

Service is Mission - A theological reflection on the Uniting Church in Australia's community services ministry and the work of UnitingCare Australia

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Overview

As an Agency of the Assembly, UnitingCare Australia exists to give voice to the Uniting Church in Australia's commitment to social justice and the enhancement of community services provision. This paper brings to light the life-giving connection between faith-based Church identity and values-based service delivery: "Love God and love your neighbour".

This biblical teaching reclaims a core value underpinning the work of community services over many decades. While it gives expression to our changing context about how the Spirit of God is moving our attention into the margins, it also articulates where community services and Church identity are called to mutual affirmation, and how to go forward into the world with hope, as partners within the life of the Uniting Church, to embody the vocation of service and participate in God's mission in the world.

This paper envisions the network of community services organisations as a web of human relationships through which the Uniting Church is connected to the land and its diverse peoples. Professional skills, lived experience, and operational innovation within community services are a collective gift to the Church. These skills and lived experiences enhance the Church's capacity to work in many areas of social discourse, including social justice, multiculturalism, sovereignty of our First Peoples, community development, and climate change.

Social service is a relational bridge into God's mission, and the paper recognises the reservoir that is the community services ministry of the Uniting Church.

UnitingCare Australia belongs to the universal Church through the Church's ecumenical relations. Social service is a pathway for the Uniting Church to participate in, and contribute to, ecumenical dialogues.

We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere — the family of the One God — the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave His life for others.¹

We, too, as the Church's community services ministry, give our life for others.

Over forty years ago, the Uniting Church declared to the whole nation that by partaking in the spirit of God's self-giving love, "we seek to go forward into the world". Today, we reclaim that same spirit: The Church is in and for the world, or it is not Church.

¹ *Statement to the Nation, 1977.*

About UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia and the national body for the Uniting Church's community services ministry. This ministry includes a network delivering services in over 1,600 sites, with 50,000 staff and supported by the work of over 30,000 volunteers.

UnitingCare Australia's purpose is to give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provision. Our vision is that all people can thrive in a healed and reconciled world.

The work of UnitingCare Australia is grounded in the faith, values and vision of the Uniting Church, the expertise in our network of service providers, and the experience of those people who use our services.

The following theological reflection is informed by Biblical witness and historical teachings making known the Christian tradition, which lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. It connects the work of the Church's community services ministry with the prophetic teachings of Christ and the Word of God.

The work was undertaken as part of our evolving and enriching development of identity as a whole Church together – being one with Christ.

Introduction

"God is love...We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4: 8; 19). The primary motivation for the Uniting Church in Australia in providing social services is our Christian response to the universal and self-giving love of God. Love is the foundation of compassionate service to the world.

Community services ministry was an essential part of the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia. The Uniting Church's response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in Australian society and beyond; social engagement is fundamental to the mission of the Church.²

The history of the Uniting Church's community services ministry and our reputation for quality service delivery has contributed to our Church's identity, and serves as a renewable resource in God's mission.

During the forty-plus year journey of the Uniting Church, Australian society has experienced significant social, cultural, demographic, economic and environmental change. In this time, we have begun to understand more clearly God's preferential love for the poor and that God's mission calls from and compels us to the margins. In a spirit of solidarity with those who experience marginalisation, and informed by their experience and aspirations, the Church is better able to give voice to the social and political centre for the welfare of all people.

These changing contexts become a source of theology for reshaping our identity as a faith-based and skill-based organisation. Our experience will continue to inform our tradition.

² *Statement to the Nation, 1977.*

1. Love God and Love Your Neighbour

“Love God and love your neighbour” (Mark 12: 30-31) underpins the Uniting Church’s social response to “God is love” and “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4: 8;19). Our shared mission as the Uniting Church, which includes UnitingCare Australia and the community services ministry, is to embody God’s love for all people and exemplify the Church’s commitment to supporting individuals, families and communities through advocacy and the enhancement of service provision.

The Uniting Church, in accordance with the *Basis of Union*, believes God guides the Church into union,³ and is calling people of the Church to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands. Acknowledging the postcolonial context of our faith and action, the Church’s Preamble to the Constitution recognises that the land has been created and sustained by the Triune God before churches arrived as part of the colonisation process⁴:

*Through this land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the languages of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.*⁵

The Uniting Church is located within this cultural and geographical context. It is informed by its history, is committed to ecumenism, and understands itself as a pilgrim people on a journey.⁶ The 14th Assembly repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, and its theological foundations as a relic of colonialism, feudalism and religious, cultural, and racial biases that have no place in the treatment of First Peoples. The 15th Assembly, in 2018, expanded the definition of sovereignty. The whole Church affirms that the First Peoples of Australia, the Aboriginal and Islander Peoples, are sovereign peoples in Australia.

The Uniting Church’s community services ministry is part of this journey, working with the wider Church, communities, and government to extend services to our First Peoples. By faith and action, the Uniting Church celebrates its Covenantal relationship with the First Peoples as a foretaste of that future reconciliation with God, which is the purpose for the whole creation.⁷

The Uniting Church and its community services ministry are not separate entities, but one in Christ. Many witnesses of the Church and community services are inwardly connected through the unfolding life of the Triune God gathering people into the household of God. This unity is not dependent upon human aspiration, “but upon the will of God made effective through Jesus Christ”.⁸ The Spirit of God permeates the boundary between the sacred, the secular, the Church and the world by creating life through the whole of creation. The Church’s community services ministry further broadens the horizon of God’s mission by building relationships with multiple stakeholders, including within the Church, people, government and communities. Our compassion for people’s lives seeks to incarnate God’s love for the world (1 John 4: 8-10), so that the people may have life abundantly (John 10:10).

³ *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 1.

⁴ *Preamble to the Constitution*, Paragraph 1.

⁵ *Preamble to the Constitution*, Paragraph 2.

⁶ Colleen Geyer, “Transforming Mission in Faith-Based Community Services” in *Uniting Theology and Church*, Issue 3, October 2010.

⁷ *Preamble to the Constitution*, Concluding paragraph.

⁸ Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 19.

UnitingCare Australia's engagement with social justice exists in the DNA of our tradition. At the time of formation, the Uniting Church's Inaugural Statement to the Nation declared:

A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race. We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur.⁹

Our forty-plus year journey has manifested this commitment and given birth to a diverse range of services reaching out to all aspects of life. God's love in Christ is bound neither by time nor space (Ephesians 3: 18-19), love never ends (1 Cor 13:8). Loving God is made visible in loving our neighbour, and God's peace is found in service – "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord" (Micah 6:8).

God's love is universal – everyone has the right to receive care. This equality extends to all people, with no discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, cultural origin, ability, sexuality, class, colour, or creed. The Church's commitment to equality will continue to draw many skilled people into service, to involve diverse members of the Church and many others from society to build the whole mission of God in the world.

2. God's Mission in the Margins

The large footprint of the Uniting Church's community services ministry enables us to reflect broadly on where God's mission is in Australia. Together with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), we learn that our experience with the Land and ancient cultures is a source of theology. The self-emptying God, vulnerable yet magnificently human, has broken unbreakable boundaries and become the suffering servant and risen friend.¹⁰ Living in a post-Christendom world, we affirm, with the World Council of Churches, a paradigm shift in mission: from "Church's mission to the margins" to "God's mission in the margins".¹¹

"The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Incarnation is the marginalisation of God. God the Creator participates in the world and lives among the people, who are God's radical "other". In Jesus' ministry, we come face-to-face with the humble, non-violent, self-giving God, among humble people in difficult circumstances.¹² Through service to the disadvantaged, the passion narrative of Jesus continues to unfold in communities, while our staff gather the suffering into hope. Many people of faith, such as lay leaders, chaplains, pastoral care and other workers, have collectively exercised servanthood ministry and

⁹ *Statement to the Nation*, 1977.

¹⁰ Faith Statement from UAICC Tasmania, a paraphrase of the Apostles Creed by Rev Tim Matton-Johnson.

¹¹ *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, World Council of Churches, 2012, pages 6-

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¹² Parts of speech by Randall Prior and Sally Douglas at the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania 2017, later adopted by Uniting VicTas.

witness to the Risen Lord, who pardons sin, restores life and awakens faith: so, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It is through the self-emptying love of God moving into the world that UnitingCare Australia gives voice to the most disadvantaged and marginalised. Our advocacy of social justice is matched with daily service to all people in Australia through a vast workforce of employees and volunteers across the Church's ministry. The Spirit of Life, indeed the totality of all life, is most visible in the margins. Through our presence of community services, we see the Spirit upholding the dignity of the 'other' by our compassion and care, and through our social justice advocacy, we strive to set the people free with access to care and healing.

Christian belief in the Triune God. This belief invites us to see God as a divine community whose inner life is fundamentally about love-abiding relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This inner community of God is constantly moving outwards by the virtue of self-giving love (John 3: 16), forming diverse communities of life through the Spirit that give witness to the risen life of Christ.

God is in all our communities through the Spirit. God has always been present in this land, and what has changed is that we are discovering and naming God through community services ministry. In serving all people, especially the marginalised, the Spirit of Life continues to move us from the centre to the margins of society. This same Spirit calls the Uniting Church to be part of society, including in the margins of social service. This is a calling of God "to loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free" and "share food with the hungry and open homes to the homeless poor" (Isaiah 58: 6-7). In so doing, the marginalised may come to the centre of social attention as they are already at the centre of Christ's attention.

We are accountable to God's mission at the margins. God's mission affirms the brokenness of Christ's Body in humble places where God's mercy touches upon the lives of the lonely, the jobless, the homeless, the abused and the dying. The future of social service is in God's becoming – in the likeness of the incarnation, forming a life-giving relationship with the 'other' and gathering communities into the unbounded love of God for the world.

For this purpose, UnitingCare Australia and the Church's broader community services ministry seek partnership with congregations so that together we can be better connected to God's mission in the margins. In daily service, we seek to remove the social divide, deliver best practice services, and enhance the quality of people's lives. We honour the Uniting Church's openness to the world and continue to journey with those in our community seeking support. Together, we nurture love-inspired communities, where people live in dignity, enjoy full lives, and have their needs met. There is a mutuality in our relationship with those who engage with our services – our connection to them leads to our shared discovery of the mystery of God's love as a beloved person.¹³ This image of Christ - the crucified and risen One who lives in the "other" - is to be named and embraced.

The whole of the Uniting Church in Australia partakes in ecological justice. Social service seeks to connect people both in community and with the land that gives life to all existence, for the ecological world has sustained the whole circle of life with many interrelated

¹³ Stuart McMillian, the 14th President of Uniting Church, points out the mutuality of living in relationship in his reflection on Henri Nouwen's book *Adam – God's Beloved*. Adam could not speak nor move, but it was in the caring for Adam that the scholar Nouwen learnt a new and deeper understanding of faith – what it means to be God's beloved.

blessings. We have learned from the First Peoples: Life is inwardly connected.

Therefore, we affirm mutual relationships in all dimensions of the world so that in the future humanity and the natural world will transform each other.

3. A Fellowship of Reconciliation

The Uniting Church was formed in response to God's mission in Australia; to be a fellowship of reconciliation. Before this calling, the churches – the Congregational Union in Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia - did not have separate missions of their own, but the Uniting Church was called into existence to partake in God's mission: "reconciliation and renewal...for the whole creation".¹⁴

The mission of the Uniting Church and its community services ministry is one. This unity is a relational wholeness that accepts operational differences and follows God's mission in Australia. It affirms that God's reconciliation is radically open to the world. Our engagement with people, cultures, and religions through service provides us with the opportunity to live out a vision of hope in God's ultimate renewal in New Creation. This vision is inclusive, all encompassing, and restores the covenanting relationship with the Creator, as well as renewing the whole creation.¹⁵

The mission of God is larger than the mission to the Gentiles by the early church. In mission with the Gentiles, the horizon of God's mission begins to open, bringing the common good of life into focus beyond the duality of the secular and the sacred. This outward unfolding of God's Self is the Incarnation of God's own life in the world, regardless of the Church's capacity to conceptualise its fullness in theology and practice.

As we look deeply into all services and reflect truthfully on this, we see one thing in common: suffering. Again, suffering unites us. On the cross, Jesus's suffering draws the world's attention to the irreducible problem of human suffering. The Uniting Church proclaims this risen crucified one:

*Christ calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.*¹⁶

Our discipleship in service is a pathway that draws the whole Church into the fellowship of Christ's suffering. In all types of service provision, we see that people are gathered daily from all walks of life into communities celebrating lives. Through the establishment of the Australian Regional & Remote Community Services, we rediscover that "in his own strange way, Christ constitutes, rules and renews" us all as his Church.¹⁷ By engaging with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, we relearn a biblical teaching: "Faith alone without action is dead" (James 2: 17).

"The Son of Man does not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Our services came into existence to serve. The ministry of the laity has been expanded over many decades as part of the Church's vocation. Today many leaders,

¹⁴ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 3.

¹⁵ UnitingCare Australia Mandate, approved by Assembly Standing Committee July 2008.

¹⁶ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 4.

¹⁷ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 4.

managers, and staff come from all faiths and walks of life to give a significant part of their own lives for the overall mission. In order to achieve the best outcomes for the people we serve, service providers work with partners and multiple stakeholders, including other organisations, congregations, communities and government. This collaborative work seeks outcomes where the restoration of a person's life and the reconciliation of the world are akin.

The Uniting Church is a pilgrim people on a journey. The Uniting Church's community services ministry participates in, and contributes towards, God's ever-broadening circle of reconciliation in the world. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord.¹⁸

As a Church, our unity is not fixed, but still in the making. On the way, God constantly corrects that which is erroneous in its life – this includes the removal of false tension between faith tradition and service tradition. Social service belongs to the very nature of the Church. It calls the whole Church to be in communion with Christ through the daily action of loving one's neighbour and walking the journey with the sick and afflicted. Social service is not a mere expression of ethical goodness by citizens but emerges from Christian discipleship to Christ's renewal of the world. By serving the world, the Uniting Church becomes one with Christ and, at the same time, brings Christ to the world, not by proclamation but with action.

To achieve this common good, ecumenical relationships are nurtured to influence government policies that enhance the dignity of people. Collaboration with other Assembly agencies further enables UnitingCare Australia in the exchange of information across Synods and service providers and in providing leadership in community matters. Ministry formation is encouraged to include the theology of service in the training of future ministers. Theological reflection is used in the continuing education of mission directors, chaplains, and pastoral care workers. All these activities point towards a purpose the Uniting Church articulated in its Statement to the Nation: "We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere".¹⁹ Forty plus years on, we, as the Church, still embrace policy changes to enhance people's dignity and capacity, even if those changes require our own organisational transformation.

4. Mission with God

The Greek word *diakonia* is often narrowly translated as "service" to others. In ancient Greek, *diakonia* has a connotation of charity, but primarily means an assignment - like a messenger who goes in-between, who both instructs and delivers. Paul uses the term *diakonia* when he affirms his relationship to the Triune God (Acts 20:24; 2 Corinthians 3:8), and to Christ who has authorised him to be his *diakonos* (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:25).²⁰ The notion of "service", therefore, denotes God's mission through a

¹⁸ *Basis of Union*, paragraph 18.

¹⁹ *Statement to the Nation*, final paragraph.

²⁰ Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia, Central Committee, World Council of Churches, (revised draft), 2018, 31-33.

messenger like Paul to embody the relationship between God and the purpose of God for the world.

Based on biblical reflection, it is the Church's affirmation that social service is not a secondary order of the Church but rather embodies the primary order of God's mission.

The Uniting Church's community services ministry is part of Christ's presence in Australia: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). By participating in Christ's service to the world, the ministry becomes a partner with God's mission in gathering diverse people before God, who loved us first (1 John 4: 19). The identity of faith-based service also grows by including values-based professionals and action-based service-delivering staff. All of them are called into Christ's mission in the world; their collective status also transforms from being agents delivering the Church's services and, in some cases, providing government programs, to being contributors informing the uniting identity of the Church.

Being a partner of God's mission also means bearing witness to the inclusive unity of the Uniting Church. From the personal experience of salvation to the delivery of social services, the community of care has broadened the scope of the community of faith, turning the outsider of the Church into the insider of social transformation. God has been calling into existence a new way of being for the Church, that is a Church for the "other" in the margins of faith and at the peripheries of society. There the commandment of loving God is like salt dissolved into community actions of loving our neighbour, so the light of God shines in people's renewed hope for life. "The Church of God is committed to service in the world for which Christ died".²¹ Like the Kingdom of God, social service is the yeast which permeates every part of the dough of society (Matthew 13:33). The Church is a part of, not apart from, society.

The Uniting Church's community services ministry intentionally supports mutual engagement between congregations and community services in all forms. This priority of mission rests upon the understanding of God's people as a fellowship of God's abundant life, in which the Spirit of God draws diverse people to share in God's transforming Spirit. It is through the people who we serve that the ministry rediscovers the ancient promise, "God will dwell with people" (Ezekiel 37:17; Revelation 21:37). Through this service, we reclaim the Good News for us today – God with us (Matthew 1: 23) – and renew the mission in partnership with Christ who takes away sins of the world (John 1:29).

Mission with God will enlarge the scope of our faith tradition. The Spirit demands our attention to Jesus's passion and the aching love of God for the world, which always touches first upon the suffering people. God's Church is called into existence to bear witness to the cross of forgiveness and salvation. The Spirit also leads us to see the rising of the fallen and recalls the resurrection of Jesus underpinning our deepest faith. This mission with God awakens hope, empowers the poor in spirit, supports the meek, and takes away social injustice and sin, so that people may live to their full potential as the image of God.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6: 10). The Uniting Church's community services ministry is part of God's vision for how life should be lived. It actively discerns what God is doing in creation and history in the power of Spirit.

²¹ *Basis of Union*, Paragraph 1.