

WITNESS



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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From the President

A Christmas Message

Christmas is upon us. There are early warning signs – sales, full-on toy promotions, early cards and worship committee planning. Which all makes me ponder – How do we plan for Christmas? Do we mock the commercialism, or paint gorgeous thoughts and word pictures of peace and goodwill while the world is crying out from all types of vandalism – physical, emotional and spiritual. Do we overdo the sentimentality of the modern event, or say that it is 'really for children'. I am reminded of a US city I visited where there were no Christmas services except a midnight Mass because Christmas was for families. Or do we preach the Coming of God's Word into the world. Many years ago a minister preached the Christmas message as Conception to Cross – and was severely criticised by many in the congregation. But in a sense he was right. Christmas is not an isolated event – it was the start of an on-going process about God's redemption for the world.

It is an interesting thought that Jesus was brought up in an environment that has, in

many ways, similarities with the modern world. There was poverty and oppression. Life was very difficult and dangerous for many. Multiple taxes burdened the populace and life for most was a day to day existence. There was not much glamour in being a subservient nation under Rome – even for many of the 'rich and famous'. So, if Jesus came today, what would be the level of our acceptance? To whom would He turn?

One wonders whether we place too much reliance on the extras to the Christmas story. Modern scholarship is trying to straighten out the story of Jesus' birth, particularly where the traditional story is different from the actual translations. But does it really matter whether the family was rejected from an inn or a guest-room whether the star was a congruence or a new star in the firmament, or whether the number of magi had any bearing on events. Because in the final analysis it is the fact that God sent His Son – the rest is just a sideshow.

However, the Star has always intrigued

me. It prompted a group of seers to journey out to find a king. Whatever the Star's origin it was a miracle. And part of that miracle was that God spoke to outsiders, just as He spoke to another group of outsiders – the shepherds. Both were given a preview of God's plan for the world. When Jesus comes again with whom will He spend His time?

Light is a message of God's presence: from the pillar of fire for the children of Israel in the desert to the coming of the Light into this world. And we, as Christians, are absorbed into the Light. So let us never grumble about Christmas time. For every day is a part of Christmas, every day is a celebration of the Light coming into the World; and we should not keep Christmas but rejoice and celebrate it every day, spreading its message and joy to all - every minute of our lives.

So, to one and all – peace with our God and peace with all God's creation, and may we all be blessed as we work for the Kingdom into 2016.

Alastair Davison

2016 Annual Conference

will be held at the Centre for Theology and Ministry, 29 College Crescent, Parkville on **Friday, April 15, 2016** between 7 – 9pm and **Saturday, April 16, 2016** 9:15am to 4:30pm.

At the Friday evening worship LouAnne Stabb will be installed as the President of the Lay Preacher Association of Victoria and Tasmania.

also

We anticipate that the **Lay Education Day** will also be held at CTM on **Saturday, 6 August 2016**.

Book these dates in your diary now. These are great opportunities to meet with other Lay Preachers, candidates and worship leaders across the synod. A great line-up of speakers is being arranged and the full programme will be in the February *Witness*.

Dates for your Diary

2017 National Lay Preachers' Conference

to be hosted by the VicTas Synod.

Date yet to be set but please let LouAnne or Alastair know if you can help with registrations, hospitality, speaker suggestions, stage management, program development, and any of the multitude of tasks that surround a conference.

Presbytery Committees

Gippsland

When we talk with our lay preachers they usually say that they are doing about as much as they can handle. Then they go on to talk about their busy and diverse ministry. As well as preaching and leading worship in their own and other congregations, many lead worship in nursing homes, conduct funerals, and write sermons to be used in other congregations.

Some of our lay preachers also provide pastoral care. The late Neil Newling provided caring pastoral ministry in over thirty congregations during the last 23 years.

We are glad to do what we can to support our ministers and congregations and trust the LORD to do what only he can do in our region. In many congregations worship committees and worship leaders regularly lead worship and some of these folk may feel called to train as lay preachers. There are challenges in supporting lay preachers in training and providing continuing education, in a large presbytery where people are already quite busy.

We have much to be thankful for...

Peter Morris

North East Victoria

Lay Preachers in this presbytery have had three rich and interesting opportunities for learning in the last two months.

The annual Field Days were held in Wangaratta on September 11 and 12. Dr Sunny Chen was the guest speaker at the Friday dinner. He also led two splendid Bible studies on Unveiling the Book of Revelation. Among the presentations and workshops were Interrelated Councils of the Uniting Church, led by Dr Jenny Byrnes; a workshop on Conflict Management, Walking with People During and After Times of Crisis; Reflection Stations - designing small simple stations for public places; and Words, Images and Movement - using PowerPoint creatively in worship, all lead by ministers in the presbytery. Lay Preacher LouAnne Stabb presented a workshop on the Ministry of Song, and Lay Preacher Tony Bradshaw presented a workshop on a Christian Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Other Lay Preachers were present as organisers and participants.

Emeritus Professor Bill Loader and Rev Dr Avril Hannah-Jones were the presenters at the special weekend at Corryong at which Lay Preachers were among the participants. Following that, on October 4, Bill Loader presented two sessions at Wangaratta to a large and very appreciative audience which also included Lay Preachers and others who lead worship. The morning's session, Using the Bible: Issues of Distance and Proximity, helped participants to clearly hear exactly what the Bible says. This was even more warmly appreciated in the second session, Sexuality in the New Testament and Its World. Lay Preachers who attended the 2014 National Conference will have heard Dr Loader speak on this topic.

Unfortunately, many of our Lay Preachers were not present at any of these excellent events. Recent good news is the likelihood of a new Candidate for the ministry of Lay Preaching.

Joan McRae

Western Victoria

Western Victoria Lay Preachers have been quietly going about the routine of providing worship in many out of the way places where it would not have otherwise been possible as well as be-

ing involved in the many aspects of their congregational, region and Presbytery life.

Wisdom's Feast was a wonderful opportunity to expand our spiritual self and find all manner of Eureka moments as well as to catch up with friends and make new ones. Being located in Ballarat was most appreciated by those who find travel to Melbourne impractical. Val Webb's recent visit to Ballarat also gave some LPs a chance to hear her speak. So many worthwhile evening events are advertised at CTM but it is usually too difficult and too expensive both cost wise and time wise for country based LPs to access them which is regretted.

Elaine Edwards

Port Phillip West

A training day was conducted on 5 September 2015 with an attendance of 14. Rev Dr Sean Winter was guest presenter with the topic being; 'Introduction to exegetical/interpretation skills for preaching'. This was followed by a Q&A time with questions around 'Reading the New Testament'.

The number of Lay Preachers in PPW is decreasing with several retirements and transfers to the presbyteries and other denominations. At present there are:

27 Active

11 Not prepared to preach outside own congregation

7 candidates

Currently reviewing current LP status within PPW to ensure accuracy of records

Rob Coulson

Tasmania

'Who is Jesus?' the CTM Intensive was well attended with about 20 people attending each weekend. Many were just testing the waters to see if they would go ahead with the LP studies or were there just for their own interests, some came for one weekend only. One person came from Victoria on both weekends to do the subject. Some people came for the continuing education value. Leaders were Rohan Pryor, Rod Horsfield, Jeff Shrowder, Geoff Thompson and Michelle Cook who did an excellent job and we thank them. I think everyone would agree they had a most enjoyable learning time. We thank Anthea Maynard who organised the weekends, catering and billets. To everyone well done.

As a result of these weekends we have one definite new Lay Preacher in training and a couple of people thinking about it. Three trainees will be attending the Formation Weekend in November followed by their assessment of services leading to Recognition services next year. The Tasmanian system of one subject per year means these three people have been training for 5 years and have all led many services over that time.

'Live Streaming' CTM and the Tasmanian Presbytery are working together to organise Live Streaming of suitable speakers. This was tried a few years ago and fell under the radar. If there is reasonable support it is planned to make this happen as often as possible. This will give access to CTM Speakers to everyone across the Synod either at home on their own computer or in groups. The first was held on October 26th with Val Webb as the speaker. I am writing before the event but early booking looks promising.

In the Hobart/Southern Tasmania area a number of congregations have been without ordained ministers for periods of time over the last few years and the lay people have ably kept the

services going. Many of these people have had no training. How to support and encourage these people has been exercising the minds of those in the presbytery for some time. We hope that things like 'live streaming' and future training opportunities that

are on the drawing board will be helpful for these people and hopefully encourage some to start their LP training. More about this as things develop in 2016.

Heather Cowled

Centre for Theology & Ministry

Working With Children Checks (WWCC) and Working with Vulnerable People (WVP)

Synod policies in relation to Safe Church and Keeping Children Safe have been evolving rapidly, and not always clearly. Some uncertainty still exists, as well as many misunderstandings and myths.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is raising many issues for Churches as well as government and other community organisations. Although that process is still under way, Justice Peter McLelland's address to the Uniting Church Assembly meeting in July, and other public statements including the Commission's Working With Children Checks Report, give very strong indications that the wider Australian community will not tolerate many of the practices that have been implemented by Churches in the past. In addition to systemic improvements, the WWCC Report specifically (and first of all) points to religious organisations: the Commission's recommendations will "require all religious leaders and officers or personnel of religious organisations to have WWCCs". Then follow 36 recommendations to various levels of government.

This indicates a significant shift: from a focus on Church activities involving children ('we don't have children in our congregation') to a focus in suitable leaders ('we are confident all our leaders are appropriate for keeping everyone safe, particularly the most vulnerable people').

Note also the shift from a focus on activities involving children to the broader recognition that many different people are vulnerable at different stages of their lives. Wider community expectations will continue to grow, just as they have done around other aspects of physical, emotional and spiritual safety (for example, compare the growing awareness of these aspects in relation to emergency services and military personnel).

For this reason I expect the Synod policies will require every person in a leadership role in the Uniting Church to have

a WWCC or equivalent – regardless of whether this is a role formally recognised by the Uniting Church's internal structures or not. The wider Australian community will certainly see Lay Preachers, Elders and members of Church Councils, to be religious leaders and officers. More broadly anyone in a leadership role (as perceived by the public, not Uniting Church role titles) will be expected to be able to demonstrate they are appropriate for leadership – and despite the various WWCC limitations noted by the Commission the Executive Summary concludes "they deliver unquestionable benefits to the safeguarding of children".

All Lay Preachers and Lay Preacher candidates, and people who share in the leadership of worship and other activities of the Uniting Church, should obtain a Working With Children Check as a matter of good practice and demonstrated appropriateness for leadership roles, regardless of their actual presence in activities involving children.

Lay ministries and the Synod's Major Strategic Review (MSR)

The recently released Synod Vision and Mission statement¹ provides a timely focus or lens to my growing sense that worship acts as a 'centre of gravity' that often absorbs a high proportion of attention and effort at a local level. Conversation with some of the MSR team on lay ministries and lay leadership recognises the unlikelihood or impossibility of a 'worship-led recovery' which has set me thinking about other 'recovery' possibilities:

- a Messy Church-led recovery?
- a radical discipleship-led recovery?
- a social activist-led recovery?
- a new-monastic-led recovery?
- a fresh-expressions-led recovery?
- a schools-led recovery?
- an agency-led recovery?

The list of possibilities could go on, but the changed and increasingly diverse globalised societal context means the Church cannot realistically expect to recover the former centre of community life that it previously occupied within living

memory. Social patterns have fundamentally changed, and diversified.

A challenging insight comes from setting that 'recovery' list alongside a growing awareness of the urgency of environmental and social-political catastrophes of global scale – and which the political-media environment in Australia often distracts us from, or casts as threats to our lifestyle and values. How might the Church focus attention to address the most pressing issues the world faces, rather than emphasising difference and division? As the Synod vision statement reminds us, in following Christ the Church must seek community, compassion and justice for all creation.

For some centuries the inherited western liturgical form of worship into which Lay Preacher candidates are oriented has been the primary pattern of the (protestant) Church for forming disciples, building faithful community, and engaging in mission. This is to overstate the place of gathered worship amidst the many ways that individuals and communities express their faith and share God's love in the world. However I have become increasingly aware of the effort and focus that Sunday worship draws at a local level, at the same time as becoming more conscious of the many other effective ways that discipleship, community and mission may be fostered – often in ways which bypass or break down the barriers that liturgical worship may perpetuate.

None of this reflection is to discount the faithful and valuable witness that Lay Preachers make, and will continue to make, in the Uniting Church. It does raise significant questions around the challenges that Lay Preachers and congregations face, including how to assist appropriate Lay Preachers to become change agents in their local communities and regions. Lay Preachers are part of the inter-related leadership network of the Uniting Church that can help congregations to rediscover at least two key Christian foundations:

- (a) the many ways that faithful discipleship and missional community may be

¹ See the 'Vision and Mission' resources at <http://listeningpost.victas.uca.org.au/msr>

- expressed in a world that desperately needs good news and the new community that Christ can bring, and
- (b) how that diversity can form a more effective and sustainable body of Christ, the Church.

Education options for Lay Preacher Candidates

Information to pass on to anyone you know who may be interested in pursuing LP studies in the near future.

In terms of the Uniting Church's rules and regulations, education for recognised ministries are overseen by the Assembly Education for Ministry Working Group (formerly the Ministerial Education Commission, MEC), and Synod Ministerial Education Boards (MEBs): in VicTas this is the Board of the Centre for Theology and Ministry. For formal recognition Lay Preacher candidates must complete an appropriate course of studies, recognised by the "Certificate of Lay Preacher Studies". The Assembly rules stipulate relevant areas of study and require that not more than two courses are done outside a Uniting Church context.

Several education options for Lay Preacher candidates continue to be available, providing flexible opportunities for initial studies (or for a 'refresher' for continuing education). At present there are no presbyteries looking to run Lay Preacher courses in 2016 based on the intensive face-to-face weekend courses developed by NSW.ACT (the Education for Lay Ministry Centre, ELM), but the CTM remains open to collaboration with presbyteries to meet various educational needs.

Trinity College (Queensland – adult education level, 'Cert IV friendly'): Exploring the Old Testament, Exploring the New Testament, Exploring Christology, Exploring Theology and the forthcoming Exploring Worship and Preaching courses for Lay Preacher candidates and lay leaders are hosted by my colleagues Neil Thorpe & Mel Perkins. These courses are blended online courses, with some interactive webinars (web-based seminars, like using Skype) as well as online interaction between participants and educators. I'm thinking about hosting a learning group (both at the CTM and online) who meet once a month to get started on these courses, and to work together.

Pilgrim Theological College (located within the CTM, part of the University of Divinity – tertiary / Higher Education level): many courses exploring the Bible, mission studies, theology and a range of other areas are offered as semester-length weekly courses, online courses, or intensive courses. Pilgrim includes various CTM colleagues including Geoff Thompson, Sean Winter, Monica Melanchthon, Katharine Massam, John Flett, Maryanne Confoy, and others, who all teach within the University of Divinity.

Uniting College (South Australia – VET Cert IV level): Engaging in the Gospels, Engaging in the Christian Scriptures, Engaging in the Christian Faith, Believing in Jesus Christ and other courses for Lay Preacher candidates and lay leaders are offered as distance education courses, with video & reading materials provided online, and contact with the course supervisor as needed.

visor as needed.

Pilgrim 'enhanced audit' for Lay Preacher Continuing Education

This year Pilgrim Theological College has offered an 'enhanced audit' option for individual subject units, at a significantly reduced cost. This option has been taken up by a small number of participants, and without a formal review this has broadly been seen as successful. Participants have access to all the class resources and learning materials, and are encouraged to submit assessment tasks for feedback, but do not receive formal University of Divinity recognition of their studies. This option is very suitable for recognised Lay Preachers undertaking continuing education, and those who have some previous theological studies, but would not be suitable for those without any prior theological study in an academic context.

*Rohan Pryor
CTM Lay Leadership Educator*

PS - My colleagues Neil & Mel (Trinity College, Queensland) offer all of their courses in an "at your own pace" mode. In semester 1 next year I understand that they are planning to offer "Exploring the Old Testament", and "Exploring Theology" and hoping to set these up as cohorts/ learning communities with participants moving through the Courses together, allowing for greater communication between participants.

I continue to think that the Queensland online courses are the best option overall option available at this time, balancing effective learning and participant interaction, cost, and availability, among other factors.

Summary Table

*LP courses typically include introductions to 4 subjects – the New Testament, Old Testament, Theology and Christology – with Worship and Preaching subjects either integrated throughout those 4 (following the ELM model of adult education) or as 2 additional subjects.

UCA body	CTM + Presbytery	Trinity	Pilgrim	Uniting College
Synod	VicTas	Qld	VicTas	SA
LP courses*	4 integrating W&P	4 + W&P	4 (no W&P)	4 + 2
Mode	Intensive weekends	Blended online	Semester, or online	Distance online
Cost	Catering & books	\$275 per course	\$1350 per course	\$350 per course
Education frame	Adult education	Adult education	Tertiary/Higher Ed	VET
AQF Level	Approx. Year 12	CertIV 'friendly'	Diploma or higher	CertIV

The Word Speaks!

The Bible in Worship in an Inclusive Church

Part One

The church is a story-formed community... Baptism is our adoption into a story, God's re-creative story, which is recorded in the community's story book (the Holy Scriptures), incarnate in the community's life, and made present through its sacramental rituals, especially the Holy Eucharist. Each of us also has a story... In the context of our liturgies we are initiated into God's story and we appropriate its significance for our lives so that it might influence our common life day by day... Our most important and fundamental task as Christians is to learn God's story.

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1984.

How does God speak to us through the Bible in worship today? From what Bible should we read, preach and teach?

As a denomination, the Uniting Church recommends the New Revised Standard Version (NSV) as the preferred translation for preaching and teaching. This is for several good reasons, including the calibre of the Biblical scholars involved in the translation, the approach to translation and the ecumenical acceptance of this version. Thus it is recommended as the norm for reading in worship, as a reference for preaching, and for study in English-speaking settings.

Does this mean that the NRSV is the only version of the Bible that can be used in worship?

As John Westerhoff suggests, our task as a church is not simply to read texts aloud in worship, but to let our lives be shaped by God's Story. How does Christ, the Living Word, speak through the Scriptures to diverse Christian communities today? Is this question mainly about which translation we do or don't use? Given the diverse nature of communities of faith, we can adopt a broader view than 'one translation fits all' for several reasons.

An inclusive church recognises that its members may include diverse ages, abilities and languages. This diversity includes:

- People of different ages, from young children to the very elderly
- People of different cultures whose first language is not necessarily English
- People of differing abilities, including intellectual or cognitive abilities, as well as literacy abilities

"If we want to raise children to rejoice in being members of the Christian community, what we do in worship is critically important."

Marva Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Becoming through Belonging

The first question regarding version or translation of Scripture is "To whom is this translation addressed? For whom is it intended?" Any text has a 'reading level'. Based on the complexity of language and concepts, specialist educators can estimate the age at which a competent reader can comprehend a text. To put it simply, the NRSV was not translated at a child's level of reading comprehension.

There are, broadly speaking, two views about the place of children in worship. One is that children will "grow into" adult understanding by participating along with adults. We shouldn't "dumb down" our language simply for their sake. Marva Dawn, noted for her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, sees that children and young people will grow into understanding and character as they experience the richness of Christian worship. To paraphrase her slightly, "Shallow worship forms shallow people." Dawn is resistant particularly towards the influence of contemporary culture upon the church's faith, its worship and its nurture of children and youth. She also emphasises the need for the church to explain its traditions and practices to young people.

These are vital considerations for Christian worship. John Westerhoff, C. Ellis Nelson, and Iris Cully, for example, have highlighted the essential nature of the church as an intergenerational, faith-forming community. Westerhoff reminded us that children learn by participation in worship long before they understand what is going on. In Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990's, Stan and Pauline Stewart, encouraged congregations to explore all-age worship rather than send children out to Sunday School.

It is important for children to participate in an intergenerational community in which they might learn from others and grow into mature faith and character. Baptism is the sign of full participation in the body of Christ. Alongside this, there is a sense in which the language and understandings of the Bible are foreign to all of us: we all need to be shaped by the story passed down through time and across cultures.

The same could be said to be true for people whose first language is not English: they will just grow into understanding the Bible spoken in the dominant language. However, these people can be of any and all ages. When the Bible is read or spoken aloud in English, what does it mean for them if we always choose a text at a high level of literacy? What are our considerations about their sense of inclusion? (Of course, the Bible can also be read in more than one language in worship.)

The point here is not to put children, people with intellectual disabilities, and people whose first language is not English into the same category (even though the language of "dumbing down" seems guilty of that). The question is whether it is enough to say, "They will grow into it." (There's also a problem here in conflating issues of culture, intelligence, and human development.)

We can affirm the vitality of an intergenerational community without suggesting that everything taking place needs to be at an adult level or within a particular cultural framework in order for people to grow to maturity.

Craig Mitchell

On behalf of the Worship Working Group, Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly, craigm@nat.uca.org.au

February 2016 - Part Two "Up Close and Personal": Being addressed by the Word

Presbytery Focus – The Presbytery of Yarra Yarra

The Yarra Yarra presbytery stretches east and north-east from Melbourne's CBD giving oversight to 87 congregations. It contains three Uniting Church schools and numerous aged care and community service agencies. The presbytery of Yarra Yarra is large and varied embracing both rural and inner urban regions.

The presbytery recognizes that crucial to mission and ministry is working in partnership. Examples of such partnerships include those existing and developing with Uniting Care agencies and Uniting Aged Care.

Over the past decade the presbytery has invested a lot of time and conversation in to exploring ways to encourage 'fresh expressions' of church. There have been new expressions of Church emerge over this time with conversations continuing to develop further opportunities with a number of the new expressions occurring at times other than

Sunday mornings with a focus on families.

The presbytery has a multicultural population with a number of Cultur-

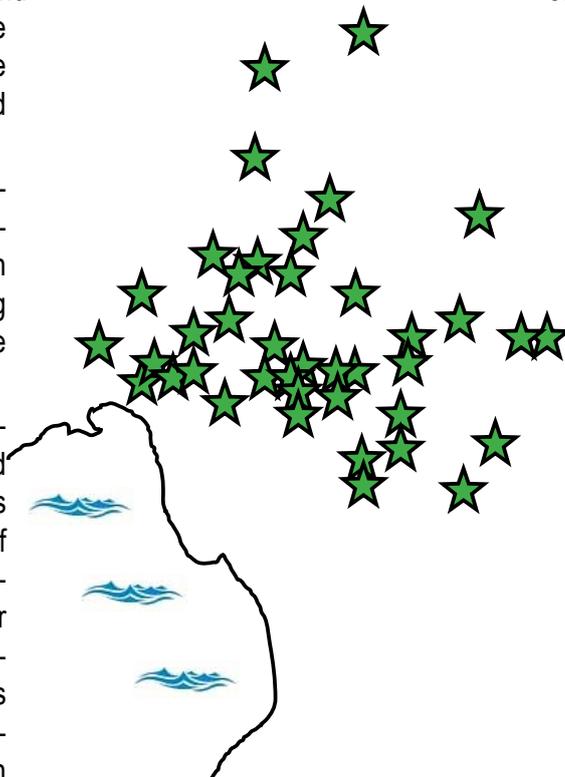
ally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) congregations and faith groups that meet within Uniting Church buildings and are a growing element of the life of the presbytery.

There are a number of small congregations across the presbytery. Some of these congregations have combined to form multi-congregation parishes and are exploring different ways of sharing worship, e.g. through use of technology including Skype. There has been a stark numerical decline of the church in what was once the 'Bible belt' in Victoria.

The presbytery has considered mental health ministry as a priority with an example of this being Hope Springs at West Heidelberg.

Yarra Yarra has approximately 100 accredited lay preachers with approximately one third regularly attending Lay preacher events.

Hayley Rose



The Presbytery Focus series of articles is nearly at an end with only one presbytery not yet covered. As there is no representative of Port Phillip East on the Committee of Management, I am seeking a volunteer from Port Phillip East to write about their Presbytery. Then all can get a better understanding of your strengths and difficulties. Please contact editor, Jay Brooks, if you are willing to help.

The Lay Preachers' Association of The Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Committee of Management

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