

Being Church Differently:

Encouragement and guidance for the formation of new Congregations and Faith Communities of the UCA within institutional and other settings

The purpose of this document is to encourage Presbyteries and others to discern prayerfully and creatively where God is leading us as we seek to live and share the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ. It suggests some new directions for joining with the Spirit of God in making and nurturing disciples.

For previous generations, the church was often the centre of community and social life. Church attendance was a mark of respectability in the community. We could rely on habit or custom or even social pressure to maintain participation in a community of faith. For many parts of the church in “western” nations, this is no longer true. Rather than providing a religious legitimization of cultural values, the Christian faith now, as for the early church, has the opportunity to support people as they give their first loyalty to Christ and have their lives shaped around the alternate values of the Reign (Kingdom) of God.

But people usually do not become Christians in isolation. Furthermore, the faith-sharing of an individual Christian may begin to interest people in the Christian faith and to help them consider the claims of Christ seriously, but to become a disciple requires the ongoing support of a community. It takes a Congregation to evangelise people and to be the Spirit’s agent in reshaping their identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. How does this happen?

Where are the points of contact? Fewer people look to the church to help in negotiating the “passages” of life through baptisms, weddings and funerals. Of those who still do, only a small number make the transition from, say, having a wedding in a church building to participating in the ongoing worship, witness and service of a Congregation. There are also fewer Sunday Schools and youth groups than three or four decades ago to incorporate children and young people.

The Uniting Church is widely involved in community service agencies and schools. The Church sees these as an expression of God’s mission to the world and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many initially grew out of a Congregation’s concern and compassion for the needy in the local community. These services have now largely become highly professionalised. The community service agencies may still have links with Presbytery, Synod or Assembly and so have structural links with the church as institution. The church may also provide important chaplaincy services. Yet the distance between community service agencies and the life of a Congregation has increased.

This document invites Presbyteries, Congregations and Community Service agencies to ask if more can be offered, as a fuller expression of the gospel of Christ. It suggests that words (confessing the faith) and deeds (providing community services) should not be separated, and that deeds by themselves do not always speak clearly. The suggestions here point to an integration of worship, witness and service as a more holistic expression of the gospel.

1. IMAGINE ...

A large Anglican-Uniting school in a growing Brisbane suburb has students from many different racial and faith backgrounds. Some of the teachers are practising Christians. A few of the students attend youth groups and some also attend Sunday worship. The school employs both an Anglican and a Uniting Church chaplain. While there are school assemblies in which the chaplains may lead some devotional exercises from time to time, these are conducted with the sensitivities of Jewish and Muslim families in mind.

About 20 students, 3 teachers and the groundsman attend a weekly worship gathering on Wednesday lunch times, which includes the discussion of some issues pertinent to the lives of those present in the light of scripture and the Christian tradition. This weekly gathering is explicitly Christian, although some students who are not ready to call themselves Christian also attend. Recently three students came to faith through this group. They are receiving instruction and have been encouraged to consider preparing for Baptism ...

For thought and discussion - 1

- ✦ ***If a request for advice about this came before your Presbytery, what would you say? Is it appropriate to conduct Baptisms in a school setting?***
- ✦ ***Should the students be referred to existing Congregations?***
- ✦ ***Is the Wednesday Christian group already performing the functions of a Congregation?***
- ✦ ***What issues would the Presbytery need to consider?***

2. IMAGINE ...

The Uniting Church operates a retirement complex in a coastal Western Australian town. Many of the residents have been staunch church members in the past. Some are now too infirm to attend local Congregations in the town, and those who could attend find the music much too loud for comfort.

The chaplain conducts a weekly Tuesday morning service in the complex. This is regularly attended by about a quarter of the residents. This group sees itself as having ministry of intercession for the residents and staff. They take time to welcome newcomers to the retirement complex and to spend time with lonely residents. They raised funds for the Pakistan earthquake victims. From time to time they discuss issues with the management about how to improve the service the complex offers ...

For thought and discussion – 2

- ✦ *Is this group performing the functions of Congregation of the Uniting Church?*
- ✦ *What else would be required to be a Congregation?*

3. WHAT IS NOT ESSENTIAL AND WHAT IS?

3.1 What is *not* essential to being a Congregation?

- It is not essential to meet on a Sunday. Sunday is symbolically important, because it celebrates the completion of creation and the renewal of creation in the resurrection of Christ. It also looks forward to the consummation of all things in Christ. It may therefore be helpful symbolically to worship on a Sunday, but not essential. A group of Christians may worship at any time.
- It is not essential to meet in a church building. The architecture of a building may help (or hinder) the worship of God. The sense of continued worship over many years in one space may be helpful. But the Uniting Church does not regard it as essential to worship in an especially dedicated worship space. Christians may gather for worship in any house or building, or in the open air.
- It is not essential for a group which gathers for worship week by week to have a full time paid minister of the Word or Deacon. To have a person who has been selected by the church, trained for the purpose and recognised by the church as having the gifts and graces for ministry through the act of ordination is a rich resource, but is not essential. An ordained person may serve part-time or be a volunteer (Reg. 2.4.20). Lay people, especially accredited Lay Preachers, Lay Ministry Teams, Lay Pastors and Community Ministers, may be authorised to lead worship. Presbyteries may also authorise lay persons to conduct the sacraments following appropriate training and formation (Reg. 3.4.4n).¹

¹ See “Guidelines for Lay Presidency” available at <http://nat.uca.org.au/resources/pdf/laypresident.pdf>

3.2 What *is* essential to being a Congregation?

- In short, three things are essential to being a Congregation: worship, witness and service. The *Basis of Union* states that:

The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, **worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ**. Its members meet regularly to hear God’s Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. (Par. 15a)

- A Congregation of the Uniting Church needs to be recognised by a Presbytery (Reg. 3.1.2).
- The responsibilities of a Congregation include:
 - appointing Elders and other members of the Church Council, appointing one or more representatives to Presbytery,
 - making arrangements to call a Minister,
 - providing facilities and resources (Reg. 3.1.8).
- To fulfil its responsibilities, a Congregation shall:
 - bear witness to Christ’s gift of unity,
 - build up the members and adherents in faith and love,
 - sustain the members in hope,
 - equip people for worship, witness and service,
 - discipline members in love,
 - maintain pastoral oversight,
 - encourage participation,
 - provide the means for sustaining the members in the Christian life (Reg. 3.1.1b).
- The responsibilities of the Church Council are extensive and are spelled out in Reg. 3.1.13.

3.3 What about “Faith Communities”?

- The Uniting Church also provides opportunities for people to explore the Christian life together without the full range of privileges and responsibilities of a Congregation. Such a group may be recognised by a Presbytery as a “Faith Community” (Reg. 3.1.32).
- Faith communities may choose to develop and progress towards recognition by the Presbytery as a Congregation (Reg. 3.1.32 e).

Coolamon College has a course for lay presiders: <http://coolamon.org>

Faith Communities are not defined as necessarily being “the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” and have fewer requirements placed on them than Congregations.

For thought and discussion - 3

- ✦ ***What fresh thoughts or new discoveries have you made about what is essential and what is not essential to being a Congregation or Faith Community?***
- ✦ ***What is still unclear, or what else needs to be said?***

4. SOME EXCITING POSSIBILITIES

Given what is essential and not essential to being a Congregation, some of the possibilities open to us include scenarios such as the following:

- There are over 50 Uniting Church schools across Australia. In some of them, it may be possible to establish a Congregation or Faith Community within the school, with some students, staff, family members and others joining together in worship, witness and service. That Congregation could, perhaps, meet mid-week at a suitable time. (This is not to suggest that the school as a whole is recognised as a Congregation, but rather that there might be a Christian community *within* the school.)
- There are many community service agencies operated by the Uniting Church across Australia, including aged care residences, counselling services, support groups for people with disabilities etc. Within some of these, it may be appropriate to establish a Congregation or Faith Community. The appointed ministry worker or chaplain may be best person to offer leadership, or another person may be designated.
- There may be schools and agencies not operated by the Uniting Church in which Congregations or Faith Communities may be established.
- There are many work places in which a Congregation or Faith Community may be established meeting, for example, during a lunch hour.
- Some Christian groups have taken to worshipping in coffee shops, cafes, clubs and pubs. Where there is continuity of worship, witness and service, designation as a Congregation or Faith Community may be a desirable next step.
- The early church had no church buildings, but worshipped in homes

around a meal. In some situations, that may again be appropriate today. Again, encouragement and recognition by a Presbytery as a Congregation or Faith Community may be appropriate (e.g. remote areas of outback Australia).

- Hospitals tend to be places where people come for just a few days. It may be that some of the staff could form a worshipping, witnessing, serving group, with the hospital itself as the mission field. Worship services could then be open also to patients and visitors.

It is not suggested that the establishment of a new Congregation is always the best option. In many cases it may be preferable to integrate people within an existing Congregation. The key question is, “What will best serve the Reign of God in the world?”

The gospel calls us to be a missional people – caught up in God’s mission in the world. Faith-sharing, evangelism and disciple-making are key aspects of mission. People may come to faith and be nurtured in faith in wide variety of settings. There is no single formula or method. God’s Spirit blows where it wills. It may well be that some people find it easier to become part of a Congregation in a school, agency, workplace or café setting, rather than in a traditional Congregation meeting on a Sunday morning.

For thought and discussion - 4

- ✦ ***Which of these do you see as suggesting possibilities in your area?***
- ✦ ***What other opportunities do you see, not mentioned above?***

5. CAUTIONARY TALES – SUGGESTIONS AND PITFALLS

It is worthwhile being aware of some of the potential pitfalls beforehand, and avoiding them wherever possible. Here are some issues to consider.

- ↳ Many well-established Congregations have their own ways of doing things and “cultures” into which it may be difficult for a newcomer to move. If we are to be faithful to our calling of “making disciples”, we will want to provide a whole range of opportunities for people, in addition to walking into an established Congregation. But if a Congregation tends to be inward looking, inflexible and unable to change entrenched ways, alternative opportunities to make contact with those outside of the Christian community will need to be found.

- ✚ Before a Presbytery recognises a Congregation, the Presbytery needs to be assured that the group can adequately fulfil its responsibilities (see Reg. 3.1.8). Being a Faith Community (Reg. 3.1.32) may be a first step, with full recognition as a Congregation to follow as the commitment to worship, witness and service consolidates.
- ✚ Candidates for Baptism need to be carefully prepared and nurtured, as befits the seriousness and life-changing nature of the sacrament. This assumes a caring worshipping, witnessing, serving Christian community who takes responsibility for the mentoring, formation and teaching of the candidates. The “Becoming Disciples Process” is a good way to do this. See http://assembly.uca.org.au/TD/disciple_s and *Uniting in Worship 2*.
- ✚ The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper should not be dispensed casually. In its proper setting, it is a powerful and awesome means of grace. To celebrate it responsibly, it is normally offered to people who have been formed in the Christian life and have then been baptised. This is not meant to exclude people, but to help them to realise that the Eucharist is something very important and central in the Christian community. Often people for whom it is new may well grasp and respect the fact that this is something with spiritual power, which should not be taken lightly. In particular, the Lord’s Supper should certainly not be offered indiscriminately in a multi-faith setting, such as a school assembly; this would not only cheapen the sacrament, but may also cause offence.
- ✚ If new Congregations are to be recognised, the Presbytery will need to take its responsibilities very seriously. This means much more than the Chairperson of Presbytery occasionally attending ceremonial functions of a school or agency. Close relationships with the Presbytery will need to be formed, with regular contact, support and review – enriching for all!

For thought and discussion - 5

- ✚ *Which of these suggestions and potential pitfalls are particularly pertinent for your situation?*
- ✚ *What others can you think of?*

6. FAIR QUESTIONS

- 6.1 **Isn’t it better for people to join existing local Congregations?**

It may be better in some circumstances. In other circumstances, this will not be the best way to go. Is there a fear that a new Congregation may deplete an existing Congregation and, if so, is this a legitimate reason not to proceed? Has the existing Congregation demonstrated its willingness to reach out? Can it rise to the challenge? The Presbytery has an important role in consultation, discernment and advice in the decision about whether forming a new Congregation is the better option.

- 6.2 **Students are at school for a limited time. What happens to those who have been part of a Congregation or Faith Community in that setting when they leave?**

They are transferred to another Congregation in the usual way. Many people are in Congregations for a limited number of years before moving on.

- 6.3 **Will school chaplains be personal chaplains to students and staff in private schools?²**

We would hope that Congregations and Faith Communities within school would be open to students, staff, families and the general public. Again, it is the Presbytery’s role, along with others, to discern where Congregations and faith communities may be established.

- 6.4 **Agencies and institutions have a particular clientele; how can they reflect the full inclusiveness of the body of Christ?**

Most established Congregations already cater for a particular clientele or socio-economic group. Congregations or faith communities, wherever they are situated, need to be open and inclusive, and encouraged in links with other Congregations in the area for mutual support and encouragement.

- 6.5 **Will a Congregation within an institution risk “selling out” to the culture of the institution, rather than offering a genuine alternative Christian worldview?**

This is always a temptation of any Congregation, and this temptation may indeed be greater in an institutional setting. Where this happens, people may no longer be called to genuine conversion to the triune God and the alternative values of the Reign of God. It needs to be guarded against vigilantly, and Presbyteries in their regular oversight responsibility must challenge ALL Congregations and faith

² Some private schools apparently require a Baptismal certificate before enrolment is accepted. Hence, chaplains are asked and expected to conduct Baptisms to fulfil this formality. This seems to be a travesty of all that the sacrament signifies and ignores the essential link between Baptism and faith, let alone the life of discipleship.

communities to reflect on the integrity of their worship, witness and service.

6.6 Who should take the initiative?

The Presbytery may take the initiative. "Its function is to perform all the acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area for which it is responsible" (Basis of Union, 15c). It needs to give attention to "the promotion and conduct throughout the Presbytery of such activities as will encourage and instruct the people generally toward a better understanding and fuller participation in the whole range of Christian witness and service" (Reg. 3.4.4d).

A Christian group wanting to worship, witness and serve together may take the initiative. Application is made to the Presbytery for recognition.

The management, clients or staff of the agency or workplace may take the initiative.

6.7 What if there is resistance from the agency?

In some cases the people in charge of the agency may resist the formation of a Congregation or Faith Community. This may make it very difficult for the chaplain or church worker to do the task he or she is charged with. It may then be important for representatives of the Presbytery, rather than the pastoral worker by him or herself, to explore the reasons for the resistance and how these may be overcome.

For thought and discussion - 6

- ✦ *Can the concerns be adequately dealt with?*
- ✦ *What other questions do you have?*

7. WHAT SHOULD WE BE AWARE OF?

7.1 Presbyteries, agencies and members need to be prayerful and alert about settings where new Congregations and Faith Communities might be established.

7.2 It needs to be clear to whom the Congregation is open. Clients and staff of the agency may form a core group, but normally a Congregation or Faith Community will be open to all interested persons. (A prison may be an exception!)

7.3 There needs to be good communication and rapport between officers of the Presbytery and the persons in charge of the agency. All need to be enthusiastically supportive. As issues or difficulties arise, these need to be addressed promptly in a spirit of good will.

7.4 The legitimate purpose of the school (education), agency (caring for clients) or institutional setting needs to be honoured. At the same time the legitimate purpose of a Congregation (worship, witness and service) needs to be respected. While there may be some overlap (e.g. where a church school recognises that among its purposes is caring for the spiritual well-being of its students), nevertheless recognising some measure of distinction, even if slightly blurred, may help to make for easier relationships and accountability.

7.5 The lines of accountability between the ministry worker and the Presbytery on the one hand and the agency on the other, must be clearly spelled out in written form and agreed on by all parties. These may need to be amended from time to time. In particular, the Presbytery must have oversight of the Congregation as set out in the Regulations (whilst recognising the legitimate authority of the person in charge of the agency). The Presbytery must also exercise oversight of that part of the ministry worker's role which pertains to the Congregation, including the sacramental role.

7.6 Where a ministry worker has responsibility for the pastoral well-being of all the students/residents/clients of an agency, his or her particular responsibility for the Congregation, including sacramental responsibility, needs to be set out and agreed on.

7.7 The sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) are Christ's gift to the Church. They are communal celebrations at a time and place publicly announced. We celebrate an "open" table i.e. the Lord's table is open to baptised persons who love and serve the Lord, and are in fellowship with any branch of Christ's Church. They are presided over by persons authorised by the Councils of the Church. The sacraments should not be presented so as to make people feel under some compulsion to participate, or that others feel excluded.

7.8 Membership rolls need to be kept, as for any other Congregation (Reg. 1.1.14).

7.9 The legitimate role of elders and church councillors must be recognised by all parties (Reg. 3.1.13). In a new Congregation, such elders and church councillors may be provided by an existing Uniting Church Congregation until new leadership emerges.

For thought and discussion - 7

- ✦ *What other specific guidance would it be helpful to provide?*
- ✦ *Consider the pro forma agreement which follows. What else might it be useful to include?*

8. OUR PRAYER

The Basis of Union concludes with the following prayer. May this be our prayer for every Congregation and Faith Community:

***The Uniting Church prays that,
through the gift of the Spirit,
God will ... use its worship, witness
and service
to God's eternal glory
through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.***

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Pro forma Memorandum of Understanding

(Please adapt this pro forma to best suit your local situation.)

1. The partners in this agreement are [legal name of agency, school or institution] and [name of Presbytery] of the Uniting Church in Australia.
2. [Name of agency] and [Presbytery] share a common concern for the total well-being of the [students/clients/residents] and staff of [name of agency].
3. The purposes of [name of agency] are [quote from constitution or other formal document].
4. The purposes of [name of Presbytery] are set out in Regulation 3.4.4 of the Uniting Church in Australia. [This may be spelled out in detail if thought necessary.]
5. Both partners recognise and respect each other's legitimate purposes and areas of responsibility.
6. As a component in fulfilling the responsibilities inherent in these purposes, both partners agree that a [Congregation or Faith Community] will be established under *Basis of Union, Constitution*, and the relevant *Regulations* of the Uniting Church in Australia.
7. Membership of the [Congregation or Faith Community] shall be open to all staff and [students/residents/clients] of [the agency], to their relatives and to members of the general public.
8. Pastoral oversight of the [Congregation or Faith Community] shall be exercised by [name of Presbytery] in accordance with the *Regulations* of the Uniting Church in Australia. The appointment of the person exercising oversight of the Congregation, whether part time or full-time, shall be by the Presbytery, following consultation with the [Principal/CEO]. Where such a person also undertakes responsibilities as a staff member of [agency], other than pastoral responsibility for the [Congregation or Faith Community], he or she shall be

accountable to the [Principal/CEO] for the exercise of those staff functions.

9. [Statement about access to property by the Congregation or Faith Community where the proposed place of meeting is owned by or operated by the agency/school/institution.]
10. [Financial arrangement in relation to property.]
11. [Financial arrangements in relation to pastoral staff.]
12. This arrangement may be varied at any time with the consent of both parties. It shall be reviewed after twelve months and then every [5?] years.

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