing from 1 Corinthians 12, reminds us that gifts given of God are the basis for ministry and mission, not education or gender or ordination or other human categories. In contrast to most of the rest of the Church throughout history and around the world, the Uniting Church has always been committed to the ministry of women and of men, despite biblical passages to the contrary. The Uniting Church has always been committed to freedom from slavery and apartheid, despite our parental churches supporting slavery at various times, and despite biblical support for slavery and slaughtering your opponents. The Bible affirms human dignity and abundant life as good news for all people: you can probably tell I’m a John 10:10 kind of guy, in which Jesus says “I have come that you might have life, life in abundance”. Jesus demonstrates this – *embodies* this, *incarnates* this – call to abundant life in the ways that he engages with the marginalised as well as the powerful, the ways that he heals people back into community and challenges those structures that imprison people, and that is why we reject those biblical passages that support slavery and genocide. This is particularly important this week – Reconciliation Week – as we recognise the dispossession, devastation and multi-generation trauma that European colonial settlement brought to Tasmania’s indigenous peoples. That is why we commit ourselves again and again to building relationships and to reconciliation and justice as fundamental expressions of God’s good news.

Jesus is the interpretive key to our holy scriptures, the Bible. It is in Jesus' own life and ministry that we see God most clearly revealed in human form, as well as in Jesus' crucifixion and the resurrection which is God's resounding 'Yes' to the world's fatal 'No'.

It is to Jesus' own example we turn, when interpreting the Bible divides us.

The Jesus we meet in the scriptures, again and again and again, calls for freedom and for justice and for healing and for wholeness, for a change of heart in each individual and for the whole world: "turn around, look anew, for God's loving way is the way that brings abundant life for all".

Jesus challenges the religious rules and secular rulers of his day, seeking inclusion and healing for even the most vulnerable and marginal. Jesus interprets the scriptures in ways that bring justice and good news to the poor, and that challenge the powerful. The Gospel according to Matthew shows this through the common phrases "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...". Again and again Jesus interprets the scriptures in ways that bring people to new life, to renewed community, to a deeper awareness of God's loving and living presence in all of life. Jesus summarises this in the central commands to love God and to love your neighbour – and for the cunning lawyer who asks who is my neighbour, Jesus illustrates this in ways that turn inherited religious and cultural boundaries on their head: the despised Samaritan is the model of faith, a confronting theme repeated again and again in the gospels as tax collectors, prostitutes, and fishermen see God revealed in Jesus in ways that the more obviously religious ones miss.

Jesus' early disciples and apostles got all this, and they got into trouble again and again with the religious powers of their day for disregarding religious rules like the food purity laws and the circumcision of men – and this continued to cause dissent and difficulties within the early Christian communities and churches too. But those churches recognised that the boundaries they had previously assumed were God-ordained actually prevented God's mission to the whole world; the good news was for gentiles as well as for Jews, for women as well as men, for slaves as well as free. After faithful reflection on God's mission as well as scripture, the early Church realised that new disciples of Jesus didn't have to be circumcised in order to belong to the Christian community. Women were apostles in the early Church, not just men. Jesus was divine Wisdom, not just Christ. Children were precious, too.

The Uniting Church has always been committed to this ongoing enquiry: what does God call us to reform and renew, in order to bring the gifts of the people of God into more full expression for the mission of God in the world? This is our challenge, in our context, in our time. There are many inherited expectations that we can no longer uphold, many hopes and dreams that are faded or outdated. But there are also many glimmers of new possibility, new hopes for sharing this gospel of good news with the world, and particularly those most in need. We have some terrific examples of faithful communities willing to step out in faith, to try something new and to discern anew what God might be calling them to in their place and time.

The challenge for this council of the Uniting Church, this Presbytery which carries a shared responsibility together for all the Uniting Churches across Tasmania, and for the inherited gifts and ministries of our forebears in the faith, is to bring those many gifts to life and to use them for the mission of God in the world today: to bring abundant life to the world, and to bring the world to abundant life.

As the world warms, never has good news been more vital, and never has action in solidarity with the vulnerable and marginalised been more needed. How we show our love for God and our love for our neighbours speaks volumes to the world: for they will know we are Christians by our love, our compassion, our commitments to justice and to the flourishing of all creation.

As we meet today, as we discern God's call to us as faithful disciples and communities of faith, as we encourage each other and plan together how to best use the gifts God gives, I know that the Basis of Union continues to guide us in God's way for the Uniting Church, and I pray that – today and every day – together we will better discern God, and will better share God's love within Tasmania and with the whole world. Amen.

We have choices to make, and we have to make choices...

by finding ways to understand & engage in mission anew

Invitation to reflect & respond

What gifts and ministries have you noticed already today?

What are you grateful for as this gathering begins?