



# Uniting Church in Australia ASSEMBLY

## Guidelines for calling a minister from a partner church of the Uniting Church in Australia to serve in a Uniting Church Placement

July 2016

### Background

This document has been initiated by UnitingWorld and Multicultural/Cross Cultural Ministry in discussion with a number of overseas church partners and Presbyteries within the UCA with experience and concerns regarding some ministry placements in the past. Subsequent conversations with Synod General Secretaries and the Uniting Church Assembly have also taken place.

The document seeks to respond to the complexities inherent in calling a minister from a partner church. First and foremost it acknowledges that Partner Churches see this process as them placing a minister from their church into the Uniting Church for a finite period. It seeks to respect the processes and expectations of Partner Churches in this.

The document acknowledges the different bodies within the Uniting Church involved in the process and honours their respective responsibilities. It also acknowledges the current visa requirements imposed on people coming from overseas to work in Australia and should always be read in the light of changing legislation in this area. As such, it serves as a guide for the Uniting Church and Partner Churches seeking to discern a call to ministry within a Uniting Church congregation.

### Introduction

1. This document provides a framework for a discernment process to call a minister that involves a partner church of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and therefore more than one ecclesial system. The calling process should respect cultural differences and honour any regulations and decision making processes of our partner churches.
2. Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry and UnitingWorld of the Uniting Church Assembly recognise that the process of calling a minister is situated in the context of three defining principles:
  - a) International partnership
  - b) Process of call
  - c) The right to call

### International partnership

3. Since its formation, the Uniting Church in Australia has been committed to seeking special relationships in Asia and the Pacific (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 2). Today, the Uniting Church has 36 international partners in Asia, Pacific, and Africa. The Uniting Church in Australia, through its national agency, UnitingWorld, develops and encourages partnerships between Uniting Church congregations and partner churches in these regions.
4. The purpose of these partnerships is to build effective relationships with our partner church communities, to share gifts and resources and to offer opportunities to express our understanding of

the Christian church as being a universal community around the world. We have much to learn from our church partners about how to be faithful to Jesus Christ. There are challenges, issues, possibilities and concerns arising from our contexts that are helpfully shared with each other.

5. The changing multicultural nature of the Uniting Church and its commitment to living its faith and life cross-culturally affirms the importance and recognises the need to mutually share and exchange ministers according to each of our respective regulations and processes. In recent years, there have been a number of ministers from partner churches seconded to the Uniting Church to serve as ministers. This is one dimension of our partners' involvement in international mission, in this instance, exchanging ministers with their overseas partner churches.
6. The Assembly of the UCA through UnitingWorld and Multicultural Cross Cultural Ministry will make best endeavours to encourage the Synods and Presbyteries of the UCA to enable ministers in good standing in partner churches to serve in the Uniting Church following the due process of the partner church and UCA. This document outlines a process by which ministers from partner churches come into the UCA and under its ethos and discipline, whilst respectfully considering the status and standing of the individual and respecting fully the regulations and processes of the partner church from which the minister is called.
7. The regulations of the UCA (2.5.1 c) provide for the calling and placement of a minister from a partner church within the UCA including a framework within which an invitation, conversation and call may take place. The regulation is as follows:

*A placement or placements shall be for no more than three years in total unless the Synod or the Assembly (in the case of an Assembly placement) determines otherwise after considering:*

- (i) any mutual understanding, written or unwritten, between the Church and a partner church concerning the placement of Ministers from the partner church into a ministry of the Church;*
- (ii) in a case where the applicant has also applied for admission as a Minister of the Church and has engaged in the process relating to that admission in good faith, whether that process is likely to be completed within the three year period; and*
- (iii) any other matters that it considers relevant.*

In addition, and in the case of the placement of ministers from overseas partner churches, Synods have the right to determine the duration of a placement at the beginning of the call process, based on factors including compliance with prevailing immigration policies. Should the visa granted be for two years only, then the placement should be considered for that time period only.<sup>1</sup>

However all placements must be subject to consultation with the relevant partner church, visa availability and an undertaking by the minister that having fulfilled the terms of placement he/she will return to the partner church at the end of his/her term.

Duress should not be placed on any minister from a partner church to enter the process of becoming a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. Should a minister from a partner church (while in placement in Australia) decide to become a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Synod and the minister must notify the partner church before proceeding further in the process for the admission of ministers. UnitingWorld should be included in any communication to ensure communication has taken place and the partner church has the opportunity to engage fully in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing the current Visa 401 Religious Worker's Visa (Temporary Long Stay) only allows for a maximum of two years and can only be extended once, i.e. four years in total.

## Process of call

The Uniting Church recognises that their partner churches have different and independent regulations and processes of call and placement for their ministers.

### 8. Discerning Placement

When discerning the placement of a minister from a partner church into the UCA, the UCA encourages all parties involved to respect the regulations and processes of both the UCA and the partner church, to bear with one another in love and to make every effort to build up church-to-church connections.

The discerning of a call is a dialogical process and involves a number of parties. The following steps help to keep the relevant people and parties informed during the process of discerning the call.

- 8.1 In consultation with UnitingWorld, the congregation and the Joint Nominating Committee (JNC) and the relevant Synod need to seek understanding of the processes of calling and/or appointing a minister from a partner church. Synod involvement is crucial because of the immigration ramifications.
- 8.2 UnitingWorld, on behalf of the UCA, and in particular, the relevant Synod, contacts the partner church inviting them to be a part of the discernment process. This initial conversation, facilitated by UnitingWorld, will include informing the partner church of UCA protocols and the terms of placements. The conversation will also ensure that the partner church is fully aware of the call process and protocols of the UCA. This should cover matters that relate specifically to the minister coming into the UCA. Issues such as private medical insurance (if not eligible for Medicare), education and enrolment costs of the minister's children, stipend and manse should be clarified and responsibility of who carries these costs clearly explained to the partner church and to the congregation seeking to call the minister from the partner church.
- 8.3 Following this conversation, UnitingWorld advises the Chair of the JNC of the partner's response to the invitation. Presbytery and JNC will need to respectfully consider and make allowances for the partner church's meeting timelines and the decisions and steps that need to be made before a conversation can begin.
- 8.4 The JNC follows the Synod protocols and will advise the Placements Committee of any changes to process that may need to be considered to accommodate partner church requirements if a nomination or nominations from the partner church are to be considered. JNC will provide a copy of the Placement Profile to the partner church through UnitingWorld.
- 8.5 UnitingWorld will advise our partner church if one or more ministers' names are invited to be brought forward to the JNC. The partner church is encouraged to consider the placement's profile and invited to discern whether they have a suitably gifted minister or ministers able to be considered for a call and are willing and able to serve under the discipline and ethos of the UCA.
- 8.6 The partner church advises UnitingWorld whether they have a suitably gifted minister who is available and assists the minister in providing necessary documentation to the JNC through UnitingWorld. This documentation will generally be a Minister Profile following the template provided to the partner church by JNC.
- 8.7 JNC through its normal discernment processes contacts the minister for a conversation to explore and discern the possibility of a call. Should a call be discerned and confirmed the name is approved by the Presbytery and the Synod Placement Committee is advised. JNC should, through UnitingWorld, keep the partner church informed of the steps being taken.
- 8.8 The Synod Placements Committee contacts the partner church requesting the secondment of the minister to serve in the Uniting Church. The Presbytery will issue a Letter of Call, terms and conditions of the placement, and its review and evaluation. Synod will forward the Letter of

Call on behalf of Presbytery. Copies of appropriate documentation should be sent to UnitingWorld who will follow up with partners to ensure there is clarity of process.

- 8.9 The partner church exercises the authority of pastoral oversight and decides on the secondment of the minister. A letter of confirmation is sent to the Placements Committee and UnitingWorld to ensure clarity of process.
- 8.10 The period of placement must be negotiated by the Placements Committee, the minister and the partner church and must be compliant with prevailing immigration legislation. The length of placement should consider factors including:
  - 8.10 i Ministry placement cycles and terms of placement or arrangements within the partner church to whom the minister remains accountable.
  - 8.10 ii Length of visa available to the minister to stay in Australia and the likelihood of the visa being able to be extended. At the current time of Visa 401 Religious Worker's Visa (Temporary Long Stay) applies.
- 8.11 The expectations on the minister to return to the partner church following this period should be documented and agreed by the Synod, the partner church and the minister.
- 8.12 The Synod, at the request of the Presbytery, initiates the visa application. This process may require health checks and police checks being carried out for the minister prior to being granted a visa. These requirements may be unfamiliar and potentially confronting in some overseas partner contexts so must be communicated carefully and explained fully.
- 8.13 The Congregation and the Presbytery prepare an induction service; an invitation is sent to the partner church to participate in the induction of their minister in Australia.

## 9. During Placement

- 9.1 During the placement the minister comes fully under the regulations and discipline of the Uniting Church.
- 9.2 During placement regular communication between the Uniting Church, the minister and the partner church should take place to address any issues of concern regarding the placement and ensure understanding of the status of the placement. Issues of concern may be raised by the Presbytery, the Synod or the partner church. UnitingWorld should be included in significant communication so that visits by staff to partner churches, or hosted visits from partners to Australia can directly follow up on the placement and address issues as they arise.
- 9.3 While the minister is in placement in the Uniting Church, that person remains a minister of the partner church. Any decisions by the minister to apply for permanent residency in Australia or to seek to become a minister within the Uniting Church or any other denomination must involve consultation with the partner church. Similarly, consideration of the extension of a current placement must be undertaken in consultation with the partner church.
- 9.4 The purpose of placements is to provide mutual benefit to both the Uniting Church and the partner church. Ministry placements are not intended as a migration pathway from the partner country to Australia. There is a clear, documented expectation and timelines for the return of the minister to the partner church to resume ministry that clearly identifies the immigration constraints and requirements.

## 10. Concluding Placements

- 10.1 Prior to the conclusion of placement in the Uniting Church, the Presbytery will undertake steps to prepare the minister for return to the partner church and resume ministry in the church. The hope is that the placement in Australia will have provided both experience and professional development that will be of assistance in building up the life of the partner church when the minister returns.
- 10.2 At the end of the ministry placement in the Uniting Church, the minister will return back to the partner's country. Within the confines of the relevant visa requirement, any potential negotiation of extension of the placement will then be conducted between the relevant Presbytery of the UCA, the partner church and the minister. Before the process of admission begins, the relevant Synod and minister should advise the partner church of their intention.

## **The Right of Call**

11. The Placements Committee of the Synod has the right to initiate the call process and following conversations and due process of the UCA, call the minister to serve in the life of the Uniting Church (Reg. 2.6.5). Congregations and individuals should be discouraged from initiating a call or making direct contact with the partner churches or individual ministers within partner churches.
  12. The discernment process defines the call through various stages of conversation between the partner church, the JNC, the congregation and the minister. It is through these conversations that discernment as to whether this placement is the best place for the minister to exercise their skills and gifts takes place.
  13. This calling process is an expression of the Uniting Church's commitment to cross-cultural ministry and mutual partnership with our partner churches. It involves the congregation, the presbytery, and the synod, to build community-to-community connections between partner churches whilst respecting the partnership that exists between the UCA and the partner church at the Assembly level.
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Some additional practical considerations, contributed by the Vic/Tas Synod:

These may change from time to time but must be considered before any call is made.

### ***Visa application and dates***

Visa 401 commences on the date specified at the time of grant, not from the date when the Minister arrives in Australia. The visa allows the person up to two years to work on secondment with the Uniting Church in Australia. If the minister's travel date is delayed because the UCA process is not completed or perhaps because the congregation does not yet have a suitable manse to accommodate the Minister, the visa continues to be active, thus running down the time available.

### ***Misunderstanding of overseas minister***

Ministers from overseas sometimes misunderstand the conditions of their Visa 401 and their employment with the Uniting Church in Australia. These misunderstandings have led to heartbreak and distress for some Ministers and their families. It is essential that the Congregation, Minister and JNC fully understand the implications of a Visa 401 before any call is issued. Rules applicable to visas can change frequently. Up to date information about the 401 visa can be found at <https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/401->.

In the past Ministers have arrived believing:

- That they have come to the Placement for 5 to 10 years
- That they have become a Uniting Church in Australia Minister
- That their children will be able to enroll in an Australian University
- That their children are entitled to a free education. This may vary in different states but some states expect Visa 401 holders to pay for their children's schooling and fees are relatively expensive. Similarly, students on a Visa 401 are not able to enroll in three-year university courses.
- That they are entitled to free medical care
- That the congregation will supply a vehicle

### ***Permanent Residency***

Some Ministers have arrived looking towards achieving Permanent Residency in Australia.

In this regard they can be unaware that there is an enormous financial cost if applying for Permanent Residency through a migration agent and there is no a guarantee that the Uniting Church in Australia will act as a sponsor. This also misunderstands the position of the partner church which sees itself as placing the minister into the UCA for a fixed term after which the minister will return to the partner church.

### ***Health insurance***

Ministers and their families on a Visa 401 must maintain adequate health insurance for their entire stay in Australia. They are not entitled to Medicare on this visa.

### ***Costs for Congregations***

As a result of the above factors, a Congregation seeking to call a minister from overseas on a Visa 401 should consider the extra costs of health insurance/health care, education for children and the provision of a vehicle as a very important part of the Joint Nominating Committee's conversation.

The JNC should complete all negotiations and document decisions prior to a Call and not once the Minister and family arrive in Australia for the welfare of all concerned.

### ***Final note of caution***

The terms and conditions of Australian Immigration issued visas are constantly under review and change. For information on a religious workers visa conditions access the Australian Immigration and Border Control website.