

29 November 2024

To: Church Council Secretaries, Ministers in Placement
Cc: Presbytery Chairpersons and Secretaries



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Dear friends in Christ,

Re: Faithful Futures

Greetings in the name of Christ!

As we begin a new year in the Christian Calendar, I'm writing to you to provide you with an update regarding the Faithful Futures Project. You will hopefully already be aware of this Project from the article in the October 2023 Crosslight (just prior to the 2023 Synod meeting) and through reports from your presbytery.

God calls the Church on a journey of ministry and mission, following Christ. The presbyteries and the Synod have been working together to consider the opportunities and challenges for the church in the coming years, to ensure that we are prepared well for the journey. This work is aligned with much of the work of the national Act2 project, aimed at equipping communities of faith for discipleship and mission, with fit-for-purpose arrangements for administration and oversight. The Faithful Futures Project is helping to discern priorities and direct resources in response to the call of the gospel, and to the life and needs of the communities in which we are located or may be located in the future.

In the following pages there is information about the Faithful Futures project. Section A provides background information about the Faithful Futures project. Section B describes where we are now with the discernment of shared Vision, Values and Goals for across Victoria and Tasmania. Section C described the draft goals in more detail, and Section D outlines the next steps in the Project.

Also, with this letter you will find a "single page" poster summary of the Vision, Values and Goals as they are being discerned and developed.

A briefing video is available for you to view. That video may be viewed by Church Council members or interested congregation members or faith communities linked [HERE](#).¹

Many of these goals represent directions that are already being taken across parts of many presbyteries. There will be varied and flexible ways of approaching the goals, depending on the local contexts and conversations with presbyteries. Having consistent goals will enable presbyteries and the Synod to work more effectively for sharing experiences and responding to the needs and opportunities that God brings our way.

I commend the work of this project to you.

Grace and peace,

Rev David Fotheringham
Moderator

¹ <https://vimeo.com/1026701480/714e394c6a?share=copy>. Note that this is an updated version of the video shown at presbytery meetings in early November.

A. Background

What is the faithful futures project?

The Faithful Futures Project is working to prepare the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania for the next 10 to 15 years. The project was initiated out of conversation at the Presbytery Synod Forum, recognising that there are common challenges and opportunities for the church right across Victoria and Tasmania. Some of the challenges include the changing age profile and size of congregations, availability of leadership, and the burden of property maintenance. Some of the opportunities include growing in ways of worship, witness and service that are experimental or flourishing, listening for where God's Spirit is inviting us to reach out in faith, love and hope.

Who is involved in the Project?

Project meetings have included up to two members of each Presbytery, along with up to two from the Synod Standing Committee, chaired by me as the Moderator. At various times we have had contributions from members of eLM and representatives from Uniting Vic.Tas and Uniting AgeWell, and further consultations with various other groups from around the Synod. There has been a small Steering Group, consisting of Dr Tom Spurling (Port Phillip East), Deb Bye (Gippsland), Rev Linley Liersch (Port Phillip West) and myself, to guide the Project between the major meetings.

How is God leading this journey?

We have been listening for God's leading through Bible study, surveys, conversations and prayer. Early in 2024, in various ways, all presbyteries engaged with a Bible study based on Acts 16:9-15 in which Paul meets Lydia at a place of prayer by a river. In response to that study we considered the shapes and locations of communities of faith and discipleship. At the Synod meeting in November 2023, working groups discussed stories of the 'church on the move' and Biblical wisdom about choosing right paths. The working groups considered pathways, obstacles, and what we value on the journey in which God constantly leads us.

Why is this important?

Presbyteries and the Synod, working together to discern God's guidance and share goals, can coordinate and align priorities and support. This can encourage mission and reduce layers of administration, enable learning from experiences across the Church, and make the most of the national Act2 process to support local and regional ministry and discipleship. The Assembly meeting in July 2024 affirmed directions towards enabling 'fit-for-purpose' governance arrangements, and for the recognition of diverse communities of faith which sustain a life of worship, build one another up in love, grow disciples of Jesus and participate in God's mission. (See *Act2: The Gift of the Spirit Report*, pp 75-78, linked [HERE](#).²)

² <https://act2uca.com/report/gift-of-the-spirit/>

B. Where are we up to?

The Vision: **Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples, seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation**

This vision has received strong affirmation - it resonates strongly through the Uniting Church across Victoria and Tasmania. Some presbyteries already have this, or a variation of it, as their Vision statement. It has been the Vision for the Synod since 2016.

The Values: **Inclusive, Diverse, Seeking Justice, Journeying with Jesus**

These values have been distilled from the work of the Synod meeting in November 2023. These are values that we recognise in ourselves as the Uniting Church, and that other people appreciate in us. These values will be expressed in all of the ways that we pursue the goals and follow Christ into the future.

The Goals: There are specific goals in the areas of:
Coordinated Ministry
Respecting Country
Intercultural Leadership
All-Age Growth

These goals are detailed in section C. They have been developed through the course of consultations in the Faithful Futures Project. They build on directions already being taken among the presbyteries in response to local needs, and to the Spirit's call as we discern it in changing patterns of ministry and mission.

The Resourcing: **Equipping for leadership**
Digital
Financial

In order to support the Vision of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania, following Christ and working towards these goals, support will include:

Equipping for leadership: ensuring that educational opportunities are available for lay and ordained people, at both basic and advanced levels, in the areas of

- Navigating and negotiating change
- Cultural competence
- Community engagement and chaplaincy
- Team building and governance

Digital: Assisting physically, personally and financially with digital networking where congregations request it.

Financial: Prioritising these goals will be reflected in budgets.

C. Goals in more detail

As described in the section D below (Next Steps), the goals will be finalised in a meeting between presbytery and Synod appointees on 21 March 2025. This section describes the current draft expression of the goals and gives some accompanying notes. Please note that the way that these goals are expressed in various congregations and regions will vary according to local contexts and in consultation with the local presbyteries.

COORDINATED MINISTRY: Coordinated ministry and mission in each Local Government Area (or suitable equivalent), attentive to the life and needs of the local context, by 2030.

- Coordination across regions is aimed at encouraging new and emerging ministries which are responsive to the life and needs of the local context, sustaining and encouraging existing ministries, and encouraging faith formation and discipleship.
- Coordination across regions will enable much more effective distribution of resources (including ministry agents, property and finances) to help support the priorities within each region. Congregations and presbyteries would discern together the best configuration of diverse worship, witness and service for each region.
- Many presbyteries and congregations have moved in this direction, which provides for case studies from which we can learn.
- Local Government Areas (LGAs) are suggested as they allow for straightforward interactions with Local Governments regarding the life and needs of the LGAs. However,
 - In Tasmania, broader regions, such as the House of Assembly Divisions, are likely due to the small size of Tasmanian LGAs
 - Some presbyteries may opt for larger regions, or vary boundaries in accordance with the local contexts
- Each region may have either a lay or ordained resource ministry agent, OR a Ministry Team made up of lay and ordained members, with a designated team leader, designed to foster various expressions of ministry and mission.
- A move to a single Church Council for the region would be encouraged and should be carefully explored in this process, in order to simplify rather than duplicate administrative arrangements. This may be a 'staged' process and consideration must be given to arrangements regarding authority. In this regard, it is noted that:
 - Moving to a single Church Council would be in keeping with the directions of the Act2 project, which is aimed at simplifying leadership and administrative arrangements and maintaining a broad view of ministry and mission.
 - A regional Church Council could include representation from any Uniting Church Institutions or Chaplains in the region (eg. Uniting AgeWell or Uniting Vic.Tas; Uniting Church affiliated schools).
 - A working group will be established to determine how best to resource and progress this goal, and share relevant experiences and case studies.

- It is recognised that within any given region there may be Congregations who do not naturally work together, or between which there is difficult history. This does not take away from our high calling in Christ to love one another and to show that we are Christians by our love. We have the opportunity to model working together across barriers of language, theology and culture, all within a Uniting Church context.
- Online communities of faith could be connected with appropriate regions.
- Ecumenical partnerships may form a part of ministry and mission in some regions.

RESPECTING COUNTRY: Every congregation will be able to tell some of the story of the Country in which it is located by the end of 2028 and be invited to develop local and appropriate ways to respond.

- In the Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Church affirms its belief that “God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First People and of Second Peoples from many lands”, and in so doing acknowledges that God has nurtured and sustained First Peoples through history, acknowledges the history and impact of colonialism, and looks towards a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.
- This work can be coordinated with nearby congregations, such as across Local Government Areas or equivalent.
- Many schools and local government councils have already done considerable work in knowing and telling stories of First Peoples, and connections with them may be fostered.
- Stories might include some or all of:
 - First Peoples’ stories of the land from before colonisation;
 - the stories of the First Peoples of the region, including the impact of colonisation and current leadership;
 - the story of how the land on which the Congregation is located came to be in the possession of the Church (if the Congregation meets in a property owned by the Uniting Church);
 - stories of the life and hopes of the Congregation within the community of this area.
- In order to be able to ‘tell some of the story’, at least some of the story should be written so that it can be shared or expressed in some other form such as through artwork.
- Stories may have greater or lesser levels of detail, depending on resourcing and engagement in the local context.
- Oral histories from longstanding congregation members could be recorded as part of the collation of history and story.
- A working group will be established to assist with the research and collation of stories.

INTERCULTURAL LEADERSHIP: By 2028, to: (a) be providing leaders of different cultural groups with appropriate formation and equipping; and (b) develop networks to support worship, witness and service among communities of diverse languages and cultures.

- Currently there are 20 main languages used among Uniting Church worshipping communities across Victoria and Tasmania, with 28 CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) congregations and 10 CALD faith communities.
- The Uniting Church declared in 1985 that “We are a Multicultural Church”.
- Leadership formation and training will be available for both lay and ordained leaders, shaped by particular cultural and linguistic needs.
- The needs of people for whom English is not their first language will be taken into account.
- Networks may feature combined events for African, Asian and/or Pacific Islander groups, and may at times focus on the experience of “second gen” people.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities and leaders will be able to know and recognise their contribution and place within the Uniting Church.

ALL-AGE GROWTH: 80% of Local Government Areas (or equivalent) have at least one all-age community of faith that is interactive, diverse, inclusive and transformative by 2030

- Intergenerational faith activities include but may not be limited to worshipping communities, Bible Studies, fellowship groups, mission groups and Christian camping.
- Comments in the UCA Assembly resource titled “Being an intergenerational church: A commitment, a vision, an invitation” include:
 - “An intentionally intergenerational environment is more likely to encourage and sustain lifelong discipleship for all ages”
 - “A biblical pattern, seen in both the Old and New Testaments, theologically grounded in the relational nature of God and the church as the Body of Christ”
 - “Being intergenerational involves at least two different generations intentionally engaging together, NOT everyone being all together all the time!”
 - “Being intergenerational involves different generations engaging together in respectful relationships marked by mutuality (all benefit), reciprocity (all give and receive) and the recognition that God equally values all, NOT just being in the same space at the same time!”
- Further material can be found at <https://uniting.church/being-an-intergen-church-papers/>
- Current data shows that between 60 and 70% of ‘regions’ have at least one intergenerational community of faith. A target of 80% means consideration needs to be given to which regions might most benefit from new intergenerational communities and considering how to initiate and support them.
- Where a region already has an all-age community of faith, it will be important to build on, strengthen, support and grow that community.

D. Next Steps

You may like to watch the **ten-minute video presentation (linked HERE)**.³ You may like to share the video with other members of your Church Council, or your congregation or faith community.

As has been described, these draft goals have been developed through consultation and a shared process between the presbyteries and the Synod. On 21 March 2025, a final meeting of the Faithful Futures Project will be held, for which each presbytery and the Synod Standing Committee will be invited to appoint three people, empowering them to consider and finalise the goals on behalf of the presbyteries and the Synod.

Provisional planning for implementation is underway. The Faithful Futures Project meeting in March will give consideration to appropriate working groups to assist with stepping through the provision of resources and implementation.

Presbyteries will work with you to consider ways in which you may engage in regional cooperation, how regions might follow up with being able to tell stories of Country, and where a focus on all-age communities of faith will be best supported. Any transitions will be staged, based on the experience of others who have already been on these journeys.

You are invited to fill in a short, **4 question survey which can be found HERE**.⁴ You may fill this in either as an individual response or after consultation with your Church Council or other group. It would be most helpful to receive responses to the survey by Friday 7 February, or sooner if that is possible.

If you have other questions, please make contact via FaithfulFutures@uca.victas.org.au. Charis Fraser is providing administrative support for this Project.

God calls the Church on a journey of ministry and mission, following Christ and responding to the changing context in which we find ourselves. Across Victoria and Tasmania, in communities of varied ages, sizes and cultures, may these values and goals help us to respond to the vision:

**Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation.**

³ <https://vimeo.com/1026701480/714e394c6a?share=copy>

⁴ <https://forms.office.com/r/G7jNw4vyQz>